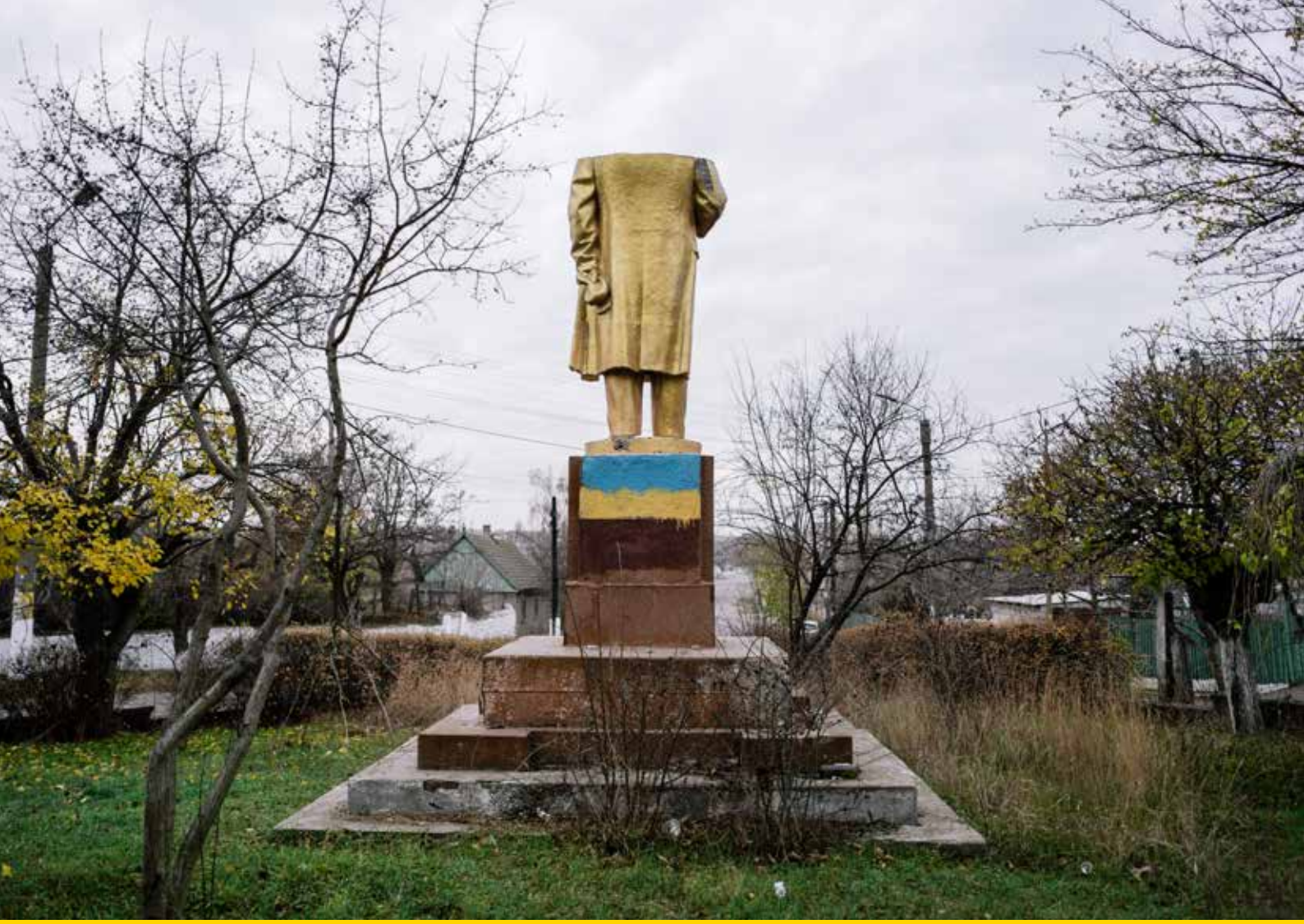

art exchange

LENINFALL

Niels Ackermann

University of Essex

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This exhibition brings together photographs by Niels Ackermann in which he attempts to find `Leninfall' – the removal of statues of Lenin and all that they symbolise – in Ukraine. Following the 2013 protests against a corrupt and pro-Russian government, a massive toppling of monuments dedicated to the Communist figurehead spread throughout the country. In 2016, the Swiss photographer Niels Ackermann undertook a series of photographs across Ukraine documenting the aftermath of Leninfall. Central authorities had not given instructions regarding the fate of the fallen statues or their empty plinths, and neither did local governments provide any information as to what was to happen to these monuments. As a result, no uniform handling or registration of Leninfall has occured. The work of Ackermann is therefore similar to a quest: an investigation into the whereabouts of these fallen monuments. To understand the events leading to the scenes captured in his photographs, we have to go back to the 20th century.

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was created. These territories attached to a central power included former parts of the Russian Empire, such as Ukraine. The USSR also seized control of artistic expression, dedicating it to supporting its power and imperialism through an intense propaganda machine. Lenin, considered the father of the Russian Revolution, became the embodiment of this new era. His image was ubiquitously spread across promotional supports such as banners, paintings, posters and statues.

In Ukraine, the first monument to Lenin was erected in Kyiv in 1919. From that moment onwards, statues of Lenin were sited in every major city in the country. Erecting monuments to Lenin was a way to prove loyalty to the Soviet government based far away in Moscow. Ukraine, with its 5,500 statues, became the Soviet territory with the greatest density of Lenin statuary.

When the USSR fell in 1991, its former territories had to find a way to deal with this monumental heritage, symbol of the grip of the Soviet totalitarian rule. In the early 1990s, many Lenin monuments were removed from the streets of Kyiv. However, in other parts of Ukraine, they remained standing.

The political and symbolic aspects of the remaining Lenin statues were revived during the EuroMaiden (European Maiden) protests of 2013. When President Viktor Yanukovych failed, under pressure of Russia, to sign an agreement meant to tighten ties with the European Union, Lenin was again seen as a symbol of the Kremlin imperialism. In December that year, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians demonstrated in opposition to the brutality of government's management of the crisis. On 8 December, a group of protestors, linked with the far-right Svoboda ('Freedom') Party pulled down one of the most prestigious statues of Lenin, in Taras Shevchenko Boulevard, Kyiv. If many Ukrainians did not welcome their ideology, they did agree that it was time for Lenin to go. Thus began 'Leninfall', fuelled in 2014 by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and war in the Donbas. In 2015, the Ukrainian Parliament passed the "Decommunisation Laws", bringing a legislative framework to the movement by enacting a decree for the removal of all monuments to Lenin and other Communist leaders. Today, not a single Lenin statue remains in Ukraine.

Within the Ukrainian landscape, clues can still be found that reveal one of the motivations of the Leninfall: the will to affirm a national identity against Russian imperialism. For example, one of Ackermann's photographs shows a Ukrainian flag painted on the plinth of a headless Lenin still standing in Shabo. Nevertheless, the remains of now often seem unattended – even abandoned – with some of statues simply left where they fell. In Slovyansk, an intact figure of Lenin lies facing down on the ground, surrounding by bushes. In Kremenchuk, a statue lies down on its back, facing the sky. The greyish tone of the fallen statue matches the façades of the buildings of this industrial city.

However, there are occasions when initiatives are being taken. Some citizens and local authorities have tried to sell the statues. This way, the village of Korzhi left a chopped in half statue Lenin standing in a meadow, next to a car – also in pieces – waiting to be sold as scrap metal. Another photograph taken in Chernihiv shows us pieces of a former bronze monument and represents the end of its journey. Cut into chunks by a local activist who hoped to sell it to make a new artwork for the city, it was finally detained by police and stored in a warehouse. In another instance, Lenin heads stored in a truck were seized by the nationalist group Sokil to sell and use the money for the medical care of friends fighting Russians in the Donbass.

On the other hand, some of the fallen monuments seem to have been rescued, as with a golden painted Lenin in a garden in Adzhamka, standing next to a bust of Karl Marx. Others ended up in museum vaults, such as a beheaded Lenin now in the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Kyiv.

Artists have also taken actions, such as those by Leonid Kanter. Living in Chernihiv region, he dispersed the pieces he owns in open spaces, and lets his children and visiting artists modify them. Another striking initiative in a public space has been taken by Oleksandr Milov, who transformed a sculpture of Lenin into Darth Vader in the courtyard of a factory in Odessa. This subversion matches with the progressive image this city wants to project.

A common point emerges from these various situations: an eerie feeling of absurdity and incongruousness, that raises more questions than answers. Indeed, more than a precise documentary census or catalogue of fallen statues, the work of Ackermann captures the underlying wonders of the aftermath of the movement. Whether left where they have been toppled, stored away by the authorities in museums or picked up by locals, these fallen monuments seem to ask: what comes next after decommunization and an emancipation from a Soviet past? How will these events impact on the construction of a Ukrainian idea of nationality? According to the current events, it is likely that this will of autonomy towards Russia will continue to be a major element of Ukrainian identity.

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