

Tanja Schult

Monuments as Tools for Democratic Activism

In January 2025, I felt paralyzed. For several years, my applications for research on democratic monument making were refused, presumably also because they brought two seemingly antipoles – monuments and democracy – together, and maybe also as my claim that democracies were under threat, seemed exaggerated, at least from a Swedish perspective. World politics changed and generated generous funding. But when I finally was about to write my book, political reality seemed to have outlived its idea. Was writing a book on monuments as tools for democratic activism really a meaningful endeavour? Being an art historian provides me with a longer perspective. I recalled earlier attempts of democratic monument making, either deliberately ignored in art historiography or which suffered outright political repercussions but nevertheless had a lasting impact on how monuments look and function in today's democracies, as the *Monument to the March Dead* (1922) by Walter Gropius. I began to realize that there were several (prevented) shifts towards the expanded monument understanding I had detected in recent works. The three monument makers I currently write about, the Equal Justice Initiative in the US, The Centre for Political Beauty in Germany and the citizen of the world Françoise Schein all significantly renewed, and in fact democratized the genre. They remained resilient amidst growing authoritarianism and right-wing populism and used their works to make democracies more democratic. Wasn't it my role to act as their critical companion, and at least write their accomplishments into art history for a future researcher to rediscover?

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