

Racist imagery in the public space of Bern – introducing the example of the
contestation of the racist ABC “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school



Racist “Wandbild” hanging in the Wylergut school in Bern, taken in March 2022

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Table of Contents

Introduction: introducing the example of the racist ABC “Wandbild”	3
Theoretical framework.....	6
Racism in Switzerland – the concept of Race and racial denial.....	7
Switzerland’s historical involvement in racist and colonial practices	8
Methods	9
Data gathering process	9
Results: presenting the data from the interviews	10
Problematic aspects of the “Wandbild” and dealing with them.....	10
Potential of the competition format for to the public discourse about racism	11
Influence of the activist involvement (“Übermalung”) on the public discourse around the “Wandbild”	12
Influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement on the public discourse around the “Wandbild”	13
Discussion	14
Conclusion	16
Bibliography.....	19

Introduction: introducing the example of the racist ABC “Wandbild”

When one uses the words racism and Switzerland in the same sentence, the general reaction is usually one of denial that such a problem even exists. Switzerland is often seen as a country that does not struggle with racism: “true” racism happens in countries like the United States or South Africa and is considered as no longer present in Europe, therefore also in Switzerland (dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022, p. 26). Social anthropologist Serena Dankwa argued in an interview with the SRF (Swiss radio and television), that in order to fight racism in Switzerland, it must first be acknowledged that racism does exist in Switzerland (Dankwa, 2020). Dankwa argues that to achieve this recognition, Switzerland’s colonial past needs to be acknowledged, because Switzerland profited economically and was therefore politically involved to some extent. People who have experienced racism, as well as activists, need to be taken seriously in their struggles and need to be put in positions in order to make changes (Dankwa, 2020).

Switzerland seemingly has no obvious colonial past, and many believe that there was no involvement in slavery and slave trades. A spike in research on Switzerland’s colonial past and involvement proves that these assumptions are false and that this research is needed. Acknowledging Switzerland’s historical role in colonialism and thus racist practices, as well as rethinking the conceptualization of race in Switzerland, would be a first step in the right direction, acknowledging and rectifying these commonly made assumptions (see books by David et al., 2005; dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022; Fässler, 2020; Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015).

Racism however is not something that solely belongs to Switzerland’s past but is still a topic present today. As recently as 2018, police violence caused the death of a man in Lausanne. After refusing to be checked by the police, he was pressed to the floor by six officers for several minutes and died shortly after the incident in the hospital (dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022). In 2015, a case of racial profiling by the police caused Mohammed Wa Baile, after he refused to show his documents, to take the case to court, which went as far as the European Court of Human Rights, in order to prove that he was only being controlled due to the color of his skin (Allianz gegen Racial Profiling, n.d.; Wa Baile et al., 2019). This is an example that shows racism is structurally anchored in Swiss society. Another incident of racist practices in Switzerland took place when a group of people dressing up as colonial officers, drawing a cage filled with “savages” behind them at the carnival in Basel in 2019 (dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022, p. 10). The group, who named their presentation “Bimbotown – Neuigkeite us em Dschungel” (Bimbotown- news from the jungle), denied that this was racist, claiming rather

that they wanted to stimulate people to think about racist stereotypes (*ibid.*, p. 10). Furthermore, there are multiple cases of racist imagery in public spaces, which have been problematized around Switzerland, such in the Niederdorf neighborhood in Zurich and the statue of David de Pury in Neuchatel (Kollektiv Vo da, 2020; Mal Denken, n.d.).

Each of these examples highlight the presence of racism in Switzerland and demonstrate a need to act upon racist practices and to demand change. The aim of this seminar paper concentrates on the debate of racist imagery in Switzerland, more specifically by looking at the example of a racist mural or “Wandbild” that is painted in a public school in Bern. The mural, which is painted on the wall of a public school that teaches students from kindergarten to grade 6, depicts an Alphabet. For each letter in the Alphabet there is a drawing of an image that can be used to easily connect the image to a letter. The letter C is illustrated by a painting of a Chinese person with yellow skin, whereas the letter I illustrates a stereotypically painted person of Native American descent. The letter N depicts a person with black skin color. The other letters are mostly illustrated by paintings of animals, or images of nature, equating people with nonwhite skin to wild animals. This mural was painted by Swiss artists Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden in 1949 and has been hanging in the public school Wylergut ever since, neither acknowledging the racist imagery, nor presenting a proper contextualization.

Although there were private complaints about the racist imagery used in the “Wandbild” and visible to school children every day, action about how to deal with racist imagery in the public space of a school was only taken into consideration after the “Wandbild” received media attention in March 2019 (Berner Rassismusstammtisch, 2019; der Bund, 2019). A discussion of how to deal with the problematic imagery of the “Wandbild” was then opened for the public when the Kommission für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (KiöR) opened a competition for interdisciplinary teams to submit an idea of potential ways to deal with the racist imagery in August of 2019. The jury of the competition invited the interdisciplinary teams to connect the disciplines of art, pedagogy, and mediation, and gave them the task of combining these disciplines using a critical view regarding racism. According to the jury the aim of the competition is to situate the racist “Wandbild” from a historically distanced perspective and contextualize the “Wandbild” to current times, thus stimulating internal and public debates within and outside of the school. The initial idea was that the winning groups’ idea would be installed as a permanent artistic work in Wylergut school, therefore becoming municipal property, as the school belongs to the city. The groups had time to submit their ideas by mid-November. The budget supplied by the city to realize and install this potential artwork was set at 55’000 Swiss Francs. In November of 2019 the jury selected five groups into the final round

and set a deadline for their final submission to February 2020. The planned final presentations from the interdisciplinary teams were unable to take place, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures enforced by the Swiss government. During this time, when the competition was put on hold due to the lockdown, unknown activists went to the Wylergut school and painted over the three racist images with black color. The anonymous activists posted a statement on the internet page barrikade.info, stating that they did not understand why an image such as the “Wandbild” was protected and seen as more important than the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), who face oppression on a daily basis. They state that they:

hope the teachers and students start confronting and reflecting on their own privileges and the oppressive structures they reproduce. Perhaps it is time to open up new topics of discussion, and start recognizing Switzerland’s participation in colonization and how to actively deal with it (Blogpost barrikade.info, 14.06.2020).

The “Übermalung” (painting over the letters) of the racist images by the activists triggered different reactions by the actors involved in the process of contestation of the ABC “Wandbild”. In an interview with *TeleBärn* the director of the school, Jürg Lädach, stated that he understood the reason of the activists but found it regrettable that they did this illegally and condoned this type of activism. The city council of Bern refrained from pressing charges against the anonymous activists, due to their understanding of the activists’ reasons, stating however, that they do not believe that long-term change in society could be achieved by acting this way. The competing groups were then asked to include a way of dealing with the painted images in their project idea. The final presentations of the five different project ideas took place in September 2020, with the jury announcing the winning group in their report from the 9th of September 2020. The project “Das Wandbild muss weg!” (Translation: the mural must go) was selected unanimously by the jury. Due to the group proposing a project that would not be entirely covered by the budget, the results were not made public until there was more security regarding the financing. The city council of Bern officially announced the winning project to the public on the 19th of March 2021. The final presentation of the project by the interdisciplinary winning team took place a day later, during the annual action week against racism in Bern. The decision to remove the “Wandbild” from the school brought about a variety of opinions from the public and was widely received by the media in Switzerland. As the example of the “Wandbild” is so far a unique way of dealing with racism, the seminar paper deals with the following main research question and multiple sub questions:

What were the positions and actions of the multiple stakeholders involved in dealing with the contestation of the racist ABC Wandbild in Wylergut school?

- *What is seen as problematic about the “Wandbild” by the general public in the Wylergut school?*
- *What possibilities does the format of the “Wettbewerb” offer for a public discourse regarding racism for the example of the “Wandbild”?*
- *How did the activist involvement (“Übermalung”) influence the public discourse around the “Wandbild”?*
- *In what way has the Black Lives Matter Movement facilitated the public discourse around the “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school in Bern?*

In order to answer these research questions, this seminar paper aims at looking more closely at one official way of dealing with racist objects in public spaces. By doing this, the potential benefits, and disadvantages of an institutional approach of problematizing racist objects or practices, such as the competition format in the case of the “Wandbild”, will be analyzed. Looking at the different positions and actions of the stakeholders will offer a nuanced insight into the public discourse surrounding the contestation of the racist ABC “Wandbild” in Bern. The goal of this seminar paper is to add to the discussion surrounding racism in Switzerland and to highlight and analyze a successful example of institutional contestation.

In a first step, the concept of racism, race, and racial denial in Switzerland will be presented, followed by an insight into Switzerland’s historical involvement in colonialism and racist practices. The methodological section gives an overview of the methods used to gather the data for this seminar paper, which is presented in the next chapter. The result section is followed by the discussion of the results and the answering of the research questions. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the main points made in this seminar paper.

Theoretical framework

As this seminar paper analyzes the public discourse surrounding the racist ABC “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school, we will take a closer look at the concept of race and racism, specifically in the context of Switzerland. To contradict the narrative that Switzerland is only indirectly affected by racism, the concept of racial denial in Switzerland will be discussed. Additionally, Switzerland’s historic background regarding racism and its involvement in racist and colonial practices will be considered.

Racism in Switzerland – the concept of Race and racial denial

Racism is often seen as an outdated concept, which no longer has influence and power in the socio-political realm, especially in European countries (Boulila, 2019). The concept of post-raciality assumes that racism belongs to the past and argues that racist behaviors are the product of uneducated individuals. Therefore, according to Alana Lentin (2015), post-racial racism management can be defined through “deflection, distancing, and denial” (p. 34). In Switzerland, racism is seen as something that belongs to the past and has been removed from state structures, as well as from Switzerland’s historical past (Boulila, 2019). This institutional form of racial denial benefits right-wing parties, such as the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), whose political campaigns often use racist imagery, such as a white sheep kicking out a black sheep. These images were however not deemed as racist and therefore permitted, as the majority of authorities and citizens in Switzerland feel that due to the supposed non-involvement of Switzerland in past colonial practices, such as slave trade and possession of colonies, Switzerland is exempt from historical remains of colonialism and racism (Boulila, 2019; Michel, 2015). Concerns regarding racism in political discourse in Switzerland by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (such as in the case of the initiative against mass migration in 2014) have been labeled as racism hysteria or unfair propaganda against Switzerland (Boulila, 2019, p. 1402). Swiss anthropologist Rohit Jain (who is also a member of the competition jury) responded to racism hysteria accusations of the Swiss radio and television¹ that every attempt to name racism in Switzerland is proclaimed as hysterical (*ibid.*, p. 1410). This supposed racism hysteria can be connected to the example of the “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school in Bern. In response to the winning group’s project idea, “Das Wandbild muss weg!”, an article was published in the newspaper “Der Bund” in 2021, in which author Hans Witschi states², that by proclaiming the “Wandbild” as racist, it plays down “true” racist practices, such as the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America and other “true” forms of racism that happen all over the world (Witschi, 2021).

¹ In response to Oprah Winfrey sharing a racist experience in a store in Zurich in 2013, white Swiss comedian Brigit Steinegger mocked this experience by portraying a stereotypical role of a black woman in a full blackface. According to the SRF, this sketch was meant to mock racism hysteria (Jain, 2014).

² The article was originally published in German and the content was translated into English by me

Switzerland's historical involvement in racist and colonial practices

Many people react with irritation, disbelief, or astonishment when they are confronted with the fact, that Switzerland has connections to slave trade (David et al., 2005; Fässler, 2020). Although Switzerland was never officially involved in slave trade, nor owned any colonies, colonial culture was highly influential in Switzerland (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015). Switzerland profited immensely from slavery relationships, for example through profits achieved from trade, insurance, banking, and investments on an economic level. Additionally, Switzerland also profited on a cultural level in terms of education, books, art, and cosmopolitanism, as well as in relation to social capital through relationship networks and group affiliation (Fässler, 2020, p. 20). During colonial times, Switzerland was particularly involved in the trade of *Indiennes*, a type of printed or painted cotton manufactured in Europe between the 17th and 19th century. The trade in *Indiennes* caused a surge in wealth and economic profit for Switzerland, as these printed cotton materials were used as a currency in slave trade (David et al., 2005; Fässler, 2020). *Indiennes* were shipped to Africa and were traded, alongside other goods, for slaves to be shipped to the “New World” (*ibid.*). The first *Indiennes* manufactures were located in the canton of Neuchatel, followed soon after by a manufacture in the canton of Basel (David et al., 2005). Some of the companies printed almost exclusively for slave vessels, advertising their products as trade goods (*ibid.*). Switzerland was not only involved in the production of *Indiennes*, some families from the canton of St. Gallen were plantation and slave owners. Furthermore, mercenaries from the same canton fought for the reintroduction of slavery in Haiti in 1803 (Fässler, 2020, p. 18). Similar form of involvement from Swiss citizens can be found in the case of Congo, where four different banks from Switzerland financially supported Leopold II, the self-proclaimed ruler of the Congo Free State (*ibid.*). Many more examples of Swiss involvement in slave trade and colonial practices can be found³. The extensive involvement of Switzerland in these racist and colonial practices have markedly influenced colonial and racist cultural practices, which were reproduced over time and still contribute to Swiss colonial culture still present in everyday behavior (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015). The cultural effects of colonialism still affect and shape political, scientific, and popular discourse in Switzerland and other countries without colonies, as well as in countries that were not formally colonized (Purtschert et al., 2015, p. 292-293). These effects and everyday practices are described by James Baldwin in his essay “Stranger in the

³ For more examples see the books by David et al. (2005) and Fässler (2020)

Village” (1953), in which he describes his experience with racism during his stay in Leukerbad, a village in the mountains in the canton Wallis. Baldwin opens his essay with the words “from all available evidence no black man has ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came” (p. 179). His essay tells the story of racism experience in Switzerland, describing the landscape around the same time the “Wandbild” was painted in 1949 in the Wylergut school in Bern. A time in which it was considered normal to call people of color the N-word and appropriate to teach children that black people were called this way. This exact “Wandbild” is still hanging in the Wylergut school without proper contextualization, reproducing racist practices on an everyday basis. The racist images are put off as naïve or as clichés, but were intended for children, in order to open the world to them at that time and were certainly not meant in a racist or malicious manner (Witschi, 2021). This trivialization of the racist images is a perfect example how downplaying historical instances can lead to a reproduction of racism in the long term. Zamudio and colleagues (2010) state that “the very notion that race no longer matters is part of an ideology that justifies and legitimates racial inequality in society” (p. 3), which can be applied to the case of the “Wandbild” and makes apparent the need to find a proper way of dealing with the racist images visible in the “Wandbild”.

Methods

This section gives insight into the process of gathering data during the course of my research lab on the topic of the contestation of the “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school in Bern.

Data gathering process

This seminar paper uses the data gathered during my research lab on the topic of the public discourse of the racist “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school. In a first step, data was gathered by systematically going through and reviewing newspaper articles, official documents of the city council, blogposts, and videos of the presentations of the five groups selected for the final round of the competition. All data was collected and organized through the platform Zotero. In addition to the gathering of data across these different media, semi-structured interviews were led with four people, who were involved in some way around discourse surrounding the “Wandbild”. The first interview was led with Stanislas Zimmermann, an architect, and member of the Kommission für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (KiöR, commission for art in public spaces), as well as the president of the jury for the competition. The second interview was led with Jürg Lädach, director of the Wylergut school, that houses the racist “Wandbild”, and a

member of the jury for the competition. The third interview was led with Annina Zimmermann, who was responsible for the management of the project “Wettbewerb” and its’ acting secretary, as well as a specialist for art in public spaces. The final interview was led with Angela Wittwer, one of the members of the winning group “Das Wandbild muss weg!”. A guideline for the interviews was prepared, with the main part of the questions being similar, in order to gather comparable data, as well as some questions specifically catered towards the knowledge and specialty of discipline of the person interviewed. By combining the data collected through the different media and the data gathered through the interviews, a timeline with relevant information was created as a part of the research lab, serving as a basis for this seminar paper.

Results: presenting the data from the interviews

In this section the main results gathered from the interviews with the four people involved in the process of the contestation of the racist “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school will be presented. The results will feature the different viewpoints of the interviewees to relevant topics on the topic and process of the contestation of the “Wandbild”.

Problematic aspects of the “Wandbild” and dealing with them

A variety of aspects were named by the interview partners regarding the problematic conditions and how to deal with them. All of the people interviewed agreed on the fact, that one problematic aspect of the “Wandbild” was its’ location. The setting of the school, especially a school visited by students aged 6 to 12 years old, was considered an inappropriate location for the “Wandbild”. For Angela Wittwer, member of the winning group “das Wandbild muss weg!”, it was very problematic, that young and impressionable students were seeing the “Wandbild” on a daily basis, as this reproduces racist thinking patterns. The age of the students makes a proper contextualization of the racist images difficult, as the topic of racism is broad and extensive, and there is no “right” way to look at it or teach it. Stanislas Zimmermann, president of the competition jury, mentioned in his interview that he found the school’s way of dealing with the racist images problematic. Prior to the competition, the school dealt with the racist images by covering them up with drawings and paintings created by students. During the interview with the director Jürg Lädach, this was still the case in March 2022 (see cover image). Jürg Lädach mentioned that it was a problem, that the images were no longer contemporary, something he realized as soon as he started his position as school director.

However, there was another problematic aspect because the “Wandbild” was protected by “Denkmalschutz” (monument protection) and this presented institutional hurdles too high for him to battle. Time was an important element which was also mentioned in different ways by Annina Zimmermann and Jürg Lädach. For Annina Zimmermann, time was a problematic aspect, as she found it difficult to leave the “Wandbild” without contextualization during the process of the Wettbewerb, as the institutional process always takes a long time. The outcome was further prolonged because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Jürg Lädach’s point focused more on the dimension of time in connection to context. His concern was regarding the right to remove something (the “Wandbild” in this case) that had been there for a long time and take it out of its historic context. This connects to the topic of contextualization, a common observation made by all of the interviewees. They all agreed that images such as the ones for the letters C, I, and N, need proper contextualization. Context was additionally crucial during the entire contestation process of the “Wandbild” for Lädach. He regarded it as problematic that the example of the “Wandbild” was being looked at without considering the historic setting of the time in which it was painted. For Angela Wittwer, contextualization was especially essential with regard to the topic of colonial cultural heritage, such as the “Wandbild”. Properly contextualizing racist cultural assets of the “Wandbild” was an important focus for the winning group.

Angela Wittwer reflected on the general question of whether the “Wandbild” is racist and argued, that racism is not an opinion. She stated that if a person feels affected and hurt by any form of racism, they should not have to explain or justify themselves. She argues that racism both works on a individual as well as on a structural level and that it is our job as a society to critically deal with the heritage of colonial past and its ongoing effects in the present.

Lastly, Annina Zimmermann reflected on the blind spot that the leftist artists Zbinden and Jordi had regarding racism in 1949. The artists wanted to highlight through their pictures how wonderful and rich in culture our world is, but by choosing racial images, performed what Zimmermann called benevolent racism (“wohlwollender Rassismus”).

Potential of the competition format for to the public discourse about racism

The format of the competition to find a suitable solution for what to do with the “Wandbild” is a new, institutional way of discussing and acting upon racist traces in public spaces. According to Stanislas Zimmermann and Annina Zimmermann, the main goal of the competition format was to enable and spark a public debate around the topic of the “Wandbild” and to in turn find

potential ways of dealing with it. The format of the competition enabled the general public to actively participate in the discussion and to contribute their own ideas. The format required an interdisciplinary approach, thus offering a more nuanced way to come to terms with the “Wandbild”. Having a competition furthermore encouraged highlighting the variety of ways that the “Wandbild” could be dealt with and that there is no single right or correct way to achieve this. Annina Zimmermann reported that one goal of the format was set up so groups could compete with each other, but that they were also able to complement each other with their ideas in various ways. The ideas created during this process were expected to further feed the public debate on the topic. Stanislas Zimmermann stated that the jury considered that moving the “Wandbild” would spark the biggest public discussion, which was one of their main goals for the competition. School director Jürg Lädach thought that it was valuable that the competition format offered a platform to discuss the problematic “Wandbild” but found that the media attention the school and the “Wandbild” received were out of proportion in regard to his perceived extent of the problem. Angela Wittwer reflected on the positive possibilities enabled through the competition format, which fostered the individual team members’ knowledge in their respective disciplines, as well as encouraged her group to pursue their more radical goal to remove the “Wandbild” entirely from the school and to find a more suitable place for it. The entire process led to a debate with Swiss society, which turned out to be beneficial and fruitful for the winning group chosen. However, Angela Wittwer stated that the administrative and bureaucratic hurdles were a hassle for the winning team, after their idea was selected, prolonging the process even further.

Influence of the activist involvement (“Übermalung”) on the public discourse around the “Wandbild”

As previously mentioned in the introduction, during this time of waiting when nothing happened in the process around the “Wandbild”, anonymous activists went into the school and painted over the letters C, I and N, to leave a sign symbolizing racist images, such as these, cannot be left uncontested or left without context any longer. The people interviewed reported contrasting opinions interpreting this activist act and in turn its influence on the public discourse surrounding the “Wandbild”. The school director Jürg Lädach stressed the illegality of the activists’ action and argued against illegal means, calling their action an unjustified act of vandalism. Furthermore, he did not agree with the city’s decision to not press charges against the activists, as he found that showing understanding for acts of vandalism was not

acceptable in any discussion. Jury president Stanislas Zimmermann argued that the conservation of the “Wandbild” was compromised, which had an influence on the value from an artistic point of view. Nevertheless, Stanislas Zimmermann stated that the “Wandbild” gained a new historical dimension through the “Übermalung”, which gives it even more historical richness. Angela Wittwer agreed with this statement and reported, that the winning group agreed that the “Wandbild” gained even more historic context and value. Unlike Jürg Lädach, Angela Wittwer said that she felt relieved, maybe also a bit happy, that the racist images were not as visible as before. The winning group reflected even further if the activist actions already did all the work for them, but collectively felt that the “Wandbild” still needed more contextualization, partly because the outlines of the racist images were still visible. The fact that the city did not press charges against the anonymous activists was another thing that made Angela Wittwer happy, as this showed understanding for the activists reasoning, thereby showing some extent of support. According to Annina Zimmermann, painting over the letters C, I, and N, had different consequences for the discourse and process of the “Wandbild”. She perceived the activist involvement as unfair for the groups that were in the process of working on their project ideas and now had to rethink their ideas because of the “Übermalung”. Having said that, she understood the reasons for the activists’ actions and agrees with Angela Wittwer and Stanislas Zimmermann, that the paint gives the “Wandbild” more historical substance. The aggression of the black color in her opinion, represents the self-empowerment of the activists, which causes self-reflection on the topic of racism in general. Annina Zimmermann also stated that it was now easier for her to know that something had been done and that the “Wandbild” was not left in its original state during the time of the lockdown, when nothing was being done. She believes that it would have been problematic to just leave the “Wandbild” as it was for such a long time.

Influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement on the public discourse around the “Wandbild”

The public discourse around the racist imagery in the “Wandbild” was set during a time when the controversy around racism was very present. Waves of mass protests broke out all over the world following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in the United States of America. All interviewed people agreed that the political landscape in Switzerland at the time had an influence on dealing with the example of the “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school. Jürg Lädach argued that without the political pressure the city council felt during that time of extensive

media coverage, the example of the “Wandbild” might not even have been dealt with in such a quick and intensive manner. Jury president Stanislas Zimmermann agreed with this statement, arguing that he believed that the political pressure at the time ensured that the discussion surrounding the “Wandbild” was accelerated and that it most likely would have taken much longer, if not for the influence of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Annina Zimmermann and Jürg Lädach agreed on the fact, that the city council’s decision to not press charges against the anonymous activists who painted over the letters C, I, and N with black color, was influenced by the Black Lives Matter Movement and the high extent of political pressure they felt. Angela Wittwer contributed to these statements as well, reporting that the political landscape was ideal to present a more radical idea such as entirely removing the “Wandbild” from the school. Moreover, she argued that the political landscape inspired people to strive for changes in matters such as the “Wandbild”, which had been problematized long before the public discourse around it took flight. New ways of dealing with racist or colonial objects were now wanted due to political climate and actively sought, which can be exemplified through the example of the “Wandbild”. This want for action favored the idea of removing the “Wandbild”. The Black Lives Matter Movement and the general political setting in Switzerland not only led to the enabling of a public discourse surrounding the “Wandbild”, but also initiated debates in other spheres of society. According to Stanislas Zimmermann, the current topic of dealing with Switzerland’s colonial past led museums to more actively deal with this topic. These circumstances might have heightened the interest for the “Wandbild” by the Bern historic museum.

The topic of the Black Lives Matter Movement was also discussed by the media. In an article for the newspaper Republik in 2022, Jovita dos Santos Pinto and Stefanie Boulila highlight how the political situation made experienced racism in Switzerland visible and criticized structurally anchored racism.

Discussion

The public discourse around the racist “Wandbild” has exposed various stakeholders interested in the process. Alongside the competition format, many newspaper articles, TV spots and events discussing the topic took place, searching for possible ways of dealing with the “Wandbild” in the Wylergut school. A broad spectrum of opinions and positions could be found in the group of multiple stakeholders, which led to the contestation of the racist ABC “Wandbild” and created an animated public discussion. The positions ranged from activists,

that painted over the racist images C, I, and N without permission, to more institutionally radical suggestions like the idea to move the “Wandbild” to a museum, various interdisciplinary ideas of how to properly contextualize the “Wandbild” in the school Wylergut, and to people that did not really think the “Wandbild” was a problem that needed to be contested in the first place. Most people involved in the public discourse however, believed that the “Wandbild” at least had some problematic aspects. It was generally agreed, that the Wylergut school in Bern, that teaches children from 6-12 years old, was not the right location for the “Wandbild”. Most stakeholders involved acknowledged, that a proper contextualization would be confusing for children that young, and that an artistic adaptation of the “Wandbild” at the school would prevent it to be seen by as many people as if it were to be contextualized in a museum.

When the “Wandbild” was first problematized in the media, the Kommission für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (KiöR, commission for art in public spaces) announced, that there was going to be a competition for interdisciplinary teams to provide possible ways of dealing with the “Wandbild”. This competition format offered a new way of institutionally dealing with racism in public spaces. The main goal for this format was that it would spark an extensive public discussion around the topic of the “Wandbild”. Additionally, the competition highlighted, that there is not one right way of dealing with these racist images, but that there are several possible ways of reflecting on racist practices.

Although the format by the KiöR invited all people and groups interested in involving themselves and contributing to the discussion on how to best deal with the “Wandbild”, it was vandalized by activists⁴ during the lockdown. There were a variety of reactions to the activists painting over the racist images, from relief, to happiness, to disappointment, and incomprehension. The “Übermalung” did however further spark the discussion and media attention surrounding the racist “Wandbild”, which, under the line, was one of the main goals of the format. Some of the interviewed people agreed that the black paint added a new historical dimension to the “Wandbild”, making the competition and activist action part of its history, that cannot be forgotten when looking at it.

The political climate during and after the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter Movement around the world and in Switzerland greatly facilitated and accelerated the public discourse around the racist “Wandbild”. Jury members of the competition agreed that the political pressure stakeholders felt, enabled the format of the competition. The public discussion being

⁴ For more information see the blogpost published by barrikade.info, linked in the bibliography

considerably sped up, in comparison to how long institutional changes usually take was also agreed upon by the jury members. Additionally, all interviewees recognized the political climate as the main reason to why the city council of Bern did not press charges against the activist's vandalism of the "Wandbild", thereby indirectly supporting the activist endeavor of the people who painted over the three images.

The public discourse regarding the racist ABC "Wandbild" in the Wylergut school and the combination of an institutional approach, that was disrupted by the direct-action approach of the activists, opened the question of which way to politically take action is more effective and suitable for cases of racist objects. In a session of the seminar "Decolonizing the Swiss Urban Landscape" taught by Dr. Claske Dijkema, guest speaker, PhD student and political activist Yuvviki Dioh⁵, reflected on the different sides of institutionalized activism versus disruptive, direct-action approaches. She reflected on this question by stating that it is a question of if you want to change the system from within or from the outside, and argued that both is needed (Y. Dioh, personal communication, October 28, 2021). This statement can be applied to the example of the "Wandbild" in the Wylergut school. As a mainly institutionalized way of dealing with the racist images was chosen, but activists inserted themselves into the process by taking direct action. Yuvviki Dioh also argued that in the case of public spaces, it should be the city's responsibility that everybody should be able to visit these places without feeling discriminated. By just taking direct-action, the city is relieved of its' responsibility and is not held accountable for providing inclusive public spaces (Y. Dioh, personal communication, October 28, 2021).

The example of the racist ABC "Wandbild" therefore highlights how different stakeholders bring different approaches of dealing with racism in public spaces to the table. The city is taking action by enabling formats such as the competition to give all people a possibility to partake in the process, whereas the activists add a different, more disruptive action, speeding things up and challenging officials to act and reflect upon their privilege.

Conclusion

This seminar paper looks at potential ways of dealing with racism in public spaces by analyzing the example of the racist ABC "Wandbild" in the Wylergut school in Bern. The following research question was explored in this context: *What were the positions and actions of the*

⁵ Yuvviki Dioh is part of the collective "Vo Da", an activist group in Zurich and presented a similar case of racist imagery in the public space of Zurich's Niederdorf neighborhood

multiple stakeholders involved in dealing with the contestation of the racist ABC Wandbild in Wylergut? When the example of the racist “Wandbild” was made public following complaints by members of the Berner Rassismusstammtisch in the newspaper *der Bund* in March 2019, it received a lot of attention from different stakeholders. This upsurge in attention led to the Kommission für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (KiöR) inviting interdisciplinary teams to deliver project ideas in order to deal with the racist images of the “Wandbild”. The project idea that was selected suggested removing the “Wandbild” from the school, which was argued to be the wrong place and to contextualize the racist images of the letters C, I, and N.

The results of this seminar paper highlight the different positions of the stakeholders involved in the process and what actions they took to underline their respective positions. From an artistic point of view perspective, keeping the “Wandbild” in its original state was the main priority. Anti-racist activists and the members of the winning group prioritized the proper contextualization of the “Wandbild”, arguing for its removal to a more suitable place. For the KiöR, the main priority was enabling a public discussion surrounding the “Wandbild”, so the question of how to deal with it would be reflected on by everybody that was interested in participating in the debate. Anonymous activists prioritized timely action and took matters into their own hands.

The exceptional moment in time was indeed one that challenged the process of the contestation and the implementation of the winning groups project idea. On one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic prolonged the process of the competition, whereas on the other hand, administrative hurdles that can be traced to the nature of the institutional manner of the competition format, dragged out the timeframe of the process. Furthermore, the winning groups’ idea of moving the racist “Wandbild” to the museum went way over the allotted budget provided by the competition format. This meant that the “Das Wandbild muss weg!” group needed to fundraise the missing money, which meant the implementation of the project was further pushed back. Additionally, finding the right person to remove the “Wandbild” out of the wall in the school, was another challenge that led to extending the outcome. Even to this day, the “Wandbild” can still be found in the Wylergut school, due to administrative hurdles of service contracts between the city of Bern and the Bern historic museum.

These examples emphasize the dimension of time in institutionalized formats of dealing with racist traces in public space. Had the activists not painted over the racist images, the letters C, I, and N would still feature pictures of a person with Chinese descent, a person with Native-American descent, and a person with black skin color, amid other letters of the alphabet that mostly picture animals, without proper contextualization. It can therefore be argued that the

statement by Yuvviki Dioh, that both institutional and activist forms of dealing with racism in public spaces are greatly needed.

Due to the fact that this seminar paper only thoroughly analyzes one example of contestation of a racist object, it is unable to paint an image of how racist objects or images in the public space of Switzerland are generally dealt with. It would be interesting to analyze more similar examples, such as the case in Zurich's neighborhood Niederdorf. It would be interesting to consider the potential of Critical Race Theory in the context to education, because the "Wandbild" is still located in a public school. Further research and analysis regarding racist traces in Swiss society are needed to highlight Switzerland's responsibility and accountability in this subject matter.

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