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COMING OUT OF “THE DEATH OF THE MONUMENT”

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George Segal, *Gay*
Liberation Monument, 1992.
Christopher Park, New York.
Photo: Martin Zebracki.

Lewis Mumford, in his 1937 essay “The Death of the Monument,”¹ wrote that “the notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms; if it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.”² The statement of this American architectural critic reveals the temporal paradox inherent in monuments. Or rather, this claim may have condemned some of the traditional ‘modern’ monuments to the dustbin of history. But there is more dusting to do.

What do we need monuments for in the first place? It has been a time-honoured practice to incarnate periods and people, as well as ideologies, philosophies of life, forms of power and so on, deemed important at the time, in the shape of monuments (and thereby as a kind of testament to their historicity). In many cases, monuments have not commemorated invisible lives or ideologies, despite notable examples of monuments honouring victims of war, unknown fighters or abstract systems of belief or faith. Rather, a more apparent mechanism has been to produce stone exoskeletons for those who hold power (such as politicians and influential thinkers), rather than for ordinary citizens or the voiceless.³ In a civic square, central business district, or places

where the then ins and outs of society mattered most, it is no coincidence to stumble across a monumental statue representing a statesman.⁴ And permanence is paramount. It is therefore not accidental either that such a statue needs to remind the generation, and generations to come, of the pecking order that governs life. But whose life? And which lives matter most?

A dominant heteropatriarchal, abled and well-off society has too often reproduced itself on the same lines—in word and in image in the guise of monuments. The imperative of queer theory to question, or ‘queery’, implies an *activist* stance, in thought and practice, to challenge such normative reproductions.⁵ This is one of the places where queer studies and socially engaged art intersect.

Art critic Rosalyn Deutsche placed hegemonic normativity at the heart of the treatise *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*.⁶ Deutsche critiqued how material culture, including monuments and the norms that take part in it, have paid lip service to creating art that is truly public, that is to say: in the interest and inclusive of all members of society. Deutsche discussed, amongst other



Karin Daan, *Homomonument*, 1987.
Opening of Pride Amsterdam,
July 28, 2018. Photo: Martin Zebracki.

P. 42-43 : **Julita Wójcik**, *Tęcza*,
2012-2015. Warsaw. Photo: Lukas
Plewnia. www.polen-heute.de
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salient examples, Krzysztof Wodiczko's *The Homeless Projection* which was on temporary display in Union Square, New York, in 1986. For Wodiczko, Union Square is an archetype of a neoliberal "journey-in-fiction,"⁷ where the homeless, and in a broader sense the marginalised, fall between the cracks. The installation projected homeless imagery on buildings and statues, to disrupt how the permanent urban fabric recalls political hegemony and social hierarchy and inequality.⁸

The condition of the marginalised in the past still applies today. However, there is ample ground to suggest that, following the Great Recession, the gap between the haves and have-nots has only been further widened, both socially and spatially.⁹ Paradoxically, this also has been the case in places which are seen as 'developed' and 'progressive.' Populist voices have increasingly marked the new world order, (mis)using creative expression to cause further political and social rifts within and across societies. These divisions are also mediated in, and through, digitally networked spaces. We can see this in the form of proliferating alt-right memes targeted against *the* establishment to fuel social tension and cause political distortion. In a sense, such memes

perhaps function as ideological anti-monuments that epitomise the deep-seated discordance of the Twitterverse and, by extension, the online public realm.¹⁰

Feminist art historian Arlene Raven asserted that public art is no longer "a [male] hero on a horse."¹¹ Notwithstanding, this still sets the stage for a myriad of places wherein one can find permanent, phallographic monuments as relics of the traditional, heteropatriarchal society. There are some notable recent exceptions though. Marc Quinn challenged the centralisation of male able-bodiedness by crafting a sculpture in the image of the armless pregnant artist Alison Lapper for Trafalgar Square. Yet this work only made a short-lived appearance there from 2005 to 2007 and as a replica at the 2012 Summer Paralympics opening ceremony.

In most parts of the world, people identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer+ (LGBTQ+) have traditionally not seen themselves represented as heroes on the street, to say the least. Rather, their closeted psychophysical spaces have historically been made as small and invisible as possible for the public eye. LGBTQ+ people have been living so much on the





margins of society, and still do in the majority world, that they do not even dare to dream of anything like a permanent beacon on the street. A lasting statement, or an outward sign of acceptance of who you are, has seemed to be a distant future. Yet, LGBTQ+ activism since the late 20th century can be seen as a paradigm shift in the way it has facilitated the commissioning of public artwork that allows more visibility of marginalised LGBTQ+ voices and icons.¹²

It is perhaps not much of a surprise that places that have been in the vanguard of battles over equal rights for gender and sexual minorities have become safe harbours for LGBTQ+ people and monuments dedicated to them (although such monuments also manifest gender and sexual exclusions from within LGBTQ+ communities¹³). One can encounter memorial references to same-sex desires and relationships in historical objects of interior art, poetry, personal letters and the like.¹⁴ However, such expressive forms are a long way from permanent stone objects in public space that openly and enduringly give expression to non-heterosexual identities.

The world's first commissioned permanent and public 'gay' monument is the triangle-shaped *Homomonument* designed by Karin Daan, which was unveiled in Amsterdam's city centre in 1987.¹⁵ This shape is a reference to the pink triangle: once known as a Nazi shame badge for homosexuals, it has become an emblem of gay pride. This *homomonument* has, nevertheless, been critiqued by some as having a perceived gay male bias.¹⁶

George Segal's *Gay Liberation Monument* is another case in point, which appeared right across the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village in 1992 (so five years after the *Homomonument*'s inauguration). It represents a tribute to the Stonewall Riots in 1968 and the succeeding gay and lesbian rights movement.¹⁷ The design of the sculpture, more particularly the white casting of the statues of two seated women and two standing men, was not met without controversy. In 2015, activists blackfaced the statues of the two men as a statement against the whitewashing of the queer liberation movement, which in particular embodied Black and Brown people who fought on the movement's front line.¹⁸

A recent LGBTQ+ monument that has not weathered the ravages of time is the case of *Tęczca*, Polish for rainbow. This benign rainbow-coloured arch that artist Julita Wójcik created was unveiled in Poland's capital Warsaw in 2012. The artist associated the rainbow colour scheme with feelings of joy and values of peace and hope. *Tęczca*, nevertheless, gave rise to contempt among religious, ethno-nationalist and far-right segments of society opposing the perceived LGBTQ+ symbolism, and the very presence of the 'sexual other', as a threat to the nation.¹⁹ Repeated arson attacks resulted in the work's total destruction in 2015, thus becoming what the cultural anthropologist Weronika Plińska called the allegory of a "rainbow in flames."²⁰ LGBTQ+ activists, for their part, co-opted this structure as a monument to their persistent struggle for equal rights and acceptance. This is an interesting case, as the artist did not

initially (or explicitly) conceive of *Tęczca* as an LGBTQ+ monument. And although it no longer exists in a material state in public space, it has become a game changer, 'queering' civic debates about LGBTQ+ rights in the Polish society.

Queering, as a tenet of activism, is not reserved for gender or sexual minorities alone. Queer is a disposition towards activism, something that is 'done' rather than an identity system as such.²¹ The spirit of queer activism to fight forms of oppression, discrimination and exclusion based on gender and sexual identity (also within LGBTQ+ communities) resonates, intrinsically and reciprocally, with other elements that co-constitute one's identity—such as ethnicity, class, age, dis/ability, creed and nationality. Intersectionality, a term that Black civil rights activist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw popularised,²² has been an influential conceptual lens for gaining complex insights into social difference, and to raise more critical awareness of such difference. Accordingly, queer activism cannot be seen apart from—and should thus precisely be considered at the crossroads of—any other forms of activism with the common cause of the liberation from bigotry (or, if you like, the 'coming out' of normativity and prejudice). Queer activism may, therefore, span struggles against LGBTQ+ phobia, sexism, xenophobia, ageism, sizeism, speciesism, and, highly topical, racism.

Race/racism is the elephant in the room at present. Recent global events of the Black Lives Matter movement have led to an iconoclastic cascade of toppling statues of colonial, white male figureheads. This is not only a due reminder of the power that is (still) bestowed on ostensibly 'dead' matter. It reveals the lived matter of human beings who demonstrate that we are one and should rewrite the wrongs and reclaim the norms for social justice. Regarding the overthrowing of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol in June 2020, David Olusoga, filmmaker and Professor of Public History (University of Manchester), conveyed that this happening was "not an attack on history—this is history [emphasis added]."²³ And this history is a shared legacy *per se*. From an intersectional vantage point, the fight against systemic racial injustice has to do with the fight against any other form of social injustice.

Should white, heteronormativity have a form, we could perhaps conjure up a largely invisible monolithic monument that is yet still so palpable at this juncture. Let's rewrite white, heteronormative *his-story* to deconstruct and reclaim that monolithic monument. Let's tweak the closing phrase from Roland Barthes' essay "The death of the author,"²⁴ so that it reads: "the birth of [memory] must be at the cost of the death of the [Monument]."²⁵ Or does a monument relay lived matter precisely through memory, a space and time without end?

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1. Lewis Mumford, "The death of the monument" in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, edited by J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, and N. Gabo (London: Farber and Farber, 1937), 263-270.
2. Ibid., 265.
3. For a discussion on the historical, transitional state of monuments, see Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City* (London: Routledge, 1997).
4. The use of italics here lays stress on the figure and presumption of a Eurocentric (white) man, especially in hegemonic, Western political contexts.
5. See, e.g., Martin Zebracki, "Public activism: queering geographies of migration and social inclusivity," *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2020: 131-153.
6. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996).
7. Ibid., 6.
8. See Fred Evans, "Citizenship, art, and the voices of the city: Wodiczko's *The Homeless Projection*," in *Acts of Citizenship*, edited by Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, (London: Zed Books, 2008), 227-246, cited in Zebracki, "Public activism," op. cit., 137.
9. See, e.g., Jürgen Esslezibichler, Franziska Disslbacher, and Mathias Moser, "The victims of neoliberal globalisation and the rise of the populist vote: a comparative analysis of three recent electoral decisions," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018: 73-94.
10. For instance, see the discussion on the alt-right misappropriation of the cartoon figure Pepe the Frog in Martin Zebracki and Jason Luger, "Digital geographies of public art: new global politics," *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2019: 890-909.
11. Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 1.
12. Examples include the Dublin-based *Oscar Wilde Memorial Sculpture* (1997) and *Alan Turning Memorial* (2001) in Manchester.
13. Think of the absence and underrepresentation of lesbians in LGBTQ+ monuments, as examined in Thomas R. Dunn, "Whence the lesbian in queer monumentality? Intersections of gender and sexuality in public memory," *Southern Communication Journal*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2017: 203-215.
14. See, e.g., Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex between Women in Britain from 1780 to 1970* (London: Routledge, 2001).
15. For an informative overview of such monuments, see Joseph Orangias, Jeannie Simms, and Sloane French, "The cultural functions and social potential of queer monuments: a preliminary inventory and analysis," *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 65, no. 6, 2018: 705-726.
16. See Martin Zebracki, "Homomonument as queer micropublic: an emotional geography of sexual citizenship," *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie (Journal of Economic and Social Geography)*, vol. 108, no. 3, 2017: 345-355.
17. See my auto-ethnographical response to the *Gay Liberation Monument*, including the use of poetry and photography, in Martin Zebracki, "Queerly feeling art in public: the Gay Liberation Mo(nu)ment," in *Non-Representational Theory and the Creative Arts*, edited by Candice P. Boyd and Christian Edwardes (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 85-100.
18. *Autostraddle*, "Anonymous Activists Just Painted the Stonewall Statues Brown for Miss Major," August, 2015. [Online]: bit.ly/32bxIPw.
19. See Karol Sienkiewicz/HsZ, "Julita Wójcik," 2006/2019. [Online]: bit.ly/214OKCt; Hanna Kozłowska, "Rainbow becomes a prism to view gay rights," *The New York Times - The Warsaw Journal*, March 21, 2013. [Online]: nyti.ms/2Jy3MkK.
20. Weronika Plińska, "Rainbow in flames," *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, 9, 2015. [Online]: bit.ly/3oS7KVq.
21. I have also argued this in Zebracki, "Public activism," op. cit.
22. See Merrill Perlman, "The origin of the term 'intersectionality,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 23, 2018. [Online]: bit.ly/34Vkk4w.
23. David Olusoga, "The toppling of Edward Colston's statue is not an attack on history. It is history," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2020. [Online]: bit.ly/35ZXMsy.
24. Roland Barthes, "The death of the author," in *Image, Music, Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-148.
25. Barthes' original phrase reads: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author," *ibid.*, 148.



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