

# Of Monuments

Jeremy Strick

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On 9 April 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghdad, in the first month of the invasion of Iraq, a crowd assembled in Baghdad's Firdos square and tore down a statue of Saddam Hussein. The event was publicized widely, celebrated by many as an authentic expression of popular revolt against tyranny. Soon, however, it became embroiled in controversy as evidence emerged that the event (ultimately accomplished by American soldiers and equipment) was stage-managed by the American military. In all the ensuing debate, to my knowledge, no voices were raised to complain of the destruction of cultural heritage, nor of the erasure of history.

In 2017, following a vote of the city council, a statue of the Confederate general Robert E Lee was removed from Lee Park in Dallas, Texas (the park's name was also changed). The removal was preceded—and followed—by vigorous debate, part of a broader dispute in the United States over monuments to the Confederacy, as well as those who owned or profited from slavery, or those who, following Emancipation, perpetrated or profited from racial violence. This ongoing conflict parallels similar arguments taking place currently in Britain and other European countries.

The debate over Confederate monuments pits those who frame their complaints over what they claim is the destruction of heritage and the erasure of history against those who note the historical inauthenticity of the monuments, which were for the most part created not as memorials immediately after the Civil War, but a generation or more later, following the defeat of Reconstruction. They served as ideological and emotional buttresses to the institutions of segregation and disenfranchisement, and the ruthless exploitation then being enforced against Black Americans (the Lee monument dates from 1936). In any case, opponents of the monuments note that these objects portray individuals who fought to maintain an institution that can only be considered one of history's great crimes—they do not deserve a place of public veneration.

As the debate proceeded in Dallas, one voice spoke in defense of the Lee monument, but from a somewhat different perspective. The art critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, also an eminent scholar of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting, argued not in support of Confederate monuments in general, but rather in

defense of the Lee monument in particular and of the artist who created it. That artist, Alexander Phimister Proctor, the critic noted, was a sculptor of public monuments of some significance, and his autobiography and other works demonstrate that he was not a racist. His reputation and his intentions for the Lee monument, the critic argued, merited serious consideration.

Though this apology hardly represents the summit of this critic's scholarship or critical evaluation, the piece, in its mixing, if not confusion, of categories, unwittingly points to contradictions in the ways in which works that carry an ostensible public purpose are differentiated from those evaluated as manifestations of personal artistic expression. These contradictions now confront the field of public art as well as art museums and other public-facing art institutions.

Effectively, the critic asks us to consider the Lee monument as we would a work of art in an art museum. Art museums (as opposed to museums of history or those dedicated exclusively to portraiture) are often filled with portraits, and many of those portraits represent wholly despicable individuals. Until recently, very few people cared. Even now, for the most part, this is still the case. And nor are we supposed to care: it is generally understood that paintings and sculptures and other works are displayed in an art museum not because of who they represent, but because of who made them. No doubt the identity of the sitter is of interest—and many museums have begun the project of rewriting object labels and other didactics to provide more extensive information about those who commissioned works of art as well as those they portray—but that is at best a secondary interest. Primary are the identity of the artist (if known) and the cultural and aesthetic accomplishment of the work. It is not that within an art museum the identity of the subject is without importance. To offer a contemporary example, it is impossible to understand a Warhol Marilyn without knowing who Marilyn Monroe was, and the mythology surrounding her. And yet, for the purposes of art history and of the art museum, the painting's significance lies not in the subject, but in how that subject was leveraged, adapted, and transformed to create a work of art of exceptional resonance and influence.

For monuments, traditionally the opposite has obtained. Here the identity of the subject—whether person, deity, or allegory—



Fig 1. *Acción de Duelo* (Doris Salcedo 2007, candles, approx. 267 x 350ft).  
Ephemeral public project, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá 2007. Credit: Juan Fernando Castro.

is primary, while the identity of the artist (with a few notable exceptions, such as Michelangelo's *David*)—is held to be of interest primarily to art aficionados. To put the matter bluntly, the categories of monument and art, while overlapping, are not synonymous. The public purpose of a monument overrides, if not overwhelms, its artistic nature, whereas the aesthetic purpose of a work of art integrates, if not overrides, whatever public message or purpose it might have carried. The distinction, however, is not one of inherent nature nor of artistic intention. It is entirely a matter of context. Remove a monument from the public square to the precinct of a museum, and it becomes a work of art. Transfer a work of art that has any commemorative or allegorical iconography from a museum to public space, and it becomes a monument.

It may be that this distinction between monument and artwork represents an anachronism. If so, that anachronism is roughly coeval with the period from the advent of Modernism to the present day. I work in a museum, the Nasher Sculpture Center, that is devoted to modern and contemporary sculpture. Our collection stretches from works by Degas, Daumier, and Rodin, to the most recent expressions of contemporary art, with works by artists such as Phyllida Barlow, Melvin Edwards, and Simone Leigh. A number of works in our collection are of sufficient scale to occupy public space. None were created to be, nor would now be considered, monuments.

While the history of Modernism is dotted with monuments, a few—like Rodin's *Burgers of Calais*—quite famous, the production of monuments and memorials generally did not represent the summit

of Modernist sculptural ambition. It is perhaps telling that the most influential of all Modernist monuments, Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, was never built (and its talismanic importance may be all the greater for that fact). Whether it is the case that Modernist artists have largely abjured such commissions, or that their work was not deemed appropriate for the purpose, or both, the result has been the same.

But Modernist sculpture, and sculpture that derives from the Modernist tradition, is hardly absent from public space. Often such sculptures are not described as monuments but rather, as belonging to another overlapping category, public sculpture. Public sculpture certainly includes monuments, but it is not limited to works that carry out a memorializing function. Indeed, a great deal of public sculpture, whether figurative or abstract, serves no public role other than to appear as itself, perhaps in relation to the environment into which it is set. In effect, public art, as a category, turns public space into the equivalent of museum space—one where aesthetic contemplation is primary. We can think of it as a kind of categorical workaround, allowing work to be produced for public space that does not carry the traditional burdens and associations of public representation.

The schema offered above is necessarily crude, and one can cite any number of nuances and exceptions (for example, what twentieth-century monument has proven more successful than Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, a sculpture that fits fully and resolutely within the terms of Modernism?). I think it more important to

note, however, that in recent years the schema has come under pressure from two directions: from those who would question the notion of the art museum as an otherwise value-free aesthetic space (epitomized in the fictive framing of the so-called 'white cube'), and from those practitioners of public art who do not wish to cede the memorializing or socially engaged role. In that latter group would be those who work in the field of social sculpture or, as it is sometimes called, 'social practice'.

That last desire carries particular urgency for those artists who choose to treat subjects and work in spaces and communities that have heretofore gone largely without representation, or that have only been represented by those outside their communities, with interests inimical to their own. I speak most especially of art that seeks to represent people of color, or that might be set within communities of color. There is a legitimate longing for public art that can speak to and about these communities, that can recover histories that have been forgotten, neglected, or covered up, provide common points of reference, and serve as a source of inspiration and unification. None of this presupposes a single artistic language, and the range of potential artistic response is vast, capacious enough to include major works by three winners of the Nasher Sculpture Center's annual Nasher Prize—Doris Salcedo, Theaster Gates, and Michael Rakowitz—along with numerous others.

At the Nasher Sculpture Center, we are working to respond to this evolving understanding of public art through an ongoing project launched last fall called Nasher Public. The project manifests both inside the museum, and outside throughout the greater Dallas area. Inside, we have converted our former shop to a storefront gallery, fully visible from the street. Because of its unique placement, this

can be entered free of charge before accessing the main body of the museum. For that space we commission artists working in North Texas to create works which will be exhibited for brief, three-week runs, allowing us to work with an unusually large number of artists. Most of those commissions have been awarded to artists of color, and a number of the works they've created have served a distinctly memorializing function.

Outside the museum, we're working with a number of partners, private companies and individuals, as well as nonprofits—social service agencies, arts organizations, churches, and public land conservancies—to commission sculpture, either temporary or permanent, by North Texas artists in publicly accessible sites around the city. Many of those sites are located in neighborhoods from which public art has heretofore been absent, and the artists selected often hail from those neighborhoods, while their works may address themes, topics, and histories specific to those locations. Just recently, we helped launch the first of these outside projects, a collaboration with the community-centered arts organization Artillery, that involves restoration and preservation of a shotgun house located in a historically Black neighborhood, a community now threatened by gentrification—as well as the staging of performances based upon a recovered diary and other documentation. The primary goal of Nasher Public is not to create a new generation of monuments. We wish simply to enhance direct access to works of art at the Nasher and throughout our region, while providing direct support to artists working in it, even as we continue our national and international programs. But responding to a changing understanding of public art and the role it can play in enhancing civil discourse, Nasher Public aspires to contribute to an international conversation about the nature, role, and future of monuments.



Fig 2. Dorchester Projects (Theaster Gates 2009). Credit: Theaster Gates.



*Fig 3. The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh) (Michael Rakowitz 2018, Middle Eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, labels, sound, and drawings). Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London 2018. Credit: Michael Rakowitz.*



Fig 4. Grit/Grind (Giovanni Valderas 2020). Nasher Public, Dallas, Texas 2020. Credit: Kevin Todora.



Fig 5. At the Artillery shotgun houses. Credit: Nino G.