

A Questionnaire on Monuments

From Charlottesville to Cape Town, there have been struggles over monuments and other markers involving histories of racial conflict. How do these charged situations shed light on the ethics of images in civil society today? Speaking generally or with specific examples in mind, please consider any of the following questions: What histories do these public symbols represent, what histories do they obscure, and what models of memory do they imply? How do they do this work, and how might they do it differently? What social and political forces are in play in their erection or dismantling? Should artists, writers, and art historians seek a new intersection of theory and praxis in the social struggles around such monuments and markers? How might these debates relate to the question of who is authorized to work with particular images and archives?

—Leah Dickerman, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty

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On the evening of December 20, 2017, several Confederate monuments were swiftly removed from Memphis following the sale of two city parks to a nonprofit called Memphis Greenspace. The next day, Van Turner, Jr., director and president of Memphis Greenspace as well as Shelby County commissioner, held a press conference in which he delivered the following statement: Memphis Greenspace had “found a solution to remove a barrier to entry to these parks so that activation of the parks could begin. And this is only the beginning. There are other parks that need to be liberated from mediocrity and returned to the people as a unifying asset.”⁸ I begin with this statement because I find it formidably strange, its collage of corporate cant, activist watchwords, and urban-planning jargon at once shrewd and unsettling. It suggests that public space must both be free(d) and configured as property, unrestricted and yet binding. And it does so through inexplicit expressions—“barrier to entry,” “liberated from mediocrity,” “unifying asset,” the “activation” of space—that rub orthogonal shoulders in the cramped space of a couple sentences. These are words forged under duress, one name for which might be *monumentality*.

I mean by this that monuments exert a force over signification in public space, legitimizing some representations while driving others underground, where they might show themselves only in the buckling surface of statements like Turner’s. What remains tacit in the press conference is a set of positive terms for communities of color and systems of racial oppression. They’re not too difficult to puzzle out: “barriers to entry,” meaning whiteness, in both its broad and local manifestations; “activation,” meaning blackness; “liberated,” meaning made livable for black people; and “mediocrity,” a superbly cutting description of white supremacy. Even the corporate locution “unifying assets” speaks less to the privatization of public land than to a requisite changing-of-hands. The parks must not just be open to the community but claimed as its property, provided the goal is to undo the spatial and psychic domination of the statues. Their role as both representations of a regional past and representatives of a political present make their occupation of a discrete column of space in the parks but the visible extension of the state’s proprietorship (a state, needless to say, built in part on the institution of slavery).⁹ We can see the occluded meanings in Turner’s statement as the upshot

8. With the approval of the City Council, Memphis mayor Jim Strickland sold the parks on December 20, at \$1,000 apiece, to the nonprofit, which swiftly removed the monuments from the land it henceforth legally possessed. The arrangement had been quietly set in motion some months before—a fail-safe in the utterly predictable event that the Tennessee Historical Commission, an agency overseeing the state’s historic preservation, would deny the City Council’s request to remove the statues. Memphis Greenspace filed its incorporation papers in October. Van Turner, Jr., “Press Conference on the Sale of Health Sciences Park and Memphis Park to Memphis Greenspace, Inc.,” December 21, 2017, <http://wreg.com/2017/12/21/memphis-greenspace-addresses-purchase-of-parks/>.

9. On the state’s “pre-occupation” of public space, by which it grants a platform for free and

of a notion of public space oriented toward the maintenance of institutions rather than their transformation, whether that space be marked by the podium of the press conference or by the statue in the public park.¹⁰ Or, for that matter, by the scholarly framing of this questionnaire. When we mean—or perhaps need—to discuss race in America, we end up discussing monuments instead.

The slippage seems understandable. There was something exhilarating about the sudden prominence of monuments in national headlines over the past year. With it came a sense that disciplinary expertise might prove clarifying, and even politically powerful. In a number of instances, it has been both. Scholars and art historians firmly related the origins of Confederate monuments in historical waves of white supremacy, and they parsed the rhetoric of the debates from the ideological operations of the statues themselves.¹¹ At the same time, we art historians have been asked to weigh in on concerns that seem to me not just remote from concrete disputes, but tone deaf. I have trouble fretting over the fate of bronze statues—not least because it has been the destiny of so many of their forerunners to be gathered up and melted down in times of revolution or war—when the urgent problem is what’s happening to black bodies. Against the arresting images of statues dragged down, by force or by legal loophole, anxieties over the abstract loss of a leaf in the historical record look feeble and misplaced. It is hard to take too seriously the concern that the extirpation of these statues may make us forget this country’s violent racist foundations, when their legacy is so grievously apparent today. And it is callous to privilege the preservation of these statues or the traces-of-there-having-been-statues, even as object lessons, over the security and sanity of black Americans.

But if the public arena demands reparative actions—among which I would include a broad spectrum of performances and counter-monuments, from William Pope.L’s crawls to Nona Faustine’s photographs of her immobile naked body at the sites of former slave auctions, to the community concerts that Memphis Greenspace plans for its parks—there are also private zones where other reckonings with monuments might occur. Between 1939 and 1945, as Fascism plunged France and Switzerland into a different crisis of national self-representation, Alberto Giacometti toiled over countless miniature figures, most no taller than a centimeter. He anchored each in its own (comparatively) oversized pedestal, so that it resembled a monument viewed at some long distance. The project was melancholy and compulsive, as well as historically and monographically unassimil-

democratic assembly on the condition of its (potentially violent assertion of) control over that space, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 102.

10. I am grateful to Kris Cohen for his clarifying discussion of these concepts with me.

11. For instance, Dell Upton’s exemplary response to Charlottesville earlier this fall. Dell Upton, “Confederate Monuments and Civil Values in the Wake of Charlottesville,” *Society of Architectural Historians Blog*, September 13, 2017, <http://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-blog/sah-blog/2017/09/13/confederate-monuments-and-civic-values-in-the-wake-of-charlottesville>.

able. Despite this, it also engaged upheavals of national representation by yielding up the monument as a function of unstable and asymmetrical relations. Giacometti's miniatures mark the dread of the body's disintegrating boundaries in both fascism and modern sculpture through the third body they mutually, and monumentally, address: the nation. That engagement passed largely unnoticed, however, and illuminating its insights today requires a similar involution of the contemporary stakes around monumentality.

Such work, by the artist as well as the art historian, may well appear like a pale (and politically unsatisfactory) echo of action in the public arena. The counter-monument, like the monument, derives its potency from recognition. For Louis Marin, it was recognition that gave images the power to absorb and replace violent expressions of force; seeing and narrating images as representatives of sovereignty both legitimized the state and constituted those who recognized its symbols as the state's subjects.¹² But it is the nature of anti-monumental sculpture to elude notice, at least for a while. What it does, it does in private, and often inconclusively. Yet long-range problems may demand slow insights as much as swift solutions—both Memphis Greenspace *and* Giacometti, both the action that far outstrips our art-historical questions about statues, and the art whose relevance may only become clear when we learn to ask those questions differently.

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12. Louis Marin, "Introduction: L'être de l'image et son efficace," in *Des Pouvoirs de l'image: Gloses* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1993), p. 14. See also Roger Chartier, "The Powers and Limits of Representation," in *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 94–95.