

Creating Social Sculpture: Monuments Memories and Missing Passages

The world forgets easily, too easily, what it does not like to remember.

—Jacob Riis

History is all around us: it's constantly in dialogue with us. The past is present in our daily lives, it implicates us, angers us, reinforces and dismisses our beliefs.

This artwork considers the various ways in which history and monument-making intersect with collective and individual memories.

The Greeks and Romans created statues and monuments to honour warriors, leaders, poets, and philosophers.

Historian and writer Helke Rausch writes that the 19th century was consumed with "statuomania." Between 1848 and 1914 Paris erected seventy-eight new statues, Berlin fifty-nine, and London sixty-one. These statues are primarily monuments honouring the heroic lives of men.

Recently during the first Covid-19 lockdown many of us witnessed creative expressions of gratitude for frontline workers. Their selflessness and professionalism were represented in murals, posters, and performances.

The police killings of African Americans—George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, amongst others—brought about worldwide artistic responses in the forms of murals, posters, protests, and paintings strengthening the resolve and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement.

How do we honour and express gratitude for those who have participated in exemplary acts and lived exemplary lives?

Should we manipulate and juxtapose inherited statues with new plaques and artwork that represent other narratives and individuals?

Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* (1982) and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979) are both powerful, experiential and memorable works that have broad appeal. The rise of public art done by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Yinka Shonibare and Rodney Graham suggest that a variety of media can be manipulated to reveal contemporary and historical narratives and ideas.

The moving experience and the monumentality of the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* spreading 1,200,000 feet across a stadium field leaves many in tears. Each section is a biographical work, devoted to a life cut short by AIDS. This mixed media community artwork, the largest to date, is formed from textile and found objects. It speaks to the loss families and friends have experienced. It has become a touchstone for many and a point of closure for some.

How do we effectively include oral histories, notions of memorializing, and remembrance as part of collective dialogue in pursuit of monument making? Watching a Ken Burns series on PBS, or *Marco Polo* on Netflix calls up elements of what is real versus what is representative. What does one include in remaking a passage of history and what does one exclude? These examples serve as a reminder that public monuments and statues can be made from a variety of contemporary and historic media.

I have been taking photographs for over three decades. My interest in photomontage, collage, installation and writing are a more recent exploration. My hope is to incorporate new disciplines that represent my ongoing interests in identity, community and storytelling.

In this work, the archiving, cherry-picking and compartmentalizing of historical narratives that we all engage in are referenced by dresser drawers. The bottles and IV bags speak to the creative flow and possibilities of transformation that can shift the meanings of problematic statues and monuments.

Isn't it time to consider those missing pages and passages of history? Can we move on from the Titanic™ and begin some serious scientific and artistic research into the hundreds of thousands of lives that rest at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean originating from the Middle Passage? This is just one of many hidden compartments of history that needs to be remembered.

It is better to renounce revealed truths, even if they exalt us by their splendour or if we find them convenient... It is better to contend oneself with other more modest and less exciting truths, those one acquires painfully, little by little and without shortcuts, with study, discussion, and reasoning, those that can be verified and demonstrated.

—Primo Levi