

Offending Statues and the Dilemma of Commemoration

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Thomas J. Price, *Reaching Out* (detail), 2020. Silicone bronze, 290 x 90 x 86 cm. Photo: Emily Lovell

Until the mid-20th century, governments (especially in America and Europe) erected propagandistic statues and memorials at will, works that quickly melted into the realm of invisible street furniture

alongside lamp posts and traffic lights. Over the last 50 years, however, public sculpture has become properly public. With the advent of protest culture in the 1960s and '70s, the Land Art movement, and the popularity of participatory art, the public has increasingly demanded, and achieved, a say in what monuments are placed in public space.

For artists, making public sculpture under such scrutiny can be a nightmare. As Grayson Perry, who has avoided this particular quagmire himself, once told me: “I think it’s so compromised. It’s all that health and safety and not offending anybody.” Maggi Hambling recently confronted these requirements, and ran afoul of the last one. Her shiny nude sculpture commemorating the 18th-century forerunner of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, which was unveiled in London in November 2020, managed to offend a host of critics, activists, educators, and members of the public. Few observers could understand why, in the 21st century, a female artist would choose to honor the radical philosopher and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by creating a figure without clothes. Objections to the statue’s nudity have nothing to do with prudishness, responding instead to the long history of women’s bodies being objectified. The notion of an artist proposing a naked Admiral Horatio Nelson or Winston Churchill would be inconceivable, yet Hambling’s sculpture passed a consultation process involving nearly 750 people in a 10-year campaign sponsored by a group called Mary on the Green. The final shortlist came down to Hambling’s work and a sculpture by Martin Jennings of Wollstonecraft in dress and bonnet, with a quill in one hand and the other resting on a pile of books on a semicircular bench.



Hambling, *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* (detail), 2020. Silvered bronze and black granite, 10 ft. high.

Photo: Ioana Marinescu, Courtesy Mary on the Green

Hambling argues that her £143,300 (\$190,000) silvered-bronze sculpture has been misunderstood. *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* was intended to capture the spirit of the subject rather than any historical likeness, she says. “The point is that she has to be naked because clothes define people,” Hambling [told the *Evening Standard*](#). Freed from the restriction of clothes, the statue is supposed to depict an “everywoman” born out of a seething mass of entangled female limbs—although one wonders how many women will relate to Hambling’s portrayal of idealized female beauty. Also puzzling is the tiny size of the figure, which is dwarfed by what looks like a surging wave of organic matter. On the other hand, the campaign group behind the statue is to be commended for seeking a more imaginative alternative to yet another figure on a plinth. Hambling’s sculpture has certainly got people talking about Wollstonecraft, which is positive, though some might feel that a representational statue would be a better entry point for discussion of her legacy, given that she is not a household name.

It comes down what we believe is the aim of contemporary public statues. Are they stand-alone artworks, or do they have a civic function? If the point is to commemorate a historical or living person, unless the subject has an extremely familiar iconography like Michael Jackson or Queen Elizabeth, most people will struggle to make the connection between the person and an abstract artwork in his or her honor. Gillian Wearing played it safe with [her naturalistic statue](#) of the suffragist campaigner Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929), which in 2018 became the first female statue to grace London’s Parliament Square. Dressed in period attire, Fawcett is depicted in bronze at age 50, when she became president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies; she holds a banner reading “Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere,” an extract from a speech that she gave in 1920. In other hands, this commission might have been bolder and more innovative—as well as more controversial—but it may not have achieved the objective of creating an accessible representation of a female icon.



Thomas J. Price, *Within the Folds (Dialogue 1)*, 2020. Cast silicone bronze, 108 x 27 x 27 in.
Part of Sculpture Milwaukee 2020.

Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki for Sculpture Milwaukee

Of course, the fact that Wollstonecraft and Fawcett have been memorialized at all marks a small step toward redressing the gender imbalance in public statuary. Among the roughly 925 public statues listed by the U.K.'s [Public Monuments & Sculpture Association](#), only 158 depict women, and that figure falls to just 25 for statues of historical, non-royal women, according to a 2016 report in the *New Statesman*. In the U.S., the gender gap is even starker. Out of 5,193 outdoor public statues, only 394—less than eight percent—are of women, compared with 4,799 figures of men, according to the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Art Inventories Catalog cited by a *Washington Post* [article](#) in 2011. That figure may have improved slightly with recent high-profile additions such as Kristen Visbal's *Fearless Girl* (2017), which stands outside the New York Stock Exchange supposedly promoting female empowerment, and the contentious nude Medusa recently installed across from the Manhattan courthouse where Harvey Weinstein was tried. *Medusa With the Head of Perseus* (2008), by Luciano Garbati, which reverses the roles of slayer and slain as laid out in the Greek myth, has been embraced in some quarters as a symbol of the #MeToo movement. While the idea of redeeming the Gorgon's evil reputation is laudable (she was, after all, the victim of rape by the god Poseidon), her portrayal—by a male artist—as a hot, naked Amazon with full, perfect breasts and hairless pudenda ultimately reinforces a sexualized and disempowering view of women.

Erecting a statue is always a political act. Who paid for it? Which community does it serve? Do all artists have equal claim to tell the stories that come with public statues? In theory, any artist should be able to interpret any narrative. However, in an era when long overdue attempts are being made to redress the art world's exclusionism and to reframe canonical representations, there may well be others better qualified to tell those stories than the white men who have traditionally enjoyed the privilege. Back in 2005, Marc Quinn's [marble sculpture](#) of the pregnant, disabled artist Alison Lapper met with a largely positive response when it was installed on the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* was seen as a touchstone for much-needed debate around disability and its representation, although some commentators have pointed out that Quinn, as a wealthy, able-bodied artist-provocateur, got more out of the fanfare than Lapper, whose art remains little known.



The empty pedestal of the statue of Edward Colton in Bristol. Photo: Caitlin Hobbs via [Twitter](#)

This past July, Quinn received a stiffer sentence in the court of public opinion. He caused a furor after secretly installing his sculpture of a Black Lives Matter protestor on an empty pedestal in Bristol after demonstrators had toppled a statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston. Quinn's young woman with her fist raised in defiance—erected without consulting the local community or authorities—was initially welcomed by some as an impromptu demonstration of kinship with the cause. But among Black artists, the overwhelming reaction was anger. “Who’s being given the opportunity? Why not actually support some young Black artists to put something up there?” the British-Ghanaian artist Larry Achiampong [posted on social media](#). “Sometimes the best thing you can actually do when you’re part of a problem is stop. Stop putting your hands on it.” British artist Thomas J. Price accused Quinn of colonizing the space in Bristol and sabotaging the reckoning process. Since 2013, Price has been taking his own steps to subvert the tradition of honoring white patricians with permanent statues; his series of monumental bronze sculptures assert the right of anonymous contemporary Black people to be acknowledged and commemorated. A number of Price’s nine-foot-tall statues have been inserted into public spaces, with recent installations in Milwaukee and London this past year. The former, *Within the Folds (Dialogue I)*, depicts a young man in a hoody and sweats, while the latter, *Reaching Out*, represents a Black “everywoman,” standing in contrapposto and looking at her mobile phone.

Rather than erecting more statues, proponents of a competing drive actively seek to destroy or remove those representing oppressive systems of authority. The police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 galvanized protestors around the world to tear down dozens of statues of slave traders, Confederate monuments, and symbols of racial injustice. This iconoclastic impulse began in 2015 when students in Cape Town defaced a statue of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes and [successfully demanded its removal](#). Since then, campaigners in Britain, Canada, India, Germany, and New Zealand have dismantled monuments to slave traders and colonial oppressors. Yet the vast number remain in place. That these statues are lightning rods for different viewpoints is apparent in the figure of Christopher Columbus, who has been condemned as a perpetrator of genocide against the indigenous Taino people of the Caribbean following recent academic research, yet is celebrated as a brave adventurer by many Italian Americans on Columbus Day (now renamed Indigenous Peoples’ Day). Many cities around the world are grappling with how to deal with their more unsavory monuments—whether they should be destroyed, relocated to museums, or used as teaching tools, their former meanings updated with corrective information. One option might be to invite artists to recontextualize these statues. British artist Hew Locke’s ongoing project “Impossible Proposals,” for instance, reimagines statues of morally objectionable patriarchs such as J Marion Sims and Peter Stuyvesant in heavily decorated life-size photographic reliefs. Drowning in cheap paraphernalia such as plastic beads, skulls, garish medals, and brass etchings of slaves, these once powerful men become fetish figures in Locke’s reworking.



Rachel Whiteread, *Holocaust Memorial*, 2000. Photo: Sonja Bachmayer

Still, even the most well-intentioned projects can go badly wrong. Despite selection by an international jury in 1996, Rachel Whiteread's austere but beautiful Nameless Library in Vienna commemorating Holocaust victims was stalled for four years by political wrangling. Politicians, the general public, and the Jewish community all found fault with it, the latter angered by the choice of a non-Jewish artist for the job and the location of the monument, which was to be built on the site of a medieval synagogue. In 2017, the Walker Art Museum became embroiled in a damaging controversy following the installation in its sculpture garden of Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2012), which evoked sites of historic executions including the gallows on which 38 men from the Dakota tribe native to the area were hanged in 1862. Durant had intended the sculpture as "a zone of discomfort for whites" that would open dialogue about the racism of the criminal justice system, but Native communities saw it as an insensitive commemoration of their trauma by someone from the same system that had persecuted their ancestors. Massive protests led to the sculpture being [dismantled and ceremonially buried](#) with the artist's cooperation. The episode highlighted the pressing need for affected communities to be involved in decisions around public sculptures.

Even seemingly less polarizing subjects like Dwight D. Eisenhower, former U.S. President and Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, are liable to stir up dispute. The \$150

million, Frank Gehry-designed memorial unveiled in September 2020 in Washington, DC, took 20 years to get off the ground, dogged by disagreements over design and funding. While Ike's qualification for a statue is undeniable, it is legitimate to ask whether America really needed a lavish tribute to yet another white military hero. Moreover, Gehry's grand architectural monument, which covers four acres and consists of two giant tableaux, a metal tapestry, and a bronze sculpture of the president as a boy, conforms to a conventional visual language that feels in urgent need of overhaul.



Phillipson, *THE END*, 2020. Photo: David Parry PA

In this age of heightened public engagement, perhaps the solution is to embrace ephemerality. Since the rotating commissions for the Fourth Plinth began in 1999, they have captivated the public, from Mark Wallinger's everyday Jesus, *Ecce Homo* (1999) to the current occupant—Heather Phillipson's playful *The End*, which features a gigantic dollop of whipped cream, topped with a cherry, a fly, and a drone that films passersby. The temporariness is key, allowing artists to be daring and reducing the red-tape. Such is the success of the Fourth Plinth that it has inspired a similar rolling project for New York's High Line, inaugurated by [Simone Leigh](#)'s monumental bust of a black woman, *Brick House*, in 2019. I suspect, however, that there will always be a place for permanent memorials. In the wake of the brouhaha around Hambling's Wollstonecraft sculpture, funding has poured in for a naturalistic bronze statue of Virginia Woolf seated on a bench in London. This one will most certainly be fully clothed.
