

MONUMENTS IN MOTION: In August 2020, the British Museum in London has announced that it has moved the bust of Sir Hans Sloane from its position on a plinth in order to present it in a changed context. The donation of Sloane's extensive collection of 71,000 artefacts to the nation in 1753 has formed the founding collection of the British Museum. The bust has been placed into a display cabinet that explains Sloane's activity as collector in the context of the British Empire and also points out that the origin of the wealth that made his collecting and subsequent donating of his collection possible, includes profits from the ownership of slaves working on Jamaican sugar plantations.

Responses to this action by the museum are viciously divided. My opinion is that the museum has done a very good and thoughtful act by re-contextualising the bust as an artefact. Museums always contextualise every single artefact they show. They cannot avoid that – and the British Museum is here also acknowledging this fact.

The arguments against the removal of questionable sculptures from public spaces, which are positions of public honour, as well as against the renaming of streets and other public places, repeat again and again: 'We must not erase history' and 'this is my cultural heritage' and 'I won't be lectured by a liberal elite' and so on. Such arguments prove first of all, that those proclaiming them accept that what has been presented to them by past generations is a somewhat neutral delivery of a true history. Similarly, arguments stating that slavery has not exclusively existed in the form of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and pointing out that Africans participated in the trade, or that during the high times of slavery, everyone of wealth in England has somehow profited from it and further, that the entire Western wealth is based on colonisation is no argument against a more visible and re-evaluated way of how the presentation of artefacts from or relating to this period, present or hide these facts.

Fact is that history can never be presented in a 'neutral' way. All history is delivered somehow edited and mediated. The culture of honouring and glorifying certain historic events or prominent personalities is always already an act of revisionism, which is subjective and one-sided and these today questionable sculptures exemplify that fact. All systems of government and political power employ art for their purposes – and therefore, where existing also the institution of museums. Philanthropy always also sanitises wealth and legitimises a power claim or status within the system, often through creating a cultural heritage supporting the relevant system.

Or, as Napoléon Bonaparte reputedly has put it: "History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon." His own personality forever subject to a bizarre veneration and personality cult, considering the facts that his wars have caused the deaths of an estimate six million Europeans and he also reinstated slavery in 1802 in French colonies.

Concerning the UK, it is a fact that history taught in schools and museums is edited when it comes to the atrocities of the British Empire and to specifically eliminate the subject of slavery, which is simply taken out of the syllabus and hardly ever mentioned as context to art and culture of its time.

The story of the memorial sculpture of the merchant

BSC ULP TURE STORMS

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Edward Colston (1636–1721) in Bristol features everything that is at issue. To sum it up in short: The bronze sculpture was created in 1895 by the sculptor John Cassidy (1860–1939) to honour Colston's philanthropy which has left a mark on the city where several institutions and landmarks are named after him. 174 years after his death –five years shy of the 20th Century– 'Colston' was a somewhat legendary figure for the city.

The fact that the wealth that made such philanthropy possible came partly from proactively participating in the Atlantic slave trade was simply ignored and edited out of consciousness. It remained out of sight. Invisible.

In 1977 the sculpture received protective status as a listed structure on its artistic and stylistic merits. Since the 1990s calls became public to re-evaluate the person that is honoured there and to remove the sculpture or at least add a plaque that refers to his participation in the murderous trade. The text for a second plaque proved impossible to be agreed on. The council refused calls for the removal of the sculpture.

In May 2020, the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in the United States ignited the Black Lives Matter protests that found continuation in the UK. In June, a protesting crowd toppled the Colston sculpture and subsequently threw it into Bristol harbour. A media storm followed: the images of those events went widely through the international press. Fierce opinions pro and con were published profusely.

A few weeks later, the British sculptor Mark Quinn placed a new monument onto the now empty plinth. He had created the sculpture in his studio after a photograph of the protester Jen Reid who posed on the empty plinth making a black power salute. Quinn placed his sculpture on the plinth one early morning without official permission. Whilst the sculpture was taken down swiftly by the authorities, the documenting images of its short life on the plinth were again widely published.

To my sensibilities, the sight of (a photograph of) this sculpture is a powerful visual argument: In 2020, the protester who questions this presentation of history belongs on that plinth far, far more than the 18th Century philanthropist whose fortune was enlarged through actively participating in the slave trade.

It is simply not a valid argument to describe the re/moval of such sculptures as 'erasing history' as the events are doing exactly the opposite: They are drawing attention to aspects of a history that has been erased. In Germany, the propaganda art of the Nazis has been removed everywhere and still most Germans have generally a strong sense of that part of their history.

By moving questionable memorials into a museum context, it becomes apparent that the multi-layered history they represent consists not only of the history of the person or event that is honoured, but just as much of the history of the glorification that led to the making and erection of the memorial in a public place of honour at the time of its making. The wider picture is that all political power systems employ art for their propaganda purposes and the removal or destruction of such artworks following a power change is just as common.

Regarding the recent sculpture-storm in the US that focuses on Confederate monuments, it is also worth to note that some of these were only erected in the early 20th Century.



1st May 1916, Potsdamer Platz in Prussian Berlin whilst the First World War was raging: Karl Liebknecht who was then a member of the Prussian parliament called for a demonstration to end the war. In 1951 the East-German government erected a plinth on this spot that should accommodate a memorial sculpture to Liebknecht. Before the statue was completed, the location of the plinth had become part of the death strip between East and West Berlin, where it remained until the fall of the wall. It was removed in 1995 as part of building work on what was then privately owned land. In 2003 it was reinstalled with an explaining plaque explaining it as artefact of the city's history.

And it is well worth to remember that the very birth hour of the independent United States caused the immediate destruction of an iconic statue: In New York in July 1776, the equestrian sculpture of the much-hated monarch George III (in the pose of a Roman emperor) was pulled from its plinth and melted down. It was sent from London in 1770.

Such statues of colonizing rulers and their aiding classes were not made for artistic striving but rather as a marker of the land: a representation of the remote ruler, a reminder of who was in power.

The Nazis in Germany used art and architecture as an essential part of their visual propaganda spectacle. That entailed eliminating previous art and styles. After the defeat of that system, the victorious Allies in turn removed and destroyed much Nazi art. This was not an act of erasing history but of erasing the glorification of that murderous ideology and system. As a German, I have to acknowledge that this is part of my cultural heritage. An awful part. I do not want the memory erased and I want all glorification of it continuously eliminated. In Communist countries of the 20th Century, statues and images of Marx, Engels, Lenin and others celebrated by that power system abounded in their thousands which were in turn taken down after the collapse of the system. In the Ukraine alone more than 1000 statues of Lenin were removed after 2014 as well as numerous streets were renamed.

The number of possible further examples is as long as the history of human civilisation. What is different in our current situation is that there has not been such a discernible drastic replacement of the political power system. What has changed is a way of thinking – at least for part of the population.

My own life-long passion for historic art and architecture has led me to visit countless museums, historic houses, churches, castles, palaces, parks and gardens where I admire and get inspired by art and architecture and I continue to do so. I marvel at the churches of Rome and the sheer density of their numbers but I also have an awareness of the massive wealth grab that has built these temples of mammon. Our contemporary admiration of these artefacts is certainly based on huge blind spots regarding the history of the creation of these highlights of human artistic activity – made possible most often through huge fortunes whose owners wanted to sanitise their image through philanthropy as well as legitimise their power and status through its confirmation in art.

‘Art’ is so successful for this purpose because it presents a veneer of human endeavour for artistic thriving and skill. To marvel at the resulting beauty somehow seems to be beyond worldly struggles. This is why the sculpture of Edward Colston could receive listed status on behalf of its artistic merits alone.

What is needed in our current Western postmodern, neo-liberal, media-swamped world is a revised art ‘literacy’ that goes beyond the appreciation of aesthetics, beauty, skill and ‘connoisseurship’. Art appreciation must always include a focus on what the surface of art usually attempts to hide: the circumstances of art production and its eternal use for re-presenting and re-writing history and political agendas. What is needed is an increased awareness that art old and new was and is about re-presentation, influencing and hence: PR.



Trafalgar Square in London: Its world-famous Nelson’s Column was completed in 1843 as a monument to the British victory at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The Square is home to several further sculptures and busts, most of which are commemorating military men that are little known today. One massive plinth in the corner of the north side was meant to hold an equestrian sculpture of William IV, which was never completed due to a lack of funds. The plinth remained empty for over 150 years, until since 1999 ‘The Fourth Plinth Project/Commission’ began to place sculptures by contemporary artists onto the plinth for limited periods. Artists so far have included Mark Wallinger, Rachel Whiteread, Mark Quinn, Yinka Shonibare, Hans Haake and others. These projects all in their own way reflect of the monument that is the square and give it a contemporary reflection and relevance.



In 2015 the artist Monika Oechsler has made a film installation reflecting on the Fourth Plinth: “Past Imperfect was filmed between the changeover from one contemporary artwork to the installation of the next. Seeing the empty plinth has become a rare sight and leaves room for imagining the checkered history of Trafalgar Square, from symbol of national identity and victory to protest actions and more recently mass entertainment events. The film also revisits the Victorian fascination with pyramids in particular a drawing by Col. Trench who at the time proposed that a pyramid should be built on Trafalgar Square in memory of the Napoleonic wars.”

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OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings.
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

PERCY SHELLEY



The sculptures that made up the Siegesallee in Berlin’s Tiergarten have a chequered history: Commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm II. It was made up from almost 100 white marble statues, completed in 1901. It was already subject to criticism at the time, with Kaiser Wilhelm being described as ‘Denkmalwilly’ (‘Monument-Willy’) and even ‘Reklamekaiser’ (‘Advertising-Emperor’). The Kaiser clearly wanted to confirm the legitimacy of the dynasty though he did so by completely excluding any female members. Art as PR.

In 1938, the Nazis moved the Siegesalle, along with the Siegessäule to a different location in the Tiergarten. The sculptures suffered vandalism and war damage and, considering it a symbol of German Imperialism, in 1947, the allied occupational forces oversaw the dismantling of the war-survivals that stood in an otherwise barren and war-damaged Tiergarten. They were eventually buried the in the grounds of Schloss Bellevue from where they were disinterred in 1979. Now located in Berlin’s Zitadelle, they can be visited as part of the permanent exhibition ‘Unveiled, Berlin and its Monuments’. Before the sculptures were cleaned and partially restored the artist Liane Lang had the chance to stage a series of photographs in her idiosyncratic style, adding ‘flesh-like’ body parts (objects she makes in her London studio). They present a distinct counterpoint in their vulnerability to the hard stone and monumentality of the sculptures. She inserted a variety of female characters into the mossy and broken remnants of this patriarchal Prussian line up, referencing missing queens and consorts, mothers and lovers. Her work draws attention to the fact that, far from being irrelevant to history, the women were essential, as power was fomented and alliances formed more by marriage than by armed conflict and this international bartering of daughters was largely orchestrated by women.

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