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***Monumenta Italia: A Case
Study on Women's
Representation in Public
Spaces***

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Introduction

As we walk through the streets and squares of various cities, we are often drawn to the architecture, statues, monuments, and other defining details that shape the urban landscape. These elements, from the smallest architectural ornaments to the most imposing structures, silently narrate the history and culture of the places we inhabit. We live surrounded by the physical embodiment of these narratives, where every city holds within it the stories and memories of its people, revealing the essence of their lives through its spaces and monuments.

Public spaces have increasingly become a kaleidoscope composed of different communities that traverse and reshape them from time to time with their unique experiences. Each group, with its distinct cultural and social imprints, contributes to the ever-changing identity of these spaces, turning them into vibrant arenas of interaction. Public spaces are increasingly a place of experimentation continually evolving as they respond to the fluidity of human activity and social transformation¹.

Public art, particularly monumental art, reflects more than just aesthetic choices: it embodies power structures, political ideologies, and societal values. Monuments and statues have long played a pivotal role in shaping public spaces, acting as markers of historical significance and vehicles for collective memory. The creation of a monument is an intentional act of remembrance, one that selectively commemorates specific individuals or ideals. In fact, the Italian encyclopedia Treccani's definition of the term "monument" is:

Monument (ant. moniment) n. [from Lat. *monumentum* meaning 'reminder, monument', derived from *monere* 'to remind']. - 1. a. A marker placed to commemorate a person or an event: to place, erect, or construct a monument. Specifically, a work of sculpture or decorative architecture situated in public spaces to celebrate illustrious individuals or to memorialise significant events (honorary or commemorative monuments; equestrian monument to Garibaldi), or to mark or enclose a tomb: funerary or sepulchral monument [...]².

At the same time, the German language offers several nouns to translate the concept of "monument": *Denkmal*, *Ehrenmal*, and *Mahnmal*. While all of these

¹ L. Parola, *Giù i Monumenti? Una Questione Aperta*, Einaudi, Torino, 2022, p.129.

² Treccani, *Monumento*, "Vocabolario Treccani online";
<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/monumento/> [last access on 02 September 2024]

terms share the common syllable “*mal*”, which means “sign” or “trace”, it is through their differing first syllables that it is possible to uncover important nuances in meaning and reflect on the purpose or intention behind the creation of each type of monument. For instance, *Ehrenmal* (from *ehren*, meaning “to honour”) and *Denkmal* (from *denken*, meaning “to think” or “to remember”) celebrate people or events considered notable at the time of their construction. In contrast, *Mahnmal* (from *mahnen*, meaning “to exhort”) serves as a reminder of a tragic event or period that has had harmful or devastating effects on society and the people who suffered from it³.

Monuments are first and foremost experienced by the citizens who encounter them, whoever they are and whatever their economic and social status. However, as society evolves and history takes new directions, it is inevitable that the monument may no longer reflect the value system which it once upheld, becoming a dissonance presence, no longer accepted by those who now live in the public space it occupies. Therefore, drawing on the distinctions within the German language, if the gaze of the times changes and the actions of the person commemorated are considered harmful, a *Denkmal* or *Ehrenmal* may, in retrospect, transform into a *Mahnmal*.

Furthermore, the overwhelming dominance of male figures in statues raises critical questions about which histories are preserved and whose contributions are instead overlooked or erased.

As Maurice Agulhon wrote in his *Histoire Vagabonde* in 1988, “The streets are full of beautiful women, [...] sculptural and expressionless, draped in the old-fashioned way, naked or half-naked, whose appearance [...] in any case contrasts with the modern and expressive realism of ‘great men’, invariably men”⁴. These observations from the last century have not changed at all in the last twenty years. Our cities continue to bear the signs of a lack of consideration for women’s independence and their value as social models. This imbalance prompts reflection on a deeper cultural issue: the underrepresentation or exclusion of women (and other marginalised groups) from public commemoration and, by extension, from the historical narrative.

³ I. Demangeat, *Rivelazione – Assenza – Riconoscimento – Donne*, in *Monumenta Italia*, exhibition catalogue (Turin, Recontemporary, 8th – 29th March, 2024), curated by Lisa Parola and Tea Taramino, 2024, Turin, p. 12.

⁴ M. Agulhon, *Histoire Vagabonde - Ethnologie et Politique Dans la France Contemporaine*, Gallimard, Paris, 1988, vol. 1.

This thesis aims to investigate the relationship between monuments, public space, and gender representation.

The first chapter begins by laying out the fractured nature of the public sphere and the ways in which public art serves both as a reflection of societal values and as a tool for reinforcing existing power dynamics and how it interacts with memory and community. Subsequently, it is outlined how urban spaces serve as sites of power displays, political protests, and the interplay of art in those contexts.

Then, it is explored the paradox that arises when considering that monuments, while intended to memorialise significant figures and events and anchor a community's identity through their physical presence, often fade into the background of daily life as they blend into the environment they were meant to shape. However, as societies evolve, monuments can undergo a process of revitalisation, they may be re-examined or even re-appropriated allowing them to take on new meanings and reflect the changing values and perspectives of the communities that surround them.

Through an analysis of who is chosen to be represented in public monuments, the forms these representations take, and how they are perceived – or overlooked – in daily life, this work aims to uncover the cultural and political implications of monumentality in the public sphere. More specifically, in the second chapter, it is explored, through the analysis of some case studies, the role of gender in monumental representation and how monuments often represent a “heroic” individual, usually male, while marginalising or excluding female representation. Additionally, through a critical lens, this section analyses contemporary efforts to address this gender imbalance and whether these actions are meaningful and adequately represent the complexities of women's contributions to history, if they are merely symbolic gestures, or if they still perpetuate existing stereotypes.

The third section of this paper explores contemporary artistic initiatives in Turin that address and reimagine monuments, particularly in terms of gender representation.

Drawing from my internship experience at Recontemporary, a cultural association and an exhibition and educational space, this chapter also features a detailed examination of Irene Pittatore's artistic project *Monumenta Italia*, on how this project engages the public, not only through the traditional exhibition but also

through workshops, public displays, and poster campaigns, as well as a comparison with other artistic projects, highlighting diverse approaches to public engagement and gender representation.

By exploring these intersections of art, memory, and gender, this thesis seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of public monuments in a society that is increasingly aware of its diversity and the need for inclusivity in its cultural expressions.

Chapter I

Public Art and Monuments: Navigating Memory, Power, and Community Engagement

1.1 Public Art and the Fragmented Public Sphere: An Arena of Contention

In the existing literature, public art is generally identified as the art that “acts in the public realm”⁵. This means it takes place in public spaces (outside of the conventional and traditional museum and gallery system), it is easily accessible to, and made for, the people, regardless of whether it has been purchased with public or private money. Some artworks, such as monumental statues or sculptures, are permanently located, while others are ephemeral, like those found in public art festivals which only exist for a specific place and time; some can be found in city centres, others in the more peripheral areas; finally, some are more site-specific than others, meaning that their interpretation depends on the specific historical and socio-cultural contexts in which they are located.

Works installed in this manner and context engage with a different audience and indeed invoke distinct notions of spectatorship. They are typically part of a unique (public) discourse that occurs both prior to and following the installation, involving an extensive political and planning process: determining what can be installed, where, and for whom. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the fragmentation and differentiation of the public sphere on the one hand, and the expansion and/or dematerialisation of artworks on the other. This, in turn, necessitates different interpretations and realisations of public works.

In contrast to the principles of high modernism, which upheld the concept of a singular, self-contained, and formally complete artwork, contemporary understanding views artworks within a heterogeneous field in which the meanings and communications of the work vary depending on the space, contexts, and audiences. Subsequently, just as there is no complete, ideal artwork, there is no ideal, generalised spectator: the notion of a universal, neutral spectator has been critiqued

⁵ M. Malcolm, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

and dismantled since the 1960s; instead, both art practices and theories have emphasised the specificity and diversity of viewership. This shift also entails rethinking communicative possibilities, relations, and methods within the artwork, where neither its form, context, nor spectatorship is fixed or stable. These relationships require constant negotiation and are conceptualised within frameworks of publics or public spheres. Consequently, artworks, in a broader sense, are no longer bound by traditional material forms and contexts, but are contingent upon a range of parameters described by Simon Sheikh as *spaces of experience*: “notions of spectatorship and the establishment of communicative platforms and/or networks in or around the artwork that are contingent on, and changing according to different *points of departure* in terms of spectatorship”⁶.

The gaze of the spectator is, of course, not only contingent upon the artwork and its placement but also on the social positioning of the spectator, encompassing factors such as age, class, ethnic background, gender, politics, and broader experiences and intentions. Therefore, it is possible to delineate three variable categories that mutually influence each other: the work, its context, and the spectator. None of which are given, and each of which is conflictual, indeed agonistic.

When considering art production and representation, it is therefore crucial to negotiate these terms both individually and in relation to each other. Much like contemporary art practices have illustrated that neither the artwork nor the spectator can be fixed or permanently defined, research has similarly shown that the conception of the public sphere, the arena in which interaction and engagement occur, is likewise dematerialised and/or expanded. The public sphere is no longer conceived as a singular entity or location, as suggested in Jürgen Habermas’ famous description of the bourgeois public sphere: a space separate from the state (institutions, laws), and the private sphere (the family and the household: property), where individuals from different social classes could come together to engage in rational discussion about matters of common concern, such as politics and culture. This sphere was characterised by principles of equality, inclusivity, and rational debate⁷. Instead, the public sphere is fragmented, composed of various spaces and

⁶ S. Sheikh, *In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, The World in Fragments*, b_books, 2005.

⁷ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1991.

formations that intermittently connect or isolate, often in conflicting and contradictory relationships. The space is no longer a mere container but the locus of life, like a seismograph that reveals cultural issues and relational, social, political, and individual dynamics, including psychological and emotional aspects. The city has to be perceived as an organism, a fluid network of relationships, a metaphor for the complex multiplicity of the world.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge highlight the dependency of individuals' interactions with public spheres on experiences: not only do public spheres and their ideals exist, but also "counter-publics"⁸. By emphasising the notion of experience, Negt and Kluge underline the inequality of access to the public sphere in Habermasian terms, but also analyse modes of behaviour and opportunities for speech and action in different spaces. Similar to how the concept of the singular artwork and spectator has evolved, the idea of the universal, bourgeois public sphere now appears purely historical. The well-ordered bourgeois public sphere is as much a fragment as other formations, "raising the question of whether it has ever truly existed beyond being a projection or an ideal"⁹.

Hence, when considering the art world as a specific public sphere, it is possible to explore this concept along two lines. Firstly, it is not a unified sphere but rather an arena of contention, accommodating diverse and oppositional subjectivities, politics, and economies. This perspective aligns with Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke's characterization of the art world as a battleground where various ideological positions strive for power and dominance. They argue that within the art world, different individuals and groups compete for recognition, influence, and control, reflecting broader societal struggles and power dynamics¹⁰. Secondly, the art world is not an autonomous system, despite it occasionally pretends to be. Instead, it is governed by economic and policy considerations and constantly intersects with other fields or spheres which has been particularly evident in critical theory and contextual art practices.

⁸ O. Negt, A. Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

⁹ S. Sheikh, *In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, The World in Fragments*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ P. Bourdieu, H. Haacke, *Free Exchange*, Polity Press, London, 1995.

1.2 Urban Spaces as Political Arenas: Power, Protest, and Art

One of the distinctive aspects of public art is its ability to serve as a dynamic expression, fostering engagement and dialogue within communities, irrespective of its static or ephemeral nature. As identified by art historians Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis

public art must fit within at least one of the following categories:

1. in a place accessible or visible to the public: in public
2. concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: public interest
3. maintained for or used by the community or individuals: public place
4. paid for by the public: publicly funded¹¹

Embracing these criteria helps to affirm public art as a legitimate discipline, a multifaceted practice, an academic field, and a valuable contribution to fine art. This also establishes a foundation for further critical discourse and analysis within the field.

Harriet Senie further examines various approaches for assessing public art within an "art-world standard"¹², which results in asking three crucial questions for any public artwork:

1. Is it good work, according to its type: art, urban design, or community project?
2. Does it improve or energise its site in some way - by providing an aesthetic experience or searing (or both), or by prompting conversation and perhaps social awareness?
3. Is there evidence of relevant or appropriate public engagement or use?¹³

According to Senie, to be successful, public art must satisfy all three criteria. However, even if a public artwork meets all these standards, it still requires time to integrate into its environment, whether urban or rural. This adjustment period allows the artwork to overcome initial scepticism and withstand potential reactionary responses common in public settings.

¹¹ C. Cartiere, *Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History*, in "The practice of public art", edited by C. Cartiere and S. Willis, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 7-17, p. 15.

¹² H. Senie, *Responsible Criticism: Evaluating Public Art*, "Sculpture", vol. 22, n. 8, December 2003; <https://sculpturemagazine.art/responsible-criticism-evaluating-public-art/>, [last access on 24 March 2024].

¹³ Ibid.

Additionally, as several scholars pointed out, the definition of “public” and “public use” remains relative, shaped by power dynamics within society rather than consensus among the public as a whole: these terms are defined by sectors of the public who hold more power over others¹⁴.

Hence, what does the term public mean now? Over the past decade, this question has provoked several debates among art, architecture, and urban critics. For instance, when arts administrators and city officials formulate guidelines for placing art in public places, they commonly use a language that evokes principles of both direct and representative democracy: are the artworks intended for the people? Do they promote participation? Public art terminology often references democracy as a governmental system, as well as a broader democratic ethos of egalitarianism: do the works avoid elitism and are they, in the end, really accessible?

A solution to this debate, as Jerry Allen points out and commonly embraced by many advocates of public art, is that the public context of art is “broad and heterogeneous”¹⁵, it cannot aspire to embody the values of every individual. Nonetheless, Allen contends that its objective should be to serve cohesive, albeit diverse, publics, which according to him, can be identified if “artists suppress their individual egos and consult the people ‘immediately affected by the project’”¹⁶ (existing groups or communities who frequent that specific urban site). The artist, through his project and social action, has to take a step back, descending from its pedestal to become an interpreter and mediator of the desires and expectations of an inhabited place where the care of the territory is entrusted to the residents. It is also right to note that the citizens have the right to reject those projects deemed superfluous or intrusive, like what happened to Richard Serra’s notorious *Tilted Arc* (1981), removed from New York’s Federal Plaza after a lengthy quarrel, epitomises modernism’s “scarring of the urban fabric” along with “the complicity of art in the trend toward urban dereliction”¹⁷.

¹⁴ P. Serafini, *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 99.

¹⁵ R. Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, The Graham Foundation MIT-The MIT Press, 1996, p. 281.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ M. Malcolm, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures*, cit., p. 208.



Ill. 1 Richard Serra, Tilted Arc, 1981, steel, 365.7 x 3657.6 x 30.45 cm, destroyed, Foley Federal Plaza, Manhattan, New York City, photograph by Susan Swider, courtesy of Richard Serra.

Similarly, the concept of urban space is intricate and diverse, encompassing a broad spectrum of social and public areas, spanning from streets and squares to parks, neighbourhoods, global institutions and markets. In debates on urban design, public space is often imbued with a sense of democracy, perceived as a place where people of different classes, races, and genders mix informally.

However, historically the urban space was never a site of democracy but a site of power's display by "those who held it through processions, public executions, and the siting of public monuments which construct historical narratives to lend present regimes an illusion of being a logical culmination of a history"¹⁸. As argued by several scholars, urban space is characterised by a growing trend of exclusion based on factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and disability. As stated by Rosalyn Deutsche "space is, rather, political, inseparable from the conflictual and uneven social relations that structure specific societies at specific historical moments"¹⁹. Deutsche further questions the existence of a truly inclusive space: "Is it

¹⁸ M. Malcom, *Critical Spaces Monuments and Changes*, in "The practice of public art", edited by C. Cartiere and S. Willis, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 67-90, p.77.

¹⁹ R. Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, cit., p. xiv.

possible to speak with assurance of a public space where social groups, even when physically present, are systematically denied a voice?”²⁰.

As argued by Paula Serafini, in line with critics of the Habermasian’s concept of the public sphere²¹ such as Nancy Fraser, the notion of a homogenous public sphere is deemed impossible, as it comprises multiple voices and within this sphere, marginalised voices struggle for their recognition.

Similarly, Bruce Robbins stated that “a unitary public space is not ‘lost’, but is, instead [...] a ‘phantom’”²², suggesting that the notion of a unitary public space has always been a mirage because it claims to be fully inclusive when in reality it excludes various voices and perspectives, and is shaped by conflicting interests and power. The term “phantom” emphasises the deceptive nature of the concept of a singular public space and highlights the need to recognise and engage with the plurality of voices and viewpoints within public discourse.

This interplay between access and exclusion, power and protest shapes urban space. It can be stated that on one hand, urban space serves as a symbolic arena for the State to display its authority; on the other hand, it functions as a tangible platform for political activism, serving as a location for protests and demonstrations. The urban space emerges as a complex arena where struggles, negotiations, and contestations occur, leading to the creation of communal spaces for socialisation, activism, and political action. Thus, contemporary urban space is not merely a battleground for physical territory, a “‘war over space’ but war over images in that very space – a politics of occupation and liberation”²³, a realm where images are contested.

In his theory of the *la distribution du sensible* (distribution of the sensible), Jacques Rancière states that art in the urban space is able to display these conflicts over visibility²⁴. Rancière uses this concept to describe how to delineate what can be seen, heard, and comprehended, thereby shaping what is deemed significant or

²⁰ P. Serafini, *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism*, cit., p. 99.

²¹ in which citizens leave aside their private interests and subjectivities for the sake of participating in a homogenous public sphere in which issues of “public” concern are addressed.

²² R. Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, cit., p. xxiii.

²³ T. Tunali, *Art and the City: Urban Space, Art, and Social Movements*, “LE STUDIUM - Multidisciplinary Journal”, 2019, vol. 3, pp. 25-30, p. 26; <https://doi.org/10.34846/le-studium.184.05.fr.09-2019>.

²⁴ Ibid.

valuable in a cultural context. This distribution is not an inert or impartial process, but a fundamentally political one. It reflects the exercise of power in determining what aspects of our sensory experience are acknowledged or marginalised, ultimately upholding established hierarchies and norms within society. Furthermore, Rancière suggests that art plays a crucial role in challenging this distribution. By disrupting established modes of perception, art has the potential to bring to life voices, narratives, and perspectives that are often marginalised or silenced. In this sense, art has the potential to challenge the status quo and open up new ways of engaging and perceiving the world. Therefore, the “distribution of the sensible” embodies how power structures influence our collective understanding of reality, and how art can act as a force for disrupting and reconfiguring these structures, offering alternative perspectives and narratives.

Also, Deutsche pointed out that artists and critics are eager to challenge this power and are reclaiming these concepts “by defining public space as a realm of political debate and public art as work that helps create such a space”²⁵. Accordingly, it can be stated that public art has the ability to transform urban spaces in arenas where ideas can be “contested, negotiated and performed in the daily creation of city futures”²⁶, allowing artists a means to convey messages and, in some cases, advocate for social justice causes. Hence, it fosters interactions and dialogues on social and political topics among people, influencing the character of places, communities, and their dynamics. In this regard, “[a]rt presents the possibility of an impromptu public forum for the exploration of thoughts and ideas concerning pertinent cultural and political issues”²⁷. However, as highlighted by Christine Smith, this substantial potential of public art operates based on how effectively it is “made public”, and whether the audience to which it is presented feels engaged²⁸.

²⁵ P. Serafini, *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism*, cit., p. 99.

²⁶ M. Cheung, G. Guaring, N. Smith, and O. Craven, *The Impacts of Public Art on Cities, Places and People's Lives*, “The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society”, London and New York: Routledge, 2021, p. 6.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ C. Smith, *Art as a Diagnostic: Assessing Social and Political Transformation through Public Art in Cairo, Egypt*, *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 16, n. 1, 2015, pp. 22–42.

In this regard, Ming Cheung stated that “public art has a clear placemaking role”²⁹: it significantly contributes to the creation of vibrant urban spaces, enhancing the experience of living, working, and engaging in the city. The success of public art in this role is often contingent on how well public spaces are planned, designed, and managed, transforming existing areas into more inviting, accessible, dynamic, and appealing environments. On the one hand, public art raises awareness of the site and establishes a unique identity for the location but also encourages dialogue, and occasionally, sparks debate and controversy among various stakeholders.

The potential benefits of public art are extensive, ranging from stimulating creativity and beautifying urban landscapes to enhancing the quality of life and increasing the value of communities and assets. Its ability to reach a wide audience and its potential to connect people from diverse backgrounds give it a distinctive capacity to effect meaningful and enduring changes in cities, spaces, and individuals’ lives. It has significant impacts on society which refers to, according to Fiona D. Mackenzie and Sue Jane Taylor, “public art connects the past, present and future of a place”³⁰.

Public art can enhance a city’s collective memory of its shared social heritage and, at times, foster civic pride. For instance, public art serves to document national events for a city; some statues and monuments retain contemporary relevance, though this significance is often debated within a society of diverse publics and competing interests, while others have lost their meaning and faded from public consciousness³¹.

At the same time, it can expose structural and systemic violence stemming from societal exclusions based on gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class, as identified by Falcón³², as well as highlighting women’s visibility in historical narratives and their roles in political protests, as demonstrated by Katarzyna Kosmala and T. S. Beall³³. Other examples are the public art installations that commemorate

²⁹ M. Cheung, G. Guaring, N. Smith, and O. Craven, *The Impacts of Public Art on Cities, Places and People’s Lives*, cit., p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 5.

³³ K. Kosmala, T. S. Beall, *Problematizing Silences in Intangible Heritage: Unsettling Historical Records of Women in Protests*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2019, vol. 25, n. 4, pp. 348 – 364.

historical events or figures, such as the Berlin Wall murals, which serve as powerful reminders of the past while fostering discussions about freedom and division; murals and sculptures that celebrate cultural diversity, like the murals in San Francisco's *Mission District*, which reflect the community's rich Latino heritage and address issues of immigration and social justice; or memorials like the *National September 11 Memorial & Museum* in New York City, which not only honour the victims of the tragedy but also provide a space for reflection and collective mourning.

1.3 Eternal Voices and Historical Anchors: The Role of Monuments in Shaping Collective Identity

Statues and monuments pervade our public spaces, and according to Marc Augé, they stand as “tangible expression of permanence or, at the very least, durability”³⁴. They serve as commemorations of notable individuals and significant events but also as symbols of the values and ideologies that societies wish to perpetuate across generations. Lisa Parola emphasises this debate by stating that “The monument doesn't question history, it wants to be history”³⁵. Erecting a statue or monument is in fact an intentional act of remembrance and reverence, aimed at immortalising certain narratives and ideals: “a marker at a particular place for a specific meaning/event”³⁶. Statues and monuments provide gods with shrines and sovereigns with thrones and palaces, elevating them above transient circumstances and fostering a sense of continuity across generations.

Through their imposing presence, monuments anchor collective memory, providing a continuous link between the past and the present and instilling in each individual a sense of belonging to a historical continuum: they existed before and will endure beyond them. Rosalind Krauss suggests that a monument “sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place”³⁷. In this way, statues and monuments do more than merely occupy physical

³⁴ M. Malcom, *Critical Spaces Monuments and Changes*, cit., p. 77.

³⁵ L. Parola, *Giù i Monumenti? Una Questione Aperta*, cit., p.19.

³⁶ R. Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, The MIT Press, October 1979, vol. 8, pp. 31–44, p. 33; <https://doi.org/10.2307/778224> [last access on 22 April 2024].

³⁷ Ibid.

space; they engage with the public psyche, serving as focal points for both reverence and controversy. They remind us of the complexities of history and the importance of critically engaging with the legacies that have shaped our present and will continue to influence our future. For instance, statues of political leaders, war heroes, and cultural icons serve as reminders of their contributions and the eras they influenced, helping to shape public consciousness and national identity.

These monuments' architectural grandeur and artistic detail often reflect the aspirations and aesthetics of their time, adding layers of meaning and context to their existence. Given their function within the framework of representation and symbolism, sculptures typically adhere to a figurative and vertical form, with their pedestals playing a significant role "since they mediate between actual site and representational sign"³⁸. Paradoxically, as Augé suggested, the interruptions and discontinuities within physical space evoke a sense of temporal continuity, highlighting the dynamic relationship between the past, present, and future³⁹.

Conversely, Robert Musil, the Austrian writer and essayist, offered a fascinating and critical perspective on monuments in his essay titled *Monuments*. Musil observed that monuments, although erected to commemorate significant events or figures, tend to go unnoticed in daily life. Paradoxically, while their purpose is to be remembered, they often become invisible to those who regularly encounter them. Highlighting how monuments ultimately lose their original significance, becoming mere elements of urban decor or landmarks, devoid of their commemorative value, Musil stated: "They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed to attract attention. But at the same time, they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment"⁴⁰.

Musil argued that monuments represent a form of collective memory that, however, is passive. Unlike books or works of art, which stimulate reflection and discussion, monuments remain immobile, allowing their message to fade into the noise of everyday life.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ M. Malcom, *Critical Spaces Monuments and Changes*, cit., p 77.

⁴⁰ R. Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, Archipelago Books, 2006, p. 64.

The artist Christo (together with his wife Jeanne-Claude), renowned for his practice of wrapping monuments and iconic buildings in fabric, explored the idea that a monument might suffer from a form of invisibility due to its excessive visibility⁴¹. By wrapping the monuments, Christo made them visible once more, compelling viewers to reconsider what has always been there, but has become imperceptible in everyday life. His art, therefore, reveals and subverts the very perceptual habituation Musil spoke of, bringing to light what had disappeared into the obvious.

Musil's thoughts on monuments extend into a broader and nuanced discourse concerning the relationship between memory, history, and the means by which society seeks to preserve the recollection of the past. This "blindness" towards monuments underscores society's struggle to keep historical memory alive through these symbols. He proceeds to critique the manner in which society attempts to fix historical memory in tangible objects, only to let them slip into indifference, inviting reflection on how we preserve the memory of past events and recognising that memory requires active and conscious engagement, rather than a mere physical presence in the urban landscape⁴².

Merlin Donald enriched this reflection by defining the monument as an "exographic trace"⁴³, a material support that a community uses to externalise and preserve fundamental elements of its mnemonic heritage. However, this heritage can only be accessible if future generations are able to correctly decode its meaning. Here emerges a crucial tension: the monument, although conceived to endure over time, risks becoming an enigma whose meaning is lost as generations pass.

In this regard, Christo argued that: "any work of art exists outside of its *prime time*, when the artist likes to do it, when the social, political, economic times fit together"⁴⁴. He continued, asserting that, thereafter, the work risks being subject to interpretations that distort its meaning and compromise it; therefore, it would be preferable to remove it promptly. This reasoning seems to imply that the original

⁴¹ A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un Paradosso della Memoria*, Johan & Levi, 2023, pp. 138-139.

⁴² R. Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, cit.

⁴³ M. Donald, *L'Evoluzione della Mente. Per una Teoria Darwiniana della Coscienza*, Garzanti, 2004.

⁴⁴ Christo, *Lecture and Interview. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, in "Christo and Jeanne-Claude. On the Way to the Gates", curated by Jonathan Fineberg, Yale University Press-The Metropolitan Museum of Arts, 2004, p. 135.

state of the work might “guarantee an ‘authentic’ and ‘true’ understanding”⁴⁵, as though the subsequent layers of meaning, generated by the work’s history through engagement with diverse audiences and sensibilities, are less legitimate or truthful.

The paradoxical effect observed by Musil, wherein monuments erected to be remembered are progressively forgotten, is analogous to what Jacques Derrida defines as a “dysfunctional reminder”: a device that, by externalising memory, inhibits its actual functioning⁴⁶. Although reminders are indispensable, we must remember that they do not function as simple tools that faithfully and definitively preserve past memories. On the contrary, reminders construct and shape memory each time they are used. This process occurs in a dynamic context, influenced by the changes in history and politics, understood in the broadest sense as public life in society. This public space is not a place of harmony and uniform consensus, but rather an environment characterised by tensions, conflicts, and divisions.

Roland Barthes, on the other hand, observed how modern society has shifted the baton of memory from the monument to photography, suggesting a metamorphosis of monumentalisation rather than its renunciation⁴⁷.

Meanwhile, Pierre Nora introduced a further fundamental distinction between memory and history. While memory is dynamic, mutable, and susceptible to oblivion and manipulation, history presents itself as a rigid and analytical reconstruction of the past⁴⁸. Nora also asserted that the “true mission [of history] is to suppress and destroy [the memory]”⁴⁹, transforming what was once a lived experience into a distant and objectified subject of study. This process of historicisation stiffens memory, separating it from its vital and collective nature.

Therefore, the power of these symbols in shaping identities and promoting a sense of historical continuity should not be underestimated. Even though monumental memory may be exposed to processes of oblivion or reinterpretation, this does not mean that the monument has failed. Rather, its significance can evolve, reflecting the transformations of society and its capacity to reinterpret the past.

⁴⁵ A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un Paradosso della Memoria*, cit., p. 148.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 96.

⁴⁷ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill & Wang Pub, 1982, p.93.

⁴⁸ P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, “Representations”, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 7-24.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

The idea that monuments might be erected but forgotten as an example of “social strategies of erasure”⁵⁰, as Régis Debray hypothetically suggested, invites us to consider monuments not only as tools of memory but also as potential machines of oblivion: “When a community wishes to bury a hero or a war definitively, it erects a statue, a memorial, or a mausoleum”⁵¹. This ambiguity is intrinsic to the very nature of reminders, which, as Musil suggested, can easily transform from instruments of remembrance into instruments of perceptual anaesthesia⁵².

Monuments share with all reminders the destiny of being devices with a paradoxical function: created to preserve and stimulate memory, they end up contributing to oblivion. This destiny reflects the complex and problematic nature of memory itself, which cannot be fixed once and for all but is continually reconstructed, shaped, and transformed by historical and political dynamics. The experience of memory, therefore, is never simple or univocal, but constitutes a constant process of confrontation and critical reflection on the tools through which we attempt to preserve it. It is thus important to acknowledge that monuments are not merely passive objects: their ability to evoke emotions, reflections, and debates is a testament to their enduring power. If it is true that monuments can become invisible due to familiarity, it is equally true that they can be rediscovered, revitalised, and/or reappropriated, thereby keeping their commemorative function alive.

Andrew Leicester and James E. Young expand on Augé’s idea of monuments as anchors of collective memory and symbols of historical permanence by highlighting the dynamic relationship between monuments and public interaction, suggesting that it is the ongoing engagement over time that sustains and revitalises the memory embodied in these structures.

In the contemporary discourse on public art and monuments, Leicester’s perspective contrasts sharply with the prevalent traditional view that “we cannot separate the monument from its public life, that the social function of such art is its

⁵⁰ R. Debray, *Trace, Form, or Message?*, “Les cahiers de médiologie”, Gallimard, 1999, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 27-44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁵² A. Pinotti, *Nonumeto. Un Paradosso della Memoria*, cit.

aesthetic performance”⁵³, implying that engagement with monuments may evolve over time. This view posits that memory is preserved rather than negated by the temporality of ephemeral public projects. Similarly, Young articulates, that the counter-monument

recognises and affirms that the life of memory exists primarily in historical time: in the activity that brings moments into being, in the ongoing exchange between people and their historical markers, and finally in the concrete actions we take in light of a memorialised past⁵⁴.

The belief that monuments are inseparable from their public life suggests that their significance and impact are not static but dynamic, shaped by the continuous interaction between the public and the monument. This interaction is mediated through various forms of engagement, including reflection, commemoration, and even protest. Monuments, therefore, serve as active participants in the public discourse, evolving in meaning as societal values and collective memory shift over time. Ephemeral public projects, such as temporary art installations or performance pieces, challenge the traditional concept of permanence associated with monuments. They emphasise the transient nature of memory and the fluidity of historical narratives. These projects can provoke immediate, visceral reactions and encourage a more active form of participation from the public. By existing temporarily, they highlight the importance of the moment and the present interaction, which can be powerful in its immediacy and relevance.

Furthermore, the concept of the counter-monument, as described by Young, underscores the active role of the public in maintaining and shaping memory. Counter-monuments often reject traditional forms and instead seek to provoke thought and dialogue about the past. They engage viewers in a more direct and sometimes uncomfortable manner, forcing a confrontation with history rather than a passive reception. This engagement reinforces the idea that memory is a living process, continually influenced by the present and reinterpreted through ongoing social interactions.

⁵³ T. Cohn, *As Rich as Getting Lost in Venice: Sustaining a Career as an Artist in the Public Realm*, in “The Practice of Public Art”, edited by C. Cartiere and S. Willis, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 176-192, p.188.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Malcolm Miles stated that public art, in the context of the cultural industries as perceived drivers of redevelopment, reinvents the tradition of the public monument⁵⁵.

Statues in public parks and squares appear nowadays “inoffensive as they blend, covered in moss and pigeon shit, into an urban landscape”⁵⁶, however, they emerged as part of a spectrum of public institutions, museums and other products of nineteenth-century liberal reformism. Their presence invites scrutiny and debate. As societies evolve and historical narratives are re-examined, the relevance and appropriateness of certain statues and monuments can be called into question. This dynamic discourse underscores the fluid nature of history and the ongoing process of re-evaluating and redefining the symbols that shape our public consciousness. Echoing Foucault’s thought in which he indicated self-coercion in a series of social situations in which we, as subjects, submit to perceived patterns of behavioural ordering, Miles suggests that public monuments (statues and monuments) present a specific representation of the society in which we live, shaping our behaviour as we conform to the order implicitly represented. Thus, he contends that when power undergoes a radical shift, it becomes necessary

to destroy the monuments of the old regime as a re-enactment of the change of regime, as if to prove that the shift of power has really occurred. When people spat on or kicked the statue of Bonaparte, which was toppled during the Paris Commune of 1871, for instance, or the statue of Stalin during the Hungarian uprising of 1956, they behaved acted almost as if the statue *were* the figure represented⁵⁷.

Similarly, Paul B. Preciado claims that “judging by the forces that destabilise them, statues fall for three reasons: decline, removal (from above), and toppling (from below)”⁵⁸. Most of the times, he further explains, statues become meaningless objects, forgotten and left to deteriorate: reduced to “faceless stones”⁵⁹, and worn out without being repaired. In the second instance, statues are ceremoniously removed by government decree: “a grandiose gesture via heavy machinery that usually signals a

⁵⁵ M. Malcom, *Critical Spaces Monuments and Changes*, cit., p. 71.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ P. B. Preciado, *When Statues Fall*, “Artforum International”, vol. LIX, 2020, n. 3;

<https://www.artforum.com/features/paul-b-preciaados-year-in-review-248910/>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

regime change”⁶⁰ and such actions are often intended to persuade the public that significant transformation is indeed taking place. Finally, the third instance can be defined as the most unpredictable, bottom-up action, and politically intriguing: using

ropes, hammers, picks, shovels, bags, paper, paint, flowers, and any other implements or techniques available, statues are collectively transformed, disfigured, partially dismantled or dismembered, or brought down completely in an unauthorized, unofficial, and usually illegal manner⁶¹.

Similarly, Martin Warnke drew an important distinction between these forms of iconoclasm acts: “from above” and “from below”⁶². He observed that the former, which aligns with the interests of those in power, tends to replace destroyed symbols with new ones and prohibit further destruction and this form is often celebrated among the great dates in art history. In contrast, the latter, born out of political impotence, rarely establishes new symbols and is often denounced as “‘blind vandalism’: iconoclasm thus became ‘a privilege for the victors, and a sacrilege for the vanquished’”⁶³. Additionally, Colin Ward pointed out that the activities of vandals are often less devastating and expensive than destruction brought on by other forces in society⁶⁴.

As described by Dario Gamboni, both the terms “iconoclasm” and “vandalism” have undergone significant shifts in their meanings over time⁶⁵. Originally, iconoclasm denoted the destruction of religious images; however, its scope has since broadened to include opposition to any images, artworks, or even institutions. The symbolic use of “iconoclast”, referring to an individual who attacks cherished beliefs or institutions, first emerged in the mid–nineteenth century. This semantic shift highlights the symbolic significance of image destruction as a means for contesting entrenched systems of authority. Conversely, the concept of vandalism has expanded from the destruction of art and monuments to include any objects, often perceived as a barbaric or ignorant act, devoid of any meaning. Gamboni

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² M. Warnke, *Bilderstürme*, in “Bildersturm. Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks”, Frankfurt, 1977, pp. 10–11.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁴ C. Ward, *Vandalism*, Architectural Press, London, 1973, p. 18.

⁶⁵ D. Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art - Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Books, London, 1997.

further observed that, while the terms “iconoclasm” and “iconoclast” may carry neutral or even positive connotations, “vandalism” and “vandal” are inevitably pejorative, implying ignorance, stupidity, or lack of taste⁶⁶.

Additionally, the art historian Albert Boime posits that iconoclasm offers a possibility of “concrete (...) participation in historical change”, providing individuals with a “momentary feeling of self-realization” through collective action, fostering the creation of a genuine public space⁶⁷. As Gamboni suggests, the contemporary re-evaluation of monuments can thus be seen as a form of symbolic iconoclasm, one that challenges the traditional gendered hierarchies entrenched in public art⁶⁸.

Whenever the invisible, the unspoken, shines from the monument, the surrounding public space assumes an overwhelming force that bypasses and damages the traditional sites of power representation. When this occurs through a sudden jolt, a form of destabilization from below that entails an inevitable shift in perspective, the statue regains its imposing physical presence. It then becomes an object for new urban performances, as can be observed in more contemporary examples. Notably, the statue of Edward Colston a prominent slave trader, was torn down and thrown into the harbour in Bristol, England, amid global protests against racial injustice in 2020, symbolising a rejection of the values he represented by demonstrators; during the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States in 2020, demonstrators in numerous cities toppled statues of Confederate leaders, such as General Robert E. Lee, viewing them as symbols of racism and oppression; while amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, activists in cities like Kyiv have targeted statues of Soviet leaders, such as Vladimir Lenin, viewing them as reminders of Soviet oppression and advocating for their removal.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ A. Boime, *Perestroika and the Destabilization of the Soviet Monuments*, ARS: Journal of the Institute for History of Art of Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1993, pp. 212–218.

⁶⁸ D. Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, cit.



Ill. 2 Photograph of the Robert E. Lee monument, taken by Anaheed Mobaraki on 1st August 2020, city of Richmond, Virginia, during Black Lives Matter protests.

The fall of images and statues can be interpreted as a form of revenge by the many who lack power over the few who hold it, a symbolic triumph of the “living over the petrified”⁶⁹. Once a statue is removed, the empty pedestal gains its symbolic potential. This reflects, as the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino suggests, the “irruption in history” of previously voiceless masses, whose narratives have long been forgotten or omitted by those in charge. Now that the statues are visible again, the established order is called into question⁷⁰.

As these groups reassess their histories, they identify certain monuments as symbols to be torn down, through actions deemed violent or scandalous by some. Despite these acts target objects, not people, the power structures recognise the human and political anger behind them as an attack on their worldview, which they

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ E. De Martino, *Intorno a una Storia del Mondo Popolare e Subalterno*, “Società”, 1949, Vol. 5, pp. 411–435.

consider intolerable⁷¹. Alongside protests to dismantle symbols that no longer reflect current values or identities, numerous voices, have emerged to foreground the lack of true representation in public spaces. Many of these movements “from below”, often led by female activist–artists, aim to address this striking absence by creating a new and inclusive urban image, updated with new formal languages, that goes beyond the statues and monuments.

A compelling example of performative action is Sthembile Msezane’s work in South Africa. As a Black South African performance artist, Msezane uses her art as a form of social commentary, focusing on the absence of Black female bodies in memorialised public spaces. Reflecting on her motivation, she stated “I felt a deep sense of dislocation and invisibility. I couldn’t see myself represented. I couldn’t see the women who have raised me, the ones who have influenced me, and the ones who have made South Africa what it is today. I decided to do something about it”⁷².

Msezane’s performances draw on African mythology to critique the exclusion and misrepresentation of women of colour in colonial narratives and public spaces. She challenges the dominance of whiteness and colonial hyper–masculinity on South African landscapes by occupying these spaces on behalf of Black African women. Through her works, she interweaves colonial history, artistic expression, and the concept of memory to highlight this absence.

During the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement, Msezane’s performance *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* made a powerful impact: on the day of Cecil Rhodes’ removal in 2015, she stood silently in front of the monument on a narrow plinth wearing heels, throughout the four–hour of the removal process (Ill. 3). She performed dressed as Chapungu, a bird of good omen in Shona mythology, evoking the visual symbols of Great Zimbabwe. As Nicholas Mirzoeff described, “the task was not to fall so that Rhodes might fall”⁷³. Her silent, powerful stance symbolised the erasure of African women’s contributions and directly challenged the colonial legacy represented by Rhodes.

⁷¹ S. Bordone, *Ombre di Monumenti*, Roots-Routes; <https://www.roots-routes.org/ombre-di-monumenti-di-simona-bordone/> [last access 15 September 2024].

⁷² S. Msezane, *Living Sculptures that Stand for History's Truths*, TEDGlobal, August 2017; https://www.ted.com/talks/sthembile_msezane_living_sculptures_that_stand_for_history_s_truths/transcript?subtitle=en&lng=it&geo=it [last access 17 September 2024].

⁷³ N. Mirzoeff, *Of Slingshots, Statues and Shacks. Coloniality and the Infrastructures of Whiteness*, il Mulino, August 2021, n. 2, pp. 181–200, p. 191; DOI: 10.1405/101881.



Ill. 3 Sthembile Msezane, Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell, 9th April 2015, photo, Cape Town University, South Africa.

The protests that led to the statue’s removal were part of a wider movement against colonial symbols and institutional racism. Rhodes, known for his white supremacist and imperialist views, became a focal point for students and activists demanding his statue’s removal. They viewed it as a relic of colonial oppression and South Africa’s apartheid past⁷⁴, sparking a nationwide debate on decolonisation and the role of public monuments in shaping historical memory. These protests sought the horrors of Rhodes’ colonial actions and the often-overlooked moral failings of imperialism. Importantly, the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement did not advocate for an erasure of history but called for the statue to be relocated to a museum, where it could be contextualised within the legacy of imperialism⁷⁵.

Like the Rhodes statue, other monuments around the world have become focal points for re-examining whose stories are memorialised and how the glorification of controversial figures often silences and marginalises the experiences

⁷⁴ M. Cabe, *How Rhodes Must Fall Amplified Calls To Decolonize*, “New Internationalist”, 21 August 2023; <https://newint.org/features/2023/08/21/how-rhodes-must-fall-amplified-calls-decolonize> [last access 16 September 2024].

⁷⁵ T. Timalina, *Why Rhodes Must Fall*, “Harvard Political Review”, March 21, 2021; <https://harvardpolitics.com/rhodes-must-fall/> [last access 16 September 2024].

of those they exploited. For instance, the monuments of Dr. Marion Sims in Central Park, New York, and Indro Montanelli in Milan became symbols of public outrage, representing figures whose legacies of exploitation and harm are now deemed incompatible with contemporary values of justice and equality.

Dr. J. Marion Sims, a prominent American physician renowned for developing techniques and tools which advanced gynaecological practice, had a commemorative statue for his brilliant achievements in Central Park in 1934 (near the New York Academy of Medicine). However, the monument became the subject of protests due to Sims' unethical medical experiments on enslaved Black women in the 19th century, often performed without anaesthesia or consent⁷⁶.



Ill. 4 Black Youth Project's protest against white supremacy in front of a statue of Dr. J. Marion Sims, 17th August 2017, Central Park, New York City.

⁷⁶ L. L. Wall, *The Medical Ethics of Dr J Marion Sims: A Fresh Look at the Historical Record*, Journal of medical ethics, 2006, vol. 32, pp. 346-50.

Since 2006, local activists have been calling for its removal, arguing that the statue glorified a figure who exploited Black women's bodies in the name of medical progress. In 2016, The Park Department suggested adding a plaque to the statue to honour the three women whom Sims named as his experimental subjects; however, this proposal was rejected by the community which kept demanding the statue's removal⁷⁷. On 17th August 2017 four activists of the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP) staged a powerful protest while dressed in hospital gowns splattered in pink paint resembling blood, drawing national attention to the debate (Ill. 4)⁷⁸. This ultimately, led to the removal of the statue in 2018, as also part of a broader reckoning with historical racism in the United States. Then, the statue was relocated to Sims' burial site in Brooklyn, and later that year, the City of New York issued an open call for artists to propose a new sculptural artwork to replace Sims' monument. Initially, Simone Leigh's project was shortlisted, but following community protests in East Harlem⁷⁹, Vinnie Bagwell's *Victory Beyond Sims* – a bronze statue of a woman holding a caduceus and a flame symbolizing eternal victory – was chosen⁸⁰. As Marina Ortiz, founder of East Harlem Preservation, explained, the purpose of this open call was to find an artist who would actively engage with the community in the creation of a new statue. Therefore, as Vinnie Bagwell was the only artist who truly came forward, as a result, she had their full support⁸¹.

In the summer of 2020, protests against symbols of colonialism spread from across the Atlantic to Europe. In Italy, where the legacy of colonialism is still not widely acknowledged, these protests primarily focused on the imposing remnants of

⁷⁷ The Contested Histories Initiative, *J. Marion Sims Statue in New York, US*, Contested Histories Case Study #228, December 2021; <https://contestedhistories.org/wp-content/uploads/USA-J.-Marion-Sims-Statue-New-York.pdf> [last access 17 September 2024].

⁷⁸ R. Barber, *Monuments to the Father of Gynecology Honor Brutality Against Black Women*, "Institute for Southern Studies", 25 August 2017; <https://www.facingsouth.org/2017/08/monuments-father-gynecology-honor-brutality-against-black-women> [last access 17 September 2024].

⁷⁹ See more H. Bishara, "*We Feel Very Betrayed*": *Community Protests Replacement for J. Marion Sims Monument*, "Hyperallergic", 7 October 2019; <https://hyperallergic.com/521269/we-feel-very-betrayed-community-protests-replacement-for-j-marion-sims-monument/> [last access 17 September 2024].

⁸⁰ F. Timeto, *Speculum. Le Altre Storie*, "Technocultures Research Unit", November 4, 2019; <http://www.technoculture.it/speculum-le-altre-storie/> [last access 17 September 2024].

⁸¹ News Desk, *Sculpture by Vinnie Bagwell to Replace Controversial Public Monument in New York's Central Park*, "Artforum", 10 October 2019; <https://www.artforum.com/news/sculpture-by-vinnie-bagwell-to-replace-controversial-public-monument-in-new-yorks-central-park-244972/> [last access 17 September 2024].

fascism and the most obvious symbols of colonialism. Among these was the *Monument to Indro Montanelli* in the public gardens of Porta Venezia, Milan (Ill. 5).

The statue, created by sculptor Vito Tongiani and unveiled in 2006, initially seemed to be subject to become a mere element of urban decor, as Musil would describe it⁸²; however, from February 2012 (when the first pint of colour was thrown and a false bomb was found under Montanelli's hat⁸³) the monument was torn from oblivion and reintroduced to public attention.



Ill. 5 Vito Tongiani, Indro Montanelli, 2006, bronze, Milan (photo taken after the feminist collective *Non Una Di Meno* splashed the statue with pink paint, March 2019).

The controversy revolves around the legitimacy of a memorial erected in memory of a man who had participated in the Fascist colonial wars of the 1930s and especially his admitted involvement in the practice of *madamato*, through which he purchased a young Eritrean girl as a wife during his time in Africa. Montanelli

⁸² R. Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, cit.

⁸³ A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un Paradosso della Memoria*, cit., p. 213.

himself recounted this episode in several interviews, sparking protests over the years⁸⁴.

On 8th March 2019, during a women's rights and anti-gender violence march, the feminist collective *Non Una Di Meno* splashed the statue with pink paint. Rather than an act of iconoclasm, this was more a form of highlighting⁸⁵: the monument of the journalist was presented in a new light to provoke reflection on his personal choices and the broader colonial context. Montanelli, like many others of his generation, was complicit in colonial and abusive practices, and the pink paint added another layer of meaning to the monument, urging the public to confront the darker aspects of this legacy.

As argued by Gamboni, adding rather than removing elements is often the easiest way to challenge a monument, and paint – especially pink – has frequently been used for this purpose⁸⁶. Montanelli's statue has been defaced multiple times, including on 25th April 2020 (Liberation Day)⁸⁷, when it was covered in red paint and then labelled with the words “Racist rapist” on the pedestal. In 2023, during the International Women's Day, the statue was once again subjected to protest, with pink smoke bombs and a banner demanding its removal. This year, the monument was marked by handprints in purple paint, leaving symbolic imprints on its base⁸⁸.

In response to these actions, Milan's mayor Giuseppe Sala called for a nuanced view of Montanelli, recognising his role as a journalist who defended press freedom and was later killed by the Red Brigades, arguing for the statue's preservation⁸⁹. One cannot simply remove everything, just as one cannot tell the full history through a single monument. Accordingly, Mario Panico pointed out that the

⁸⁴ See more; E. Biagi, and I. Montanelli (Interviewee), *Questo Secolo*, RaiTeche, 22 July 2015; <https://www.teche.rai.it/2015/07/indro-montanelli-racconta-il-fascismo/> [last access 17 September 2024]; G. Bisiach, I. Montanelli (Interviewee), and E. Banotti, *Il Madamato. Indro Montanelli Racconta L'atroce Vicenda della sua Sposa Bambina*, L'ora della verità, 1969; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8lJr2STfiI> [last access 17 September 2024].

⁸⁵ E. Pirazzoli, *Sul Piedistallo della Storia. Statue Innalzate, Contestate, Difese e Demolite dalla Rivoluzione Francese a Oggi*, E-Review, December 2021, Vol. 2021-2022, pp. 1-27, p. 6.

⁸⁶ D. Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, cit.

⁸⁷ Liberation Day is a national holiday in Italy that commemorates the victory of the Italian resistance movement over Nazi Germany's occupation and the Fascist regime during World War II.

⁸⁸ P. Farina, *Imbrattata la Statua di Montanelli*, “Radio Lombardia”, 4 April 2024; <https://www.radiolombardia.it/2024/04/04/imbrattata-la-statua-di-montanelli/> [last access 16 September 2024].

⁸⁹ M. Panico, *Chi Difende i Monumenti? Appunti su Retorica e Congelamento della Memoria*, Roots-Routes; <https://www.roots-routes.org/chi-difende-i-monumenti-appunti-su-retorica-e-congelamento-della-memoria-di-mario-panico/> [last access 16 September 2024].

complexity of history is best represented through the layering of meanings, allowing as many perspectives as possible to be heard. Yet, this balance is often utopian, as something is always left out. Therefore, the challenge lies in understanding the power dynamics that drive erasure⁹⁰.

Beyond these acts of defacement, there have been other, more creative interventions. Director Diana “Spaghetto” Manfredi created an augmented reality filter for Instagram titled *Monumento al presente*, which replaces Montanelli’s statue with an image of a Black girl wearing a t-shirt that reads “My Life Matters”. In 2020, the artist Ozmo painted a mural titled *Monumento in memoria della sposa bambina* depicting the young Eritrean girl on a pedestal with her fist raised. Meanwhile, the activist Cristin Donati Meyer used another strategy of re-appropriation. She placed a doll of a child wrapped in a white sheet on Montanelli’s lap, accompanied by a sign reading “The old man and the girl. Now the monument to Montanelli is complete”. Meyer was later detained by police and explained that her intent was not to vandalise the statue but to integrate it, making its memorial purpose explicit⁹¹.

This case illustrates how public monuments are not isolated entities but are entangled in a web of relationships with other monuments and shifting societal values. As highlighted by the political collective LUMe⁹², without critical revision, history cannot be considered complete. It is a living entity, subject to change, and the statues that celebrate its figures hold a collective social function because they occupy public space and represent what the ruling class chooses to commemorate about its past⁹³.

In conclusion, it can be stated that time becomes a crucial element in the life of a monument. It is not merely a passive backdrop but an active force that shapes how monuments are perceived and interacted with. The passage of time can alter the

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un Paradosso della Memoria*, cit., p. 217.

⁹² LUMe - Laboratorio Universitario METropolitano is a political collective of students, workers and artists. They believe in the political and cultural value of artistic cooperation and co-creation. LUMe is participatory and supports collaborative practices to stimulate critical thinking and interpersonal growth;
https://lumelaboratoriouniversitariometropolitano.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwY2xjawFZUDdleHRuA2FibQIxMAABHdfCJ7NOpCHxKVujrQr56xao1HTrgNOTdtqbXKBglFLhC8xoAPW_oaPIA_aem_l8mDbivuUENZ5aVkJ3FjZw.

⁹³ G. Grechi, and S. Lombardo, *Statues Also Die*, *Roots-Routes*, January – April 2021, n. 35;
<https://www.roots-routes.org/year-xi-n35-january-april-2021-statues-also-die/> [last access 16 September 2024].

significance of a monument, as new historical events and changing societal values provide fresh perspectives. Monuments that were once revered can become objects of controversy, and those that were overlooked can gain new relevance.

The ongoing exchange between people and their historical markers ensures that monuments remain pertinent and reflective of the society they inhabit. This dynamic process illustrates the inherent power of public art to adapt and resonate with successive generations, reinforcing the notion that the true essence of a monument lies in its ability to foster continuous dialogue and reflection about the past, present, and future.

Chapter II

The Gender of Monuments

2.1 The “Heroic ‘I’”

According to the Australian anthropologist Laurajane Smith, it is a question of gender how heritage is represented, introjected and how it reproduces and legitimises the identities and social values that support it⁹⁴. The manner in which heritage is constructed and maintained often reflects and reinforces patriarchal values, thereby perpetuating gender inequalities. This perspective invites a critical examination of whose histories and experiences are celebrated and preserved, and whose are marginalised or omitted.

The debates and protests concerning statuary, instigated in public spaces by activist groups and feminist collectives in numerous cities worldwide, frequently stem from reflections on the intricate relationships between monuments, communities, and the urban environment: based on their findings, it can be disputed that several are the statues and monuments that commemorate arrogance and hegemony, and cultivate the idea of an undisputed singular domain very distant from the pluralist design of contemporary public space. Statues and busts erected on plinths almost invariably represent a white man, serving as a tangible and concrete symbol of patriarchal thought that continues to influence political, cultural, and economic power today. The outlines of their bodies evoke a position of dominance, even when their poses express gratitude, attachment, trust, loyalty, or compassion. What is mainly being contested is precisely the representation and the authority accorded to a singular “I” always elevated above the “we”⁹⁵.

As argued by several scholars (like Parola, Krauss, and Riegl), the essence of the monument lies in its ability to preserve its aura, characterised by its maintained distance and verticality. This is always aimed at defining a significant spatial separation between the subject represented and the observer. The monument’s size and height are the principal elements that physically delineate this distance with the pedestal playing a pivotal role in fostering a state of contemplation that further

⁹⁴ L. Smith, *USES OF HERITAGE*, Routledge, 2006.

⁹⁵ L. Parola, *Giù i Monumenti? Una Questione Aperta*, cit.

confers the aura of power. Moreover, this architectural choice frequently suggests a direction that leans more towards the political rather than the purely aesthetic.

In monuments and statues with multiple subjects depicted, only the hero remains truly visible, the strong and unfeeling “I”, invariably elevated above the other subjects who appear, most of whom are positioned at his feet, at the base of these monuments, and often portrayed in subordinate positions or by their very absence, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusions.

In this context, the art historian and independent art curator Lisa Parola identified the “heroic I”’s concept of the monument⁹⁶: it refers to the traditional portrayal of monumental figures as singular, heroic individuals who are celebrated for their extraordinary achievements or virtues. The dominant “heroic I” emphasises individualism and exceptionalism, often highlighting the accomplishments of mainly notable men in history while marginalising collective efforts and the contributions of ordinary people, including women and marginalised groups. Furthermore, Parola critiques this approach for perpetuating a narrow and exclusionary narrative of history, especially in public spaces.

Another important point has been stressed out by Preciado. He highlighted how vastly the representation of power is largely based on monuments depicting human bodies and figures, which directly allude to subaltern communities, “because the bodies are often those of workers used as models. Bodies copied and erased of their identity become anatomical forms that support the faces of white people”⁹⁷. This process effectively erases the identities of the subaltern figures, further entrenching existing power dynamics and social hierarchies.

From these reflections emerges how much that monumental “I” can be powerful, dominant and cumbersome. To such an extent that the sociologist Michael S. Kimmel concluded that “the masculinity of the monument is now a veritable openly Western and white cultural category. It is practised by starting from the need to distance and remove the ‘I’ from all the complex identities that are the ‘other’”⁹⁸.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹⁷ Paul B. Preciado, *When statues fall*, cit.

⁹⁸ M. Kimmel, *Invisible masculinity*, *Society*, XXX 1993, n. 6, pp. 28-35.

2.2 Nameless but Naked: Examples of Women’s Representation in Italian Monuments

In examining the representation of bodies in public monuments in Italy, it becomes evident that “the prevailing public and political body is therefore the male body”⁹⁹. According to the findings of the first census on the representation of women in statues, conducted by the association Mi Riconosci?¹⁰⁰

The results are illuminating: in Italy, there are only 171 monuments dedicated to women, out of a total that is unquantified but certainly numbers in the tens of thousands. For example, in Milan, there is one statue of a woman compared to 125 of men, and among the Roman busts on the Janiculum, there are 228 males compared to one female¹⁰¹.

The public space of our country sees very reduced the female presence in monuments and toponymy. In the institutional art that populates our streets and squares representations of women who really existed are rare. It is also important to point out one aspect: the distinction between the so-called difficult heritage of fascism and colonialism with which we have to reckon in terms of the presence, and the absence of a heritage that shows the feminine, and also the queer, and the trans¹⁰².

The idea that the reasons for this disparity are the lesser opportunities for distinguishing themselves that women in the past had over men is simplistic. The problem is certainly more complex and concerns the conservative, sexist and patriarchal culture of our country, which determines monuments and street names. The space of the city is still “mainly the field of action of the men who have the

⁹⁹ L. Parola, *Giù i Monumenti? Una Questione Aperta*, cit., p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Mi Riconosci? Sono un professionista dei beni culturali is an Italian association founded in 2015. It was born from a movement of cultural heritage students and young professionals, initially as a campaign focused on access to careers in the cultural heritage sector and recognition of academic qualifications in this field. Today Mi Riconosci? is a national collective and an approved association that engages in activities related to raising awareness, advocating for change, and proposing solutions to issues concerning the management of cultural heritage and working conditions within the sector; <https://www.miriconosci.it/>.

¹⁰¹ “I risultati sono illuminanti: in Italia ci sono solo 171 monumenti dedicati a donne, su un totale non quantificato ma che certo ascende all’ordine di decine di migliaia. Per esempio, a Milano, siamo a una statua di donna contro 125 di uomini, e tra i busti romani del Gianicolo siamo a 228 maschi contro una donna”; T. Montanari, *Le Statue Giuste*, Editori Laterza, 2024, p. 34.

¹⁰² In this thesis, I will only address aspects related to the representation of female subjects.

power, political as well as professional, being very low the female presence in both areas”¹⁰³. The cultural construction of modern Western society has intertwined ethnicity and gender, resulting in stereotypes of male warriors, patriots, mothers, and victims, leading to the illusion of a homogenous community, “an us where the male belongs anyway all the verticality of the public space”¹⁰⁴.

While statues and images of males often stand alone as individuals, politically and socially empowered to assert control over their identities, depictions of female figures frequently embody the universal and generic, symbolising national ideals or even an abstract representation of the nation itself. Furthermore, where women have been depicted, it has often been in roles that reflect traditional gender norms, such as mothers, muses, or allegorical figures representing virtues like justice, liberty, and peace. The female bodies are most often represented reclining or kneeling always at the hero’s feet: depicted as victims or rhetorical symbols, maternal or martyr figures, in a sensual, allegorical or ancillary way, all - with the exception of those religious - are nameless¹⁰⁵.

Furthermore, these depictions rarely reflect the women of the region or their actual experiences during the period of their creation. These representations have reinforced stereotypical views of women as passive and supportive rather than as active agents of change. In such contexts, statues of women (generally fictional figures sculpted in classical styles dictated and shaped by men) often serve merely as conduits for broader messages: their bodies are appropriated to convey whatever symbolism the artist or commissioner intended.

Women face more than just a lack of representation, apart from being completely unrealistic and idealised allegorical forms: real women were largely left out.

¹⁰³ R. Pirajno, *Il Senso della Donna per la Polis*, in “Le Strade Maestre. Un Cammino di Parità”. Proceedings of the II and III Conference of Female Toponymy, curated by M. Ercolini, L. Junck, Roma, Universitalia, 2015, pp. 127-130.

¹⁰⁴ L. Parola, *Giù i Monumenti? Una Questione Aperta*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.



Ill. 6 Mario Rutelli, Monumento ad Anita Garibaldi, 1931–1932, bronze and travertine, 945 cm total, statue 260x326 cm, Colle del Gianicolo, Rome.

It is emblematic that only one woman is a dedicatee of a monument in Rome: Anita Garibaldi, strictly with her Italian name and her husband's surname (Ill. 6). She is depicted in a statue of the Fascist era that sees her on horseback holding a gun with her right hand and holding a newborn son with his left arm and with a constant reference to Garibaldi in the base. In an equestrian representation that does not compare to male ones, the role of a fighter was not enough to celebrate it, and it was associated with the role of a mother.

The project for the monument was initiated by the Federation of Garibaldian Veterans, led by Ezio Garibaldi, who secured the support of Benito Mussolini and the Fascist government. It was decided to proceed without a public competition, opting instead to directly select the artists. This initiative to erect the monument was part of the celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of Giuseppe Garibaldi's death in 1932, a period during which the Fascist regime sought to legitimise itself

through the celebration of historical figures from the Risorgimento. Mussolini, in fact, used the monument to emphasise the continuity between Garibaldian and Fascist ideologies, highlighting the revolutionary and patriotic role of the Garibaldian movement in contrast to the bourgeois and liberal one¹⁰⁶. The first artist contacted was Antonio Sciortino, who produced a sketch that was not approved; subsequently, the commission turned to Giuseppe Guastalla, whose project was favourably received by the Duce. However, the final work was entrusted to Mario Rutelli, a renowned sculptor of the time, who created the equestrian statue depicting Anita Garibaldi holding her son Menotti in one arm and a pistol in the other. It was Mussolini who desired the alteration that would portray the amazon not only as a heroine but also as an exemplary mother, thereby creating a perfect propagandistic representation of the Fascist mother¹⁰⁷. The monument was placed on the Janiculum Hill, a symbolic location due to its association with the defence of the Roman Republic in 1849. The selected area for the monument was near the Tricolour Lighthouse and the Helbig House, thereby enhancing the site's historical and patriotic significance. The monument was inaugurated with a speech by Mussolini, who emphasised the intended interpretation of the protagonist by stating:

The Fascist government sought to dedicate to the memory of Anita the depiction of her galloping presence, portraying her in the dual roles of a warrior chasing the enemy and a mother protecting her child. The distinguished artist thus encapsulated not only the effigy but also the spirit of Anita, who throughout her brief and adventurous life always reconciled the noble duties of motherhood with those of an intrepid combatant alongside Garibaldi¹⁰⁸.

In cities like Turin, Naples or Bologna there are no statues in public space that celebrate specific women of the past. As reported in the article of *Mi Riconosci?* of 2020 it is underlined:

It is impossible and superfluous, therefore, to make a list of those missing in our public memorial spaces. But it is evident that in the selection of the personalities to be publicly honoured also intervened an androcentric criterion, It has led to the silencing of women who would have deserved recognition at

¹⁰⁶ S. Grandesso, *Il Monumento ad Anita Garibaldi a Roma*, Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2012, p.177.

¹⁰⁷ F. Grasso, *Mario Rutelli*, exhibition catalogue (Palermo, Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, 8th May – 6th June 1998), Regione siciliana, Assessorato dei beni culturali ambientali e della pubblica istruzione, Palermo, 1998, p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ B. Mussolini, *Scritti e Discorsi*, Hoepli, Milano, 1939, vol. 8, p. 59.

least equal to that given to many men whose faces we know by heart. Almost half of humanity and history is missing¹⁰⁹.

Bologna is reputed to be a city particularly attentive to gender issues; however, regarding the presence of women in public spaces, as reported by the census of *Toponomastica femminile*¹¹⁰, it is quite minimal: they are neither present in monuments nor in street signage¹¹¹. Statues in public spaces celebrating great women of the past are completely absent; 1,191 streets are dedicated to men compared to 104 to women¹¹².

While strolling through the streets, one may encounter a few statues with female features: a few saints, some nymphs, and very sensual, naked sirens.

Among the secular female statues in Bologna is the most recent one, the *Lavandaia* (Ill. 7), a bronze sculpture created by architect Saura Sermenghi as part of Bologna's initiative as the European City of Culture in the year 2000, a project presented by the Associazione donne d'arte (Adda). Statues honouring washerwomen are reasonably widespread in Italy: it is undoubtedly the most historically represented female profession in Italian public statuary. Hence, it is also important to note that this is the only statue of a washerwoman created by a woman.

¹⁰⁹ “È impossibile e superfluo, quindi, fare un elenco di chi manca nei nostri spazi pubblici commemorativi. Ma è evidente che nella selezione delle personalità da omaggiare pubblicamente è intervenuto anche un criterio androcentrico, che ha portato al silenziamento di donne che avrebbero meritato un riconoscimento almeno pari a quello dato a molti uomini di cui conosciamo a memoria i volti. Manca praticamente tutta una metà di umanità e di storia”; *Mi Riconosci?, Perché Non Ci Sono Donne nei Nostri Monumenti?*, “Mi Riconosci?”, 28 giugno 2020; <https://www.miriconosci.it/donne-nostri-monumenti/>.

¹¹⁰ *Toponomastica femminile* is an Italian association focused on promoting and enhancing the presence of women in place names, such as streets, squares, and other public spaces, with the intent to give voice and visibility to women who have contributed, in all fields, to improving society. The association's main activities include conducting research to highlight gender disparities in toponymy, raising public awareness about the importance of recognizing women's contributions to history and society, and working with local administrations to name new public spaces after notable women. Their goal is to honour the contributions of women and create a more equitable and inclusive representation in public place names; <https://www.toponomasticafemminile.com/sito/index.php/home/il-progetto>.

¹¹¹ From the national toponymy census conducted by the group, it turns out that the average of streets dedicated to women goes from 3 to 5% (mostly Madonnas and saints), while that of the streets dedicated to men is around 40%.

¹¹² *Toponomastica femminile*; <https://www.toponomasticafemminile.com/sito/index.php/bologna-bo>.



Ill. 7 Saura Sermenghi, *Lavandaia*, bronze, 2000, Bologna, (photo taken by Guido Checchi)

This statue, depicting a naked woman kneeling inside a basin, was indeed created with the intent of celebrating washerwomen near the public washhouse, which was located along the Reno canal, now covered. Besides this significance, Sermenghi identifies a historical one by citing various testimonies regarding the sexual objectification to which washerwomen were subjected by men who stopped to watch them toil. Accordingly, she explains that “the true current provocation is not the sculpture itself but the unveiling of such roles and the representation of the morbid gaze upon the washerwoman”¹¹³. Therefore for the architect’s intentions, the purpose of the sculpture is thus to draw attention to the gaze of the observer, exposing its morbid aspect. Unfortunately, this aspect does not come through as the other dialectical element, the lecherous man, is absent, and it cannot be replaced by today’s observer, who in turn should be observed by an unspecified third person. Consequently, the focus remains on the sculpture rather than on the one who looks at the sculpture. What becomes apparent to the eyes is a naked, nameless, and prone

¹¹³ S. Sermenghi, *Saura Sermenghi: La Lavandaia in Via della Grada a Bologna che “Nella Sua Nudità Lava e Si Lava”*, “Inchiesta online”, 19 aprile 2017; <https://www.inchiestaonline.it/arte-poesia/saura-sermenghi-la-lavandaia-in-via-della-grada-a-bologna-che-nella-sua-nudita-lava-e-si-lava/> [last access on 18 June 2024]

woman, a passive object of the passer-by's attention who lacks any element to contextualise her.

The explicit sexualisation of the *Lavandaia* has been noted by the citizens of Bologna and led to a petition for its removal, which apparently and unfortunately went unheard¹¹⁴. As evidenced by this example, even when the intention is to celebrate a profession, particularly a laborious one, it is not a given that sculptors and administrators will avoid sexualising the female figure practising it.

In the province of Bologna, more precisely in Castelfranco Emilia, there is another case of public statuary that is decidedly worthy of mention: the *Monumento al tortellino* (inaugurated in 2006 in Piazza Aldo Moro – Ill. 8). This work was created by Giovanni Ferrari and financed by the association La San Nicola and the Dotta Confraternita del Tortellino of Bologna¹¹⁵. Unlike the previous case, here several subjects are depicted: a semi-nude woman holding a cat, a man bent over observing her through a keyhole, and the tortellino.

¹¹⁴ Biblioteca Salaborsa, *Un Monumento Alle Lavandaie In Via Della Grada*, “bologna.online”, 12 June 2001; <https://www.bibliotecasalaborsa.it/bolognaonline/cronologia-di-bologna/2001/la-lavandaia-di-via-riva-reno> [last access on 9 July 2024].

¹¹⁵ The Dotta Confraternita del Tortellino of Bologna is an association dedicated to the promotion and protection of the tortellino, one of the most iconic dishes of Bolognese and Italian culinary tradition. Founded in 1965, the association aims to preserve the authentic and traditional recipes of tortellini, ensuring that the preparation techniques and ingredients used are those of the original recipe. The confraternity organizes events, culinary competitions, and educational activities to spread knowledge about tortellini and Bolognese gastronomic culture; <https://www.confraternitadeltortellino.it/en/>.



Ill. 8 Giovanni Ferrari, Monumento al tortellino, 2006, patinated bronze, cement, and travertine, Castelfranco Emilia, Modena, (photo taken by Rosanna Carrieri).

There are various legends regarding the origin of the dish, all of which originate from Castelfranco Emilia, but in the basic imagination, in every version, there is the revelation of the female body through an act of violence. In this case, it is the scenic representation of the version celebrated by Giuseppe Ceri in 1908, who enriched the second canto of Alessandro Tassoni's *La secchia rapita* (1622): in Ceri's poem, it is recounted that in the Osteria Corona of Castelfranco, the innkeeper, during a conversation with a beautiful woman guest at his inn (whom some identified as the Goddess Venus), was shocked by her beauty and sensuality, particularly by her navel, which he glimpsed when her blouse accidentally lifted. In this state of ecstasy, he wished to imitate its form, thus creating the tortellino.

As noted by Rosanna Carrieri, Alexandra Forcella, and Ludovica Piazzì, "it is about a woman betrayed in her privacy, a female body subject to the eye of man: a devouring eye that takes the viewed object, incorporates it, destroys it, and forces it to submit to its will – the tortellino to be devoured"¹¹⁶. The trope of the woman being

¹¹⁶ R. Carrieri, A. Forcella, L. Piazzì, *Nude o Martiri? Rappresentazione e Riappropriazione Femminile nello Spazio Pubblico*, E-REVIEW, vol. 2021-2022, pp. 1–28, p. 12.

spied upon while “she unveils herself” to wash is still widespread in modern times, while at the same time, in literature and art, the depiction of a veiled female body signifies that it is a protected body. As Giuseppina Paola Viscardi notes

Letto nell'ottica dello scioglimento dei veli, lo svelamento della donna è, dunque, metaforicamente accostabile alla breccia aperta nella difesa della città una volta che se ne è conquistata la fortezza e della violazione della città stessa che inevitabilmente ne consegue. [Il velo viene visto] come elemento di protezione della castità, dell'onore, della posizione sociale di chi lo indossa, ovvero dell'*aidós* (femminile), termine, quest'ultimo, etimologicamente connesso all'intimo senso di pudore o vergogna mostrato da chi indossa un certo indumento, da un lato, e al senso di riguardo o rispetto (...) mostrato nei confronti di chi indossa un certo indumento, dall'altro¹¹⁷.



Ill. 9 - 10 Giovanni Ferrari, Monumento al tortellino, 2006, patinated bronze, cement, and travertine, Castelfranco Emilia, Modena, (photo taken by Rosanna Carrieri).

¹¹⁷ “Read from the perspective of the unveiling, the “revelation” of the woman is thus metaphorically comparable to the breach opened in the city’s defences once its fortress has been conquered, and the inevitable violation of the city itself that follows. [The veil is seen] as an element of protection of chastity, honor, the social position of the wearer, or *aidós* (feminine), the latter term, etymologically linked to the intimate sense of modesty or shame shown by the wearer of a certain garment, on the one hand, and the feeling of regard or respect (...) shown towards the wearer of a certain garment, on the other.” (my translation); G. P. Viscardi, *Usi Letterari e Significati Culturali del Kredemnon in Grecia Antica: La “Retorica Costitutiva” del Velo nella Prassi dell’Invisibilità*, “I Quaderni del Ramo d’Oro”, vol. 6, 2013, p. 86.

There are certain details present in the monument that distort the relationship between the various figures in the story: the presence of the cat in the woman's arms could allude to seduction, to the "female action" of capturing prey, a meaning widespread in modern times, and this is further accentuated by the fact that she seems pleased to be observed. Moreover, the introduction of the keyhole in the monument highlights the innkeeper's deliberate intention to spy on the woman's body. The woman in the *Monumento al tortellino* is neither an ethereal Olympian deity nor a merciful Madonna but a deliberately sexualised bronze body, bent, naked, unaware (in the poem) of being devoured by the man's gaze (or through the slit of a keyhole); while on the other side, the innkeeper (also bent in his harassment) stands as the extreme opposite to the central element, the product ready to be served on our plates, the tortellino to be devoured.

Thus, once again, we are faced with yet another female body that has been chosen to be accentuated in its most sexual, suggestive parts and transformed into a voyeuristic object, losing sight of the true purpose for which it was decided to create a statue with a fountain: to celebrate the tortellino.

The *Spigolatrice di Sapri* (2021) is another example of public statuary that has divided public opinion since its inauguration: the woman is depicted semi-nude and in a provocative manner, thus deemed by many as sexist. In Sapri, a coastal town in the province of Salerno, there are two statues of the *Spigolatrice* inspired by Carlo Pisacane's expedition of 1857. In the poem, the landing at Sapri is narrated by the poet Luigi Mercantini in 1858, who chose the perspective of a young and naive gleaner to recount the failed expedition intended to incite an anti-Bourbon revolution in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The young girl, while heading to the fields, witnesses the landing, meets Pisacane, becomes infatuated with him, and decides to abandon her work and join the insurrection. It should be noted that Mercantini personally participated in an intellectual and political movement that was interested in the condition of women: in 1856 he became director of the first Italian women's periodical, *La donna*, a newspaper attentive to the condition of women¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁸ F. Brancaleoni, *Mercantini Luigi*, Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, vol. 73, 2009; https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigi-mercantini_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/, [last access on 10 July 2024].

The first statue, created in 1994 by Gennaro Ricco (Ill. 11), depicts a young woman dressed in peasant clothing, lying on a reef, observing the sea before her, while leaning on her elbows. She is not portrayed in the act of gathering grain but when she notices the arriving boats and stops to observe as referenced in the first verses of the poem: “me ne andavo al mattino a spigolare / quando ho visto una barca in mezzo al mare”¹¹⁹. Her position on a rock and prone posture make her difficult to notice.



Ill. 11 Gennaro Ricco, Spigolatrice di Sapri, bronze, 25 June 1994, Sapri, Salerno, (photo taken by Riccardo Pesce).

¹¹⁹ L. Mercantini, *La Spigolatrice di Sapri*, 1858.



Ill. 12 Emanuele Stifano, *Spigolatrice di Sapri*, 2021, bronze, Sapri, Salerno, (photo taken by Lucrezia Lerro).

The second statue, however, created by Cilentan sculptor Emanuele Stifano (Ill. 12), was inaugurated on 25 September 2021 and placed on the promenade of the Sapri seafront. This sculpture shows an attractive young woman, dressed in a fine and very tight-fitting gown that appears almost wet, revealing her forms with little left to the imagination (particularly her gluteus), starkly different from the loose shirts worn by mid-19th century peasant women. She is posed in a manner that many have interpreted as lascivious and alluring: her right arm folded across her chest serves to hold a single ear of grain at her elbow but, more importantly, to hold up the dress's neckline.

While the depiction of wet drapery is traditionally a sign of artistic virtuosity in sculpture, this veiled nudity has been perceived as clashing with the subject represented and the references to the history of Italian unification that the subject should evoke¹²⁰. Many women, including some political figures, have protested and accused the new statue of the *Spigolatrice* of needlessly sexualising the female body.

¹²⁰ Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude: La Rappresentazione Femminile nei Monumenti Pubblici Italiani*, Mimesis Edizioni, 2023.

However, some do not view it this way, such as MP Franco Castiello, who asserts that the statue accurately represents “the physical features of Southern women”¹²¹. Following numerous complaints, the author himself stated that he has always preferred working with the nude and would have liked to depict the gleaner nude as well and added: “Since it was to be placed on the seafront, I took advantage of the sea breeze to give movement to the long skirt, thus highlighting the body”¹²². A quick web search reveals numerous photos and embarrassing selfies of men touching the most mentioned part of her body, proving that the real intent of the author has been correctly perceived by passers-by. Equally emblematic are the photos from the inauguration moment, which frame the statue from behind with the authorities in a semicircle in the background (among whom there are no women).

According to the art historian Annamaria Ducci, the artist “extrapolated the narrative occasion, the verses of the encounter between the young woman and a soldier, however interpreting them in a trivial, purely anecdotal”¹²³. Subsequently, she asserted that while for Mercantini, the young man epitomised the archetype of the valiant volunteer willing to sacrifice his life to liberate the South from Bourbon tyranny, Stifano envisions a tarnished romance, imbuing the *Spigolatrice*’s portrayal with a sense of sensuality: “a very serious misunderstanding of the lyric, which reveals a voluntary revision in a trivial key of those verses”¹²⁴. Therefore, it can also be stated that, in betraying the meaning of such a foundational lyric for the national imagination, this second statue of the gleaner fails to convey the same significance as a monument, understood as a memorial image. Instead, following Ducci’s considerations, the statue of Stifano has immediately absolved to its real function, to attract tourists, to act as a focal point for initiatives of local folklore or purely commercial: in short, “an image designed as a marketing tool for the promotion of

¹²¹ Il Fatto Quotidiano, *Spigolatrice di Sapri, Polemiche per la Statua in Bronzo che Mette in Evidenza le Forme. Boldrini: “Un’Offesa alle Donne e alla Storia”*, “Il Fatto Quotidiano”, 27 September 2021; <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/09/27/spigolatrice-di-sapri-polemiche-per-la-statua-in-bronzo-che-mette-in-evidenza-le-forme-boldrini-unoffesa-alla-storia-delle-donne/6334056/#cComments>, [last access on 20 June 2024].

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ A. Ducci, *Dalla Parte delle Cittadine. I Monumenti al Femminile in Italia, Alcune Riflessioni*, in “Predella journal of visual arts”, December 2023, n. 54, p. 158.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Sapri (...) precisely because of its sensuality, explicitly inspired by some models of Mediterranean women”¹²⁵.

Similarly, the art critic and journalist Helga Marsala from the pages of *Art Tribune* points out the “commercial” aspect of the *Spigolatrice*:

Sapri’s case is just another confirmation. Art conformist, populist, instagrammable, more naively close to decoration than to the complexity of aesthetic and intellectual investigation: the Italian cities overflow, at the expense of a high-level design, with a contemporary and international breath¹²⁶.

The issue lies precisely in that “ideal of woman” pursued at all costs, as well as in the symbolic value that the statue was supposed to convey: “The action is absent, the focus is on the female body and its appearance”¹²⁷. It can be stated that this is yet another example of the notorious *male gaze*, a concept introduced by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in 1973¹²⁸: it is the male perspective that observes and reproduces the world from its own viewpoint, a perspective with which women have become accustomed to viewing themselves and other female due to its pervasive cultural and media presence over centuries. In the 18th and 19th centuries, patrons commissioned paintings to admire, to please their gaze and to reflect their desires, and these patrons were mainly men. The problem is that such patterns are still being replicated today in a public statue, without any analysis of the chosen perspective and the message the work ultimately conveys. Thus, the young *Spigolatrice di Sapri* vanishes within the male gaze: no one has yet succeeded in truly giving her a voice.

As journalist Elisabetta Moro suggests, “It is yet another missed opportunity. While Mercantini’s poem is written by a man adopting a woman’s perspective,

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Il caso di Sapri è solo l’ennesima conferma. Arte conformista, populista, instagrammabile, più ingenuamente prossima alla decorazione che non alla complessità dell’indagine estetica e intellettuale: le città italiane ne traboccano, a discapito di una progettualità di livello alto, dal respiro contemporaneo e internazionale” (my translation); H. Marsala, *La Spigolatrice Sexy. A Sapri Polemiche per la Statua che Celebra una Famosa Poesia*, “Art Tribune”, 27 September 2021; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2021/09/la-spigolatrice-di-sapri-arte-pubblica-sessismo/>, [last access on 20 June 2024].

¹²⁷ E. Moro, *La Statua della Spigolatrice di Sapri e la Sessualizzazione (Inutile) della Donna Rappresentata: Parliamone*, “Elle”, 28 September 2021; <https://www.elle.com/it/magazine/women-in-society/a37767236/polemica-statua-spigolatrice-sessismo/>, [last access on 20 June 2024].

¹²⁸ L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, “Screen”, vol. 16, 1975.

Stifano's statue is sculpted by a man who does not even attempt to deconstruct the male viewpoint"¹²⁹ although it has been a century and a half since the publication of the poem. The general feeling, paraphrasing the content of the 1989 work by the Guerrilla Girls collective¹³⁰, is that women must necessarily be undressed to be included in the public sphere and that they can only enter it when they are objects offered to the gaze. Furthermore, whatever the theme that leads to the creation of a female statue, it appears to be merely a pretext for the display of an objectified body, subsequently cloaked in justifications invoking the freedom of art and the artist, as well as nudity as a right of expression and a demonstration of virtuosity.

In a similar way, Marsala challenged the idea that "[It would take] works as tanks of complex and changing identities, more than figurines to collect between urban space, social media and the voracious consumerism of pop"¹³¹. Meanwhile, Ducci expressed the opinion that the statue not only does not interpret the pseudo-historical figure of the young *Spigolatrice di Sapri*, "but reduces it to a miserable icon in which patriotic rhetoric and Italian machismo overlap"¹³².

These issues extend beyond statues depicting archetypal female figures as previously described, to encompass full-figure statues intended to honour women from the past. Among the most striking examples is the fountain dedicated to journalists Ilaria Alpi and Maria Grazia Cutuli (2003) in Acquapendente, in the province of Viterbo (Ill. 13). Both journalists were assassinated in war zones (Somalia and Afghanistan respectively) while performing their duties.

¹²⁹ E. Moro, *La Statua della Spigolatrice di Sapri e la Sessualizzazione (Inutile) della Donna Rappresentata: Parliamone*, cit.

¹³⁰ Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989.

¹³¹ H. Marsala, *La Spigolatrice Sexy. A Sapri Polemiche per la Statua che Celebra una Famosa Poesia*, cit.

¹³² Ducci, *Dalla Parte delle Cittadine. I Monumenti al Femminile in Italia, Alcune Riflessioni*, cit., p. 161.



Ill. 13 Mario Vinci, Monumento a Ilaria Alpi e Maria Grazia Cutuli, 2003, bronze, Acquapendente, Viterbo.

In describing the bronze monument, the artist Mario Vinci explained that the two young women, united in an imaginary circle with water flowing from a sheet of newspaper, symbolise the continuous flow of news, which is the lifeblood of modern journalism, and for which Ilaria and Maria Grazia sacrificed their lives¹³³. The practice of “rejuvenating” the depicted figures is widespread, as is the excessive emphasis on delicate details or beauty. However, the crucial issue is whether such an approach is necessary, especially in monuments intended to honour and celebrate real women or specific categories. A statue that represents women in a sexualised manner, when it is supposed to celebrate them, is far more offensive. The fact that journalists Ilaria Alpi and Maria Grazia Cutuli are depicted nude and as young girls is not only anachronistic but also far more egregious than the actions of their

¹³³ G. Mazzuoli, *Un Monumento a Ilaria Alpi e Maria Grazia Cutuli*, “Canino.info”, 23 May 2003; <https://canino.info/index.php?view=article&id=185:un-monumento-a-ilaria-alpi-e-maria-grazia-cutuli&catid=80>, [last access on 20 June 2024].

predecessors. The critique of this monument by the curators of the volume *Comunque nude*, Ludovica Piazzzi and Ester Lunardon, is particularly severe

non essendo una rappresentazione allegorica di due ninfe bensì di due giornaliste professioniste morte sul lavoro, la nudità è un elemento non necessario; ci siamo chieste se due giornalisti sarebbero stati rappresentati allo stesso modo, finendo col trovarlo un monumento irrispettoso della professionalità e della memoria delle due giornaliste¹³⁴.

It is not enough to represent a famous person for their memory to be respected, but it is important how the memory is expressed, with what intention and with what gaze. The issue is not the use of nudity as an artistic category, but its instrumental application in the representation of women. Invoking the so-called “artist’s vision” in relation to this type of monument would be erroneous. A work placed in a public space is conceived to convey specific messages, reflect society, and be observed daily by citizens. Public statuary, by its very nature, serves as an instrument for disseminating moral values, and encouraging adherence to norms through emulation. In the case of public commissions, the artist thus assumes a political responsibility in publicly representing the emotions and realities intended to be depicted: a representation that must conform to the expectations and shared ideals of the community.

The *Monumento alla Partigiana Veneta* (1969), located on the banks of the Gardens of the Venice Biennale, is another interesting example that deserves an analysis. The decision to commemorate the role of women in the movement in Veneto was not considered before 1957. It was then that the sculptor Leoncillo Leonardi received the commission that resulted in the work now displayed in the Museum of Modern Art at Ca' Pesaro. Leoncillo crafted an unusual neo-cubist piece for the time, in polychrome ceramic, to be placed in Venice in the public gardens at the entrance of the Biennale (Ill. 14). The statue depicted an armed woman with a red handkerchief, which was soon replaced by a copy with a brown one (it was rejected

¹³⁴ “As this is not an allegorical representation of two nymphs, but rather of two professional journalists who died in the line of duty, the nudity is unnecessary. We questioned whether two male journalists would have been represented in the same manner, concluding that it is a monument disrespectful to the professionalism and memory of the two journalists” (my translation); Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude: La Rappresentazione Femminile nei Monumenti Pubblici Italiani*, cit.

due to its reference to socialism and communism, which, according to the commission, did not reflect the diversity of political ideas within the partisan movement). The statue was inaugurated in 1957, in the presence of the Gold Medal recipient Carla Capponi, among others. However, on the night of 27-28th July 1961, the monument was blown up with a charge of dynamite, leaving only the base partially intact. The fascist hand behind the attack was evident, and the population reacted with anger and astonishment, organising several demonstrations in the following days¹³⁵.



Ill. 14 Leoncillo Leonardi, *Partigiana Veneta*, 1954-1955, polychrome ceramic, Museum of Modern Art Ca' Pesaro, Venice.

¹³⁵ G. Bigi, *Il Monumento Perduto a Ricordo delle Partigiane*, Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia (ANPI), 8 September 2012; <https://www.anpi.it/il-monumento-perduto-ricordo-delle-partigiane> [last access on 12 July 2024].

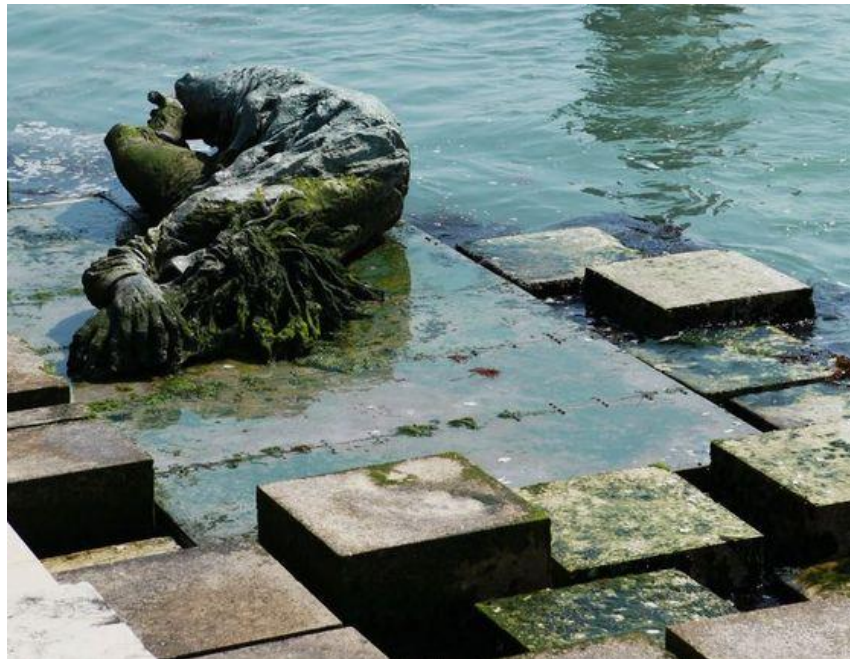


Ill. 15 Carlo Scarpa, portion of the basement left intact after the terrorist attack, concrete, public gardens of Venice Biennale.

After the attack, the municipal council of Venice committed to the immediate reconstruction and announced a competition for a new monument, which was awarded to the sculptor from Cadore, Augusto Murer, known for other monuments dedicated to the partisan memory. It was decided to not replicate Leonardi's work, both to preserve a trace of the attack, with the remains of the base still in the Castello Gardens (Ill. 15), and to project a different image of the woman in war, one that is more comforting and classical: that of sacrifice and suffering¹³⁶.

Murer conceived a bronze sculpture depicting a dead woman, her hands still bound, resting on a base of iron and stone designed by Carlo Scarpa, in the lagoon facing the Riva dei Giardini della Biennale. Scarpa intended for the platform to rise and fall with the tides, creating a striking visual effect, but this mechanism never functioned as intended. The monument was inaugurated on 25th April 1969.

¹³⁶ Ibid.



Ill. 16-17 Augusto Murer, Monumento alla Partigiana Veneta, 1969, bronze (statue), concrete and copper plates (basement), 12 x 5 m, Riva dei Giardini della Biennale, Venice.

As briefly mentioned before, Murer's new *Partigiana Veneta* (Ill. 16–17) possesses characteristics and meanings vastly different from Leoncillo's work: it represents a dead woman, with bound hands, presumably tortured, lying just above the water's surface. As a representation of pain and sacrifice, it also mirrors the evolving mindset of the 1960s: on one hand, the predominance, in memory, of drama and suffering over triumph in the victory over dictatorship; on the other, the terror

and apprehension regarding signs of a resurgence of that monster thought to be defeated forever¹³⁷. According to Enrico Bascherini, architect and PhD in architectural design, the observer could take on an active role in this work, as the concrete and stone blocks invite one to approach the woman's body "with difficulty and sanctity"¹³⁸, whose body being placed lower than the observer, imposes mercy and transmits suffering and anguish. Unfortunately, the statue goes unnoticed by most due to its hidden position, transforming this statue too into another "forgotten woman"¹³⁹.

Without delving into the artistic merits of the two statues, in both cases, they are again anonymous monuments, not dedicated to individual female personalities of the partisan movement. Moreover, it is striking to note the shift from portraying a strong, dynamic image of a woman who reacts and resists to a more conventional depiction of a woman who does not immediately appear as a partisan. This image of a woman defeated by war, aligns well with a historical narrative that, for decades, overlooked women's contributions to the struggle, relegating them to supportive and brave roles in the background. Adding to the bitterness today is the malfunctioning mechanism, which leaves Murer's otherwise splendid figure at the mercy of water, seagulls, and debris brought by the sea.

The issue of androcentric public spaces prompts a broader reflection on the concept of monuments. As previously discussed, the idea of the monument appears to be in crisis today, largely due to its perceived inadequacy in representing history and the shifting focus of art towards the present. Historian Pierre Nora has described this as a "crisis of memory", foreshadowing the risk of a split between history and memory¹⁴⁰. When history is reduced to a mere "object of historiographical study"¹⁴¹, the discourse becomes trivialised, either reduced to the simple celebration of individuals or by succumbing to revisionism, which can strip even significant or

¹³⁷ M.T. Sega, *La Partigiana Veneta. Arte e Memoria della Resistenza*, Istituto veneziano per la storia della Resistenza (IVESER), Nuova Dimensione, Portogruaro, 2004.

¹³⁸ E. Bascherini, *Comporre il Dolore. Il Monumento alla Partigiana Veneta di Carlo Scarpa*, "in bo Ricerche e Progetti Per Il Territorio, La Città e L'Architettura", July 2018, vol. 8, n. 12, pp. 165-173; <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2036-1602/7856>.

¹³⁹ G. Bigi, *Il Monumento Perduto a Ricordo delle Partigiane*, cit.

¹⁴⁰ P. Nora, *Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des Lieux*, in "Les Lieux de Mémoire", curated by P. Nora, Paris, 1997, Vol. I, pp. 23-43.

¹⁴¹ Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e Mutamenti della Memoria Culturale*, Bologna, 2015, p. 14.

tragic events of their meaning. Devoid of its emotional depth, history thus becomes a mere accessory. For this reason, it is crucial to reflect on historical monuments, reconstruct the context of their creation, and understand their role in civic life.

The art historian Annamaria Ducci asserts that

In globalised society, the connection between the city - understood not as *urbs* but as *civitas* - and the monumental image is broken: this is why 'monuments' are created that are stereotypical or banal images, aimed, as mentioned, at tourism promotion or, more generally, at consumption. The anonymous naked body of a woman perfectly fits this populist and capitalist intent¹⁴².

In this view, monuments are reduced to mere urban decoration, often used by public administrations to give identity to otherwise anonymous areas of the city, such as suburbs, roundabouts, or parks, or to attract tourists (as seen in the case of the *Spigolatrice di Sapri* - Ill. 9 - or statues of famous people sitting on benches to allow the tourist to take a photo with them like the one dedicated to the singer Lucio Dalla in Bologna).

2.3 The Rush to Fill the Gap

Owing in part to the publication of two censuses initiated by Mi Riconosci?, there is undoubtedly a greater awareness today of the inadequate and insufficient representation of women in public spaces and discourse. However, as the art historian Ludovica Piazzì observed, “some hasty inaugurations represent a clumsy attempt at *pinkwashing*, an attitude that only appears to be supportive of women and the issues they champion”¹⁴³. With this criticism, Piazzì highlights what in her book refers to as *monumental washing*, a practice in which certain administrations or companies choose to finance the creation of monuments as means to enhance their reputation and visibility. Piazzì further asserts that “we do not need token female

¹⁴² A. Ducci, *Dalla Parte delle Cittadine*, cit., p. 167.

¹⁴³ S. Pignataro, *Statue di Donne? O Madonne o Stereotipate. A Parte Margherita Hack (e Poche Altre)*, “IO donna”, 22nd May 2022; <https://www.iodonna.it/attualita/costume-e-societa/2022/05/22/statue-di-donne-o-madonne-o-sterotipate-a-parte-margherita-hack-e-poche-altre/> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

representation in monuments, especially if these new works perpetuate a diminishing, sexist, and stereotypical portrayal of women”¹⁴⁴.

The rush to “fill the gap” in female representation highlights how the absence of thorough debate on the subject can only lead to projects that lack meaningful impact. The desire to increase the representation of women in public monuments and to achieve parity with male representation is strongly felt by associations, collectives, and individual political figures in Italy and abroad. While these discussions have been ongoing, they are often driven by motivations that, although appearing urgent, can sometimes be insincere and reveal a simplistic desire for propaganda.

Indeed, the focus has remained on the absence of women in representation, without considering who is actually represented, what values are being communicated, and what they stand for. The purpose of the censuses was not to draw attention to numbers alone, but rather to stimulate a deep and critical reflection on what public spaces convey about the society we live in, the role they assign to women, and the characteristics for which women should be publicly remembered and immortalised.

For this reason, the association *Mi Riconosci?* has made itself available to become a key voice for those involved in commissioning, proposing, and approving public monuments in Italian cities, engaging in constructive dialogue with administrators and politicians, and providing guidance to ensure that new monuments do not offend or disrespect the individuals they portray. Furthermore, the association aims to prevent future proposals from being misused for political or propagandistic purposes.

A pertinent example of this occurred in October 2023 in Florence, when former mayor Dario Nardella made statements promising the swift creation of five statues dedicated to real women. A commission of experts was to be established to oversee the project and select four figures for the main statues, while the fifth was to be chosen by the public through a survey, involving schools as well. To date, no statues have been created, and the project is at a standstill¹⁴⁵. This situation demonstrates that the mayor’s declarations were driven by momentary enthusiasm,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ *Mi Riconosci?*, *Comunque Nude*, cit.

fuelled by the recent publication of the inquiry, but without consideration of the city's true needs, the opinions of its citizens, or prior consultation with relevant professionals. Although the mayor expressed a desire for public participation, the initiative was once again prompted by a top-down approach.

A similar project, though with slightly different results, was initiated in 2018 in New York City: the *She Built NYC* project¹⁴⁶. This initiative was launched by Mayor De Blasio's wife, Chirlane McCray, in collaboration with Deputy Mayor Alicia Glen and Tom Finkelppearl, Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs. A budget of \$10 million was allocated to fund public art installations dedicated to prominent women in New York's history who contributed significantly to the city's development. Although this proposal was also initiated from the top, the innovative and positive aspect of the initiative was that it genuinely involved the entire city: the public could suggest names of influential women who played a crucial role in the metropolis' growth via the project's website.

Through women.nyc¹⁴⁷ members of the public submitted nearly 2,000 nominations of women, groups of women, and events in women's history that significantly impacted the city. Unfortunately, the programme was delayed by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, and despite McCray's announcement that the commissioning process for the first statue had been completed, the initiative was actually paused for a couple of years. The programme remained stalled until July 2023, when the first of the five projects – honouring Shirley Chisholm in Brooklyn's Prospect Park (Ill. 18) – was realised, and the remaining four projects were restarted with the launch of an open call for artists to design them¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁶ V. Poli, *New York lancia il progetto "She Built NYC" Per Costruire Monumenti Dedicati alle Donne*, "Artribune", 28th August 2018; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2018/08/new-york-progetto-she-built-nyc/> [last access on 3rd August 2024].

¹⁴⁷ <https://women.nyc/>.

¹⁴⁸ NYC Cultural Affairs, *SHE BUILT NYC Open Call For Artists*; <https://www.nyc.gov/site/dcla/publicart/shebuiltnyc.page> [last access on 3rd August 2024].



Ill. 18 Amanda Williams and Olalekan Jeyifous, Shirley Chisholm Monument “Our Destiny, Our Democracy”, steel, 1219.2 cm, 26 May 2023, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York City.

Returning to the contemporary Italian context, in Padua in 2022, a heated debate emerged during a city council meeting after two councillors (one male and one female) proposed a motion to create a statue of Elena Cornaro Piscopia, the first woman to graduate from the University of Padua and the first in the world. The plan to place it on one of the empty pedestals in Prato della Valle (a square that represents the city’s secular pantheon, decorated with 78 statues dedicated exclusively to illustrious men of Padua) received most criticism¹⁴⁹. Although the Superintendency initially welcomed the motion with openness and possibility, the project was later rejected. One argument from opponents was that Prato della Valle should remain untouched, with some claiming the project would be “out of context” and “a wrong and disrespectful intervention in relation to history”, while others irrationally invoked the concept of *cancel culture*¹⁵⁰, despite there being nothing to cancel, but

¹⁴⁹ Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude*, cit.

¹⁵⁰ The concept of *cancel culture* in the context of monuments refers to the practice of re-evaluating and, in some cases, removing statues, plaques, or other public commemorations that are seen as celebrating figures whose actions or beliefs are now considered offensive or harmful by contemporary standards. This often involves a reassessment of historical narratives and a shift in societal values, leading to debates over whether certain monuments should remain as part of the public landscape or be removed, altered, or relocated to reflect a more inclusive and accurate representation of history.

rather something to add¹⁵¹. Furthermore, the fact that already had a statue dedicated to her within the university (Ill. 19), created and placed there in the late 18th century – precisely when Prato della Valle was being developed as a showcase for the city’s most important men – was used as a justification for not creating another (even though there are already multiple statues of figures like Dante, Petrarca, and Livy scattered throughout the city).



Ill. 19 Bernardo Tabacco, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, 1678, marble, Palazzo del Bo, Padua, (credits Università degli Studi di Padova)

Critics of this practice argue that it can erase historical memory, while supporters contend that it is necessary to address and correct past injustices.

¹⁵¹ L. Bison, *Una Statua di una Donna in Prato della Valle a Padova? Sarebbe la Prima Volta: Infuoca il Dibattito*, “Finestre sull’Arte”, 3rd March 2022; <https://www.finestresullarte.info/opinioni/una-statua-di-una-donna-in-prato-della-valle-a-padova-infuoca-il-dibattito> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

The controversy surrounding Elena Cornaro Piscopia's statue generated such a stir that, within weeks, it attracted international attention: after coverage by "The Guardian" and "The New York Times", all the major international newspapers reported on the ongoing debate in Padua and the absurdity of such strong opposition¹⁵².

Although feminist calls for the realisation of this monument have once again been inevitably entangled with political manipulation and propaganda, the motion put forward by the Padua councillors likely tapped into a genuine need within the city. This is evidenced by the fact that a petition launched on January 8th on [change.org](https://www.change.org)¹⁵³, advocating for a statue dedicated to Elena Cornaro Piscopia, gathered 6,000 signatures within a few hours. The various proposals and counter-proposals exchanged between December and January were numerous, particularly across newspapers and social media, and witnessed significant public engagement – a desirable outcome when aiming to intervene in public space (for instance, the idea of creating a third tier of statues, a list of prominent Padua women from the 14th to the 19th centuries, or establishing a "Prato delle donne" near the railway station, were among the suggestions)¹⁵⁴.

It is apparent that to create a truly public monument, it is essential to avoid offending sensitivities, respect the individual being commemorated, and thoroughly discuss the message to be conveyed without imposing top-down proposals. It would be prudent to consult with associations, activists, and those knowledgeable about the relevant issues before making hasty proposals. In cases involving individuals with living descendants, it is advisable to collaborate with the family in designing the monument. Additionally, seeking out female sculptors or artisans for the creation of the works is important – since, according to the census, only 7% of monuments in

¹⁵² See E. Povoledo, *Put a Female Statue on a Vacant Pedestal? An Italian City Says Not So Fast*. "The New York Times", 5th January 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/world/europe/italy-female-statue-padua-prato-della-valle.html> [last access on 2nd August 2024]; A. Giuffrida, *Italy: proposal for statue of first woman to get PhD sparks debate*, "The Guardian", 3rd January 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/03/italy-proposal-statue-elena-cornaro-piscopia-first-woman-phd-debate> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

¹⁵³ <https://www.change.org/p/comune-di-padova-una-statua-per-elena-cornaro-in-prato-della-valle>

¹⁵⁴ Associazione Padova Sorprende, *Le statue di Prato della Valle: Il Terzo Anello*, "Padova Sorprende", January 2022; <https://padovasorprende.it/le-statue-di-prato-della-valle-il-terzo-anello/>, [last access on 2nd August 2024].

Italy have been entrusted to female artists¹⁵⁵. Moreover, consulting with technical experts on sculptural materials and investing in high-quality execution, avoiding low-cost options, and considering innovative or recycled materials are crucial. It is also necessary to ensure that the final product does not appear rhetorical, excessive, or vulgar. Finally, implementing scheduled maintenance programmes is essential to address any negative interactions between the public and the monument.

Then, a pressing question to consider is: why must the concept of a female monument always be tied to a statue? As Ducci pointed out, the answer is pretty straightforward: “A statue is always a body (...) we have known since antiquity that the female statue possesses an intrinsic force that, from the myth of Pygmalion onwards (if not from Paleolithic Venuses), evokes a sense of touch and a desire for possession”¹⁵⁶. Thus, the choice of a figurative representation seems to remain a limitation for the concept of a female monument. Persisting in depicting the physical forms of individuals – whether male or female – rather than creating works that focus on the reasons for commemoration, represents yet another obstacle to achieving gender equality and fostering an inclusive and respectful form of monumentality.

Activist Maren Reeder argues that the presence of statues of women can help to establish role models, enhance self-confidence and personal potential, and thus support female emancipation¹⁵⁷. Journalist Nilanjana Roy wrote in “The Financial Times”, “This goes beyond political correctness: what children and teenagers see of the world shapes their view of it, their sense of the place they should occupy”¹⁵⁸, while instilling in all young people the notion of equality and respect for the contributions of both men and women moving forward. According to Lorenza Perelli, an expert in public art, it is both just and necessary for public spaces to represent women; however, she adds, the time has come to also include “all the other people who animate and make up the nation”¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁵ Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁵⁶ A. Ducci, *Dalla Parte delle Cittadine*, cit., p. 165.

¹⁵⁷ M. Reeder, *Monuments to Notable Women: Increasing Female Representation in Public Space*, “Trinity women’s review”, vol. 1, 2018.

¹⁵⁸ N. Roy, *Why Aren’t There More Statues of Women?*, “The Financial Times”, 7 June 2017; <https://www.ft.com/content/2f9137c6-49ff-11e7-a3f4-c742b9791d43> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

¹⁵⁹ S. Pignataro, *Statue di Donne?*, cit.

It has long been understood that what we refer to as collective memory establishes an essential relationship not only with time but also with space. Following Maurice Halbwachs' reflection, in their relative artistic dimension, monuments are always contemporary, embodying values of memory that are continually renewed through ongoing interaction with the present, with aesthetic tastes, and with the expectations or sensitivities projected by societies¹⁶⁰. From this perspective, monuments can be described as “inhabitants of the present”¹⁶¹.

As Aleida Assmann has emphasised, contemporary memory has taken on forms different from those of the previous century: it has been replaced by “diverse, sometimes contradictory memories, each claiming the right to social recognition”, and this change has been facilitated by individual and collective engagement with cultural heritage¹⁶².

It is pertinent to link this concept with the notion of *heritage community*, which was ratified by the Faro Convention of the Council of Europe (2005)¹⁶³. Its preamble acknowledges “the need to put people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage”, and it reaffirms “the recognition that rights relating to cultural heritage are inherent in the right to participate in cultural life, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”¹⁶⁴, in “respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law”¹⁶⁵, as “everyone, alone or collectively, has the right to benefit from the cultural heritage and to contribute towards its creation and preservation”¹⁶⁶. This represents a dynamic interpretation of the concept of cultural heritage, based on the principle of the interconnection between individuals or communities and the environment, understood both as a natural habitat and as an urban and social space. The Convention thus proposes to place emphasis on the term “cultural”, rather than on the idea of “heritage”. It further specifies:

¹⁶⁰ M. Halbwachs, *La Memoria Collettiva*, curated by P. Jedlowski, T. Grande, Milano, 2001.

¹⁶¹ A. Ducci, *Dalla Parte delle Cittadine*, cit., p. 168.

¹⁶² Assmann, *Ricordare*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁶³ Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199), Faro, 27 November 2005; <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatyid=199> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 1, a.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 3, b.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Art. 4, a.

Cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time¹⁶⁷.

The idea of a heritage community has been incorporated into Italian legislation through Art. 2, c of Decree Law 26 March 2008, No. 62 (an update to the 2004 Cultural Heritage Code), albeit with a significant restrictive semantic shift, where cultural assets are still defined as “expressions of collective cultural identity”¹⁶⁸.

It is important to highlight that the Faro Convention clearly establishes the link between access to cultural heritage and the respect for human rights. It states that “the exercise of the right to cultural heritage may be subject only to those restrictions which are necessary in a democratic society for the protection of the public interest and the rights and freedoms of others”¹⁶⁹. Within this ideal framework, this principle should guide how we address the issue of gender discrimination in this context.

In essence, while artistic freedom is crucial, it must be balanced with respect for fundamental human rights, especially when it comes to public spaces. This includes respecting women’s rights and, more broadly, ensuring that communities have the right to live in a public space that is democratic, respectful of diversity, and protective of everyone’s rights.

It can be stated that monuments can influence the collective unconscious and help to free us from certain stereotypes. Therefore, if in Western societies, monuments serve as precise tools for transmitting values and ideologies, their creation should be carefully considered. Unfortunately, it is not only challenging to identify which models are needed and how they should be represented to be effective and meaningful, but it also raises the question of whether public funds should indeed be invested in “models” rather than in concrete political actions that truly equip us to achieve gender equality.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., Art. 2, a.

¹⁶⁸ Decree Law 62, 26 March 2008; <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/08062dl.htm> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

¹⁶⁹ Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199), cit., Art. 4. c.

In this debate, scepticism about achieving equality through the erection of statues is not unfounded. Transforming mindsets and overcoming ingrained biases is a gradual slow process, and for some, focusing on erecting monuments to historically marginalised women might seem like a misallocation of priorities. The journalist Jonathan Jones argued in “The Guardian” that time and resources would be better spent on advancing the lives of women today rather than memorialising those from the past. He further contended that “permanent statues don’t advance feminism – they trap people in the past”¹⁷⁰.

This urgency to construct, commission, and realise memorials and sculptures can indeed divert attention from addressing the genuine needs that should be strongly communicated to our administrations. Nonetheless, the experiences discussed earlier highlight that when a community voices a desire or necessity to honour an individual – whether male or female – in the public spaces they occupy, or if they consider such commemorations inappropriate, administrations and political representatives have to actively listen and strive to understand their citizens, ensuring that they respond effectively to their needs.

¹⁷⁰ J. Jones, *Feminism Doesn’t Need More Female Statues - It Needs Political Action*, in “The Guardian”, 27 March 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2017/mar/27/female-statues-erka-sofia-feminism> [last access on 2nd August 2024].

Chapter III

Artistic Projects in Turin: Rethinking Monuments and Gender Narratives

3.1 Monumentale Dimenticanza: Reviving Forgotten Female Figures in Public Art

In this significant historical moment, as there are numerous global debates concerning the theme of monuments and their significance, a new vision of public art necessarily presents a threefold challenge: aesthetic, political, and social, with the aim of constructing a shared symbolic universe that embraces the enhancement of resources and differences.

In Italy, women are actively engaging in the reclamation of public space and its symbols, often through performances and flash mobs. These forms of expression, intentionally ephemeral, are designed to impact the sensibilities of citizens by involving them directly, contrasting sharply with that of traditional institutionalised monuments, which frequently seem to lack resonance in today's society. Numerous artists and artistic projects (and not only artistic ones) have recently addressed the theme of forgotten and overlooked narratives within our collective history and, among these initiatives, *Monumentale Dimenticanza* stands out.

Monumentale Dimenticanza is an artistic project from the 2018 project developed in Turin by Safe – Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile APS¹⁷¹, in collaboration with Toponomastica femminile. This project was conceived and curated by a group of contemporary artists who sought to explore how certain events and historical figures have been progressively forgotten or marginalised in the official narrative. It addresses the theme of collective memory and historical erasure through the publication of a census of the statues of women present in Piedmont and national territory¹⁷², educational activities aimed at making the primary and

¹⁷¹ Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile APS deals with projects and activities to combat gender violence through research, training and education. From 2018, it realizes the SAFE project; <https://www.pensierofemminile.org/>.

¹⁷² The census was supported by the Regional Council of Piedmont and the Consulta delle Elette of Piedmont in 2018 and revealed unequivocal data: in Turin, in the provincial capitals of Piedmont, and in the 1088 municipalities with populations over 5000 inhabitants, the number of monuments dedicated to women is minimal, if not zero.

secondary school students know the monuments in the city, performance and installations of works in public spaces.

Through an interdisciplinary approach that combined sculpture, video installations, performances, and urban interventions, the artists created a series of works that invite spectators to reflect on what is remembered and what is forgotten. Each installation was in fact accompanied by informational panels that provided historical context and encouraged critical reflection from the public. Additionally, during the public events and workshops, citizens could discuss and share personal stories related to the themes of memory and forgetting with historians, artists, and other professional figures. Therefore, these meetings fostered intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, contributing to a broader and more inclusive understanding of history.

There were two main flash mobs in 2019 featuring actresses from local theatrical groups. The first performance (Ill. 20–21) took place on 7th March in Turin, in Piazza Carlo Emanuele II, beneath the statue dedicated to Cavour where the theatrical company ArTeMuDa dressed as and gave voice to four women who were either from Piedmont or closely connected to the region: Rosalie Montmasson¹⁷³ and Virginia Oldoini Countess of Castiglione¹⁷⁴, who have been significant in the Italian Risorgimento, Rita Montagnana¹⁷⁵ and Teresa Noce¹⁷⁶. There they told their stories

¹⁷³ Rosalie Montmasson (Saint-Jorioz 1823-Rome 1904) was a notable figure in the Italian Risorgimento, best known as the only woman who participated in the Expedition of the Thousand (*Spedizione dei Mille*) led by Giuseppe Garibaldi in 1860. She was married with Francesco Crispi, a key leader in the unification of Italy. Montmasson played an active role in the struggle for Italian unification, not only by supporting her husband's political activities but also by directly engaging in the revolutionary efforts herself. Despite her contributions, she was later marginalized, both in her personal life and in historical memory, often overshadowed by the male figures of the movement; Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), *#donneinarchivio – Rosalie Montmasson*, 24 October 2022; <https://acs.cultura.gov.it/donneinarchivio-rosalie-montmasson/> [last access on 14 August 2024].

¹⁷⁴ Virginia Oldoini, Countess of Castiglione (Florence 1837-Paris 1899), was an Italian aristocrat, diplomat, and one of the most famous women of the 19th century. She became renowned for her beauty, her influence in European courts, and her role as a mistress of French Emperor Napoleon III. Sent to Paris by her cousin, Italian statesman Camillo Cavour, she used her charm and connections to advance the cause of Italian unification. Beyond her political influence, she is also remembered for her involvement in early photography, commissioning hundreds of portraits that captured her in various dramatic and artistic poses, making her a pioneer in the art of self-presentation; G. Fazzini, *OLDOINI, Virginia, Contessa di Castiglione*, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 79, 2013; [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oldoini-virginia-contessa-di-castiglione_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oldoini-virginia-contessa-di-castiglione_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) [last access on 15 August 2024].

¹⁷⁵ Rita Montagnana (Turin 1895-1979) was a politician and member of the Constituent Assembly. She played a significant role in the anti-fascist resistance and was a key advocate for women's rights in Italy; M. Casalini, *MONTAGNANA, Rita*, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 75, 2011;

and their contributions to the culture and society of our country¹⁷⁷, engaging in a sort of dialogue with the statue of Cavour, wryly remarking that he managed to secure not just a statue but one in a beautiful square, while they, despite all their efforts, were denied such recognition.

The second event was held in Asti on 9th March, another Piedmontese city, like Turin, where there are no statues of female personalities. This performance unfolded along a route encompassing several streets, depicting the biographical tales of Maddalena Orsola, Anna Francesca Guglielma Caccia, Francesca Baggio, Lina Guenna Borgo, Rita Montagnana, Rita Levi Montalcini, and Enrica Jona¹⁷⁸.

All the actresses involved were supported by the work of the San Carlo Technical Schools. The classes in hairdressing and fashion handled the makeup and hairstyling, while the carpentry and decoration classes constructed the marble platforms.

[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rita-montagnana_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rita-montagnana_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) [last access on 14 August 2024].

¹⁷⁶ Teresa Noce (Turin 1900-Bologna 1980) was a partisan and member of the Constituent Assembly. Her activism and contributions played a crucial role in shaping post-war Italy, particularly in advancing the cause of gender equality and democratic reforms; G. Gaballo, *Teresa Noce*, “Enciclopedia delle donne”, 2024; <https://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/edd.nsf/biografie/teresa-noce> [last access on 17 August 2024].

¹⁷⁷ Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude: La Rappresentazione Femminile nei Monumenti Pubblici Italiani*, cit., p. 181.

¹⁷⁸ Maddalena Orsola Caccia (Moncalvo 1596-1676) was a painter; Anna Francesca Guglielma Caccia (Asti 1608-1628) was a painter; Francesca Baggio was a teacher and activist for women’s emancipation; Lina Guenna Borgo (Novi Ligure 1869-Asti 1932) was an educator; Rita Montagnana (Turin 1895-1979) was a member of the Constituent Assembly; Rita Levi Montalcini (Turin 1909-Rome 2012) was a neurologist; Enrica Jona (Asti 1910-2000) was a teacher who was deported to Auschwitz.



III. 20–21 Performance *Monumentale dimenticanza*, 2019, Turin (photographed by Ferdinando Vella).

3.2 Irene Pittatore: Monumenta Italia

Originating from *Monumentale dimenticanza*, *Monumenta Italia* is a public art project by Irene Pittatore, curated by Lisa Parola and Tea Taramino, that critically examines the artistic heritage within urban spaces. The artistic project's catalogue describes it as

an artistic initiative aimed at raising awareness, disseminating information, and engaging the public in reflecting on the scarcity of monuments dedicated to women: a civic reflection on urban artistic heritage and the contemporary significance of monumentality, memory, and heritage in relation to women's history¹⁷⁹.

Irene Pittatore is an Italian visual artist, performer, and photographer, born in Turin in 1979, renowned for her work that intertwines visual art and social engagement. Utilising multiple visual, narrative, and participatory tools, she has built a career dedicated to exploring social, cultural, and political dynamics. Pittatore employs photography not merely as an aesthetic medium but also as a means of critical reflection and social transformation.

A distinctive feature of Pittatore's work is her ability to actively engage communities in her creations. She develops highly participatory artistic projects for universities, museums, businesses, healthcare services, and magazines. Through these projects, she seeks to give voice to often marginalised or underrepresented groups, fostering collective reflection on crucial issues such as gender identity, historical memory, and social inequalities. In addition to her artistic practice, Pittatore is actively involved in education, conducting workshops and seminars aimed at spreading critical awareness and the ability to interpret images. Her commitment to education reflects her belief that art can be a powerful instrument of change, healing, and personal growth.

Among her most well-known projects are *L'amavo troppo e le ho sparato* (I Loved Her Too Much and I Shot Her), dedicated to gender-based violence; *You as me / Nei panni degli altri*, focused on diversity and inclusion; and *Homeless Eroine*, addressing the housing emergency.

¹⁷⁹ *Monumenta Italia*, exhibition catalogue (Turin, Recontemporary, 8th – 29th March, 2024), curated by Lisa Parola and Tea Taramino, 2024, Turin.

The stark observation that “Turin, a city with 101 monuments, has none dedicated to a woman”¹⁸⁰ served as a starting point for Pittatore to work on her new artistic project. This then prompted the question, “Do we still need heroes?”. Through this inquiry, *Monumenta Italia* challenges the concept of monumentality, with the aim to transform “what remains of the monument, the plinth, into a sort of dialectical platform to question what it means today to speak of monumentality, memory and history with regard to the gender issue”¹⁸¹. Therefore, through a critical appreciation and reinterpretation of Italian monuments and their historical and cultural significance, Pittatore explores these relationships seeking to provoke reflections on how monuments shape our perception and worldview. She emphasises the need to reconsider the value and role of these symbols in the contemporary context, questioning how they can be reinterpreted and updated to meet the needs and sensitivities of present and future generations, always inviting a critical, open and participatory debate.

As noted by Isabelle Demangeat, the project’s title itself, *Monumenta Italia*, suggests:

The final ‘a’ is the sign of a plural future of representations and a hint of the feminine. The intention, however, goes beyond grammatical form. The dynamics of this artwork emerge from an encounter between various paradoxes: revealing absence by rejecting individual representation, through the language of statuary, ironically challenged¹⁸².

In addition to the patronage of the City of Turin, the project has been supported by various scientific partners such as the Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile APS¹⁸³ and Forme in Bilico APS¹⁸⁴, and collaborations such as Associazione Flashback¹⁸⁵, Recontemporary, and Torino Città per le Donne APS

¹⁸⁰ Mi Riconosci?, *Censimento delle Statue Pubbliche e dei Monumenti Dedicati a Donne in Italia*, dicembre 2021; <https://www.miriconosci.it/censimento-dei-monumenti-femminili-risultati/>.

¹⁸¹ R. Carrieri, A. Forcella, L. Piazzini, *Nude o Martiri? Rappresentazione e Riappropriazione Femminile nello Spazio Pubblico*, cit., p.22.

¹⁸² I. Demangeat, *Rivelazione – Assenza – Riconoscimento – Donne*, cit.

¹⁸³ See footnote n. 132.

¹⁸⁴ Since 2017 it is a cultural association of social promotion - for a circulation of ideas between the worlds of education, art, school and therapy - formed by the association between professionals from different fields and from different nations; <https://formeinbilico.com/>.

¹⁸⁵ Flashback is a project born in 2013 and independent art center; <https://www.flashback.to.it/>.

ETS¹⁸⁶, all based in Turin. Furthermore, the main support of Fermata d'autobus Onlus¹⁸⁷ highlights the pervasive and structural erasure of women's ideas and history as a form of violence.

Although the project is initially based in Turin, with an exhibition at the Associazione Recontemporary's spaces, *Monumenta Italia* is intended to be extended nationwide, bringing together the expertise of cultural and art professionals alongside a series of works conceived by Pittatore. As the artist suggests, this project has to be disseminated across every Italian region because such research “stimulates curiosity and reflections. It is contagious. These data should also become public heritage”¹⁸⁸. The dissemination through exhibitions, interventions, and street poster campaigns activates our thinking, promotes recognition, develops debate, and raises awareness of what Pittatore refers to as “epistemicide”¹⁸⁹: the eradication and concealment of thought - in this case, female thought - manifested through the lack of public recognition of civil, intellectual, political, artistic, and scientific merits¹⁹⁰. For all those reasons stated before, building upon this initial action disseminated across the Turin area, and in accordance with the relevant institutions, the project will first be proposed to other municipalities and provinces within Piedmont to disseminate the collected data within their territories through the production and display of one or more posters. Subsequently, the project will be expanded to other cities throughout Italy.

¹⁸⁶ Torino Città per le Donne APS ETS is a non-profit organisation based in Turin, Italy, dedicated to promoting gender equality and supporting women's rights. The association focuses on fostering social inclusion and empowerment for women through various initiatives, including advocacy, educational programmes, and cultural events. It aims to address gender-based discrimination and to create a supportive community for women in the region, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society; <https://www.torinocittaperledonne.org/>.

¹⁸⁷ The Association offers hospitality and care to those who present a picture of psychological and psychic discomfort accompanied by forms of pathological addiction. From an idea of Raffaella Bortino, founder of Fermata d'Autobus Onlus, in 2017 the Gliacrobati Gallery was born as an exhibition space dedicated to the languages of Art Brut/ Outsider Art, which deals with irregular arts, art-therapy and artists from various parts of the world, promoting their activity as a means of knowledge and liberation of one's inner reality; <http://www.fermatadautobus.net/>.

¹⁸⁸ I. Pittatore, *Orientamento - Epistemicidio - Rovesciamento - Basamento - Contagio - Sciopero*, in *Monumenta Italia*, exhibition catalogue (Turin, Recontemporary, 8th – 29th March, 2024), curated by Lisa Parola and Tea Taramino, 2024, Turin, p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ The term “epistemicide” was coined by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Souza Santos and defined it as the destruction of some local forms of knowledge, the inferiorisation of others, wasting himself in the name of the designs of colonialism, the wealth of perspectives present in the cultural diversity and multifaceted world views they represent. See more in B. Santos, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice against Epistemicide*, Paradigm Publishers, 2014.

¹⁹⁰ I. Pittatore, *Orientamento - Epistemicidio - Rovesciamento - Basamento - Contagio - Sciopero*, cit.

3.3 Engaging the Public: From Posters to Exhibition

Monumenta Italia starts with a series of posters aimed at sparking curiosity and prompting viewers to reflect on their knowledge of public monuments dedicated to women in the provincial capitals of Piedmont and the municipalities included in the census. These posters also provide answers by presenting the data collected from the census conducted by the Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile (APS), detailing the number and types of monuments dedicated to women across urban and regional areas. To further engage the public, these banners have been strategically placed in various locations around the city of Turin, inviting reflection and interaction via QR codes.

During the period of February to March 2024, the following actions took place:

- In collaboration with the *Opera Viva* project¹⁹¹ in Barriera di Milano, a neighbourhood of Turin, on 26th February 2024, the public unveiling of a poster (measuring 6 x 3 metres) was held in Piazza Bottesini. It depicted the first main question “Do you know how many monuments dedicated to a woman are in Turin? No one.” with which the artist wants to spark curiosity in any passerby (Ill. 22);

¹⁹¹ Urban art project that adds meaning to the concept of public art by virtue of using the pre-existing in conceiving the work of art, born in 2013 by the artist Alessandro Bulgini in the belief that art is immortal and therefore the work is always alive; <https://www.flashback.to.it/opera-viva>.



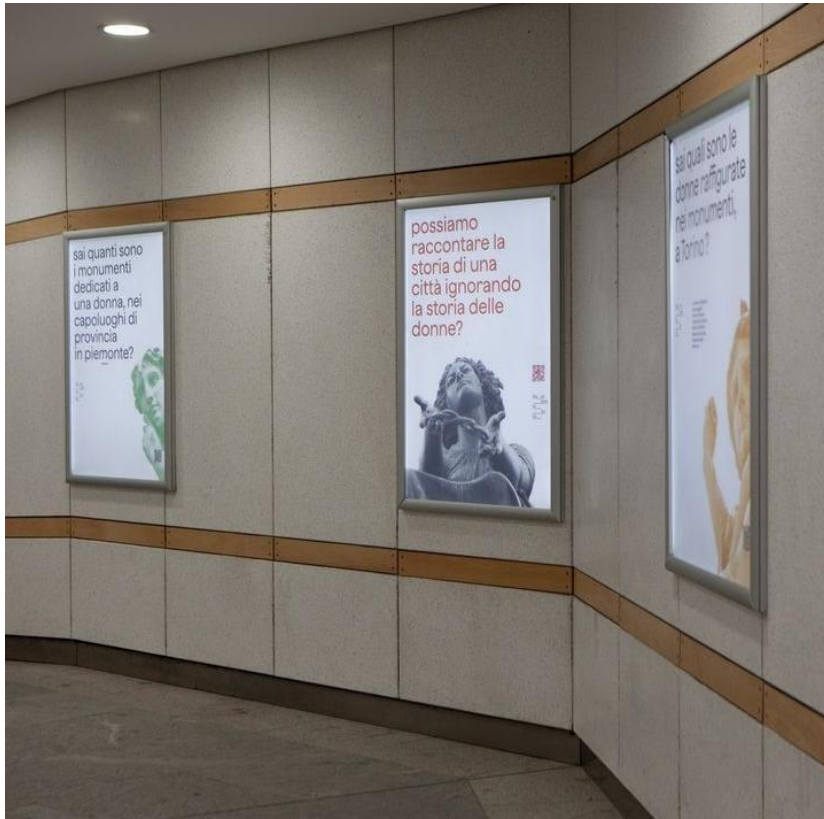
Ill. 22 Irene Pittatore, *Do you know how many monuments dedicated to a woman are in Turin?*, 2024, billboard, 6x3 m, Piazza Bottesini, Turin.

- From 4th to 29th March, the complete series of posters (100 x 70 cm) and two videos were displayed in the windows of the Public Relations Office (URP) of the Regional Council of Piedmont (located at Via Arsenale 14/G);

- From 6th to 31st March, the complete series of posters (119.5 x 84.7 cm – Ill. 23) were showcased within the light boxes of the Piazza Bengasi metro station (part of the *Metro Light Gallery*¹⁹² project, a collaboration between the City of Turin and INFRA.TO). Each poster features a statue accompanied by a question, along with a concise answer derived from data collected by the Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile APS. Each of these answers is subject to a following civic and collective reflection. The questions posed are as follows: “Do you know what women are depicted in monuments, in Turin? / Do you know how many monuments are made by a woman in Turin? / Do you know how many monuments are dedicated to a woman, in the chief towns in Piedmont? / Can we tell the story of a city ignoring the history of women? / Can we imagine today more open forms of the monument to

¹⁹² This project is an expression of the collaboration between the City of Turin and Infra.To, *Metro Light Gallery* was born from the desire to identify places open to citizens in order to give visibility, dignity and value to the irregular artistic productions preserved in the archive and art gallery of the Centro Singolare e Plurale of the City of Turin.

celebrate the ideas and history of women? / What stories of women is it urgent to bring to public space?";



Ill. 23 Irene Pittatore, eight light boxes with the complete set of posters, 2024, 119.5 x 84.7 cm, Piazza Bengasi Metro Station, Turin.

- Subsequently, some copies of these posters (in different formats) were also exhibited within the exhibition space of the Recontemporary Association during the associated exhibition.

In the spaces of Recontemporary, from 6th to 28th March 2024, an exhibition-laboratory was set up to investigate the themes of women's historical presence in public spaces and its narration. Irene Pittatore's works were presented as tools for reflection, initiating workshops and meetings open to schools, universities, and a diverse audience. Given the project's itinerant nature, the exhibition was described as a work kit comprising posters, an embroidered banner, videos, and photographs of

artistic performances, which will be used each time as the starting point for meetings with experts and activists.

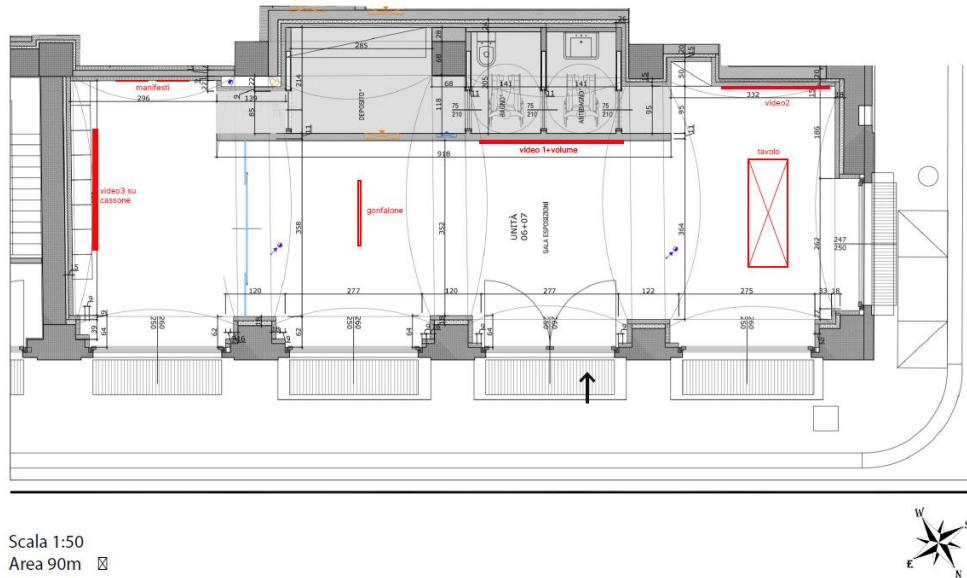
Recontemporary is a cultural association and an exhibition and educational space located in the historic centre of Turin (on Via Gaudenzio Ferrari, under the Mole Antonelliana). Founded in 2018 by Iole Pellion di Persano, it is curated by a team composed of Giulia Turcati, Costanza Hardouin, and Camilla Ferrero. For *Monumenta Italia*, the team hosted the exhibition part of the project and organised workshops dedicated to children and university students to make the audiovisual language more accessible and to foster collaboration and dialogue between institutions, youth and the artist. Scholars and experts from various fields (sociology, communication sciences, artistic and curatorial practice, art history, and urban planning) contributed to the various meetings and workshops.

The exhibition consisted of: a series of posters in various formats, an embroidered banner, three videos, four photographs, a column with the gelatine base model itself, and the plasterboard model used in one of the artist's performances. On the table, visitors could view the design for the gelatine basement mould and consult several documents: a list of the monuments dedicated to female figures in Piedmont organised by municipality; the copy of the census of the research project by the Centro Studi e Documentazione Pensiero Femminile, which analyses these monuments at national level; and the bilingual catalogue.

As evident from the floor plan, the exhibition space is adorned with large windows facing two busy streets in the heart of Turin. This prime location naturally attracts a diverse array of passersby of varying ages and genders. I was able to observe these interactions firsthand, thanks to my internship at this exhibition space. During the exhibition period, these windows played a crucial role in capturing the attention of many individuals: numerous people paused outside, taking photographs – primarily of the *Gonfalone* (Ill. 25) – or pointing in surprise at the posters displayed. Equally, many ventured inside, asking about the project and examining the various artworks with renewed curiosity.

RECONTEMPORARY

Via Riberi, 12/b Torino, 10124
Piano Terra



III. 24 Planimetry of the exhibition Monumenta Italia, March 2024, Recontemporary, Turin.

3.4 The Exhibition in Details

- *Gonfalone* (III. 25)

This embroidered banner is a type of flag bearing the Italian phrase: “Turin is the Italian city with the most monuments: there are 101. No one is dedicated to a woman”. This impactful and reflective item, which echoes a phrase and the related data from one of the posters, was designed to be portable and consequently displayed in other urban centres of the region.

A gonfalon is a traditional banner used in Italy (particularly common between the 12th and 14th centuries), representing towns, provinces, regions, or other local entities. Typically, its design often includes coats of arms, emblems, or symbols that reflect the history and culture of the community it represents. Gonfalons are displayed during important occasions such as official ceremonies, public events, parades, and processions. As the gonfalon is traditionally a symbol of local pride and

identity, used in this way can be a powerful tool to stimulate public discussion and raise awareness on the issue of women's representation.



Ill. 25 Irene Pittatore, *Gonfalone*, 2024, embroidered fabric and wood, Turin.

- *A Week-Long Monument (The Ice Plinth)*, (Ill. 26–27–28)

The video showcases a performance in which Irene Pittatore attempts to position herself - and maintain balance - atop an ice plinth placed in a public space (Flashback Habitat park). The plinth, unable to provide stable support, compels the artist to continually adjust her posture due to the slipperiness of the surface, its temperature, and its gradual melting. For seven days, as the ice melted, Irene Pittatore performed an ironic and playful dance that demonstrates the impossibility of

remaining comfortably and balanced on the plinth, which thus becomes the element that defines the position of power in the urban space. Even when the artist tries to wear spiked shoes, she cannot stand on it for more than a few seconds: it is as if the plinth itself rejects her, causing her to fall. The precarious balance and effort to maintain it, as suggested by the video, invite reflections on the contemporary relevance, forms, and consequences of the very concept of monumentality in a globalised world. The audio includes ambient sounds that enrich the sensory experience of the viewing.





Ill. 26–27–28 Irene Pittatore, *A Week-Long Monument (The Ice Plinth)*, 2024, video stills, Flashback Habitat park, Turin.

- *One Weak Monument (The Jelly Plinth)*, (Ill. 29–30–31)

The video shows the artist wandering through the main streets and squares of Turin, attempting to replace the bases of monuments with a precarious version made of edible pink gelatine. The fragrant, fragile, and glistening base is entirely incapable of supporting objects without enveloping them within its mass, thus once again

testifying to the impossibility of elevating anything on its surface. In the video, the artist is seen pausing at the following statues: *Cavour e L'Italia*, by Giovanni Duprè (1865–1873) in Piazza Carlo Emanuele II, the *Monument to Alfonso Ferrero della Marmora*, by Stanislao Grimaldi (1881-1891) in Piazza Giambattista Bodoni, and the *Monument to Massimo d'Azeglio*, by Alfonso Balzico (1867–1873) in Corso Massimo d'Azeglio. The video also shows the gradual damage to the pink base due to its movement around the city. It concludes with the artist sitting at the base of a statue, staring at the gelatine before proceeding to eat it.

Exposed to melting and deterioration over time, a copy of the base used in the video was placed next to the video for the public to see and touch. The choice of gelatine as a material is highly symbolic: while traditional pedestals are built to endure and support the weight of commemorative statues, gelatine is unstable, malleable, and destined to disintegrate. This contrast underscores the ephemerality of the things we choose to celebrate and remember. The video's aesthetic emphasises the fragility and instability of the gelatine, with close-ups of the wobbling details highlighting its transient nature.





III. 29–30–31 Irene Pittatore, *One Weak Monument (The Jelly Plinth)*, 2024, video stills, Turin.

- *Basamento Pubblico* (III. 32–33)

Action performed with the curator Roberto Mastroianni and passersby in Porta Palazzo. This performance took place as part of the *Piazze d'Italia* project and is one of the artist's earliest videos offering a critical reflection on the role and forms

of contemporary monuments and the responsibilities of artists, public administration, and private investors involved in urban transformation processes or their narratives.

In this video, the artist is carefully lowered onto a custom-made concrete pedestal at the beginning of Ponte Rossini using a system of ropes and pulleys managed by the curator Roberto Mastroianni. Once on the pedestal, the artist stands upright and adopts various poses that reflect the grandeur, strength, and composure of heroic figures from both ancient and modern sculpture, as well as comic book superheroes. Additionally, the artist assumes poses reminiscent of prominent historical figures from the Italian Risorgimento, such as Mazzini and Cavour. This symbolic act invites the public to reflect on who or what deserves to be celebrated and remembered in public spaces. Furthermore, it critiques the notion that merely commissioning an artist for a project intended to address social issues or beautify certain urban areas is frequently insufficient to resolve the underlying problems.

Passersby were not merely passive spectators but became integral parts of the work. Many stopped to watch, photograph, and question the artist, while others ignored her completely. This dynamic created a range of reactions from curiosity to indifference, contemplation to active participation. Pittatore leveraged the curiosity of some passersby by inviting them to step onto the pedestal: a laughing child posed first alone and then with the artist, followed by a middle-aged man working at a nearby construction site. This inclusion prompted viewers to consider who is represented in public spaces, suggesting that not only prominent figures but anyone can and should be celebrated.

The performance video is characterised by a simple yet evocative visual quality, using static shots interspersed with descriptive phrases, allowing viewers to focus on the artist's details and gestures. The audio includes ambient sounds that enrich the sensory experience of the viewing.



Ill. 32–33 Irene Pittatore, *Basamento pubblico*, 2013, video stills, HD Video, 7'.27", Porta Palazzo, Turin.

- 4 Photographs

These photographs capture significant moments from the performances dedicated to the pedestals.

3.5 Workshops Details

The workshop *I Want a Monument!* (Ill. 35–36) proposed by Recontemporary, held on Saturday, 23 March, was primarily aimed at children aged 4 to 10 and their parents. During the workshop, after a brief explanation of *Monumenta Italia* project and the concept of a monument by the artist and curators, the children were encouraged to use their imagination and creativity to rethink the many monuments that occupy the city’s streets and gardens and create new ones. Using coloured modelling clay and plasticine (materials kindly provided by Carioca Italia), the children transformed Recontemporary into a space for envisioning new forms and stories.

Subsequently, a similar workshop was also organised: *Art for social transformation - Experimenting in an art project* (Ill. 34), led by Irene Pittatore and Isabelle Demangeat (facilitator and executive coach specialised in diversity and inclusion), with the participation of Tea Taramino and Lisa Parola, mainly for the university students within the course for Intercultural Animators of the City of Turin and ASAI – Associazione di Animazione Interculturale.





Ill. 34–35–36 Recontemporary, workshops in the exhibition, photo, Turin (photo taken by Recontemporary).

3.6 Some Reflections

Like American artists Jenny Holzer (born 1950), Barbara Kruger (born 1945), and the Guerrilla Girls, who appropriated the visual language of advertising, specifically fly-posting, to convey their messages in a quick and accessible manner, it can be stated that also Irene Pittatore employs a similar approach. With her posters in the most frequented areas of the city of Turin, Pittatore is able to capture the attention and curiosity of many passersby, forcing them to look more closely at their surroundings, to observe our monumental heritage from a different perspective, and to look within themselves. In fact, none of these posters have any promotional purpose for the exhibition or the artist's project, their main goal is to catch the attention and obtain any kind of reaction.

It is worth noting that, while the Guerrilla Girls use provocative tactics suited to the fast-paced, media-driven culture of the United States (they emerged in the 1980s in the United States, a time of intense activism and cultural critique,

particularly around issues of race and gender), using bold, provocative campaigns that directly address institutions and challenge the status quo¹⁹³, Pittatore's work reflects the more nuanced, relational strategies that resonate within the European context. She fosters dialogue and reflection rather than direct confrontation and her projects are frequently collaborative and rooted in specific communities. Despite their differing methods, Pittatore's work can be seen as aligning with the Guerrilla Girls in its critical stance, particularly in her examinations of the commodification of women's bodies and the marginalisation of female artists. This alignment underscores a shared commitment to challenging patriarchal structures within the art world, though their approaches differ in form and execution.

Meanwhile, with regard to Barbara Kruger, her art is characterised by the use of bold and provocative text overlaid on photographic images, creating a powerful visual and textual statement. In a parallel vein, Pittatore's posters, which also incorporate text and images to enhance her commentary, similarly provoke and arouse the curiosity of those passing by.

Kruger's particular use of a generic "me" and "you" creates a sense of ambiguity and universality at the same time; the writings seem to give voice to the images and at the same time call viewers to participate in the sense of the image, and to put them in crisis, questioning themselves on what is really looking at¹⁹⁴. As identified by Kate Linker, the works show a "prospect of counter-language"¹⁹⁵ within the process of signification, through the mobility – or oscillation – of the subject between "positions" that are nothing more than the effects of language. Through the strategy of direct address, Kruger's works are able to break the fixity of a space, and subvert the rigidity of the categories of language and architecture at the same time.

It can be stated that Irene Pittatore similarly engages the public by challenging their perception of the urban landscape. Each of Pittatore's posters invites civic and collective contemplation: questions, such as "Can we tell the story

¹⁹³ A. T. Demo, *The Guerrilla Girls' Comic Politics of Subversion*, "Women's Studies in Communication", 2000, vol. 23, n. 2, pp. 133-156.

¹⁹⁴ C. Owens, *The Medusa Effect, or, The Specular Ruse*, in S. Bryson, B. Kruger, L. Tillman, J. Weinstock, "Beyond Recognition. Representation, Power, and Culture", University of California Press, Londra 1994, pp. 191-192.

¹⁹⁵ K. Linker, *Representation and Sexuality*, in B. Wallis (curated by), "Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation", New Museum for Contemporary Art/David R. Godine Publisher, New York/Boston, 1984, p. 415.

of a city ignoring the history of women?” or “What stories of women is it urgent to bring to public space?”¹⁹⁶, aim to stimulate awareness and foster a dialogue about the representation of women in public space.

Then, Pittatore uses the plinth, which melts, becomes fragile, is unstable, and is ephemeral. Therefore, can it still be considered as a plinth?

As the artist tries to raise her body on this plinth, she becomes an image of all the people not represented in our urban landscapes, whose civic, scientific or political achievements or artworks are not commemorated. But the plinth keeps refusing her presence, even when she slowly decides to undress herself in the hope that it can accept her, but this is not. In this sort of fight or dance, as these performances have been described, the artist denounces the invisibility of female memory and reveals the ambivalence of the pedestal’s function of elevation: it emphasises the inequality between the individuals represented.

Pittatore, with reference to Piero Manzoni’s work *Socle du monde* (1961), articulates her desire to “lighten the plinths of their role, to relieve them of their burden of supporting strutting and solitary humans”¹⁹⁷. She envisions that they might be able to speak, in an attempt, if possible, to create a form of monument that is more “open, dialogic, and less rhetorical (...) [in its celebration of] history and ideas”¹⁹⁸. As demonstrated by the videos and photographs on display, it is impossible to comfortably stand on a pedestal. Indeed, in any form or constitution (be it ice, gelatine, or plasterboard), it never ceases to move, whether through a dance, liquefaction, a bounce, or an inclusion¹⁹⁹.

During an interview for a podcast, Pittatore stresses that it is urgent to deal with this lack but

We must not be in a hurry to bring a solution on public ground because even if the intention is beautiful and pure (...) to tell the story of women in the public space, can take forms that however do not solve this problem but complicate it

¹⁹⁶ These questions were featured in Pittatore’s posters, which were displayed in the light boxes of the Piazza Bengasi metro station during March 2024 (see Ill. 20).

¹⁹⁷ I. Pittatore, *Orientation – Epistemicide – Toppling – Plinth – Contagion – Strike*, cit., p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

further (...) [stumbling] back into the female representation through stereotypes and images of bodies often naked²⁰⁰.

She concludes by stating that one of their ambitions is to find and work on new forms that will give voice to women, also as authors of works.

In the course of analysing and observing these performances, the *Fourth Plinth Project* at Trafalgar Square in London came to mind, particularly Rachel Whiteread's 2001 statue, *Monument* (Ill. 37) with respect to the notion of monumentality; Antony Gormley's 2009 performance *One and Other* (Ill. 38–39–40), in relation to public engagement; and Marc Quinn's sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005–2007 - Ill. 41) regarding who is considered worthy of commemoration.

The *Fourth Plinth Project* is an artistic initiative launched by the Royal Society of Arts in 1998 at Trafalgar Square, London. This project transformed an empty plinth – originally intended for an equestrian statue of King William IV, which was never realised – into a space dedicated to contemporary art. Over time, the project has emerged as a symbol of innovation and diversity in public art, inviting internationally renowned artists to create temporary works that frequently engage with political, social, and cultural themes. Each sculpture installed on the Fourth Plinth provokes public discussion and reactions, highlighting the evolving role of monumental art in contemporary society²⁰¹.

As articulated by Penny Egan, then-Director of the Royal Society of Arts, in her opening remarks, the project sought to raise pressing questions about the future of contemporary public sculpture:

In this new millennium, do we desire heroic statues in bronze or marble to adorn our streets and squares? What do we wish to celebrate, and in what manner? Is the United Kingdom finally prepared to embrace the new, rather than nostalgically lingering in the past? Can we engage in informed discourse

²⁰⁰ L. Partiti, Irene Pittatore "Monumenta Italia", "Il Posto delle parole – Ascoltare Fa Pensare", Speaker, 11 March 2024; <https://www.spreaker.com/episode/irene-pittatore-monumenta-italia--58991888> [last access 23 July 2024].

²⁰¹ S. Sumartojo, *The Fourth Plinth: Creating and Contesting National Identity in Trafalgar Square 2005–2010*, "Cultural Geographies", January 2012, pp. 67–81, p. 71.

on contemporary art in this country without the predictable, knee-jerk reactions of the tabloid press?²⁰²

Rachel Whiteread, one of the most eminent contemporary British sculptors, is an artist deeply engaged with the concept of monumentality. Celebrated for her artworks that explore absence and memory through negative space sculptures, Whiteread seized the opportunity to interrogate monumental tradition with a piece that defies the conventions and expectations of public sculpture. *Monument* (Ill. 34) is a translucent resin sculpture, and consists of a monument that simultaneously embodies a form of “counter-verticality”²⁰³. It is a precise cast of the plinth itself but inverted, creating a mirror image of the very support upon which it rests. This results in a striking visual effect, as it gives the illusion of a plinth that is at once empty and full, a parallel to the real object but with an almost spectral presence.



Ill. 37 Rachel Whiteread, *Monument*, 2001, polyurethane, resin, and granite, 4.8 x 2.43 x 4.8 m, Trafalgar Square, London

²⁰² P. Egan, *The Fourth Plinth*, “RSA Journal”, 1999, vol. 147, n. 5490, pp. 10–13; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41378787> [last access on 24 August 2024].

²⁰³ A. Pinotti, *Nonumonto. Un paradosso della memoria*, cit., p. 156.

This sculpture aspires to the condition of ice, to that which is intangible. As noted by Searle, “It is a sculpture that both wants to both declare itself, and to disappear”²⁰⁴. Viewed from across the square, it appears as little more than a blur, a disruption in the fabric of reality: the light catches it, and then it is gone. This characteristic contrasts effectively with the opacity of the granite base, further emphasising its transitory nature, as the perception of the monument continuously shifts depending on the time of day and the atmospheric conditions.

The title of Whiteread’s work itself invites reflection: in contrast to Nelson’s Column and the statues placed on the other three plinths, which honour notable figures, *Monument* is entirely devoid of any figurative representation. It does not commemorate a specific event or individual; instead, it appears to be “dedicated to the very act of monumentalising and the mechanism that makes it possible: the pedestal”²⁰⁵. In this instance, the pedestal, ordinarily a secondary support structure that simply allows the monument to be exhibited for public viewing, assumes a central and primary role.

The work thus embodies the contradiction between presence and absence, between what is remembered and what is forgotten. It challenges monumental tradition and invites the public to reflect upon the nature and significance of monuments, questioning what they omit or leave unexplored.

Antony Gormley’s *One & Other* (Ill. 38–39–40) project transformed the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, into a stage for individual and collective expression. Instead of placing a traditional sculpture, Gormley invited 2,400 ordinary people, selected through a lottery, to ascend the plinth, one at a time, each for an hour, over the course of 100 days. These participants were free to use their time on the plinth as they wished, whether to convey a message, protest, perform or simply remain silent.

This openness to individual expression draws parallels to the traditional site of public speeches and debates embodied by the famous *Speakers’ Corner* in Hyde

²⁰⁴ A. Searle, *Whiteread's Reminder of Modernist Ideals Defies Sentimentality*, in “The Guardian”, 2001; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/jun/05/arts.arts> [last access on 12 August 2024].

²⁰⁵ “Dedicato all’atto stesso del monumentalizzare e al dispositivo che lo rende possibile: il piedistallo” (my translation); A. Pinotti, *Nonumento. Un paradosso della memoria*, cit., p. 157.

Park. Since the 19th century, it has served as a space where anyone could publicly exercise their right to free speech. The Speakers' Corner, however, is more spontaneous and unrestricted than Gormley's plinth in terms of time or selection criteria, thus representing a broader, ongoing dialogue with the public. Both *One & Other* and Speakers' Corner highlight how public spaces can be repurposed to foster democratic participation.



Ill. 38–39–40 Antony Gormley, *One & Other*, 2009, photo, Trafalgar Square, London, (photos taken by Matthew Andrews).

In doing so, Gormley “enacted a gesture of democratising the plinth and offering a genderless counterpoint to the predominantly martial, white male culture that dominates the monumental landscape of the square”²⁰⁶. He relinquished his primary role as the invited artist, ceding it to an anonymous “other”, one devoid of the particular credentials typically recognised by the art world or the public memory system.

This project can thus be characterised as both a social and artistic experiment, as well as an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a person, an individual, in a public space. Rather than glorifying a singular historical figure, *One & Other* celebrated the diversity of humanity and the right of every individual to be seen and heard. The artist stated “We are celebrating the living, and not the dead, the living who make up Britain in all its magnificence. We are creating a picture of Britain, and we don’t yet know what the picture in composite will be”²⁰⁷.

By challenging the traditional conventions of public art, where statues and sculptures are often created to immortalise specific figures or ideals, *One & Other* transformed the Fourth Plinth into a site of democratic participation, where each person, regardless of origin or social status, was afforded their hour of visibility.

Despite highlighting the democratic undermining of the Square defined as a “space of (...) control”, the project faced restrictions. For instance, participant selection was confined to a set number from each region and was determined by a computer lottery. Additionally, while participants had freedom in their activities, they were restricted to a one-hour timeframe²⁰⁸. As Sumartojo pointed out, “as participants helped build a ‘composite picture’ of Britain, they created their own national narratives, but these were shaped by the constraints of both the project’s rules and the material environment of the site itself”²⁰⁹.

²⁰⁶ “Esegue un gesto di democratizzazione del plinto e di apertura genderless rispetto alla dominante marziale white male culture della piazza monumentale” (my translation); Ibid., p. 154.

²⁰⁷ C. Higgins, *Fourth Plinth Gatecrashed, but Gormley is Infazed*, “The Guardian”, 6 July 2009; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/jul/06/fourth-plinth-protest>, [last access on 14 August 2024].

²⁰⁸ A. Sooke, *Antony Gormley’s Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square*, in “The Telegraph”, 26 February 2009; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4838343/Antony-Gormleys-Fourth-Plinth-Trafalgar-Square.html>, [last access on 14 August 2024].

²⁰⁹ S. Sumartojo, *The Fourth Plinth: Creating and Contesting National Identity in Trafalgar Square 2005–2010*, cit., p. 74.

Marc Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005 – Ill. 41) presents a striking and provocative challenge to conventional notions of heroism, the role of marble in sculpture, the representation of the female nude, and the recognition of disability in public monuments. Mayor Ken Livingstone, who backed the initiative and approved the selected works for exhibition, characterised it as challenging “our notions of who should be the subject of a statue or memorial”²¹⁰.

Quinn's striking sculpture, weighing 13 tons and standing 3.5 metres tall, was meticulously carved from a twelve-foot block of Carrara marble and portrays Alison Lapper eight months pregnant. It challenges established ideas of classical beauty and questions the significance of placing a sculpture of an uncommon body on a plinth to tower above the public.



Ill. 41 Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005-2007, marble, 355 x 180.5 x 260 cm, Trafalgar Square, London.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

The choice of marble, traditionally associated reserved for mythical heroes, gods, and significant public monuments, such as Michelangelo’s *David*, to represent Lapper – a woman born with phocomelia affecting her arms and legs – forces a re-evaluation of who deserves to be immortalised in such a revered material: this use of marble elevates Lapper’s image to the status of the classical ideal, yet simultaneously challenges viewers’ expectations of heroism.

In *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, Quinn subverts this tradition to depict a contemporary, living woman whose form diverges from the idealised figures of classical antiquity: “a new model of feminine heroism”²¹¹.

Subsequently, in the form of a large-scale inflatable, the artwork also became the symbol of the 2012 Paralympics opening ceremony (Ill. 42)²¹².



Ill. 4217 Marc Quinn, *Breath*, 29 August 2012, double-layer polyester and high-capacity air pumps, 1253 x 681 x 936 cm, The Paralympic Games Opening Ceremony 2012, London, (photo taken by Jonathan Brady).

²¹¹ C. Josefson, *The Fourth Plinth: Raising the Issue of Disability*, in “Disability Arts Online”, 7 August 2017; <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/fourth-plinth-raising-issue-disability/> [last access on 12 August 2024].

²¹² S. Hubbard, *Marc Quinn: Alison Lapper Pregnant 2005*, “Artlyst”, 1 September 2020; <https://artlyst.com/features/marc-quinn-alison-lapper-pregnant-2005-significant-works-sue-hubbard/> [last access on 12 August 2024].

Furthermore, the sculpture highlights the issue of disability in public art, where statues in public spaces rarely depict individuals with disabilities, thereby reinforcing a narrow focus on who is deemed worthy of commemoration. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* disrupts this norm, standing proudly as a metaphor for our times, and as a powerful contemporary *Venus de Milo* as she has been defined²¹³. It makes a powerful statement about inclusivity and the representation of all bodies in the public sphere.

Alison Lapper Pregnant challenged societal norms and sparked significant debate since its installation on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square; some praised it as an excellent and groundbreaking piece of art, while others recoiled at its departure from traditional representations in public monuments.

For many, including Lapper herself, the statue carried a potent political message. As she remarked, “This sculpture gave me a voice for the first time, and maybe it did the same for others who have different bodies. I was up there, a pregnant, naked, disabled single mother”²¹⁴. Through this work, Quinn undeniably raised the visibility of people with disabilities and reignited discussions about their representation in public spaces. However, Lapper has also noted that while she found the piece fantastic, it would have been even more remarkable had it been her own work displayed on that plinth, highlighting the ongoing conversation about agency and representation in art²¹⁵.

Critics like Waldemar Januszczak have argued that the sculpture risks reducing Lapper’s identity to her disability, suggesting that it might evoke sympathy rather than admiration, potentially patronising the subject it aims to honour²¹⁶. He questioned whether the use of marble – associated with classical ideals of beauty – effectively challenged traditional notions of heroism or simply reinforced them through a different lens. Moreover, as the statue was selected by a committee instead

²¹³ C. Josefson, *The Fourth Plinth: Raising the Issue of Disability*, cit.

²¹⁴ S. Jeffries, *Statues are of Dead Blokes. This is a Living Woman Kicking Arse’: How We Made the Fourth Plinth’s Alison Lapper Pregnant*, “The Guardian”, 5 February 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/feb/05/statues-are-of-dead-blokes-this-is-a-living-woman-kicking-arse-how-we-made-the-fourth-plinths-alison-lapper-pregnant>, [last access on 12 August 2024].

²¹⁵ S. Hubbard, *Marc Quinn: Alison Lapper Pregnant 2005*, cit.

²¹⁶ W. Januszczak, *Art Review: Let’s Give Him a Big Hand*, “The Times”, 2 April 2017; <https://www.thetimes.com/article/marc-quinn-drawn-from-life-waldemar-januszczak-5hltqwn69>, [last access on 12 August 2024].

of through “public consensus”, in an online editorial, Brendan O’Neill argued that altering this process for selecting artwork marked a shift in power between the Square’s users and the authorities responsible for its art. He viewed the introduction of contemporary art for the Fourth Plinth as an attempt to influence national narratives by controlling the prominent public space²¹⁷.

Despite the divided opinions on its aesthetic value, the sculpture’s impact extends far beyond the art world. Its prominent position in the heart of London prompted countless passers-by to reflect on disability and the diverse forms of human experience, making its social and political significance far more important than the critical debates surrounding its artistic merit.

Alison Lapper Pregnant, like Rachel Whiteread’s *Monument*, subverts the expectation of what a monument should represent. While Whiteread’s *Monument* offers a ghostly, inverted reflection of the plinth itself, highlighting the absence and transience of monumentality, Quinn’s work confronts the public with a powerful image of physicality and presence, elevating a subject historically excluded from public monuments. Both pieces use the pedestal to critique the traditional function of public sculpture, though Quinn’s work is more overtly political in its celebration of diversity and inclusion.

Irene Pittatore’s performances similarly engage with the idea of the pedestal, though her approach often involves more direct interaction with the audience and space. Her works frequently challenge the norms of visibility and the role of the body in public art, resonating with Quinn’s focus on the human form and its representation. However, while Quinn’s sculpture is a fixed, monumental presence, Pittatore’s performances are transient and dynamic, reflecting the different contexts in which they operate – Quinn in the institutional setting of Trafalgar Square, and Pittatore in more varied and often less formal environments.

Antony Gormley’s *One & Other* further extends the critique of the pedestal by democratizing it. By inviting ordinary people to occupy the Fourth Plinth, Gormley transforms the pedestal into a platform for personal expression rather than a base for a static, traditional monument, in a manner similar to Pittatore’s *Basamento*

²¹⁷ B. O’Neill, *Statue of Limitations*, “Spiked”, 12 November 2007; <https://www.spiked-online.com/2007/11/12/statue-of-limitations/>, [last access on 12 August 2024].

Pubblico performance. These use of the pedestal as a space for diverse voices parallels Quinn's intention to challenge who is represented in public art. However, where Gormley's project and Pittatore's work both engage the public – Gormley by focusing on collective participation and the ephemeral nature of individual performances, and Pittatore by spontaneously inviting curious passersby, even though this wasn't initially planned – Quinn's sculpture offers a singular, enduring image that challenges societal norms.

The *Fourth Plinth Project* itself, despite being a highly institutionalised initiative, has consistently used the pedestal in a critical manner, commissioning works that question and redefine the role of public monuments. In a country with a rich history of traditional statuary, the project's willingness to embrace contemporary, often controversial, art reflects a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and critical engagement with the past.

Similarly to Pittatore's ambition to give voice to women through new forms, Sethembile Msezane with her *Public Holiday Series* (Ill. 43) takes another critical stance on how Black women are erased from public commemoration. As previously mentioned the Black South African artist works against the constant privileging of one history while cutting out of others, in particular the histories of Black women.

In this series she tries to re-contextualizes the physical geography of Cape Town by standing on white plinths closed to its monuments. She usually scatters some markers on the floor proving the public to engage with her by writing on the pedestal. One of the most memorable performances of the series occurred on Women's Day 2014. She stood in Freedom Square in Langa near a taxi rank: a spot which has an history of women rising up against apartheid but also questions violence against woman in taxi ranks as in the case of Noord taxi rank in Johannesburg in 2012²¹⁸.

²¹⁸ Read more: G. Nicolson, *A Man at a Miniskirt March*, "Daily Maverick", 20 February 2012; <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-02-20-a-man-at-a-miniskirt-march/> [last access 18 September 2024].



Ill. 43 Sethembile Msezane, Untitled, Women's Day 2014, photo, Cape Town.

In all her performances she wears a beaded veil that covers her face as a means which allows her to take away the attention of the viewers from her face and her identity. As Msezane explains, “I am embodying other women in trying to bring their histories to the forefront so we can start thinking more about Black women’s histories”,²¹⁹.

Therefore, as the artist and curator Kopano Maroga describes, she embodied the Black female statues absent from the African landscape, juxtaposing these representations with the enduring remnants of the colonial past²²⁰. Msezane claimed that these performances were intended as a starting point for women to reclaim their voices and recover spaces that historically had been long withheld. Through these actions, women “can also start seeing ourselves within these spaces”²²¹.

²¹⁹ C. Dee, *Claiming Public Space: Artist Sethembile Msezane on History and Commemorative Practices*, “Bubblegum Club - Art&Culture”, 2016; <https://bubblegumclub.co.za/art-and-culture/claiming-public-space-artist-sethembile-msezane-history-commemorative-practices/> [last access 18 September 2024].

²²⁰ K. Maroga, *The Poetics of Remembrance as Resistance: The Work of Sethembile Msezane*, “ArtThrob”, 27 February 2017; <https://artthrob.co.za/2017/02/27/the-poetics-of-remembrance-as-resistance-the-work-of-sethembile-msezane/> [last access 18 September 2024].

²²¹ C. Dee, *Claiming Public Space: Artist Sethembile Msezane on History and Commemorative Practices*, cit.

Kiluanji Kia Henda is another artist who has engaged with the theme of the pedestal in a more explicit colonial context tied to the history of his homeland, Angola.

In his photographic series *Redefining the Power* (2011 – Ill. 44), Kia Henda captures his artist friends from Luanda standing on the empty pedestals of former colonial monuments. This perspective echoes historical postcards from the period of Portuguese occupation in Angola, a nation that remained under colonial rule until 1975, before experiencing a Marxist regime and a civil war that lasted until 2002.

During the Portuguese colonial era, Luanda’s urban development was modelled on European principles, disregarding the indigenous character of its built environment and “entire cities were thus designed and built from scratch”²²², therefore, the majority of statues celebrated discovery, conquest, and enslavement.



Ill. 44 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Redefining the Power II*, 2011, photo, Luanda, Angola.

²²² D. Cobb, *Claiming the Future of the Past: Kiluanji Kia Henda’s Vision of Luanda’s Monuments*, The Johannesburg Workshop of History and Criticism, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2014.

Statues of colonial figures, such as King Afonso I of Portugal and General Pedro Alexandrino da Cunha, once stood on these pedestals, serving as public symbols of Portugal's domination and a celebration of its military and technological superiority. These figures reinforced colonial power and presented the settlers as culturally superior, with Luanda as the centre of this settler society²²³. After Angola's independence, these statues were removed, leaving the pedestals empty, as vestiges of a colonial legacy.

Kia Henda realised that "history and memory were a void for many Angolans, whose nation had been 'run over by history', by civil war, by colonial and neo-colonial forces"²²⁴. As a city with empty pedestals represents a time of transition, it also depicts a dangerous but productive uncertainty in terms of collective memory and imagining the future. Thus, with *Redefining The Power's* series, which was created a decade after the Angolan Civil War, the artist reflects on how historical memory, particularly surrounding monuments, can be reactivated and reimagined. By placing the young, creative generation of Luanda on these now-empty pedestals wearing eccentric fashions from local haute-couture designer Shunnoz Fiel²²⁵, Kia Henda reclaims these spaces that used to be charged with a violent history of exploitation and dominance.

As stated by the art historian Dariel Cobb, this act of re-appropriation transforms sites once used to glorify colonial rulers into platforms celebrating the future of Angola²²⁶. The photographs serve as a statement about a country grappling with its past, yet eager to define its future through creativity, resistance, and pride.

Therefore, Kia Henda's work connects Angola's historical memory, shaped by centuries of colonialism and decades of civil war, to a new narrative of hope. The empty pedestals, once symbols of colonial oppression, now hold the potential to reflect the dreams of a post-colonial society. As the curator and researcher Nadine

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ A. S. Salazar, *Is God a Communist?*, Galerias Municipais, 22 December 2020, <https://galeriasmunicipais.pt/en/jornal/is-god-a-communist/> [last access on 18 September 2024].

²²⁵ C. Foran, "To Be Continued...": *Picturing Luanda's Future through the Past in the Photography of Kiluanji Kia Henda*, Tba: Journal of Art, Media, and Visual Culture, January 2023, vol. 4, n. 1, pp. 108–129, p 120.

²²⁶ D. Cobb, *Claiming the Future of the Past: Kiluanji Kia Henda's Vision of Luanda's Monuments*, cit.

Siegert pointed out, he shows “a bright, moving and queer body representing the new Luanda, the new post-war, post-socialist and post-colonial Angola”²²⁷

By photographing his friends in these spaces, the artist symbolically places the next generation in positions of prominence, challenging traditional monuments that glorify past injustices. Through this performative gesture, these locations are transformed into anti-monuments, no longer commemorating the past but guiding the nation towards a future defined by collective aspirations²²⁸. As Kia Henda eloquently expressed, “I think every city should have empty pedestals that could be customized regarding our passions instead of having representations in cold stone of dead people that no one really cares about today and most of them are connected with wars or political power”²²⁹.

Kia Henda’s work repurposes the layers of meaning within public monuments, which Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory)²³⁰. Instead of stripping these sites of their emotional impact, the artist uses them as platforms for public contestation and redefinition of Angola’s future. As Cobb noted, “Henda’s political engagement, characterized by a seductive mix of humour and pathos, exemplifies the power art has to challenge and expand society’s oneiric capacities”²³¹.

In comparing these works, the geographical, historical, and cultural contexts play a significant role. Quinn’s, Gormley’s, and Whiteread’s works are deeply rooted in the British context and situated in Trafalgar Square with its symbolic role as a site of national history, popular history and one of London’s most popular tourist destinations²³². Their works directly confront and engage with this. In contrast,

²²⁷ N. Siegert, *Art Topples Monuments: Artistic Practice and Colonial/ Postcolonial Relations in the Public Space of Luanda*, Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies, 2018, vol. 30/31, pp. 150–173, p. 159.

²²⁸ C. Foran, “To Be Continued...”: *Picturing Luanda’s Future through the Past in the Photography of Kiluanji Kia Henda*, cit.

²²⁹ K. Knoppers, *Interview with Kiluanji Kia Henda*, Foam Magazine, 20 May 2015; <https://www.foam.org/talent/spotlight/interview-with-kiluanji-kia-henda> [last access on 18 September 2024].

²³⁰ P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, cit.

²³¹ D. Cobb, *Claiming the Future of the Past: Kiluanji Kia Henda’s Vision of Luanda’s Monuments*, cit.

²³² S. Sumartojo, *The Fourth Plinth: Creating and Contesting National Identity in Trafalgar Square 2005–2010*, cit.

Pittatore's performances, often conducted in less formal or non-institutional spaces, may reflect a more fluid, adaptable approach to the concept of the pedestal, influenced by different cultural and social dynamics. Whereas, Msezane and Kia Henda's series are overtly political and deeply rooted in their post-colonial reality: as Kia Henda stated "It is impossible to consider my work without considering Luanda"²³³.

Pittatore's actions are more performative and community-based, while Gormley's allows for spontaneous, unscripted performances by participants, on the other hand, Kia Henda's work is particularly composed and photographic. Yet, all of the actions previously analyzed transform the pedestal from a symbol of authority into a platform for new and inclusive narratives, whether through communal participation, individual expression, or political re-appropriation.

Ultimately, these initiatives reframe our understanding of what it means to be monumental, challenging the traditional canon of public art. They call attention to the importance of re-evaluating the figures we choose to immortalize in public space, suggesting that the future of monuments might not lie in permanence, but in their capacity to evolve alongside the societies they represent.

²³³ Tate, *Kiluanji Kia Henda – "I Wanted to Create a Trap"*, Artist Interview, TateShots – Youtube, 1 February 2019; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SMZ9MS6aoE> [last access on 18 September 2024].

Conclusion

The thesis investigates the complex relationships between monuments, public space, and gender representation in Italy from the mid-20th century to the present. While focusing on the Italian context, it also draws comparisons with contemporary art projects in other countries and diverse contexts, offering a broader perspective on the evolving debate around public monuments and their role in shaping collective memory.

The exploration of the monuments and statues that surround us daily showed that they overwhelmingly favour male figures, often relegating women to religious, allegorical, ancillary figures or other secondary roles, and revealed deep-seated disparities in how history is commemorated in public spaces.

Moreover, it emerged that the primary issue lies not in the disproportion in numbers between male and female representation in public spaces, but rather in the matter in which women are represented. In light of previous analysis of some monuments which depict female bodies, it becomes evident that often the choice of the subject and how the subject is portrayed frequently reveals more about the perspectives of those who commissioned it or the artists behind it rather than the history of the person being represented. Given these challenges, the presence of statues representing real women can have profound implications for the public's perception of gender roles. Is it therefore possible to think and create a new, different monumentality, using representation to change the narrative which has generated and continues to generate injustice? Based on the findings of the activist Mareen Reeder, who suggests the creation of monuments and statues depicting female figures to help create role models, promote female emancipation, and liberate us from certain stereotypes²³⁴, especially for younger generations, this seems to be more of a necessity, particularly today.

Nevertheless, as highlighted by some of the Italian examples discussed, this problem cannot be resolved by simply erecting more statues, as it would result in a time-consuming and costly race to fill public spaces with additional statues that fail to effectively “communicate” with the public, ultimately making the efforts and

²³⁴ M. Reeder, *Monuments to Notable Women: Increasing Female Representation in Public Space*, cit.

resources spent in vain. In fact, by insisting on portraying only the physical forms of individuals – whether men or women – instead of making works that highlight the reasons for their commemoration, it is a further obstacle to achieving gender equality and promoting inclusive and respectful monumentality.

These new monuments should not merely aim to correct historical omissions or serve as purely symbolic gestures; rather, they must actively reinforce the visibility and recognition of women’s contributions in fields where they have long been underrepresented. Hence, in case it is chosen to add a statue representing a historical female figure in public space, it is fundamental to avoid that this representation turns the subject into a voyeuristic object or reinforces stereotyped views of women as passive and supportive figures rather than active agents of change.

Furthermore, it is crucial to broaden and include in the dialogue not just experts but also the communities involved. As demonstrated by many of the case studies discussed in this paper, the success of any kind of public art project, and the achievement of its intended objectives, is contingent upon effective community engagement. Without it, any project risks becoming disconnected from the very people it seeks to represent. Taking into account Harriet Senie’s criteria for good public art: if it is almost impossible to aspire to represent the values of each individual in a monument, at least it should stimulate dialogue and promote greater social awareness²³⁵. Is it really intended for the general public or is it just a form of top-down decision or propaganda? When applied to monuments, these criteria challenge us to reconsider the figures we choose to commemorate and how their representation might stimulate societal reflection and conversation. In doing so, it could be possible to move beyond merely filling gaps in gender representation to creating monuments that genuinely engage the public and reflect more inclusive values.

As regards statues and monuments already in public space, on the other hand, it is essential to provide the community with the necessary tools to understand and interact better with them. Arguably, leaving damaged monuments intentionally in public spaces, with visible signs of protest, could stimulate debate and bring these

²³⁵ H. Senie, *Responsible Criticism: Evaluating Public Art*, cit.

monuments out of the anonymous urban backdrop, engaging the community more effectively than other museum initiatives, which often reach only a limited portion of the public²³⁶. This indeed challenges the traditional concept of heritage, which typically seeks to preserve monuments in their original integrity. However, this approach could offer the advantage of keeping critical aspects of “counter–heritage” alive without resorting to violence²³⁷.

By adding layers of interpretation to provide better contextualisation and understanding, or offering alternative perspectives through plaques, performance, QR codes, and educational initiatives, the public is then equipped with tools to critically engage with these works. A digital application could also allow alternative forms of materialization of memory, allowing a horizontal expansion of meaning and reflections around monuments²³⁸. Otherwise, there is the risk that these monuments remain little more than “self-celebratory representations of those who have imposed themselves from above”²³⁹.

In rethinking monuments and their power dynamics, it has also been crucial to interrogate the role of the pedestal itself. As explored throughout this paper, some contemporary artists fostered new approaches by challenging its verticality and distance or creating new forms of engagement with it, transforming the plinths into sites of dialogue and communal reflection rather than distant symbols of authority.

This broader approach to rethinking both the representation and the physical structure of monuments addresses these concerns, not only preserving historical artefacts but also fostering a more nuanced and interactive relationship between communities and their monumental heritage. *Monumenta Italia* stands as a pivotal project in addressing these concerns. By engaging the public through performances, workshops, exhibitions, and campaigns, this initiative went beyond static representations. It transformed public monuments into sites of active engagement and

²³⁶ N. Martellozzo, *Quando Cadono le Statue. Memorie Contestate e Counter-heritage nelle Proteste di Black Lives Matter*, “Dialoghi Mediterranei”, n. 45, September 2020; https://www.istitutoeuroarabo.it/DM/quando-cadono-le-statue-memorie-contestate-e-counter-heritage-nelle-proteste-di-black-lives-matter/#_ednref6 [last access on 8 September 2024].

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ R. P. Malaspina, S. Pirandello, *Memoria Interattiva. Contro-monumenti in Realtà Aumentata*, “Roots-Routes”, March 2021; <https://www.roots-routes.org/memoria-interattiva-contro-monumenti-in-realta-aumentata-di-roberto-paolo-malaspina-e-sofia-pirandello/> [last access on 8 September 2024].

²³⁹ Mi Riconosci?, *Comunque Nude: La Rappresentazione Femminile nei Monumenti Pubblici Italiani*, cit.

fostered dialogue around gender and historical memory between local activist associations, non-profit organisations, public administrators and officials, and the general public.

In conclusion, the ongoing conversation about gender representation in public art foregrounds the need for an inclusive reimagining of monuments and public statues. By transforming these spaces into sites of dialogue and reflection and drawing on Senie's criteria, we can move towards a future where public spaces more accurately reflect the contributions of all members of society, allowing public art to serve as a true marker of collective memory and societal progress.

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