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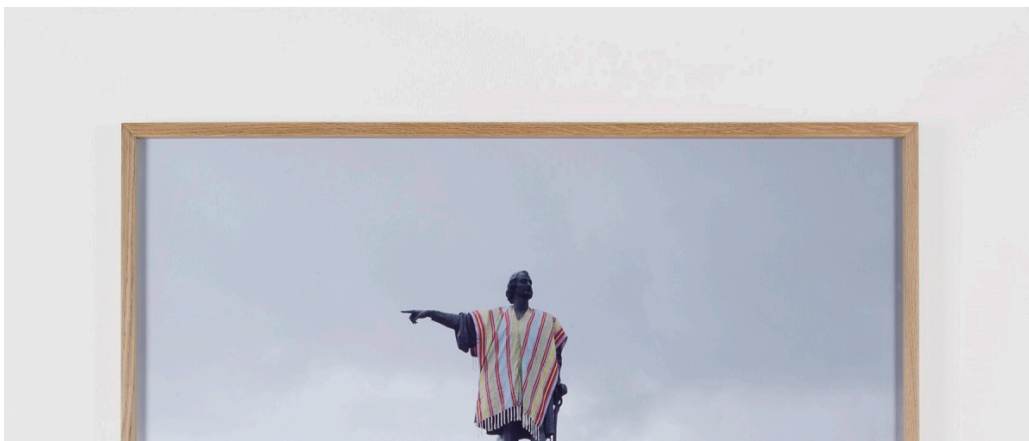
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October 9, 2017 — **Issue 10: Fayuquerxs** (<http://terremoto.mx/issue/fayuquerxs/>)

Toppling Monuments and Performing History (<http://terremoto.mx/article/derribo-de-monumentos-y-representacion-historica/>)

By Pilar Tompkins Rivas

Pilar Tompkins Rivas reflects on the importance of questioning historical narratives and the infrastructure that sustains them in light of the recent events in the United States around the protest and removal of confederate monuments.



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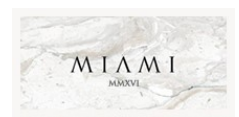
La exposición narra la trayectoria de un conjunto de artistas que trabajó en diversas iniciativas de 1965 a 1982...bit.ly/2zNhFz8



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Iván Argote, *Turistas (Christopher Pointing Out the South, at Bogota)*, 2012. Chromogenic color print, 43 1/4 x 43 1/4 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

The line between shifting discourses in art and shifting discourses in collective history may at times be exceedingly close, as grappling with canonical hierarchies in art reflects larger questions of patriarchy that play out within other national contexts. Whether in the realm of art, or in the public sector at large, we see interrelated examples of how history is performed, particularly with regards to the concept of the monument.

Monuments, for better or worse, function as markers that establish cultural and historical parameters of society. Yet culture, the theories we use to describe it, and our sentiments towards it are constantly in motion, as we actively strive to question and dismantle its boundaries and to uproot the social processes of hegemony. Within the cycle of establishing, subverting, and reimagining culture, the spectacle of public political drama will at times intersect with the brokering and negotiating of artistically driven measures.

Let us consider the harrowing, tragic, and deeply painful events that unfolded in Charlottesville, Virginia from August 11 to 12, 2017. The neo-Nazi marches and the murder of a counter-protester, followed by US President Donald Trump's continued racist rhetoric—his abject inability to disavow white supremacists—exacerbated complex issues of race and equality in the country. It left the nation heartbroken, both over the lives lost in domestic terrorism, as well as over the circulation of astonishing images and videos of white nationalists and hate-mongers thought to be part of a bygone era. Further compacted by the seemingly unending spiral of alt-right, neoconservative dogma spewed by the nation's administration, an administration that attacks and undermines all ethnic groups and gender identities other than the white male hegemony, a sense of hope or a focus on progress are beleaguered under the weight of daily outrage.



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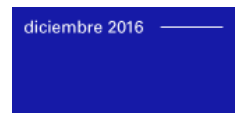
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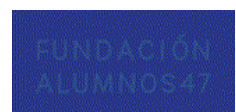
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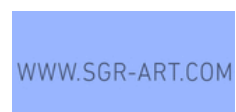
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Confederate monument taken down by protesters in Durham, North Carolina on August 14, 2017. Source: Twitter.

It is important to note that the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, which prompted said events, was staged under the guise of opposition to the removal of a Confederate statue—a public artwork intended to perpetually pay homage to the nation’s history of chattel slavery and systemic oppression of its people, from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration and police brutality. As public sculptures, monuments, and plaques to the era of the Confederacy are being removed—or are under consideration for removal (both pre- and post-Charlottesville), the question of just how much upending of the veneration of icons and ideologies of the historic past needs to be undertaken is being raised. This undoing is not without risk of retaliation, as seen in Charlottesville. The dismantling of dated hierarchies may be interpreted as subversive, threatening, and dangerous. In New Orleans in April 2017, for example, four such monuments were removed in the dead of night, smuggled out of public sight, while city-workers wore “flak jackets, helmets and scarves to conceal their identities because of concerns about their safety.” [1]

Yet there exists a long precedent of removing public sculptures erected under systems of oppressive patriarchies. One need not look too far for examples of the ousting of such artworks as public sentiment and socio-political leanings evolve over time in different parts of the world. Consideration of the artistic value of public monuments to historic “founding fathers” aside, their presence and establishment, most often enacted by the state, signifies an intention to memorialize a historical narrative that aims to usurp other narratives. Their removal denotes a break or rupture with that hegemonic structure, and the act of toppling monuments reflects a collective rejection of that set of visual images. The erection and the removal of monuments are both symbolic in their own right—and often represent oppositional sides of patriarchal and colonial systems.

For example, the Rhodes Must Fall collective movement in South Africa in 2015, a movement led by students at the University of Cape Town that called for the removal of the statue of British colonial figure Cecil Rhodes, mobilized efforts to further dismantle institutional racism in the country and its education system. It prompted public debate in South Africa and forced cultural focus on the figure of Rhodes, who had bequeathed the land for the university, but was also responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Africans through settler colonialism, laying the groundwork for Apartheid. [2] University of Cape Town graduate student Kgotsi Chikane said of the attention on the monument, “This is someone we know was involved in mass genocide, and who oppressed and enslaved black people across Southern Africa. The fact that his statue can stand there proudly, in such a prominent position, and that people can walk past it every day without questioning it, that is a problem of racism. If we can see that the statue is a problem, we can start looking more deeply at the norms and values of institutionalized racism that don’t physically manifest themselves, that are harder to see.” [3]



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Statue of Spanish conquistador Diego de Mazariegos is toppled in Chiapas, Mexico on October 12, 1992. Image via Creative Commons.

On October 12, 1992, the quincentennial anniversary of the European conquest of the Americas, indigenous leaders in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, removed the statue of Diego de Mazariegos, the Spanish soldier responsible for colonizing the region. The removal of his image from the public sector was linked to demonstrations by the Mexican Council for 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance, and closely preceded the actions of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation on January 1, 1994 in Chiapas. [4] The monument's removal was part of efforts aimed at countering the celebratory narrative of the "discovery" of the Americas in order to encompass the history of genocidal colonization and the continued disenfranchisement and abuses of native peoples in the Americas through legislative, political, economic, and militaristic forms of

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people in the Americas through religion, politics, economics, and numerous forms of oppression. [5] In each of these instances, the dismantling of public sculptures and monuments signals strategies of decolonization, demarcates a divergence from the past, and galvanizes an awakening to authoritarian, supremacist, and fascist national legacies. Does the removal of these public sculptures constitute artistic censorship? Within the curatorial field, works of art are considered in relationship to the intention of the work when it was produced, how it was produced, what it means in relationship to an artist's practice, and how that might be situated in regards to history or as a reflection of issues of the period in which it was produced. The agency of artworks often shifts over time as we gain distance from the point of production or reconsider/revise our understanding of such histories. In our twenty-first century, expanded notion of what constitutes an artistic impulse, may we not also consider the actions to remove unwanted and often traumatizing cultural images from the public sector as aesthetic gestures that bridge the spheres of politics and performance, social outcry and public intervention, or subaltern uprising and a reordering of the cultural imaginary?

Colombian artist Iván Argote's works are akin to this notion, as he contends with the ubiquitous presence of statues in honor of the Spanish conquest of the Americas in his series of photographs *Turistas* (2012-2013). In Madrid, Bogotá, and Los Angeles, the artist climbed on top of figures such as Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus and clothed them with Amerindian ponchos. With a humorous touch, the title of the series implies that the Spanish Crown was merely passing through the American hemisphere, and certainly did not discover it. In Argote's video *Barcelona* (2014), we see the statue of Bernat Boil, a Spanish priest who accompanied Columbus on his second trip to the Americas, proselytizing to an indigenous figure kneeling and kissing the cross. Here the artist, who remains off camera, climbs atop the statue, which is part of Barcelona's Columbus Monument, pours absinthe on it, and lights it on fire.



Iván Argote, *Barcelona*, 2014. Video, 05'15". Image courtesy of the Artist and Perrotin.



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Iván Argote, *Barcelona*, 2014. Video, 05'15". Image courtesy of the Artist and Perrotin.

There are two sides to today's debate over the removal of Confederate statues in the United States: one side of the debate is reflected in Trump's comments at a rally in Phoenix on August 22, 2017 rally, "They're trying to take away our culture. They're trying to take away our history. And our weak leaders, they do it overnight. These things have been there for 150 years, for a hundred years. You go back to a university and it's gone. Weak, weak people." [6] In contrast, Ruth H. Hopkins, a Dakota/Lakota Sioux writer, provides a counterargument, "Privilege is saving confederacy [sic] statues because they're "historic" but bulldozing through ancient sacred sites and artifacts for pipelines." [7] It is also important to note that wildlife and park reserves, often adjacent to or encompassing tribal lands, also constitute national monuments. In a reversal of Clinton, Bush, and Obama-era environmental conservation, the Trump administration is currently considering reducing and revoking protection of millions of acres of these public monuments in order to open them up for industrial use. [8]

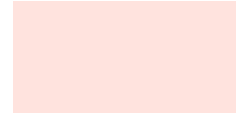
Since 2002, The Pocho Research Society for Erased and Invisible History, a collective led by artist Sandra de la Loza, has used urban guerrilla tactics to reinsert lost narratives into contested public spaces in Los Angeles. Rather than removing monuments, its emphasis is on inserting plaques and markers that re-introduce factual accounts of Latino and indigenous histories that have been lost through the processes of whitewashing, gentrification, and forced displacement. In the ongoing series *Invisible Monuments*, the collective places metal plaques with text alongside existing monuments to tell the alternative history of that place, or it places plaques denoting the locations of past cultural centers or informal gathering spaces that have been important to fostering community and social organizing. Yet in toying with the mechanisms by which "official" history is declared through monuments, de la Loza states, "The Pocho Research Society is not asserting a conclusive revisionist history; rather, it seeks to inspire further excavation of the underrepresented and forgotten." [9]



(institutotomieohtake.org.br/en/efrisson-melancholy)



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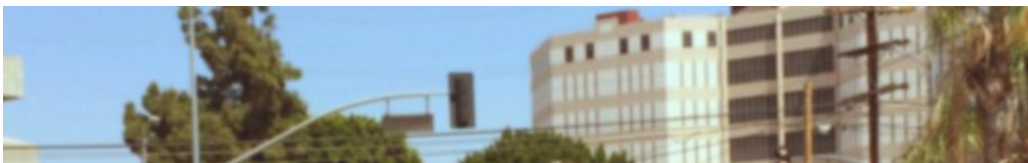


Pocho Research Society, *Operation Invisible Monument*, 2002. Photo by Dolores Rivera. Image courtesy of Sandra de la Loza.

While the open spaces of urban streets, university campuses, and public parks might seem distant from museum spaces, outmoded social orders expressed through culture—by way of statues, monuments, sculptures, and other forms of art—are not so far apart as we might wish. There is shared ground through the historicization of images and visual culture. It stands to reason that some museum frameworks structured around canonical art historical genres must also be rethought, expanded, or dismantled. What constitutes a canon of art but a convention of naming and categorizing culture and history along a timeline and within parameters that have favored outcomes? Existing canons of art history reflect academic and institutional systems that have largely excluded artists based on gender, race, class, and point of origin. As the academy and the museum (and by proxy the market) are structured to foreground particular narratives, the ongoing question remains about what gets left out of art history.

Within the dominant model of the art world, diverse conversations in art are often limited to intermittent exercises that function as momentary diversions from the otherwise narrow focus of the established canon. Statistical evidence abounds that shows that gender parity and diverse ethnic representation continue to be areas in need of major improvement in the realms of museums, biennials, the market, as well as media coverage. Maura Reilly writes in her 2015 analysis of gender issues for ARTnews, “The more closely one examines art-world statistics, the more glaringly obvious it becomes that, despite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the majority continues to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male.” [10] Much has been written that explains the tired patriarchies of the museum space; numerous factors influence exhibitions, the resources they are allocated, and the scholarship they generate—from the very nature of academic art historical categories to who makes up the work force of curators and museum professionals, to the composition of institutional boards and major patrons. [11]

A recent incident offers insight into the discrepancies of institutional representation and exposes the ramifications of disproportionate agency to narrate one’s own history in a museum context. Sam Durant’s *Scaffold* (2012) is not dissimilar from De la Loza’s work in its aim to present forgotten histories and to chronicle the abuses of the state that are at the foundational core of the United States. Yet if it intended to be a restaging or memorialization of the painful history of genocide against the Dakota People by the US government, the piece has transitioned to bring into focus the troubling distance between maker, concept, content, context, and reception. Indeed the complicated questions around the piece and its installation by the Walker Arts Center played out publicly through the press and in social media, with a confounding collision of numerous issues, ranging from defense of art for arts sake, censorship, rights of the artist, white privilege, museum ethics, tribal rights, tribal ceremonial practices, and legal issues pertaining to monument-scale sculptures in public parks that were once tribal lands. [12] The dismantling of the sculpture and its subsequent ceremonial burning represents a close encounter of art world values with the values of people who have been subject to the very atrocities of colonization and mass murder referenced in the artwork.





Rafa Esparza, *Bust, A Meditation on Freedom*, staged on the street in front of Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles, 2015. Photo by Nancy Pop. Image courtesy of the artist.

Los Angeles-based artist Rafa Esparza's practice strives to give visibility to voices of alterity within the frameworks of art—namely brown, queer, laboring, immigrant, and incarcerated bodies. In a 2015 performance piece, *Bust, A Meditation on Freedom*, the artist encased himself in a concrete and wood plinth, submerging his body up to the chest. Staged on the street in view of Los Angeles's overcrowded Twin Towers Correctional Facility and Men's Central Jail, and in front of a bail bonds agency, Esparza methodically broke himself out of the structure over the course of several hours, chipping away at the concrete with a hammer and chisel. Alluding to the form of a neoclassical sculptural bust and pedestal, Esparza performs the role of a monument to the working-class men of color disproportionately affected by the mechanisms and economics of the prison industrial complex. [13]

Extending to other institutional systems, Esparza seeks to counter patriarchies within the museum space by leveraging his own invitations to create opportunities for other colleagues and collaborators. Esparza's presentation at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field*, became a means through which he could also include the participation of five other Latino artists. Working with traditional adobe bricks that the artist created for the site with his father, Esparza built an open rotunda that was at once a sculptural installation as well as a platform for the other artists' work. No longer a white cube, the brown earthen floor and walls offered a chance for the Whitney Biennial to improve its inconsistent track record of presenting US Latino artists. [14] In this way, the artist traverses the gap of underrepresentation of US Latino Art in museums of American art, broadening restrictive canons and shaping the museum to be more reflective of the world we experience, rather than long-outdated and mono-cultural models.

While the debate about Confederate monuments continues in the US, the removal of statues can be interpreted as acts of dissidence or acts of heroism, depending on which side of history you are on. "Forty American soldiers and sailors under the command of Capt. Oliver Brown stole down to the Bowling Green in Lower Manhattan under cover of night. They lashed ropes around the statue, pulled until their ropes broke and then pulled again. At last, the symbol of a detested monarchy lay in pieces on the ground," writes David W. Dunlap about the toppling of the statue of King George III on July 9, 1776 following the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, the foundational document that established the independently sovereign United States of America. [15] William Wallcut's painting of the event intellectualizes this moment, romanticizes it, and creates an image of American art which then emblemizes national history. As contemporary

creates an image of American art which then emblemizes national history. As contemporary artists today explore intervening monuments or challenges them as concepts, they signal the ways in which monuments perform history, stand in for larger questions of colonialism and hegemony, and remind us that there is no oppressive history that cannot be overturned.



William Wallcut (US American, 1819-1882), *Pulling Down the Statue of George III at Bowling Green*, July 9, 1776, 1857. Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of Lafayette College Art Collection, Easton, Pennsylvania.



Removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes (sculptor: Marion Walgate) from the campus of the University of Cape Town, 9 April 2015.
Photo by Desmond Bowles.

Notes:

1. Christopher Mele, "New Orleans Begins Removing Confederate Monuments, Under Police Guard," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2017.
2. Don Boroughs, "Why South African Students Say the Statue of Rhodes Must Fall," National Public Radio (NPR), March 28, 2015; Bernard M. Magubane, *The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa, 1875–1910*. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996).
3. Don Boroughs, "Why South African Students Say the Statue of Rhodes Must Fall."
4. Thomson Gale, "Zapatista Rebellion" in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, ed. Patrick L. Mason. (Macmillan Reference USA: 2008).
5. Anonymous, *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance* (The Anarchist Library, 1992).
6. Max Greenwood, "Trump on Removing Confederate Statues: 'They're Trying to Take Away our Culture'" *The Hill*, August 22, 2017.
7. Ruth H. Hopkins (@RuthHHopkins), "Privilege is saving confederacy statues because they're 'historic' but bulldozing through ancient sacred sites and artifacts for pipelines." Tweet, August 18, 2017. Accessed by the author on August 23, 2017.
8. Jimmy Tobias, "Trump's day of doom for national monuments approaches," *The Guardian*, August 20, 2017.
9. Sandra de la Loza, *The Pocho Research Society Field Guide to LA: Monuments and Murals of Erased and Invisible Histories* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press: Los Angeles, 2011).
10. Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes" *ARTnews*, May 26, 2015.
11. Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, published 2015.
12. Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War president credited with abolishing the enslavement of African-Americans, ordered the execution of 38 Sioux prisoners on December 26, 1862, a mere five days before the Emancipation Proclamation was made public. Durant's sculpture depicts the gallows and a full account about the work and the history it references can be read in: Sheila Dickinson, "A Seed of Healing and Change': Native Americans Respond to Sam Durant's 'Scaffold,'" *ARTnews*, June, 5, 2017.
13. A description of the performance may be found on the blog Another Righteous Transfer! exploring performance in the LA art scene, posted April 13, 2015.
14. Wikipedia's list of Whitney Biennial Artists (1973-2017).
15. David W. Dunlap, "Long-Topples Statue of King George II to Ride Again, From a Brooklyn Studio," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2016.

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Betty Ferrell, Ph.D., Maria Medvedeva, Cultural Policy Center, NORC and the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (New York: The AAM Press, (American Association of Museum:2010).

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"All Monuments Must Fall: A Syllabus," 2017, crowd-sourced materials via monumentsmustfall@gmail.com <http://all-monuments-must-fall.ghost.io> (<http://all-monuments-must-fall.ghost.io>)

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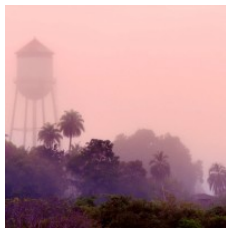
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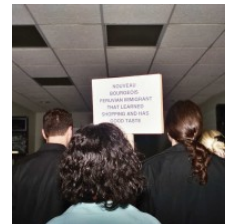
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