What’s in a Name?
Questions for a New Monument

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Abstract

What is the contemporary condition of the monument? In relation to the current issue’s discussion of immersive and discursive exhibition practices, this essay places itself at a slight remove; rather than to analyse and evaluate specific curatorial strategies it seeks to raise questions of relevance to such practices and begins by moving the discourse out of the museum and into the public space. The point of interrogation here is the monument, a form with a particular capacity to tease and expose the triad we find at the core of any curatorial discourse: the relation between institution, artwork and audience. Following an introductory reflection on how to describe and define a ‘monument’, a term so broadly used it all but loses its value, the text proceeds to examine three cases, Monument de la Renaissance Africaine, Dakar (2010), Danh Vo’s WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL), various locations (2010-13), and Thomas Hirschhorn’s Gramsci Monument, New York (2013). The sequencing of these geographically and culturally diverse works makes way for an interrogatory piece of writing that addresses the question of permanence versus temporariness of the artwork as exhibition (and the exhibition as artwork), and that of the political agency of the artistic form. Probing the social agency of the monument, the text draws lines between the symbolising capacity once held by modern sculpture and the oscillation between immersion and discursiveness as two complimentary modes of communication. The discursive content or function of the monument (i.e. what it commemorates) is activated through the viewer’s personal, immersive encounter with its form, a form that potentially places its viewer as a participant to the construction of its message rather than as a mere receiver.
Introduction

This text is in many ways the result of a long-term proximity to a single artwork, Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*. For five months, I was engaged with the preparations for this work during a curatorial traineeship at Dia Art Foundation in 2012. The insight I gained into the artistic method and the institutional strategies that preceded its physical manifestation became instrumental to my later reading of the work, and indeed to my continued interest in Hirschhorn’s declared mission: to establish a “new term of monument.” The previous year, I had been stationed in Dakar for three months, where my daily walks would take me past *Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine* (henceforth: African Renaissance Monument), a colossal bronze sculpture recently erected just outside of the city. The unexpected alignment of such vastly different responses to the category of monuments prompted the question: what is the contemporary condition of the monument? How could these two sculptural manifestations possibly be regarded within the same framework? And what would happen if they were?

Much has been written on monuments as a cultural phenomenon, analyzing their social and political role in a given society and their agency as markers of history and memory. Particularly so, in the wake of the postwar and poststructuralist interrogation of the grand narratives of modernity. Hirschhorn’s most recent work has prompted a reconsideration of the relevance of the monument, also within an artistic context. Sanja Iveković, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Mike Nelson, Walid Raad, and Danh Võ are additional names on a long list of contemporary artists whose work in various capacities engages with the legacy of this historically fraught form, and even more so with its potentials. In the following, I will be looking at three cases: The African Renaissance Monument, Danh Võ’s *WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL)*, and Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*. This essay is born of my repeated encounter with these works, and the questions sparked by my contemplation of them. Based on a principle of presence and observation, this is intended as an interrogatory piece of writing; its purpose is to question the terms on which we discuss monuments today and the precision with which we address them.

I. I would like to take a moment to reflect on how to describe a monument, or perhaps rather how to locate it. The pyramidal structures of Egypt assembled by slaves millennia ago to house the corpse of the pharaoh, Nelson’s Column on Trafalgar Square, the former residential palace of Château de Versailles, and Horst Hoheisel’s *Negative Form*, a counter-memorial to the Aschrott Fountain in the center of Kassel, all adhere to the category of monuments in the everyday use of the term. But what, then, *is* a monument? Is
it a site, an object, or a function? Is it an artwork or an edifice?

The etymological origins of the term “monument” is the Latin verb, monere, which means to remind or to warn, and the noun, monumentum, “something that reminds.” The use of the word as denoting a “structure or edifice to commemorate a notable person, action, or event” can be traced back to the early seventeenth century. When the Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl, embarked on an epistemological study of the historical monument at the turn of the twentieth century in order to evaluate its veneration in his present age (Der moderne Denkmalkultus), he suggested the following definition:

A monument is a work of man erected for the specific purpose of keeping particular human deeds or destinies (or a complex accumulation thereof) alive and present in the consciousness of future generations.

For Riegl, the commemorative value of the monument was integral to its definition, while any artistic value of the monument was inextricably bound to its historical value (due to its permanence). He also acknowledged, however, the existence of a contemporary artistic value. This relied on whether the aesthetics of the monument were aligned with the Kunstwollen (the artistic volition or style) of the time of the perceiver. Riegl further distinguished between unintentional and deliberate monuments. An unintentional monument could be the church built by a king in order to prove his power to his contemporaries, without deliberately planning for this to gain the status of a monument for future generations. Or it could even be a scrap of paper that later proves to be of historical importance, thus upgrading its role and value from inert matter to that of testimony or historical witness. The deliberate monument, on the other hand, is produced for the sake of being exactly and only that. In the case of the unintentional monument, it is “we modern viewers, rather than the works themselves by virtue of their original purpose [who] assign meaning and significance to a monument,” whereas in the case of the deliberate monument, the commemorative value is dictated to us by the creator.

It seems integral to the term, then, that a monument has a particular social agency (perhaps even a function?) as an object of commemoration. In this, it ties together past, present, and future by evoking the memory of a historical event, age, idea, or person. Through a form physically manifested in the present, it points not only to a time past, but also to the time to come, since its very manifestation appoints the subject of commemoration to be of importance to the future—and perhaps also, we might add, emphasizes the importance of the act of commemoration itself. At once signifying site and form of commemoration, and often of significant scale, the monument frequently assumes an odd status as a synthesis of architecture and sculpture—or
rather, as being not-quite-sculpture and not-quite-architecture.

Rosalind Krauss, when thinking about the state of sculpture at the end of the 1970s, drew back the historical lineage of modern sculpture to the same time as Riegl’s studies, and indeed to the monument. Sculpture, she argued, is a historically bounded category and not a universal one:

As is true of any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules [...] The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.⁶

So Krauss’s sculpture-as-monument also has a symbolical value and refers not only backwards and forwards in time, but also to the actual place that it occupies. In her reading, the late nineteenth century marked a turning point in this logical precondition. With the practice of Auguste Rodin, and particularly in the two works, Gates of Hell (1880) and Balzac (1891), a hitherto unseen degree of subjectivity broke the former timeless surface of the monuments. The fact that these works today exist in multiple versions in a range of museums served as case in point for Krauss: the sculpture-as-monument had already lost its site and now existed only as an abstraction, “as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential.”⁷ This end of the monument signaled the emancipation of the Western modernist sculpture: site-less, nomadic, and self-absorbed. The pedestal became a marker of spatial transience and a sign of mobility; with the loss of the logic of the monument and the adherence to a site, the sculpture gained its autonomy and could focus wholly on the representation of its own materials and the process of its own construction. This tendency peaked in the 1950s, and with the emergence of minimalism the idea of sculpture existing as a medium, in and of itself, had begun to implode. Sculpture had become increasingly difficult to define, and could at this point be located only in terms of what it was not. The practice of Robert Morris in the mid-1960s showed this most clearly for Krauss; his sculptures, which had begun as props for a performative practice (and arguably continued to be so), gradually grew so close to architecture and landscape, respectively, that they in the end could best be defined by negation: “what is in the room but is not really the room and what is in the landscape, but is not really the landscape.” Sculpture had become pure negativity, an ontological absence of not-landscape and not-architecture.⁸ This was the situation that, in turn, grew into the postmodern condition that Krauss notoriously termed the expanded field—not only of sculpture, but of art in general. Works such as Robert Smithson’s Mirror Displacements (1969) on the Yucatan peninsula and Alice Aycock’s Maze (1972)—monumental in scale—were both sculpture and landscape, no longer merely belonging to or marking a site, but constructing a site proper to their own being.⁹ Sculpture—and with it, one could argue,
the monument—had abandoned its originally designated site, absorbed its own pedestal, wandered out of the institutional framework that protected and consecrated its very being, and finally began creating sites on its own. The logic of medium specificity had given way to the possibility for any artist to challenge the logical conditions of art through any medium.

II.

In the suburb of Ouakam, a little outside Dakar, Senegal, marking the westernmost point of the African continent, stands the African Renaissance Monument. At its middle, we see a bare-chested, muscular man, posed as if ascending the rock-like base of the monument. He suspends a curvaceous woman in one arm, equally sparsely clothed, while supporting an austere-faced baby on his other shoulder, pointing towards the sea. With its forty-nine meters, the monument stands as the tallest statue in Africa to this date (exceeding in height both the Statue of Liberty and Cristo Redentor [Christ the Redeemer] of Rio de Janeiro), and paying tourists can ascend into the kufi of the central figure to enjoy the views over Dakar. Conceived in 2006 upon the initiative of President Abdoulaye Wade, the statue was finally unveiled on April 4, 2010, at an event that drew no less than nineteen state leaders from across the continent. The inauguration date marked the fiftieth anniversary of Senegal as an independent state. “It brings to life our common destiny, [...] Africa has arrived in the twenty-first century standing tall and more ready than ever to take its destiny into its hands,” proclaimed Wade at the ceremony, then aged eighty-three and at the end of a period of twelve years in office, as reported by Peter Walker to the Guardian on April 4, 2010. The bronze sculpture group has no particular identifying traits or attributes. Its idealized form represents a family in its most basic unit: father, mother, and child. The father as centerpiece of the sculpture carries the weight of both wife and child, while the son leads the way towards a new future. But, considering the context and the title, the monument does not stand merely as an emblem of the family, but also as an emblem of the young and independent African nation: strong, healthy, and “ready to take its destiny into its hands,” to reiterate Wade’s words.

While the impressive show of state leaders for the inauguration of the monument would seem to show some political backing of the symbolism of the monument, the statue was met with mixed emotions from its local community. First of all, the cost of the project engendered substantial critique, also from the international press: the ca. £17 million bill was paid for in Senegal by President Wade, who later claimed the monument as his intellectual property, allowing him to pocket a 35 percent share of the revenue earned from tourists visiting the site. Aesthetics was the second major point of contention. The monument as a sculpture has no connection to local sculpting techniques or formal language, argued the critics, pointing out that even
the facial features of the depicted family did not look quite African. Local imams condemned the idolatrous appearance of the sculpture, in particular the exposed physique of the female figure, and Christian communities were upset by Wade having publicly likened the depicted child to baby Jesus.

Finally, there was the controversy concerning the supplier of the monument, Mansudae Overseas Projects (MOP). Located in Pyongyang, North Korea, MOP is the international division of one of the biggest art studios in the world, and a specialist in designing and constructing architectural-scale bronze sculptures. Its workings are “under the special guidance of Kim Jong-il, the leader,” according to the official website, and are thus directly linked to the North Korean government. Since its establishment in the 1970s, MOP has built a stream of monuments across the African continent, including in Benin, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, and Senegal, identifying and answering a new market of recently independent countries with a craving for memorials and markers of current and future success. While monuments erected across the continent in the 1960s and '70s were largely offered in exchange for political allegiance, this practice of monument-offering ceased around the 1980s, when MOP was turned into a significant source of revenue for the North Korean government.

The history of the complex networks of political friendship established within the African continent in these years and its ties to the Non-Aligned Movement, and the full picture of the political critique of Abdoulaye Wade’s monumental project is much richer and more complex than I can account for here. It is important to mention, however, that this kind of complexity when it comes to the economic and political support structures of official monuments is hardly outstanding. One of the most famous monuments of the Western Hemisphere, the Statue of Liberty, was once a token in a very similar sculpture-for-political-allegiance gift economy when, in 1886, it was offered as a gift of friendship from the French people to the United States to mark the centennial of the independence of America—a universal symbol of freedom and democracy—and was later, in 1924, declared a national monument. The full title of the statue, La Liberté Éclairant le Monde, or Liberty Enlightening the World, is seldom used today.

Allow me to return to the aesthetic qualities of the statue in Dakar, dedicated as it was to the commemoration of independence and to the declaration of collective prosperity of a continent, and the following function of the monument that these qualities might condition. The design was supposedly based on a dream and subsequent sketch by President Wade, which was then edited and adjusted by the designers from MOP. Similar in expression and technique to the socialist realism of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Mansudae Art Projects identify their style as “self-reliance aesthetics” (Juche). South Korean artist Onejoon

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Fig. 2 Monuments depicting Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on Mansudae (Mansu Hill) in Pyongyang, North Korea. Produced by Mansudae Studio. Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, bjornfree.com. Image courtesy the photographer.
Che, who recently finished a three-screen documentary on MOP’s engagement in Africa, *Mansudae Master Class* (2015), says with regard to this style:

There are no abstract, minimal, and conceptual ideas and expressions in “self-reliance aesthetics.” Mansudae focuses more on techniques than the individual, creative expressions of an artist. It is this commitment to the institution over the individual that allows for an easily exported product, one that can be adapted to local context without hassle.\(^{16}\)

If the non-individual expression of the African Renaissance Monument seems to satisfy a certain expectation of what a monument should look like, it is surely because it taps into a vein of formal language often associated with Lenin’s Monumental Propaganda: a mimetic sculpture at its core, not rarely architectural in scale and impressive as an economical gesture, and placed at a highly visible and symbolically potent site. The political context of the erection is equally familiar: initiated by a head of state in order to at once commemorate a historical moment and to project into the future the qualities by which a specific and, in this case, quite diverse community is defined and unified. Judging by its recognizably monumental form and the extent of its visibility, the statue aims to address the many, and while marking a rather general site (the soil of Africa) this particular monument even more so creates one: the site of a colossus, which, not so unlike the Bilbao Effect, or indeed the draw of *La Joconde* in the Louvre, also constitutes a tourist venue and hence a possible source of income. For could we not add that, in the case of the monument erected for the purpose of becoming a site, of engendering tourist pilgrimage, that the sculpture itself becomes the object of commemoration, or the very act of monumentalization? Or perhaps simply its creator? As a sculpture, the edifice stands as an idealized and instructive expression of power, hope, and allegiance, and (again similarly to the Statue of Liberty) addresses its viewers at a physical remove—unless, of course, they are able and willing to pay the tribute money that enables them to ascend to the headband of the central figure.

III.

If in the first two sections I have addressed some of qualities that might constitute a monument, in the following I would like to discuss its possible dismantling. I will begin by returning (however briefly) to *Liberty Enlightening the World*, or Lady Liberty as it is popularly called. As we have begun to see, there are several structural commonalities between this statue and the African Renaissance Monument, including the function of serving as a viewpoint. While the two are clearly of stylistically divergent schools (and not to forget 120 years apart), the construction technique follows the same principles: a hollow sculpture composed by hundreds of...
separate pieces welded together and mounted on an intricate steel structure; a technique which is wholly a function of the scale of the sculpture. But, contrary to the monument in Dakar, the makers of the Statue of Liberty are individualized and publicly revered: the sculpture was designed by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, while the solution of how to support a copper statue of this scale was devised by Gustave Eiffel, (whose upward drive was to culminate three years later in the tallest edifice ever erected by man at that time, the Eiffel Tower).

It was in response to this monument that the Danish/Vietnamese artist, Danh Vō, started the project, WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL) in 2010. Over the next three years, he had an exact copy of the Statue of Liberty manufactured in 1:1 scale, but without ever physically joining the more than 250 copper parts, which were gradually shown—and sold—as they were produced. The copied statue thus never becomes visually manifest but remains a conceptual backdrop to the scattered copper fragments, exhibited in groups of varying sizes and constellations across art institutions, galleries, and private collections around the world. If a single person were ever to follow through with the unlikely feat of travelling to all the destinations where the pieces are exhibited, in order to be able to claim to have “seen it all,” the size and extent of the project might become graspable, but it is unlikely that the statue as a figure would do so. After all, the greater part of the sculpture (approximately 80 percent) depicts folds in fabric and, apart from a few more iconic fragments—a few toes, a hand, a lock of hair, part of the crown, a piece of flame, a chain—most of the individual fragments reveal very little of the figuration that prescribed their manufacture. And so, we can only conceive of the individual parts while the whole remains for our imagination to complete.

In the encounter with these enormous fragments, the viewer unmistakably feels dwarfed by the sheer size of the copper slabs, but even more so by her imagination of their potential as a whole. The fragments have a similar effect on the spaces they occupy, whether the small commercial gallery, where enough distance to get a full overview of each piece can hardly be achieved—and they therefore appear as a materiality of even greater abstraction—or the large sculpture hall of Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, where the architecture itself aptly accommodates the pieces but the dwarfing effect is imposed on the other artworks in the space, or when displayed outdoors, where the oversized copper objects make the cityscape somehow appear further away. This is a work that can morph and shift in expression according to the selection and constellation of the pieces on display in a given exhibition. It is equally apt to shift its aesthetical discourses from one seemingly engaging with the legacy of post-cubist sculpture and the outsourcing of artistic labor to the cultural history of the colossus.

The effect is something similar to when we stumble upon the odd remains of the Colossus of Constantine in Forum...
Romanum: a foot, an elbow, a shin, a head, a finger pointing upward. These giant fragments of a past grandeur mesmerize us in their awkwardness, which is precisely so by lack of context, or rather by their own misplacement. Their quality of disconnectedness satisfies a certain fascination with the fragment—their spiritual, political and historical context is temporarily dissolved as they lay before our contemporizing gaze, and for a while we can pretend that they are more than a residue, that they are parts without a whole, mere material objects. Let us imagine that these pieces were connected, such as one might encounter in certain museum displays, even by a steel framework so that every limb would be set in relative position to the other fragments, in order for us to visualize the sculpture in its totality. Would not, then, the effect of these pieces alter? Shift from oddity to awe? From desirable object to idol?

Vô’s reiteration of the mythical statue remains desirable only in its materiality—it clashes with the idol of Lady Liberty, which has stood as a beacon of democracy and Western civilization for more than a century, the first thing immigrants would see upon entering the harbor of New York. Or rather the quality of the idol is surgically removed from it. When asked about the work, Vô has mentioned his initial fascination upon discovering that the copper from which the Statue of Liberty was molded is only two millimeters thick, and that it was this almost unbelievable contrast that sparked his interest: that this enormous monument, with a symbolic value of equal grandeur, was revealed to consist of but a very thin skin (supported by an intricate steel framework). Reconstructing the skin of the monument after the original drawings of Bartholdi, but leaving out Eiffel’s interior metal structure, is most likely a practical decision. Nevertheless, it seems pertinent to any discussion of the material and monumental qualities of the piece. According to Vô, it was the simple unveiling of this paradoxical construction he was interested in—an unveiling which inevitably exposes the monument as a construct, and with it, its bearing ideologies: democracy, the nation state, and political freedom. But, then again, does the deconstruction of a form necessarily deconstruct what that form says?

The title, WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL), references the first three words in the preamble of the United States Constitution. At once pointing back to the official cause for the inauguration of the Statue of Liberty (the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence), it also refrains from any words of action: “We the People” remains the naming of an abstract entity. From an idealist’s perspective, this could be the “we” of a unified people united in a category that supersedes national and political borders; from a more critical point of view, the general “we” is like the imaginary writer of a letter with no sender; a statement bereaved of its speaker is a statement with no agency. Not only does Vô ultimately rid the sculpture of its bearing physical structure, thus redirecting it from a vertical to a horizontal alignment (itself a potent iconoclastic gesture for an art form which is generally characterized by its vertical strive), but by presenting it as a readymade he also removes the political

Fig. 6 Catherine Wagner, Constantine Fragments, 2014, (Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome). Archival pigment print, 114.3 x 152.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery.
motivation behind the original construction and opens up the form of the monument to material and discursive scrutiny. And yet, *WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL)* is not a mere copper shell devoid of meaning; it is more than inert material laid bare for the viewer to position herself in relation to. Although metaphorically dismantling a grand symbol of the modern world (and maybe an ideology at large?) by coolly reconstructing it and distributing it to the highest (cultural) bidder, a new economy seems to step into the footsteps of the idol of Lady Liberty—that of cultural capital. A closer look at the documentation of the various constellations in which this work has been installed will reveal an interesting diversity of physical support structures for the individual parts. Some are placed directly on the floor, others leaned against walls; some are placed on wheels or pallets, and others are suspended into upright position by makeshift scaffolding systems of diverse materials. It is perhaps here that the exhibiting institution steps in and takes over where the bearing structure of the work-as-statue (intendedly) fails, and in the stead of Eiffel’s ingenuous steel structure stands a no less intricate web of cultural engineering as a support structure for the deconstructed monument as artwork.

IV.

*My mission, with the “Gramsci Monument” is to:*  
*Establish a new term of monument; Provoke encounters; Create an event; Think Gramsci today.*

Over a time span of fourteen years, Thomas Hirschhorn has created four monuments: *Spinoza Monument* (Amsterdam, 1999), *Deleuze Monument* (Avignon, 2000), *Bataille Monument* (Kassel, 2002), and finally, *Gramsci Monument* (New York, 2013). Generally consecrated to the friendship between philosophy and art, the four projects were all located in deprived areas in the suburb of a major city, often in social housing projects with a high percentage of immigrant residents. The monuments all incorporated a form of representation of the philosopher in question (e.g., a mural painting, or a sculptural symbol of the philosopher’s work), while also encompassing into their structure a number of habitable spaces (a bar, a library, a small museum, a theater stage, an art workshop, an Internet lounge), and an array of public programs (talks, open mike nights, poetry readings). *Gramsci Monument*, as the name indicates, was dedicated to the Italian philosopher and political thinker, Antonio Gramsci, who wrote all he ever published during his eight years of incarceration under Mussolini. This monument stood out from the previous works in the series primarily by shifting from a European context to that of the United States, but also by expanding considerably in scale and duration. “Produced” by Dia Art Foundation, to use Hirschhorn’s own term, the monument came to take its place in the middle of Forrest Houses, a social housing block in the neighborhood of Morrisania, Bronx, New York. The preliminary research to locate a site, or rather a “host” for the project, as well as the legal and practical proceedings, lasted several years. The actual building process took a month, and the monument...
itself was physically present for seventy-five days (July 1–September 15, 2013), after which it was dismantled and its parts given away through a lottery.

Sprawled over the central green grounds of Forrest Houses, the monument was lacking in any traditional sense of monumentality—it was, quite simply, difficult to locate visually. The only way to “see” the monument was by physically moving through it. A library provided a wide collection of books on and by Gramsci, and in the adjacent room a number of Gramsci’s private belongings from his time in prison (a brush, a comb, his slippers, books and original notes) were displayed in Plexiglas vitrines. Next to the archive was the radio station, manned by a local resident playing tunes and broadcasting all events and talks live from the Gramsci Monument website, which was also disabled shortly after the dismantling of the monument. Yasmil Raymond, head curator of Dia, was present on a daily basis, right next door to the Internet lounge in her designated Ambassador’s Office. Past the bar and the paddling pool was the Art School, which provided daily children’s classes run by a young local art educator, and further ahead was the Stage and the Gramsci Lounge, which hosted the Gramsci Theater, poetry lectures and workshops, Gramsci seminars by a wide range of scholars (from Gayatri Spivak and Simon Critchley, to Chantal Mouffe, Christine Buci-Glucksman, and a Skype call with Antonio Negri), Open Microphone sessions, and the daily five o’clock Gramsci lecture by Hirschhorn’s long-time collaborator friend and philosopher, Marcus Steinweg.

Curator and writer Dieter Roelstraete has on several occasions evoked Habermas’s term of Unübersichtlichkeit, a term that at best translates to something like the phenomena of not being able to gain overview, which he somewhat more elegantly defines as “the impossibility of an Olympian viewpoint from which to self-confidently write the history of the present.” Roelstraete uses this term not to address a particular artist’s practice, but a certain condition of our contemporaneity, what he identifies as the incapacity of the critic and the art historian to adequately address and theoretically engage with the artistic makings of our time “in face of a phenomenon of overproduction that begs to be theorized in greater, totalizing historical terms.” Nevertheless, the term seems appropriate for this context, as Gramsci Monument left its (interpretative) viewer in precisely such a situation: overwhelmed, bombarded with signs and signifiers, and unable to leave the site with a single clear image or idea. In that sense, it was a pretty messy monument at best, at least if it is to be judged by its symbolizing capacity.

This is precisely where the work most significantly challenges the logical preconditions of the monument as an art historical genre, by resisting symbolical interpretation—

the form of the monument was its content, so to say. In relation to his work, Negative Form, Horst Hoheisel has spoken of how the (counter-)monument per se was not
located in the reversed Aschrott Fountain, sunk into the ground in Kassel, but in the minds of the people gathering around it, remembering the cause of its inversion. With Gramsci Monument, the social element was even more explicit, as the actions and interactions induced by its form (the various platforms described above) were as central to the ontology of this artwork-as-monument as its subject of commemoration, Antonio Gramsci. Rather than marking or making a site, the monument authored a temporary relation between the Bronx and Gramsci through its own workings, and established Forrest Houses as a site of artistic worth. Due to its transient nature, but also to its alignment with the Kunstwollen of its cultural stakeholders, the “contemporary value” of the Gramsci Monument thus entirely replaces the historical value, to use Riegl’s terms again. Although Hirschhorn insisted on an invitation from the local community in order to commence the project, and relied on the paid help of the residents of Forrest Houses to build and run the monument’s many platforms, he never retreated from the position of the auteur. Despite the tempting and frequent readings of Hirschhorn’s monuments as “democratic” forms, partly due to their approachable (read: disposable) materials, this is inconsistent with the clear hierarchies established on site. In keeping with Riegl’s definition of the deliberate monument, Hirschhorn as the creator determined the subject and the terms of commemoration of the Gramsci Monument. He employed the model of the monument to the ends of his own sculptural ambitions by amplifying the innate social agency of the genre so that the viewers/residents/visitors of the project became at once the audience and the medium. By even directing the role of the “exhibiting institution,” Dia Art Foundation, Gramsci Monument supplanted its form onto its own economical and art historical support structure, by allocating Dia the invisible but fundamental role of the pedestal.

V.

In this text, I have addressed three cases: an official monument (i.e., an edifice that has been declared a monument by a nation state), a work that discursively engages with an official monument, and a work that claims to reinvent the term monument altogether. While these could arguably be viewed through diverse historical and analytical viewpoints, it was my ambition to examine what a cross section of these discourses might allow for. Much remains to be said—and asked—at the conclusion of this essay. Is the difference between an official monument and an artwork-as-monument ultimately a matter of funding source—whether it be public or private? How does the consecration of a commemorative sculpture performed by a nation body differ from that provided by the art institution? How might the politics and responsibilities of the official monument compare to those of the public artwork? And does the impermanence of the Gramsci Monument, and the revealing of its support structure, ultimately make for a less commanding monument than that of a permanent sculpture?
Through Riegl, I have shown that a monument has an innate social agency, which, intended or unintended, serves to unite and establish a social group through the act of commemoration. This might, arguably, be likened with the symbolizing capacity once held by Western modernist sculpture. At the same time, this move seems similar to that of the exhibition in its oscillation between the discursive and the immersive means of communication. In the case of all three works, there is something/someone to be commemorated; this we might call the discursive content, or perhaps rather the discursive function of the monument. The experience of this content happens through an immersive encounter that potentially places its viewer as a participant to its message rather than as a mere receiver, albeit the degree and extent of participation varies. The African Renaissance Monument and Danh Võ’s sculptural fragments achieve the immersive through an overwhelming material encounter (the effect of the colossus), whereas the Gramsci Monument allows for a more literal entanglement of work and audience. Võ and Hirschhorn both challenge the logical precondition of the modern monument in their respective works, although to different ends: one in order to test and question the symbolizing capacity of sculpture and the durability of the ideas and ideals that it holds; the other by laying bare the social network created (and needed) by the monument, from commissioner to artist to audience. Võ’s sculpture speaks through fragmentation and Hirschhorn’s through the politics of form. Meanwhile, the African Renaissance Monument is alone in retaining the quality of physical permanence in relation to form and site. Of the three projects discussed, it is the only sculpture that remains in a permanent site at the time of writing; WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL) continues to circulate the world, and Gramsci Monument exists but in memory and documentation. For all the discursive self-awareness of the use of the model of the monument by Hirschhorn and Võ, one could argue that, by their fragmented and durational character, they also become more evasive, more resistant to critique. The African Renaissance Monument, on the other hand, stands in all its politically problematic, bronze-coated glory, as a witness and testimony to a certain moment in time. The solidity of its form exposes it to other uses than the one intended by President Wade—to discontent, critique, and even to destruction.

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1. See the writings of Michele H. Bogart, James E. Young, Svetlana Boym, and Pierre Nora, to mention but a few.
5. Ibid., 72.
7. Ibid., 34.
8. Ibid., 36. Morris’s earliest sculptures were created as theater props for Simone Forti’s dance performances at the Judson Dance Theatre in the early 1960s in New York, a period when he was much inspired by the ancient monuments of Egypt. See also Thomas Crow, The Rise of the Sixties (London: The Orion Publishing Group, 1996).
10. A short, brimless cap worn by Muslim men in various parts of Africa.
14. The Non-Aligned Movement is an organization that represents the interests and priorities of developing countries, and today consists of more than 120 members. The Movement was established during the Cold War (1961) as a form of counter-allegiance to the bonds between major European nations and the United States.
17. The colossus was most likely made of clay and wood with a gilded armor covering, which explains why only the more durable parts of the sculpture survived in place to this day.
19. Dieter Roelstraete, “After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings,” E-flux 5, no. 6 (2009), accessed February 2, 2016,


21. Although La Guardia Community College in Queens holds the largest archive of Antonio Gramsci’s writings within the United States, the Bronx and Gramsci remain historically unrelated.