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Ibrahim Mahama

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**'On
Monumental
Silences'**

Antonia Alampi



Statues such as monuments and memorials contribute to the writing of history: they represent frozen worldviews, and the political, social and cultural opinions and perspectives of their time. And they act more profoundly upon us as testaments to their time periods than as sources of information about the characters or events they portray. Their presence in public space, however, very often with minimal or no contextualization, makes their historically-determined form more difficult to access and decode, leaving them instead with the aesthetic power to still perform the propagandistic role they were conceived with and for.

In this short text I will explore Ibrahim Mahama's new project titled 'On Monumental Silences' by addressing its entangled layers, from the need to offer counter-narratives to prevailing ones and why that is of such utmost importance today, to a general historical background about the presence of colonial monuments in Belgium and the need to find new artistic languages for new monuments that move away from a predominantly euro-centric tradition.

Counter-Shoot

The recent events of Charlottesville (US)¹ reopened a mainstream media debate on the racist, white supremacist, and colonial monuments that adorn cities throughout Europe, North America and Australia². Monuments and memorials that are rarely contextualized still stand in public space and have not been complicated by counter perspectives that would allow for a narrative that is broader and more adherent to truths about the events and people that the sculptures represent.

On August 24, 2017, journalist, playwright and novelist Paul Daley contributed to an ongoing public debate in

¹ Started in August 2017 when a white supremacist group gathered against the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee (a Confederate soldier in favor of slavery) violently attacked counter protesters, leading to one death and at least 26 serious injuries as the result of a car running into the crowd.

² This, of course, in no way means that the subject has not been addressed before. On the contrary, a lot has been addressed in Belgium, particularly by the group Mémoire Coloniale. See below for more information.

Australia about the worrying presence of monuments still glorifying mass murderers of indigenous people, white supremacists, or other criminals:

“Once the meanings of monuments were thought to be set in stone; now they crumble in the relentless critique of history. (...) In monuments, as in written histories, some narratives are authorised, others denied or disputed. (...) And such critique raises deeper questions, interrogating the very nature of history as a scholarly discipline.

Does history cease to exist when a memorial is removed from public view and civic sanction – or is that act of removal, a forceful repudiation of the past, itself an act of choice and agency in history?”³

That we can choose is an important point here. Essentially not only is there a need to re-challenge and question the narratives monuments bear, but also to actively decide how to intervene in them, to consider which subjects are continually denied a voice, a place in history and a representation. To remember which side of the events is missing a story. As Rabih Mroué speaks about in his lecture-performance ‘Sand in the Eyes’⁴, while the shot is largely and overwhelmingly visible, where can we find the counter-shot? It is time for it to be narrated, rendered visible and given a name and an identity.

Belgian historian and academic Idesbald Goddeeris, in an article on post-colonial Belgium⁵, precisely mentions how a critical angle of opposition and counter-narrative has long been missing in Belgium, and how scholars from former colonies, post-colonial migrants and unaligned academics have rarely been given the space to narrate Belgium from another perspective.

³ Paul Daley, (August 24, 2017), The Guardian, ‘Statues are not history. Here are six in Australia that need rethinking’, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2017/aug/25/statues-are-not-history-here-are-six-in-australia-that-need-rethinking>

⁴ Performed at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin on the 7th of October 2017.

⁵ Idesbald Goddeeris, (2015), ‘Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space’, in Postcolonial Studies, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 397-409.

Belgian post-colonial remembering via public monuments:

*“The country has hundreds of street names and memorials dedicated to white colonials, but not a single tribute to a Congolese. There are at least 15 monuments built for King Leopold II, but only one presents a plaque with background information. Not one Leopold II Street or Avenue has been renamed over the past 15 years.”*⁶

As asserted by academics and critics writing on the roles of monuments and memorials in Belgium, ranging from Idesbald Goddeeris, to Bambi Ceuppens, or Matthew G. Stanard, among the others, it is noticeable that the country seems to have been one of the least critical postcolonial nations.

While the story of the Free State of Congo as a private property of King Leopold II from 1885 to 1908, from which he extracted resources and killed millions of people, is vastly known, the twice-as-long period of Belgium’s governmental colonization – until 1960 – is wrongly perceived. This is probably due, as Belgian academic and historian Bambi Ceuppens elucidates, to the fact that Leopold’s rule was so brutal and ferocious that any other rule may seem relatively “decent” in comparison⁷.

It is worth quoting Goddeeris again⁸:

“The Belgians believed they ruled the Congo as a model colony. They invested a substantial amount in economic development, infrastructure, health care, primary education, evangelisation, etc. Still, many aspects of their rule showed great continuity with the Congo Free State. The economy was based on large-scale private companies draining valuable resources,

⁶ Goddeeris, Ibidem.

⁷ Bambi Ceuppens, (September 27, 2008), ‘Les monuments coloniaux: Lieux de mémoire contestés’. Available at: <http://bournoullophie.blogspot.de/2008/11/les-monuments-coloniaux-lieux-de-memoire.html>

⁸ Ibidem.

and the society was one of the most segregationist in Africa. All black individuals were excluded from governance and higher education. In 1960, only 16 Congolese held a university diploma. When riots broke out in January 1959, Brussels quickly decided to follow the international trend of decolonisation. However, Belgium did not exit the Congo entirely. In June 1960, just days before independence, the Belgian Government transferred the public participation in companies to the private sector in order to keep control of business, and less than two weeks after independence, it sent a military expedition, ostensibly to protect the white citizens, but in reality to safeguard Belgian interests. Over the following months, the Belgian political and economic elite interfered in local politics, granted support to the rich and secessionist province of Katanga, and held a 'moral responsibility' in the murder of Lumumba."

Despite this known history, there are still monuments and memorials to Leopold II standing in Belgian public space (even if for the most part in more marginal locations). And there continue to be streets and squares (see for instance 'Square de Léopoldville' in Brussels, which ignores that the Congolese city was renamed Kinshasa in 1966) that remember and celebrate the country's imperialist past, in many cases without contextualization⁹.

Only since the early 2000s have many of these monuments been subjects of criticism and public protests in Belgium¹⁰, in most cases (with few exceptions) without accomplishing any structural or substantial change, as the government or local municipalities seem to keep categorizing occasions of dissent as minor events or irrelevant requests.

⁹ An important aspect to consider about these monuments is their existence and distribution in other forms that make their reach much broader. With this I mean postcards and images portraying them, and the activities - both public and private - organized around them enforcing the imperial idea of white supremacy, patriarchy (practically all of the subjects are male) and western domination.

¹⁰ See again the writings by Goddeeris, Ceupers and/or Stanard on the matter.

A statue that made it to national headlines and is probably one of the most obvious examples of the racism embedded in such images is that of Father De Deken in the Antwerp borough of Wilrijk. Constant De Deken was a Christian missionary who travelled through Tibet in 1889, before settling in Congo three years later, where he died in 1896. In 1904 a statue realized by the sculptor Jean-Marie Hérain was erected to honor him. The image contains all the selling points of colonial ideology. A well-dressed European man holding a cross stands with his knee on the back of a half-naked African slave in a position of gratitude and prayer. The white man is represented as the generous civilizer, while the black man represents the savage in need of intellectual cultivation. The basics of racism, white supremacy and even patriarchy are all perfectly contained in this image.

Since 1904 the monument has been removed for restoration, relocated, and even celebrated within an exhibition in 2012 (Goddeeris). Today it still stands in public space, at the margins of a well-visited cross-road and next to a school. Fortunately, in 2015, after a long period of campaigning, and thanks to the work of a self-organized group, or rather a social swarm, which emerged on Facebook under the hashtag #decolonizebelgium and was led by Belgian poet and artist Seckou Ouologuem: the local authorities agreed to mount an information panel under the statue. However, the panel, only visible from very near and to be found only if consciously looking for it, is a marginal element vis-à-vis the dominating image of the sculpture. Hence, how can a text really offer a counter perspective to such an image?

In any case, not all grassroots movements have been as successful. For example for years many groups have tried to name a small square in Brussels after Patrice Lumumba, but without result. As I write, different organizations in Flanders, and particularly

‘Hand in Hand Against Racism’, are assembling and writing a public letter, or petition, to ask different municipalities to name at least one street after Lumumba, as a symbol of the gradual decolonization process in Belgium.

On monuments as forms of naming and on the need for a pertinent language

We could think of monuments and memorials as acts of naming historical events, a baptism, a fabrication testified by their names in a legible and enduring form. The act of naming stands here as the first act towards acknowledging the presence of something, of someone, its reality. This flight of thought is influenced by the theories on naming inscribed in large parts of the work of Martinique writer, poet, philosopher, and literary critic Édouard Glissant. French-Martinican academic Priska Degras, in an article appeared in 1989 in ‘World Literature Today’ reflects on naming in Glissant’s work¹¹:

“The problem of the Name, and more generally that of naming, (...) is inscribed as an obstinate attempt to rename a world, a community, and to make of its History, its histories, and its stories a significant, meaningful “ensemble” beyond the disorder, chaos, and misery that are the necessary lot of colonial histories. For this reason the Name represents a significant textual constellation and, at the same time, an obvious historical, social and cultural preoccupation despite its inevitable weight of opacity”.

It is by giving names to the unnamable that a certain type of counter-dominant history might be written, such as that of slavery, or colonialism, but from the

¹¹ Priska Degras, (Autumn, 1989) ‘Name of the Fathers, History of the Name: Odon as Memory’, in World Literature Today, Vol. 63, No. 4, Édouard Glissant Issue, pp. 613-619.

perspective of the violated subjects and not only from the point of view of a guilt-filled white dominator. Hence, within a discussion on the role of past monuments, the question of how the unfolding of that story might be given a *new name*, from a more polyphonic perspective, remains.

As we know, slaves were given different names by their masters, thus always bearing two names, the dominator's name and the secret name, given by their forefathers, revealing and holding secret their real identity, their history. Both names may be considered necessary for an understanding of truth. But, to complicate further the argument, Glissant speaks about the need for a third name given by a community, conquered and not just subjected to, and this new name will require a new language. A new language that is the creole (read: a mother tongue formed from the contact of a European language with local languages) and the only way to speak the unspeakable, a "pertinent language" as he calls it. A new language in which a different community can also recognize itself as one transformed by collectively experienced events. A new language that might allow for a further proximity to the actual meaning of the events it is trying to portray.

Glissant continues¹²:

"The Name is first and foremost for us a collective one, it is not the sign of an "I" but of a "We". (...) Its force comes from being chosen and not by being imposed. It is not the parental name, it is the conquered name. It is not important whether I am called X or Glissant: the most important thing is that I am not subjected to my name but that I assume my name within my community."

¹² Ibidem.

The name here does not stand for the first name, or the name of the Fathers, but for the names and naming of a community, striving to find a way to its own self-determination. The name here, in Glissant's terms, stands as a metaphor of both history and language, a history that cannot be written because its pertinent language has not been given any space. To translate this back into my argument on monuments to give a voice and a place in history to he or she who has unjustly been denied one, to those whom remain unnamed, means also to allow for a different language of monuments, of sculptures, of memorials to appear. A language that might be influenced by its cultural encounters, a language of the diaspora, but one that is given the chance to root itself in a different cultural and artistic tradition, of diverse epistemologies.

On Monumental Silences

These reflections form the backbone of Ibrahim Mahama's project. 'On Monumental Silences' aims to give visibility to a myriad of experiences, stories and memories that continue to be silenced and denied a voice. It is an attempt to show how possible the erection of a counter perspective actually is. It is a thought experiment in imagining, and literally reshaping in order to forge a counter monument to one of the most violent images still standing in public space in the city of Antwerp.

A copy in soft clay of the monument of Pater de Deken of Wilrijk has been modified, reshaped and reimagined together with the public through a moderated discussion with historian, diversity and inclusion expert Omar Ba. History and public narratives here have become malleable matters to be acted upon and reshaped towards the production of a counter-monument, one that does not deny the original image, but

that constructs a further narrative from it. The sculpture is smaller than the original and without a plinth, a further attempt to give a human size to images and symbols that refuse to be understood as man-made. Two new sculptures face each other one is the old image of Pater de Deken, the other is a proposal for a new image of it, an unfinished one, in clay, speaking of the need to continue challenging these types of images permanently. Rubber on the other hand was chosen because it is a material that symbolizes and formally expresses the extraction and exploitation of resources by European colonial empires, Belgium being one of them, in different African countries, including Guinea, Angola, Congo, The Ivory Coast, and Nigeria. The two images face and challenge one another, proposing that it is in this zone of contact, between gazes, that a process of healing, of understanding each other, may be achieved. In this sense, the project is not interested in addressing the past, but in disrupting the racist image ontology, the regime of visibility that lives on its legacy. As Ray Minniecon, an Aboriginal student at Murdoch University, stated *“Monuments are not just a window into our past; they are a window into ourselves. We can choose.”*¹³

¹³ Paul Daley, (August 24, 2017) The Guardian, 'Statues are not history. Here are six in Australia that need rethinking', <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2017/aug/25/statues-are-not-history-here-are-six-in-australia-that-need-re-thinking>

Biography

Ibrahim Mahama (b. 1987) is an artist who lives and works in Tamale, Ghana. He earned a BFA and an MFA in Painting and Sculpture from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. In 2012 he began producing '*Occupations*', a series of itinerant installations made in collaboration with migrant communities using industrial materials, namely jute fiber sacks used to carry various commodities. These sacks are introduced into spaces that question the systems of production and the sense of Occupation. Architecture plays the role of both protagonist and antagonist in these immersive yet very temporal projects. His work has been included in a number of group shows including 'Pangea' I and 'Pangea II' at Saatchi Gallery, London; 'Silence Between The Lines' in Ahenema Kokobeng, Kumasi; 'the Gown must Go To Town', Accra; the 56th Venice Biennale, 'All The Words Futures'; documenta14, 'Learning from Athens'. In his most recent work ('EXCHANGE-EXCHANGER' 1957-2057) he questions the place of modern architecture within two cosmopolitan cities in Ghana with subtle choices of form and time with his network of collaborators. Failure and crisis are fundamental to his production processes.



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cahier 2:
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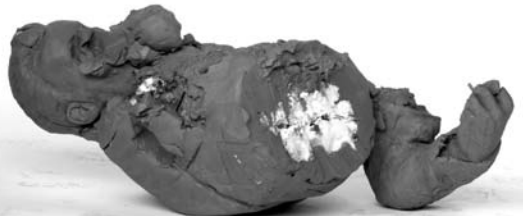
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‘On Monumental Silences’, by Ibrahim Mahama, marks the first act in a series of interventions within a three-year collaboration, developed between the curatorial team of Extra City and that of the Middelheim Museum, which aims to critically re-assess the function of monuments today.

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