In media res: Thoughts on Solidarity Through Institutional Renaming, Monumentality, and Reenactment

by Ioannis Andronikidis

Workers remove an equestrian statue from a plaza in front of a museum. The statue is replaced by a neon-light square that metonymically represents a communal "safe space". The above scene from Ruben Östlund's *The Square* (2017) stresses the symbolic fall of monuments in relation to infrastructures of solidarity (fig. 1). Inspired by the role of performative acts in reshaping monumentality, this text considers the act of renaming an institution along with its infrastructural reframing.

(fig. 1): Still from *The Square* by Ruben Östlund, 2017.

The global health crisis that resulted from the spread of Covid-19 has brought about a number reconsiderations in art production, distribution, and display, along with institutional practice and critique. Reconsiderations of the latter kind took the form of nominal indicators' alteration, symbolic, commemorating monuments' fall as well as academic and public programmes' digital appropriation. Notwithstanding the above, a proliferating question remains and has to do with the pragmatic divide between ostensible and actual, nominal and infrastructural change. Whether that is the case of the four statues before the historic Deptford Town Hall in London (fig. 2) or the (formerly known as) Witt de With in Rotterdam, institutions have been engaging in discussions around decolonisation and, specifically, the way nominal, geographical, and topical indicators correlate with policies and practices — or so should be the question.[1]

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[1] "Open Letter to Witte de With", accessed 12 September 2020, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeCz5ep2pGUvQNbuxYyn38aBLrSJy-PzZAjuwht5xPkY-vW_A/viewform?c=0&w=1.

(fig. 2): Deptford Town Hall with red paint thrown onto the figures
of slavers Sir Francis Drake, Admiral Nelson, and Sir Robert Blake
by activists.

Immediately in the middle: this is where philosophical thinking must begin according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.[2] *In media res* perhaps, then, one ought to commence institutional decisions' examination — in this case, considering the implications of global pandemics coupled with numerous attempts to decolonise and face racism, neo-fascism, and political power over decision-making; all in and through art, as well. However, what I would like to focus on is whether the inability to physically assemble, the restrictions, thus, (self- or otherwise) of social distancing, facilitated not only 'public engagement' in institutional decision-making, but also as different kind of assembling that possibly reiterated solidarity, not simply reverberating its nominal existence.

We might start with monumentality, with the role of monuments (statues, buildings, streets, areas) as commemorating symbols of past eras, patrons, and leaders. One would think, here, of the historical, political, and economic connotations that accompany monuments in their eroded materiality but also how their functionality redefines their symbolic character by means of "unrestricted" mobility in public areas. On the other hand, one might also connect an institution's name to the dynamic meanings of a monument — in the case of Witte de With, the name of 'a high-ranking colonial naval officer who worked for both the Dutch West India Company and the Dutch East India Company.'[3] The question that occurs has to do with the actual changes effectuated by the

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[2] As it appears in Brian Massumi, "Introduction: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts". In *Semblance and Event* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 2013), 1.

[3] "Open Letter to Witte de With."

symbolic fall of monuments connected to racism, colonialism, and exploitation and with whether nominal changes should be accompanied by infrastructural changes, challenging, thus, the ephemerality of the *occurrent* acts.

Although the above questions are examined while decisions around them are *in media res*, Irit Rogoff's exploration of infrastructures as functioning institutions and canonising systems (classification, funding and educational pathways, among others) appears as pertinent as ever.[4] In the respect, the act of renaming and art institution — whether it occurs as the result of an Open Letter — cannot be accomplished without considering its supporting political, cultural or economic infrastructures. Renaming becomes, thus, more than an indicator — especially when decision-making is premised upon a series of public forums and online surveys.

An institution engaged in performative acts (online or in situ) may appear more open to infrastructural reframing. Accepting Andrea Fraser's definition of the institution as that which his 'inside of us', one thinks of relevant embodying acts; perhaps, those of 'living monuments'[5] Sanja Iveković reflected on the Roma Holocaust victims' fate in the *Rohrbach Living Memorial* (2005) through a reenactment pf the silence in awaitance of deportation to a concentration camp (fig. 3). One could also consider Alexandra Pirici's *Monument to Work* (*Arbetets Monument*) (2015), which emphasises the movement patterns of the performing agents and the transition from the industrial to a post-industrial economy (fig. 4).[6] *Monument to Work*, in its enunciation as a living monument, underwrites the infrastructural mechanisms at play in the framing of an institution. Relatedly, the practices of the Russian Collective Chto Delat, whose very name, succinctly indicating their aims and aspirations, translates as *What Is to Be done?*.[7] With that question in mind, a collective body of

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[4] "Keynote Lecture: Infrastructure, Irit Rogoff, 20 March 2013," Former West, accessed 12 September 2020, https://formerwest.org/DocumentsConstellationsProspects/Contributions/Infrastructure.

[5] Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (September 2005), 104.

[6] See Alexandra Pirici"s discussion with Dmitry Vilensky as part of *The School of Mutation*, in "THE TRANSFORMATION OF MONUMENTALITY. THE RISE AND FALLS AND THE DANCE OF MONUMENTS | Dmitry Vilensky & Alexandra Pirici," Institute of Radical Imagination, accessed 14 September 2020, https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/tag/alexandra-pirici/.

[7] I point here to Chto Delat's online platform for specific details. See "About," Chto Delat, accessed 14 September 2020, https://chtodelat.org/category/b5-announcements/.

agents merges art with activism and political theory through performative acts that advocate individual and collective understandings and imaginations.[8]

(fig. 3): *Monument to Work* by Alexandra Pirici, 2015.

(fig. 4): *Rohrbach Living Memorial* by Sanja Iveković, 2005.

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[8] For the intriguing way of questioning the role of art and artists in society through The School of Engaged Art, founded in 2013, see "About School," School for Engaged Art, accessed 14 September 2020, http://schoolengagedart.org/en/.; Consider, in that respect, their first solo exhibition in State of Concept Athens. See "Chto Delat (Solo Show) When the roots start to move and get lost," State of Concept Athens, accessed 14 September 2020, https://stateofconcept.org/exhibition/chto-delat-solo-show/.

In the middle of a global pandemic, the question as to renaming and reframing and institution, specially with regards to its supporting infrastructures, remains. The above emphasis that was lent to performing agents and bodies *on the move* — their living monumentality by means of reenactment — heeds, in my view, in the development of common or interconnected forms of solidarity. I argue, overall, that despite the physically restricted acts of interconnection, solidarity is supported via online participatory forums that attempt the development of a common ground, even symbolically in periods of crises.