

REIMAGINING MONUMENTS AS MALLEABLE BODIES THAT WON'T INSPIRE CARPE DIEM

Sue Spaid

*The past isn't dead and buried. It's not even past.
President Barack Obama, 2008*

History 'Hysteria'

No one could have predicted that a conference convened in May 2020 by Spanish artist Juan-li Carrión in collaboration with the National Academy of Sciences and the Embassy of Spain in Washington, DC to investigate the "social, economic, environmental and gastronomic consequences of the first circumnavigation of the Earth 500 years ago" might end under a cloud of dust. Focused on the Magellan-Elcano Expedition (1519-1522), this series of three consecutive Thursday Zoom meetings was meant to celebrate Europe's having awakened to new cultures, languages, species, spices, foodstuffs, etcetera. Within weeks, protestors, enraged by the brutal, unconscionable and often lawless police murders of thousands of young people of colour since 2010, were toppling bronze statues of Italian explorer Cristóbal Colón in cities across the US. Who knew that this dynamic awakening would stir such tragic outcomes?

Although Magellan's five ships with 270 sailors set sail years after Colón's death, it is difficult to fully embrace the bravery of the 19 men who completed this voyage without also acknowledging that their heroism and good-fortune are partly responsible for today's masked demonstrators risking their health in the streets. Hardly ancient 'history', both explorations remain part of our present, since five centuries of reaching landfall on every shore, and one day other planets, has spawned mass species extinctions, both at home and abroad. Implicit in this tale is the devaluation of species that don't survive human invasions, whether plants or human beings; and the exoticism of those that do. Monuments to explorers' bravery belie species loss.

As it turns out, Spain too has been embroiled in waves of 'history' hysteria. In 2007, Spain passed the Law of Historical Memory, which mandated the removal of all symbols and monuments commemorating Fascist dictatorships and their protagonists. As early as 1936, anarchists demanded the removal of the statue of Antonio López y López (1817-1883), a Barcelona industrialist who had made his fortune in the illegal slave trade, thus "sustaining Spanish colonialism in Africa and South America."¹ Less than a decade after being dismantled, the monument reappeared during Franco's reign. In 2018, its removal was officially authorised, thanks to the outcries of labour unions and 'anti-racist citizens'.

Paradoxically, the City of Comillas (López's birthplace) requested the López statue for its town, but Barcelona's mayor refused to deliver, citing its value in educating the public about Spain's colonial past. Most remarkably, the statue's elaborate pedestal still stands in Plaça d'Antonio López, leaving both its base and place to serve as "testaments to López's power and influence during his lifetime and beyond the grave."² Citizen groups like SOS Racisme, focused on Spain's treatment of African immigrants, regularly stage protests in the square to raise awareness of racism and colonialism. Another 'anti-racist' group painted an image of an African migrant on its base. In not delivering the statue, the mayor averted a 'cover up', yet history 'hysteria' will reign until monuments with empowering narratives are in place.

During a 1977 conference, Native Americans recommended renaming Columbus Day 'Indigenous Peoples' Day', a move that increasingly gains traction. The artists' activist group For Freedoms initiated 'The 2020 Awakening', whereby many Native American, but also immigrant and well known artists such as Ai Wei Wei, Marilyn Minter and Shepard Fairey, created 50 state-specific billboards to honor Indigenous Peoples' Day. As For Freedoms' executive director Claudia Peña notes, "Celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day is an attempt to change the narrative by changing

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the narrators.... the narrative of the 2020 election will involve conversations between artists and the residents who see these billboards, mostly in rural areas.”³ Additionally, the *New York Times* recently invited five artists to reimagine monuments “for a more just future”⁴ and Mic editor Erin E. Evans launched The Black Monuments Project in 2018.

To my lights, the global controversy surrounding public monuments and holidays not only serves as the backdrop for Avelino Sala’s exhibition *Naturalezas muertas* (Still Lives), but it positions his oeuvre as the prelude to this and several related mass movements such as the ‘war on climate change’, ‘global inequality struggles’ and ‘Decolonising-Museum campaigns’. When Sala created these artworks, he probably didn’t intend to reimagine monuments, but the artworks selected for *Naturalezas muertas* seem to point us in this direction, or at least could be said to point us in this direction. What’s clear, however, is the way these artworks draw us into the present, while helping us to hold onto certain truths about the past, thereby actively resisting the recent tendency to be so future-obsessed. To focus on his exhibited artworks, I survey four notions of ‘still lives’: *contemporary monuments* meant to empower stakeholders to expand the narrative; *constructive stories* that remain unnaturally frozen; today’s ‘big data’ mania whose bets that unwieldy algorithms will save us often engender deadly consequences and signal alerts meant to warn the public about our planet’s vulnerability to climate change. I begin by briefly discussing *statues*, as laid out in French philosopher Michel Serres’ 1987 book.

Statues

In 2015, the English translation of *Statues: le second livre des foundations* finally landed. Despite its title’s reference to static entities, Serres’ true topic is the way “knowledge, society, the subject and object, the world and experience” rest on the same narratives that prompted culture’s statues, whether objects, images or texts. In this context, he surveys a vast array of ‘statues’, dating from

Baal four thousand years ago to the Space Shuttle Challenger 1986 explosion. Were he still alive, I doubt he would find the recent toppling of bronze monuments surprising. In fact, he differentiated statues as *rigid* things destined to break from *fluid* bodies softened by language. As Peter Owens puts it, “A statue is rigid. It cannot sway or dance. It cannot hold someone: it cannot avoid harm or avoid a blow.”⁵ For Serres,⁶ the Challenger Disaster exemplified the transformation of malleable bodies into hard technologies, much like *our* twin obsessions with algorithms and space travel. “We imitate machines, we turn children into automata, we bury ourselves beneath a skin of marble.”⁷ But it goes both ways: “An obsession with discourse causes us to forget the hard, and forgetting the hard makes us brittle”. The toppling of monuments is a call to oust the underlying narratives that buttress the status quo.

Already three decades ago, Serres wrote: “We are only now beginning to understand what cultures are useful for, what the stories told by the different literatures are useful for, what the dialects, the local accents, the ideas meditated on by philosophy, the wisdoms and moralities or the gestures prescribed by the liturgies.”⁸ Moreover, “Groups produce themselves by means of their culture and language which develop and preserve them.”⁹ Thanks to social media’s capacity to amplify and accelerate, culture wars are flamed like never before.¹⁰ For Serres, statues matter because “groups recognize themselves as existing through the existence of their gods or heroes, draw remedies from this to their specific ills and defend themselves patiently against death and disappearance.”¹¹

Among the first to recognise the significance of indigenous peoples, Serres wrote; “A group dies if its language fades, and declines like its art.”¹² He thus recognised the way culture, including its statues and language, perpetuates the group’s ‘collective immortality’, in terms of the ‘production of history or for their own reproduction in that history’. He adds, “I sometimes fear that mo-

dernity is allowing that whose usefulness we no longer understand to die or [is] even destroying it, meanwhile the violence that besieges us isn't being controlled."¹³ Finally, he asks "Who knows when we say: we know? Who decides when we decide? A single person? Everyone? A majority? An active and dynamic minority? The crowd, opinion? A few representatives? All of that, no doubt, at the same time or successively. The subject that acts and the object on which social technologies intervene remain outside our control."¹⁴ Just as culture keeps us alive, our statues keep *it* alive. Serres actually begs us to remember our ancestors, which includes every species lost to extinction. Let's reimagine monuments as malleable bodies, softened by language. They may not dance, but they sway.

Contemporary Monuments

As already noted, statues keep a culture's narratives alive, thus preventing its 'natural death'. Problem is, some narratives are not memories, but propaganda; stories circulated more to prop up people in power than to register narratives deemed too important to forget. Like history itself, the victors are typically afforded many more opportunities to air their views than the vanquished. One question worth asking is whether artists should intervene to ensure that monuments either reflect the evidence or represent many more perspectives than just that of the powerful, whether propagandists, politicians or profiteers.

Sala's artworks seem to have sprung from his constantly reflecting upon what can be done to get the public to remember events that might otherwise be forgotten. To demonstrate the unpredictable way in which history unfolds, I began this essay by introducing several entangled events swirling around Juanli Carrión's 'contemporary monument'. Far from linear (A leads to B leads to C, etcetera), these events reinforce the view that history has no endpoint (Obama apparently paraphrased William Faulkner), leaving future citizens to deal with the fallout of past deeds. Some artists have a burning desire to make sure that we never

forget what transpired and who was harmed in its wake. Artists have diverse reasons for facing history. Like writers and documentarians, some artists simply aim to set the record straight. One great sample is Jacques-Louis David's giant *Death of Marat* (1793) painted lest we forget that era's Reign of Terror. Others see themselves as first responders, who like paramedics have immediate access to providential signs signalling catastrophe. Others still, opt to focus on outcasts and minorities who otherwise remain eclipsed from human memory. Allan Sekula's photos and documentaries capture the surfeit of maritime activities as sailors toil on deck and stevedores work the docks around the clock.

At the heart of Sala's exhibition is a fundamental question concerning the importance of empowering communities to identify narratives worthy of permanent registration so as to better frame public memories. I employ the term community, since history is the kind of thing that belongs equally to inhabitants despite their diverse perspectives. Indicative of history's layers, complexity and multiple stakeholders, conference conveners evaluated the expedition's historic success given its contributions to biodiversity, history of science, Spain's national botanical garden and artworks. This is not to say that history is merely a matter of opinion or that there are 'alternative facts'. Rather, everyone who respects the truth commits to mining history to discover details that have faded from memory. Likewise, *contemporary* monuments identify and register facts originally trampled over that must come to light. If modernity erases everything, such as indigenous people's languages, whose uselessness we don't understand; *contemporary* monuments draw attention to 'inconvenient truths' thus inspiring the public to take urgent action on behalf of those most afflicted.

Although Avelino Sala's oeuvre links to myriad issues, its principle crisis concerns oceans. Given the eventual outcome of the trial regarding the Prestige oil-tanker, which was destroyed at sea in 2002 during a storm, Sala's videotaped

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interview with the prosecutor Álvaro García Ortiz and presentation of all the evidence gathered over twelve years to prosecute the ship's officers draws our attention to the captain's responsibility, thus reinforcing the prosecutor's case. A 26 year-old tanker, the Prestige was owned by Greeks and registered in the Bahamas. The resulting oil spill off the Galician coast fouled thousands of kilometers of Spain's coastline, simultaneously devastating the livelihoods of French and Spanish fishermen. In 2013, "the three judges of the Galician High Court concluded that establishing criminal responsibility was impossible. Captain Apostolos Mangouras, Chief Engineer Nikolaos Argyropoulos and former head of Spain's Merchant Navy José Luis López[-Sors] were found not guilty of crimes against the environment. López[-Sors] was the only government official charged in the case. Mangouras, 78, was found guilty of a lesser charge of disobedience and given a nine-month suspended sentence."¹⁵ Fortunately, the prosecutor pressed on, presenting his case in 2016 to Spain's Supreme Court, which sentenced the ship's captain to two years of prison for "recklessness resulting in environmental damage" and opened up the potential to sue oil tankers' insurers too.¹⁶ In presenting this video accompanied by trial evidence, Sala memorialises the prosecutor's tenacity, engendering a contemporary monument meant to inspire prosecutors.

Given that 75% of Earth's terrain is substantially degraded, the wellbeing of 3,2 billion people is currently severely threatened, thus magnifying the urgency to amend degraded sites before the globe is awash in eco-refugees. In light of such facts, Sala's glowing global logo tagged with the phrase *Love Among the Ruins* frames the planet as a sinking ship on the brink of disaster. Research shows that opinions won't change unless facts are provided and vivid stories are told, so it's appropriate that he's lit up this upfront jingle in neon yellow.¹⁷ Apparently, negative information draws and holds our attention more than positive information.¹⁸ With life in peril, we must activate our plans lest Space X markets spaceships as ordinary lifeboats.

Frozen Stories

Sala's video triptych *4'33" minutos de silencio de minutos de silencio* (2018) takes inspiration from John Cage's three-movement score *4'33"* (1952). Although performances of Cage's score highlight ambient sounds, Sala's silent video registers images of politicians, drivers, athletes and spectators paused *en masse* to honor those who have fallen due to accidents, terrorism or natural disasters. Sala's videos of athletes frozen in time and space prove particularly relevant for today's culture wars. In 2018, a Fox-TV newscaster told LeBron James to 'Shut Up and Dribble', which sparked him to organise *More Than a Vote*, further amplifying his political influence, especially after the Laker's 2020 NBA championships. Sala's video of frozen athletes belies the silence expected of athletes, since silence itself poses a powerful form of activism.

Seeing Sala's bronze surfboard surrounded by a photo of its being dragged atop a sand dune (like surf, sculpted by wind) prompts us to imagine surfing's quietus. In fact, scientists expect climate change to negatively impact global wave quality. Given the toxic materials used to make surfboards and wetsuits, few consider surfers environmentalists, yet when the online surf magazine *Stab* surveyed 700 surfers on 6 continents, they discovered otherwise. The vast majority: side with scientists regarding climate change, consider it human's most important issue, favor renewable energies over fossil fuels and expect governments to regulate it, yet only half find 'wave quality' worrisome. Surf stars like Kelly Slater and Rob Machado either promote eco-friendly gear or have set up ocean-conservation organisations. Like mastodons rising from melting glaciers, Sala's watercolour paintings of philosophical aphorisms focused on nature and ecology seduce us as their stodgy prose melts into eye-popping texts. Nothing could feel more frozen than Sala's cool marble N95 mask, whose inflexibility renders it useless either as a mask or a contemporary monument.

'Big Data' Mania

Problematically, our obsessions with rationality and fantasy that technology will save the day have rather made us more undisciplined. Hardly new ideas, "the Stoics gave to posterity the idea of the inherent justice of the universe and rational man's ability to comprehend the great orders of nature, and thus through his reason power to conform his conduct to it". Yesterday's technological determinism has given way to today's algorithm determinism, such that data mining facilitates the illusion that every problem is manageable, rendering unpredictable outcomes 'under control', whether wild fires, derivatives/swaps, hedge funds, pandemic forecasts, social media algorithms or smart cities. Big Pharma's labs increasingly unleash tomorrow's invasive species, such as genetically-modified plants that kill soil, patented organisms destined to rewild degraded lands (and one day Mars) and 750 million transgenic mosquitoes programmed to lessen the population of 'blood-sucking' females in hopes of reducing the spread of Dengue and Zika.

Not included here is NASA data regarding Typhoon Haiyan printed on a feather quill, which visualizes the way today's technology capably shrinks massive amounts of data, while tying its source (the inkwell) to both design (drawing) and language (writing). Soon after Typhoon Haiyan crossed the Philippines in November 2013, Sala arrived on Bantayan Island to photograph its destruction. While recording the devastation wrought by one of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever recorded, he was struck by the array of pitched NGO tents, whose prominently displayed logos suggested their triple role as allies, publicists and invaders. Additionally, he photographed and documented the island's coastal perimeter, whose razed coral reefs left fish populations decimated.

Signal Alerts

Avelino Sala's clearest attempt to spur the public's attention to our sinking ship is a giant green neon

sign featuring S.O.S. in capital letters. In English, SOS is an acronym meaning 'save our ship' or 'save our souls', whose letters correspond in Morse code to three dots/three dashes/three dots signal, which originally served as a distress signal, independent of the signaller's language. Surprisingly, the German maritime first adopted its use in 1905. Sala displays it to signal both maritime distress and institutional distress, as it also alerts passersby to the breaking apart of cultural, democratic and religious institutions.

- ¹ Tsuchiya, Akiko (2020). "On Race, Colonialism and Falling Monuments in Spain and the US", *Washington University in St. Louis*. Available at: <https://sites.wustl.edu/rllwustl/on-race-colonialism-and-falling-monuments-in-spain-and-the-us/>.
- ² *Idem*.
- ³ Savej, Nadia (2010). "Indigenous Peoples' Day: the latest US billboard project to send a message", *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/oct/12/indigenous-peoples-day-billboard-project>.
- ⁴ Lescaze, W. (2020). "America's Monuments, Reimagined for a More Just Future", *New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/t-magazine/confederate-monuments-reimagined-racism.html>.
- ⁵ Owens, Peter (2010). "Statues or Bodies?: Michel Serres and Human Rights Discourse", p. 6. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/30063435/Statues_or_bodies_Michel_Serres_and_Human_Rights_Discourse.
- ⁶ Serres, Michel (2008). *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. New York: Continuum.
- ⁷ Serres, Michel (2015). *Statues: The Second Book of Foundations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 199.
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- ⁹ *Idem*.
- ¹⁰ Spaid, Sue (2019). "Surfing the Public Square: On Worldlessness, Social Media, and the Dissolution of the Polis". *Open Philosophy* (2), pp.

- 668-678. [Jørgensen, Dorte (Ed.)].
- ¹¹ Serres, M. (2015), *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.
- ¹⁵ European Union (2013). Eurojust News, (10), p. 4. Available at: https://www.environmentalprosecutors.eu/sites/default/files/EurojustNews_Issue10_2013-12-EN.pdf.
- ¹⁶ Reuters Staff (26 January 2016). "Spanish court sentences captain of sunken oil tanker Prestige to two years", Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-spain-prestige/spanish-court-sentences-captain-of-sunken-prestige-oil-tanker-to-two-years-idUKKCN-0V41PA>.
- ¹⁷ Duffy, Bobby (2019). *The Perception: Why We're Wrong About Nearly Everything*. London: Atlantic Books Ltd., p. 67.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.