



Culture Montréal

SUMMARY — INTERNATIONAL FORUM
ON REVISED COMMEMORATION

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INTRODUCTION

Started by Culture Montréal's standing committee on public art, the forum *Entre raison et tension: l'art public à l'épreuve de la commémoration corrigée (Between Reason and Tension: Public Art Put to the Test of Revised Commemoration)* held on October 7, 2019, brought together Quebec, Canadian and international experts at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ) to take a critical look at the future prospects of public art in light of an increasingly global revision of official interpretations and representations of the past.

1. FORUM OVERVIEW

A. Harriet F. Senie

During the day's plenary session, **Harriet F. Senie**, art historian, public art specialist and professor at City College (New York) asked three fundamental questions that acted as a common thread throughout the forum:

1. How should administrative bodies deal with their memorials when they are deemed incompatible with a city's values? And, in turn, what are the values of said city (Montréal's for instance)?
2. What is the relationship between art and monument, and what is the place of aesthetic/artistic values in the current debate around monuments?
3. Should the choice of new monuments be solely made by the different citizens groups involved in the commissions?

Senie first provided a look back on the work of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers, of which she was a member, established in 2018 by the Mayor of New York City.¹

¹ Among the four public monuments and markers that were studied by the members of the commission, Senie focused on the case of the Theodore Roosevelt equestrian statue (in front of the American Museum of Natural History). Specifically, she outlined the controversy surrounding it, which mainly stems from the representation of the statues of a Native American and an African in the monument.

Two elements should be retained from her analysis:

1. First, Senie insisted on the need to distinguish between the original meaning of a work of art and the modern reactions/emotions to it. She argued the history of a work is as important as the modern emotions it sparks.
2. Secondly, she cautioned against altering an existing work of art, something Senie said we wouldn't dare do with literary work.

She went on to say that if public art is a form of discourse then suppressing or permanently altering it would also be a form of censorship. However, she also said that the omission and erasure of certain segments of the population that have not been recognized in our public places to date amounts to the same thing.

Senie identified the emergence of a **new paradigm** in the field of monument design: group monuments or composite monuments. Using two examples (the Boston Women's Memorial, 2003) and a project that was still ongoing at the time, the Women's Rights Pioneers Monument (New York), she described the main features of group monuments: it's a type of monument that honours more than one person at a time (to emphasize the collective nature of history), that could span multiple historical periods (several temporalities) and whose form invites audience interaction.

B. Jeff Thomas

Jeff Thomas describes himself as an urban Iroquois and independent curator. During his talk, he reflected on the evolution of his work on monuments in three photographic series: Seize the Space, Scouting for Indians and Indians on Tour. His approach consists of reimagining various sites and monuments where the presence (or absence) of Indigenous people lends itself to many interpretations (e.g. the Samuel de Champlain monument in Ottawa).

Thomas's talk offered one of the most promising and creative ways to recontextualize contested sites and monuments. They can recuperate

these sites and meaningfully integrate them into the local urban fabric as sites of negotiation and shared heritage.

C. François Le Moine

François Le Moine is a lawyer at Sarrazin+Plourde. He teaches art and cultural heritage law as well as philosophy of law at Université de Montréal.

His talk was on public art copyright. According to Le Moine, the current debate on public art and commemoration tends to exclude artists. It's mainly the values conveyed by the monuments that are subject to criticism. In light of this situation, Le Moine proposed to turn to law because law allows us to think about that link that always ties an artist to their work. Even if the artist sells their own work, they retain their copyright, particularly their moral right.

In Canada, moral right includes several prerogatives, including the right to integrity (a work cannot be distorted in such a way as to damage the reputation or honour of its author) and probably the right to preservation (that the work cannot be destroyed). The right to integrity and the right to preservation run counter to many of the currently proposed modification projects for works of art we are hearing in commemoration debates. Even where the destruction is not complete, the mere modification can very quickly turn into direct infringement on the integrity of the work and therefore an infringement of the artist's moral rights, he explained.

Le Moine warned against any attempt to interfere with works of art and pleaded for these principles to be respected by public authorities even after moral rights have expired, which in Canada is 50 years after the artist's death.

D. Mélanie Boucher

During the afternoon session, **Mélanie Boucher**, professor at Université du Québec en Outaouais, focused on a group exhibition bringing together artists of different generations and cultural backgrounds, *Monument aux victimes de la liberté* (2015, AXENÉO7, Gatineau). This was one of the four main activities of Entrepreneurs du Commun. This collective of artists and researchers was formed in reaction to the announcement of the winning design (by ABSTRAKT

Studio Architecture) for a Canadian memorial to the victims of communism in Ottawa, on a site adjacent to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Boucher analyzed the works in the exhibition she co-curated on “counter-monuments” (James E. Young, 1993). This notion describes works that, while having a commemorative dimension, use anti-monument strategies that run counter to the range of subjects addressed by traditional monuments. They also depart from the repertoire of shapes traditional monuments take, the sites they are put on, the type of experience they offer the public, and their meanings. She concluded that these works—many of which are performative, participatory and even portable in nature—are counter-monuments as they are the inverse of what a traditional monument is.

Boucher concluded her presentation by pointing out that temporary art installations on the sites of contested monuments would certainly be a solution for dealing with problematic monuments.

E. Ken Lum

In his presentation, Canadian artist and University of Pennsylvania professor **Ken Lum** discussed the activities of Monument Lab, a public independent art and history studio that he co-founded with historian and researcher Paul Farber.

Based in Philadelphia, Monument Lab works with artists, students, activists, city agencies and cultural institutions to develop exploratory approaches to public engagement and collective memory. Monument Lab facilitates critical dialogues on the past, present and future of monuments through a comprehensive portfolio of initiatives (direct action, online surveys, exhibitions, scholarships, podcasts, academic and general publications).

Lum also presented many innovative projects like Speculative Monuments for Philadelphia (2015), where the Monument Lab team asked citizens this question: “what is an ideal monument for the city of Philadelphia?” Out of the hundreds of statues that dot the city’s landscape, only two depict historical female figures and they have no connection to the city. Lum also explained that people in the city have a long memory and don’t forget so easily.

According to the results from a survey created by Monument Lab, around 3% of Philadelphia's population supports commemorating the bombing of the MOVE headquarters by the Philadelphia Police Department in 1985. MOVE was an African-American liberation group. The city has never offered an official apology for this murderous assault on its own population.

The artist and professor stressed that working with the public around community memory could be the start of a discussion about and an appropriation of the shared history of a city. Monument Lab studies citizens' reactions to historical monuments as well as the historical, political, economic and social contexts they were created in, before even suggesting solutions or actions.

F. Round Table

Moderator: Lucie K. Morisset, professor at l'Université du Québec à Montréal. **Participants:** Noémie McComber, artist; Yann Pocreau, artist; Bernard Vallée, history and heritage presenter; Elizabeth-Ann Doyle, MU co-founder and executive and artistic director; and Helena Martin Franco, artist.

This round table brought the day's debate back to the territory of Montréal. Artists and actors in Montréal's cultural scene talked about the monuments as they see them from their own professional and life experiences. A summary of their thoughts is in the findings section and some best practices suggestions are in the second part of this document.

2. KEY FINDINGS

- **More questions than answers.** Although the contributions from speakers (historians, art historians, lawyers, artists, cultural works) shed light on extremely varied sensitive contexts, there were ultimately more questions than solutions.
- **A preferred protocol.** Governments appear to favour a particular protocol when evaluating contested monuments, namely the development of recommendations and guidelines by independent boards of experts in

art history, public art, municipal authorities, lawyers, activists, urban studies experts, heritage experts, etc.

→ **Impacts of independent initiatives.** Independent initiatives (exhibits, publications, micro-projects, talks, temporary interventions, etc.) allow for various non-institutional groups that are under-represented to form and to influence the choice of monuments and themes made visible in public spaces.

→ **Additive practice.** The general tendency is to remove as little as possible and go with an additive practice instead. As Harriet F. Senie mentioned, whenever a monument is examined, the preferred course of action is most often to add new layers of meaning, new projects and not to remove them.

→ **Three recurring intervention strategies:**

1. Relocating the monument.
2. Preservation with work to contextualize the monument (text and visual documentation or permanent, temporary or ephemeral artistic interventions).
3. Creating new monuments.

→ **The site as the subject of contention.** The sites that monuments occupy seem to be as problematic as the individuals and stories commemorated by them.

→ **Exhibition as an intervention and mediation strategy.** Temporary exhibitions could be one of the answers to the current crisis around monuments and could be added to the repertoire of gestures for corrected commemoration.

→ **Several questions were not asked:**

- How many commemorative gestures does a monument need to receive before it's "corrected"? What are the limits of revised commemoration?

- How can we do it better next time?
- Why keep individuals and events in our urban landscapes that no longer make sense to us and give a temporary space to those that we are interested in today?
- How can temporary interventions on or around contested monuments be prolonged and sustained?

3. SOME GOOD PRACTICES

A. All fields

- **Understand that history is not an eternal present.** A monument represents the vision of a given society (its values, its ideologies) at a given time. It is a historical document, a legacy left from one era to another. If we start erecting too many monuments to celebrate individuals or events that are not from our era then we are altering the choices made by previous generations (whether or not we consider them wrong today). There is a danger of distorting our past to reflect our present. **Informed thinking and carefully framing history must be encouraged so we don't fall into an eternal present.**
- **Make room for our values in our public spaces.** Removing a statue of Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald will not make us forget him. It won't erase history. Removal can be understood as a way to make room in our public space for what represents and affects us and what we are interested in leaving to the next generations as a community. In doing so, we are allowing future generations to make their own choices without having to carry the burden of our current collective values, which they may or may not agree with. **Focus on the present to build a better future.**
- **Think about the values of Montréal.** Question our values as a community, in this case those that drive Montréal. While keeping in mind

that the values of a group, a city or even a country are in a state of constant flux, they change from generation to generation and even within them it seems necessary to reflect on the subject. **We would need to determine what the city's values are, if such a task is possible, to integrate them concretely into our collective actions.**

- **De-individualizing monument “prototypes.”** De-individualize monuments so they are more human. Commemorate the power of collective action: commemorate themes, joint actions, community movements, causes, common social progress, social groups, etc. **Emphasize that we are part of a whole or many wholes through works that celebrate the actions or contributions made by several individuals.**

B. In the institutional and legal field

- **Set up independent commissions** to examine government collections of public art. These commissions could thus begin to re-evaluate the messages that the works carry for those who speak through them and for those they address. These commissions should be based on equal participation of all stakeholders, including both experts and citizen representatives.
- **Research monuments** by commissioning studies from specialists. It's important to find out about their commission (main actors and sources of funding), the ideological and representation systems in which they were created, etc., in order to shed light on their initial intentions and better assess the decisions to be taken today.
- **Adopt guidelines to handle monuments deemed incompatible** with Montréal values. When formulating these guidelines, take into account existing procedures, approaches and regulations on commemoration both in Canada and elsewhere in the world. E.g. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action (2015); The Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art Monuments and Markers report for New York City (2018); Parcs Canada's new framework for history and

commemoration (the Framework for History and Commemoration: National Historic Sites System Plan, 2019), etc.

- **Identify what's missing in government collections, whether its women or people in LGBTQIA+, Indigenous, ethno-cultural, or racialized communities**, both as artists and as subjects of representation. Afterwards, actions can be considered to make these unheard voices audible and find common ground (through values, reference points), which will make dialogue possible and develop a sense of belonging.
- **Develop a legal framework to regulate actions on and around monuments (disposals, additions, removals, etc.)**. Create governmental funds to encourage historical research on monuments, mediation and educational projects, and public consultations, set up independent commissions, create new artistic projects, etc.
- **Encourage early involvement**. Be prepared to critically evaluate monuments that may be divisive or fail to achieve public consensus. Get tools, policies and structures in place early to quickly launch this commitment, without affecting other ongoing programs (e.g. the City of Toronto recently declared 2021 the "Year of Public Art" but Premier Doug Ford's proposed new legislation is already causing controversy, including budget cuts to the Indigenous Culture Fund). This early assessment also targets religious monuments. In light of Quebec's secularization law, the province's Catholic heritage—still highly visible in its public spaces—has the potential to become equally problematic.

C. In the artistic field

Ensure that the artist is involved from the initial stages when artworks are commissioned for commemorative purposes. The benefits of this involvement can be measured in several ways both in originality of the approach to

the subject and the diversity of media that will be used.

- **Involve different groups of citizens in these commissions** but ensure that the artistic value of the works carries significant weight in the selection processes.

- **Develop a space for discussions** that brings together artists, citizens and experts. This space would seek to re-evaluate traditional forms of commemoration in favour of other artistic practices that are performative and temporary in nature. This space would also allow us to find solutions for the future of existing monuments and other artistic interventions with a commemorative aspect.

- **Take into account the artistic value of existing monuments when assessing them.** However, artistic value must go hand in hand with social, moral and ethical values.

- **Put digital technologies and virtual spaces to work to:**
 - Show the “layers of commemoration” of a site (e.g. create a website or augmented reality (AR) applications that the public can access using a smartphone, “family trees” of the works that have occupied a site).

 - Promote temporary artistic exhibitions to have access to a history of “corrections” by several actors at different times.

 - Archive ephemeral works and spontaneous artistic experiments, especially when exceptional situations alter the usual uses and conceptions of our public spaces (e.g. the lockdown of cities and even entire countries due to COVID-19 in 2020).