

# Queering the Monumental

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In the context of the current public debate about the role of monuments in urban public spaces, Theatrum Mundi invited Kleanthis Kyriakou, a student in our 2018/19 CSM Spatial Practices studio, to write about his ongoing work on queer monumentality.

## Monuments for Decolonised Public Space

The global *Black Lives Matter* movement and the ongoing protests to take down troublesome (contested) urban monuments are striving to redress narratives imposed on our cities. The killing of George Floyd in late May, an African American, during an arrest in Minneapolis, sparked a series of anti-racism protests in major cities around the world, transcending national barriers and defying lockdown measures imposed by Covid-19. In the UK, a country that serenades its imperial past in its national anthem, the legitimacy of monuments dedicated to colonial-era slave traders has come to the forefront of socio-political debate. The scenes that unfolded in Bristol during a Black Lives Matter demonstration on 7 June were in equal measure preposterous and exhilarating.

An effigy of slave trader Edward Colston located in the city centre was overthrown and dragged through the streets into its watery grave, in the nearby harbour. The act, which attracted worldwide media attention and was described as ‘thuggery’ by the Home Secretary Priti Patel,<sup>1</sup> prompted (the beginning of) the removal of many other sculptures depicting those that benefited from racial violence. In London, Mayor Sadiq Khan has promised that every monument with colonial slave trade associations will fall. Racism has had material presence and manifestations in urban space for centuries, in our very own streets and squares, sometimes carved in stone, sometimes cast in bronze. As the wave of protests continue in London, graffiti, or more precisely political

## THEATRUM MUNDI

inscriptions, have appeared on sculptures around Whitehall, the central meeting ground for the demonstrations. The monument to the nation's most admired political figure, Sir Winston Churchill, was one of the victims. Following this incident, key statues around Whitehall have been boarded up, braced and concealed. London's historical elite have become invisible, monuments to no one, hidden inside wooden crates. While peaceful demonstrations proceeded, police force was employed to actively protect those monuments against destruction, highlighting their importance to the state and the caliber of the ruling power.

As the city is turning into a blank canvas, its colonial era monuments removed or boarded up, forming allegorical plinths for new monuments to be erected, is it time for minorities to claim their own permanence in the city, to immortalise our own histories, beliefs and ideals? This question truly resonates with my own practice as a queer architect and performer. In my work, I am dissecting queer fragility and looking at ways to preserve and memorialise London's queer heritage. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) histories are rooted in the buildings and landscapes all around us. Historic England hosts an extensive catalogue of LGBTQ+ sites in its online database: *Pride of Place*, ranging from the underground members clubs of the West End to the Public Courts where queers were trialled and persecuted over indecent acts. But much like the monuments in Whitehall, those stories are covered up and hidden. Huge eighteenth century mansions built as safe havens for their closeted patrons, the pubs, bars and clubs that we lost deserve to be remembered for their contribution to London's collective queer psyche. Spaces like the Joiners Arms, a notorious LGBTQ+ pub in East London, permanently shut its doors in 2015, despite community efforts to re-establish it.

In Southwark, XXL - London's premier gay nightclub that counted 100,000 members - presented its final night in September 2019. London, a city credited as the most progressive on Earth by the mayor's office, continues to witness the rapid loss of its LGBTQ+ establishments, in part due to gentrification and the rise of online dating apps. According to a 2018 study led by Ben Campkin and Laura Marshall of UCL's urban laboratory, London has lost 56% of its LGBTQ+ premises in the last decade alone, with councils such as Tower Hamlets losing an alarming 70% of those spaces.<sup>2</sup> I propose to seize this moment of change and radically rethink the potential for a decolonised public space - one where the queer minority can have a concrete presence.

During the swinging 60s, shortly after the relaxation of post-war austerity measures, the abundance of empty spaces in London's city centre provided a platform for LGBTQ+ venues to emerge. Yet ownership was temporary, as urban space has predominantly been driven by capital. Soho for instance, the city's infamous 'gayborhood' has been reduced to an array of homogenous luxury trainers shops, as seen on the district's Brewer street-once famed

## THEATRUM MUNDI

for its sex shops and cabaret nights. By using the typology of the monument to redress the impermanence that defines queer urban space, I aim to reveal alternative histories and grant the LGBTQ+ community a permanence in the built environment that other cultural or religious groups enjoy. Potential Monuments is influenced by The Church Ladies for Choice – a vocal group of crossdressers that built their own monuments to protest the lack of AIDS treatment and anti-abortion laws in the late 1980s in New York City. My finished pieces are not solely static representations of an idea, immobile statues, but they are openings for performances, led by my drag alter ego Divine III. In Potential Monuments, a plinth, an altar, a tower and a dress become shrines to London's lost queer spaces. Unlike the sculptures depicting the male slave-traders, my monumental propositions do not represent the dominance of the oppressor but instead allow for diverse voices of the oppressed to be heard, loud and clear. They don't present answers but ask questions:

- What is a monument?
- Who and what do we choose to memorialise as a society?
- Who benefits from public monuments?
- Who has a right and agency over them?

### **Potential Monuments**

## THEATRUM MUNDI

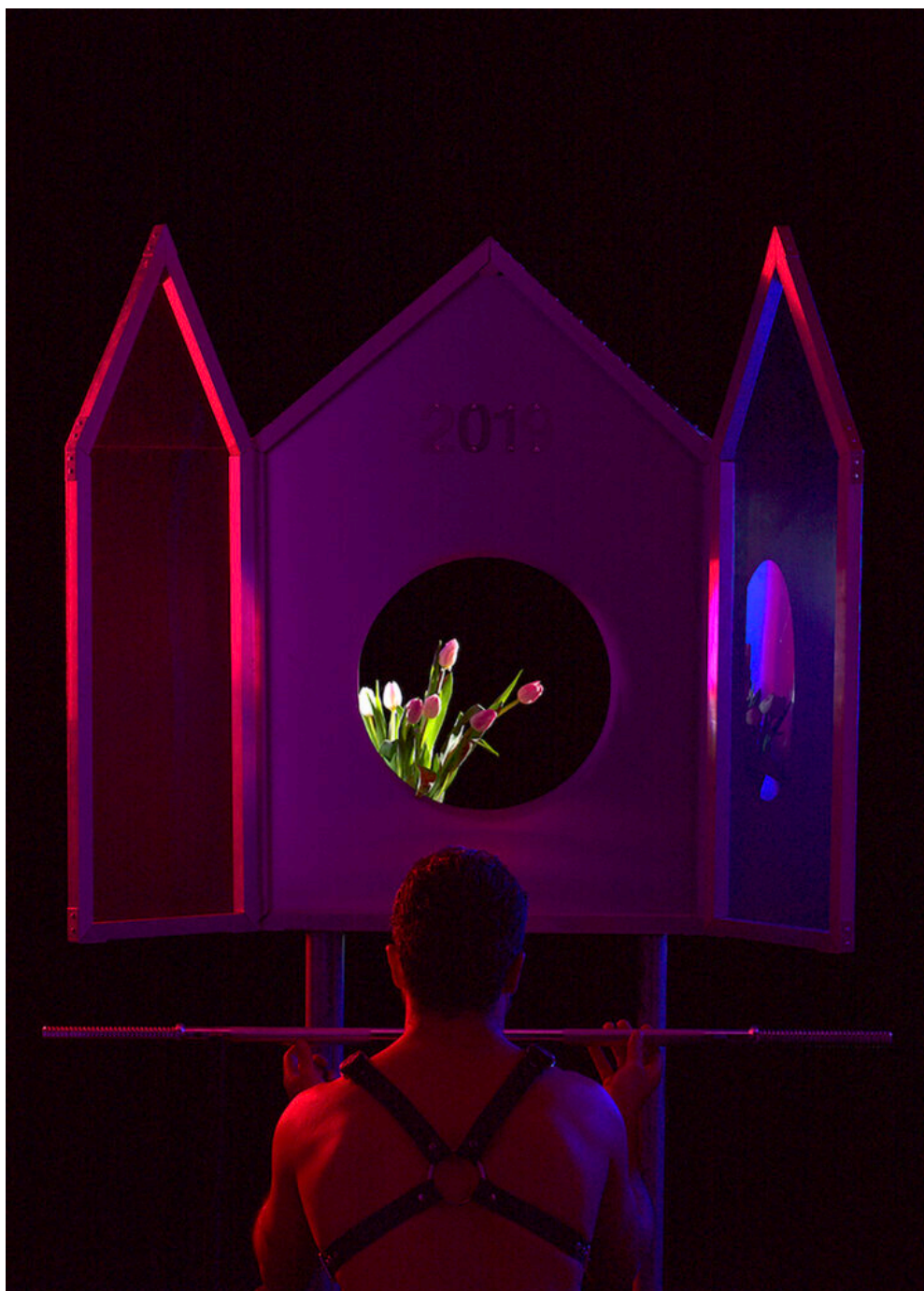


*The Queer Plinth, (2019), plaster, silicone, MDF.*

Envisaged as a monument to queer culture, it is designed to permanently occupy the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, a host to ephemeral, contemporary monuments since 1999. Responding to the multitude of LGBTQ+ nightlife closures, the monument acknowledges the importance of LGBTQ+ spaces as enclaves for gender performativity and our right to claim space within the city. Trafalgar Square is the site of the annual Pride celebrations in London, and at times of unrest, a site of civic occupation. Thus, the potential of a long-lasting monument to 'Queer culture' in the civic heart of London is extremely powerful. The form of the plinth takes its cues from ancient Greek architecture, appropriated and reworked to represent the fragility and the unstable upbringing of our ancestors. Its base bears the caption: *Non Satis Recte*,

## THEATRUM MUNDI

translated from Latin as: Not Quite Right, which was one of the first definitions of the word: queer, when it first emerged in the fifteenth century. The Queer Plinth has been used as a prop for an imaginary funeral for the Joiners Arms, the legendary LGBTQ+ pub on Hackney Road, that was forced to shut its doors in 2015. A flower wreath completes the composition, referencing the use of monuments as places to commemorate significant historical events, while at the same time drawing parallels with East End funeral traditions.



*A memorial for XXL, (2020), aluminum, chrome, MDF.*

Inspired by the typology of religious altars, A memorial for XXL is a manifestation of the gay nightclub located in Southwark, South London. XXL was a temple for London's bear and leather communities for almost two decades, before its closure in 2019.

## THEATRUM MUNDI

The terms bear and leather correspond to sub-cultures within the gay community that respond to physical characteristics or sexual preferences. Although controversial because of its strict door policy that rejected any visible signs of femininity, XXL held a special place in London's gay scene as the last remaining super club equipped with a labyrinthine dark room. The altar amplifies the spatial characteristics of XXL, private and hidden from passers-by. The focal point of the monument lies in its medial circular opening. The circle itself 'glorifies' the gloryhole, a symbol of transgressive sexuality. Alongside its symbolic representation, it enables mourners to pay their respects by placing their offerings through it. A chrome weight bar invites mourners to participate in a fitness ritual, associated with XXL's former clientele.

## THEATRUM MUNDI



*A monument to Strawberry Hill, (2020), plywood, plaster, glitter.*

This towering monument pays homage to the queer mythologies of Strawberry Hill House and its patron Horace Walpole. Horace was a queer man, writer, architect, socialite and the son of the UK's first prime minister. In 1749, he envisioned Strawberry Hill House in Twickenham - a suburban palace built in the Gothic style, at a time when Palladianism was still in fashion. Inside his secluded mansion, he created a world of his own, where he could explore his identity free from prying eyes. The Neo-Gothic of Strawberry Hill

## THEATRUM MUNDI

can be understood as a camp act of defiance against the status quo. This act of queer architectural rebellion is not any less relevant today, where we encounter the replacement of LGBTQ+ spaces with towering glass architecture. Strawberry Hill has been preserved as a cultural edifice of the past, yet stripped from its queer narrative. By queering some of Strawberry Hill's Gothic elements, the monument seeks to revive its memory as a safe space for gender ambiguity. Scaled-down casts of its facade are embellished with glitter and feathers, whereas the traditional four-pillar colonnade, found in the house's lush interior, gets a twisted makeover, representing bodies during sexual intercourse.



*A political dress, (2020), acrylic paint on silk.*



## THEATRUM MUNDI

In this piece, the body itself becomes a monument. A living, breathing monument. Positioned at the top of a ladder, it demands attention and respect. A five-metre-long silk dress is draped around the body all the way to the floor. Its purpose is to serve as a wearable protest banner inscribed with a message that is prevalent throughout my design work: 'Save London's Queer Spaces'. The message was graffitied on the dress as if protesters have added it during a demonstration. However, in this case it is not considered an act of vandalism but a call for action!

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1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/london-protests-priti-patel-churchill-statue-today-latest-a9564556.html>
  1. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urban-lab/research/research-projects/lgbtq-nightlife-spaces-london>