

Temporary Monument: A Portrait of Urban Time in Philadelphia's Public Spaces¹

1 - An early version of this photo essay appeared as a blogpost on Radical Education Department's blog. <https://radicaleducation-department.com/2018/02/26/reflections-on-time-and-monument-14-photographs-and-an-essay-ecg/>.



"What time is it?" asks artist Tyree Guyton in his mural installation at Kensington, Philadelphia. A question that asks more than what the clocks show at the present moment. As if the name of the installation, The Times –in the plural, not the singular time of the one accurate clock– asks how many times are there that order this monumental space,

how many temporalities cross-cut each other at the walls of that old Kensington factory, now being a special installation within the city-wide temporary public art and history project: Monument Lab.



Figure 2. Malcom X Park, Monument Lab location with DJ King Britt and Joshua Mays' performance in front of the park mural.¹ Photograph by the author.

1 - To learn more about DJ King Britt and Joshua Mays' performance, visit <https://philly.curbed.com/maps/philadelphia-monument-lab-public-art-locations-map>.

*Monument Lab: A Public Art and History Project*² was a temporary installation of monuments across 10 sites of Philadelphia, curated by Paul Farber and Ken Lum together with the Mural Arts Philadelphia. It centered on an overarching question: What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia? which is posed initially to 20 artists. It exhibits artists' responses in the form of temporary monuments at 10 different public sites between September 16th and November 19th, 2017. Installations accompanied

research laboratories where visitors participate through proposing their appropriate monuments for the current city of Philadelphia. I think it is fair to say that Monument Lab was a majestic collective inquiry and experimentation on the ordering of public spaces of the city with art installations and citizen participation.

2 - For more information on the project: <https://monumentlab.com/about>.



Figure 3. Thomas Paine Plaza, featuring Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People."³ Photograph by the author.

3 - More information on Hank Willis Thomas' work can be found here: <https://monumentlab.com/projects/hank-willis-thomas-all-power-to-all-people>.

The project was topical as well. It opened within the heated national debate around the politics of the monuments, primarily of the confederate monuments (Suerth 2017) in the Southern states and protests for the removal of Frank Rizzo Monument (Segarra 2017) at Philadelphia's Thomas Paine Plaza. It provided a local venue to carry out the debate on an appropriate monument in a positive form of proposing new monuments that would tell the story of Philadelphia. Monument Lab Research Director Laurie Allen's call in the project's newspaper summarizes the historical-polit-

ical starting point of the project: "Our monuments have meaning. They are the city's way of telling its story, of picking out moments in history for elevation, and for making a statement about who and what deserves to be honored and remembered. In 2017, we must recognize that the story told by our monuments is not our city's full history. Help us elevate a richer reading of our history and move creatively toward a better future (Allen 2017, p. 3).



Figure 4. Rittenhouse Square, featuring Sharon Hayes' monument "If They Should Ask"⁴ Photograph by the author.

4 - To learn more about Sharon Hayes' monument: <https://monumentlab.com/projects/sharon-hayes-if-they-should-ask>.

Some of Lab monuments, such as Sharon Hayes' "If They Should Ask" at Rittenhouse Square, marks precisely this selective historiography of the existing monuments in Philadelphia. Hayes problematizes that in the entire city there are only two monuments that are dedicated to women: French heroine Joan of Arc and Bostonian Quaker Mary Dyer. By half-scaling nine pedestals of the existing monu-

ments in Philadelphia and writing dozens of names of public women figures from the Philadelphia area on the pedestals, Hayes monumentalizes the absence of women's monuments and powerfully makes the case for the exclusion of women in the public memory.



Figure 5. Rittenhouse Square, featuring Sharon Hayes' monument "If They Should Ask" Photograph by the author.



Figure 6. Washington Square, featuring Kaitlin Pomerantz's "On the Threshold."⁵ Photograph by the author.

5 - For more details on Kaitlin Pomerantz's work, visit <https://monumentlab.com/projects/kaitlin-pomerantz-on-the-threshold-salvaged-stoops-philadelphia>.



Figure 7. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me."⁶ Photography by the author.

6 - For more information on Mel Chin's work, visit <https://monumentlab.com/projects/mel-chin-two-me>



Figure 8. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me." Photograph by the author.



Figure 9. City Hall, featuring Mel Chin's "Two Me." Photograph by the author.



Figure 10. Marconi Plaza featuring Shira Walinsky's work "Free Speech"⁷ Photograph by the author.

7 - For more information about Shira Walinsky's work: <https://monumentlab.com/projects/shira-walinsky-and-southeast-by-southeast-free-speech>.



Figure 11. Vernon Park, featuring Karyn Olivier's "The Battle Is Joined."⁸ Photograph by the author.

8 - For more information on Karyn Olivier's work, visit <https://monumentlab.com/projects/karyn-olivier-the-battle-is-joined>.



Figure 12. Franklin Square, featuring Kara Crombie's "Sample Philly."⁹ Photograph by the author.

9 - To learn more about Kara Crombie's work: <https://monumentlab.com/projects/kara-crombie-sample-philly>.



Figure 13. Penn Treaty Park, featuring Duane Linklater's "In Perpetuity."¹⁰ Photograph by the author.

10 - To learn more about Duane Linklater's work: <https://monumentlab.com/projects/duane-linklater-in-perpetuity>.



Figure 14. Logan Square featuring Emeka Ogboh's "For Logan Squared: Ode to Philly".¹¹ Photograph by the author.

11 - For more information on Emeka Ogboh's sound monument, visit <https://monumentlab.com/projects/emeka-ogboh-featuring-ursula-rucker-logan-squared-ode-to-philly>.



Figure 15. Penn Treaty Park featuring RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency).¹² Photograph by the author.

12 - To learn more about RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residency), visit <https://monumentlab.com/projects/rairrecycled-artist-in-residency-plainsight-is-2020>.

“A monument” writes Jane Golden, the executive director of Mural Arts Philadelphia, is what “commemorates something or someone, in order to uplift and keep it in public memory – an enduring symbol” (Golden 2017, p. 2). Monuments are mostly deliberate symbols engrained in the built environment of the city/town that encapsulates a particular past to carry it to the future.¹³

13 - It is important to note that there are many kinds of monuments and here I am reflecting on only the intentional ones. For instance, there are “unintentional monuments” such as a closed factory, or natural ones such as the Uluru, aka Ayers Rock at the central desert in Australia.

Most monuments are symbols of the state and commemorate the founding acts and heroes of the nation to remind whose heritage that land is loyal to. For critics such as Kim Dovey, “Public monuments often use the memory of a past use of force by the state to signify such future possibility” (Dovey 2007, p.12). Others uplift political principles such as the human rights monuments, cultural figures or commemorate past tragedies such as genocide memorials. Each monument’s commemoration of the past has a particular purpose in the present to frame future social and political relations. Monuments’ symbolic universe dictate a certain code of conduct, a way of thinking and acting in the public, and depending on the material they are made and the surrounding social-political relations, they usually do so for long durations.

William J.T. Mitchell states in his video lecture “What do Monuments Want?” (Mitchell 2016) that the desire of the monument is “to live forever, to defeat death and history.” He says that they express power and desire to immortality while at the same time; almost all of the monuments eventually succumb to the blows of history and crumble. Monuments are temporal, in both sense of the term. They are made to remain intact over time, defeat death and history, but they are also products of history and the social-political relations that erect or remove them. In that sense, the time of the monument is not less frail than human time in the *longue durée*. Nevertheless, when it is intact and granted its demand of honor, monuments’ time poses a contrast to human temporality. Our mobility and short life span stand out against the background of monuments’ claim to stability and immortality.

Lab’s exhibit of monuments, installed for a short period of time, defeats this conventional logic of monument-time from the outset. It occupies what art critic Rosalind E. Krauss calls a “negative condition of the monument” where the monument becomes nomadic by resigning its usual position of the established place and entering into a field of “sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place” (Krauss 2006, p. 35). With temporary monuments, Lab not only experiments with various monumental contents fitting for Philadelphia but also questions the temporal logic of monumentality.

The temporality of the Lab monuments, both temporary and timely, defy the oppressive elements Lefebvre detected in urban monumental spaces. In his book *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre cautions on the colonizing power of the monuments where these durable statues represent and assert the power of authorities (Lefebvre 2003, p.21). By selectively memorializing history, authorities engrave their versions of the past while ensuring their will to the future. For Lefebvre, that is what makes monuments convenient instruments of power dominating urban space. The transient nature of the Lab monuments, arguably, prevents such top-down imposition in public space. It retracts the monumental claim soon after asserting it and promises -from the outset- to leave the presently filled content empty—an emptiness in public space crucial for democratic participation.

This photography essay aimed at contemplating the difference between the time of monuments and that of human beings. Is it a contrast between the ephemeral and durable, the dynamic and stationary, alive and concrete? Against the background of Monument Lab locations in Philadelphia, this series, accompanied by a short essay, means to pursue and restate these questions. It can be considered as a visual dialogue with, or maybe rather an ocular ode to, the artists, curators, and participants of the Monument Lab. Maybe it is even a photographic attempt to immortalize the passing of multiple times at each monumental site before they migrate to their next location. Taken together, this series paints a portrait of the urban flow of time in Philadelphia’s public spaces. Each photograph in the series is taken with the same long exposure technique using an ND filter in daylight, which allows the photographic moment to be as long as 25 seconds. I am grateful to people who kindly posed for certain frames even though their faces are not recognizable.

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