

# OCTOBER

165

Leah Dickerman  
MTL Collective

*A Questionnaire on Monuments:  
49 Responses*

*Monumental Propaganda*

*From Institutional Critique to  
Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial  
Perspective on the Crises of  
Contemporary Art*

## NOAH FISCHER

The bronze public monuments built to cut through time as Shackleton's *Endurance* was built to cut through arctic ice are arriving in our present moment as anachronistic vessels. Though they might represent an outdated and even offensive worldview, they are difficult to remove from public space—even in progressive cities. This crusty stubbornness clashes with today's viral consensus production: We like, share, tweet, and post for news, public healing, and entertainment alike. All of these are forms of voting. Embedded in this constant-voting culture is the assumption that all things, people, and phenomena must eventually conform to the law of public opinion with binary options, in this case: Preserve monuments! Tear them down! What about a healing process that moves beyond the binary?

That many of the monuments are problematic is beyond debate: They commonly place racialized colonial triumph at the center of public space. They can embody power and often dominance, through both represented personages and symbols and their spatial manspreading. But when we oversimplify these intricately crafted lumps of bronze as if they were no different from an offensive logo flashing onto a screen whose pixels could simply be turned off, we miss the chance to repurpose their specific histories as artworks. We could be speaking the language of figurative sculpture and molten metal. I will offer a proposal for reshaping a particular monument, the equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH).

Roosevelt looks virile, his barrel chest puffed out as he leans back atop his horse. He's flanked by stoic and muscled Native American and African standing figures, each of whom touches one of the president's legs in a gesture of steadfast obedience. The grouping lays out a perfectly clear message. Yet as repulsive as its expression of racial hierarchy is, there's more than meets the eye in this 1939 work. Through an attempt to understand this statue and its creator, I've come to see another sculpture trapped inside it.

The statue was created in the Connecticut workshop of James Earl Fraser, a leading American sculptor of his day who was often tapped to design major monuments in the nation's capital. Fraser created two other works that will provide inspiration for our purposes: the slumped form of a defeated Indian riding a sorry-looking horse called *End of the Trail* (1918), which is one of the most iconic and frequently reproduced artworks of the American West, and the Indian-head nickel (also called the Buffalo nickel), which bears a composite portrait of Oglala Lakota chief and celebrity-circus performer Iron Tail and Cheyenne chief Two Moons (who fought at Little Bighorn). There are two important clues for us in the Buffalo nickel.<sup>1</sup> It went out of circulation in 1938, the year before bronze Roosevelt and his companions went up at the AMNH, so we might imagine the monument as a conceptual reincarnation of the coin. And the Indian-head nickel

1. <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/learn-discover/online-unit-studies/end-of-the-trail-introduction/>.

was often hacked to create the famous Hobo nickel, the hand-carved numismatic folk-art form whereby self-trained artists turned Buffalo nickels into drunken Irishmen, skulls, and other designs. It was an anarchistic collision of art and money, messing with authority by way of laborious craft. What would the bronze Roosevelt look like as a “hobo monument”?



The material we would be working with isn't just bronze. The most important element in both coin and monument is the presence of official US authority. Both coin and monument stand for the full weight of American military force, which is the same force that hunted down and defeated Native Americans. This force was part of Fraser's personal history; his father was a cavalryman active in the aftermath of Little Bighorn. That battle marked the near end of the Native “threat,” and Indian portraits graced American coins only after the US government prevailed in the late nineteenth century and the dignified Indian could be safely trophied. Coin and monument monumentalize the defeated status of a people, literally putting it into common circulation and transporting a power dynamic through time into the present day.

The present moment is marked by an overt racism reaching into the Oval Office, yet the decade prior saw a quietly progressive shift in the US canon of African American and Native American relations. In 2008, the first year of Obama's presidency, the House of Representatives issued a bill called H.R. 194, “Apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans.”

One year later, Congress tacked an apology to Native Americans into the Defense Appropriations Act of 2010 (H.R. 3326), an apology “on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native peoples by citizens of the United States” (it was signed by the president into law). Even though the apology contains disclaimers against legal damage claims (unlike the Reagan-era apologies to the Japanese interned during World War II), official apologies are more than mere formalities; they are contractual rituals that announce new behaviors from the top down. The official apologies would create a logic whereby eventually reparations could be paid. Official apologies on record cannot be taken back, but many people aren’t aware of them.<sup>2</sup> And to my knowledge, there is no official monument to the 2008–09 apologies. That is why, the more I look at the equestrian statue of Roosevelt, the more I believe that an Apology and Reparations Monument is trapped inside it. How would it look?

Figurative public sculpture tends to communicate through gesture. This is true of Roosevelt leaning back in a tense twist on the horse. This is not the posture of humility that would be appropriate if the statue were to be reconfigured to stand for the official US apologies. Instead we might remember Fraser’s *End of the Trail*. Roosevelt could be placed in a furnace and slumped over into a forward bend with head limp as if enacting a humble bow. The warped and stretched heat-induced intervention would also give the sculpture a contemporary flair. The Indian and African figures to the side could be detached and placed on a separate pedestal directly facing Roosevelt as they symbolically receive the apology. The regrouping intervention should be left in a rough state, the recycling process visible.

When the reparations begin, the figures could be given new life entirely, melted down into commemorative coins in a ceremony to mark the first round of distribution. I imagine the ceremony as a public bronze pour. A furnace would be set up outside the museum. Monument chunks would go in and liquid bronze would melt into a red-hot crucible before being poured into special tree-diagram molds using the same method as ancient Chinese coins. This proposal cannot be realized at the present moment, but one day soon it could. Public space requires vision beyond the binary. Many bronzes embody toxic messages from the past, but they should be reshaped rather than removed so that the lessons of the past—and the artistic possibilities of the future—remain intact.<sup>3</sup>

NOAH FISCHER is an artist and a founding member of Occupy Museums.

2. <http://indianlaw.org/node/529>.

3. This text complies with the stipulations proposed in the artwork *A STRUCTURAL CRISIS IN AN EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE* by Kenneth Pietrobono, according to which authors agree, for compensation, to avoid using the following words: Capitalism, Fascism, Neoliberalism, Populism, Political, Divisive, Establishment, Globalization, Nationalism, Media, Conservative, Liberal, Partisan, Country, Right, Left, Progressive, -phobic, Republican, Democrat, Democracy, Corporate, Racist, Elitism, Sexist, White, Black, Resistance.