

# WITHIN THE FABRIC OF PUBLIC SPACE

TEXTILE INTERVENTIONS IN CURRENT PROCESSES OF  
DECOLONIZING MONUMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The debate on decolonizing monuments has provoked a great deal of covering and shrouding of public sculptures. This paper looks at three examples and shows how textile interventions alter a monument's visibility and, as products of (post)colonial trade or communal handicraft, add semantic layers. Ranging from The Kudzu Project's marking of Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, VA, through the covering of the Robert Milligan statue by protesters in London, to a curated artwork by Joiri Minaya in Hamburg, the examples span both geographical regions and the recent history of the debate. The paper proposes that textile ephemerality questions concepts of history embedded in the traditional materiality of public sculptures and provides a model for imagining other practices of commemoration.

## KEYWORDS

Monuments; Iconoclasm; Textiles; Decolonization; Activism.

## I. Monumental Materiality

Two unveilings: on Juneteenth 2021, a bright blue sheet of tarpaulin was removed outside the City Hall of Newark, New Jersey [Fig. 1], while, on the same day, in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, solemn black covers came off [Fig. 2]. Both fabrics unveiled monuments to the late George Floyd, the Black man who was killed by a police officer during his arrest in May of the previous year. The first is a larger-than-life bronze statue of him sitting on a bench,<sup>1</sup> the second a huge bronze-colored bust atop a marble base.<sup>2</sup> It seems peculiar that the killing of George Floyd, the very incident that fueled the questioning and tearing down of colonial and Confederate monuments in the U.S. and – to a lesser extent – worldwide, is again creating not only new monuments but even representational images.<sup>3</sup> While the two monuments employ different techniques and materials, both refer to bronze as a traditional material for monuments and both attempt a naturalistic depiction. By choosing bronze and marble as materials, materials associated with durability, even eternity,<sup>4</sup> they continue the concept that monuments are thought to preserve a memorable image for generations to come – or even for eternity. By opting for naturalistic imagery and – in the case of the seated figure in Newark – offering direct physical contact with the monument, a central function of mimetic sculpture becomes prominent, that is, to serve as a three-dimensional substitute for a human being.<sup>5</sup> Leon Pinkney, who commissioned the latter monument, recalls that “people spoke to the statue like George Floyd was

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The statue was created pro bono by sculptor Stanley J. Watts who is known for religious and patriotic motifs, for example *To Lift a Nation*, the memorial commemorating 9/11 in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Linda Armstrong, George Floyd Statue Finds Temporary Home at Faison Firehouse Theater, in: *Amsterdam News*, June 3, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

2

Architect and artist Chris Carnabuci had created the image from layers of the rather modest material CNC-cut Baltic birch plywood, but it was coated in bronze-colored resin. He was later asked to contribute to the exhibition *seeinjustice* in Union Square at the George Washington Statue, New York, October 1–31, 2021, for which he added busts of Breonna Taylor, another victim of police violence, and of the civil rights activist John Lewis. Cf. Sarah Cascone, An Artist's Busts of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and John Lewis Go Up in New York's Union Square, in: *artnet*, October 1, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

3

Neither of the monuments was commissioned by an institution or a government entity but created on the initiative of individuals, and only later authorized by Floyd's family.

4

Cf. Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*, Münster 2019 [1994].

5

The function of sculpture as a substitute for a person who is absent or deceased is already part of the etiology of sculpture narrated by Pliny the Elder in the myth of Butades (*Natural History* 35.43.151). In addition to its application in monuments, this purpose of three-dimensional likenesses is visible in tomb reliefs, and the practice of creating death masks and effigies.

alive”.<sup>6</sup> The power ascribed to the monuments is also visible in the ways both Floyd statues have been attacked since their unveiling: the bronze in Newark was defaced and vandalized within a week of its installment as was the bust in Brooklyn. When the bust was moved to Union Square in Manhattan, it was again attacked,<sup>7</sup> and in the course of the cleaning, it was soon covered again.

The short succession of unveiling and cloaking of the Floyd bust points to the role textiles play in the monument cult (*Denkmal-kult*). They serve as ceremonial cloaks lifted during a monument’s inauguration and temporary protective sleeves or coverings for removal or transport. The unveiling of monuments marks their coming into being, that is, into the frame of public representation. When a monument is covered again [Fig. 3], textiles serve as the negation of the image: the textile coverings themselves, most of the time, do not carry an image or meaning, but the act of unveiling/veiling marks the monument as being inaugurated or “not on view”. This is even more striking when – as was the case with the Floyd monuments – a naturalistic image is disfigured by textile folds. Veiling generates abstraction: mostly mimetic, figurative sculptures become material entities. Artist Elizabeth Price commented on this with *Renderer for an Unspecified Statue* (2022), a silk-satin patchwork shroud.<sup>8</sup> When veiled, the monument enters a kind of limbo. Currently, this limbo is often extended for a longer period: the coverings, wrappings, veilings, and shroudings mark monuments as being under debate, on probation, still erect but simultaneously in flux.

Historically, textile forms used in public spaces, such as tapestries, flags and banners, or canopies are – not unlike monuments – related to the representation of power, but they mostly serve as *temporary* additions to stone, metal, concrete, and glass. The contrast between the fixed monumental object and the ephemeral veiling of statues echoes that of architecture and textiles as described by Anni Albers in her well-known essay: “If the nature of architecture [monuments, statues] is the grounded, the fixed, the permanent, then textiles are its very antithesis.”<sup>9</sup> She describes the reversible potential of the two-dimensional textile to take on temporary forms as its “nomadic nature”; this is also visible in temporary wrappings or additions to monuments. When monuments

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He uses similar words to describe George Floyd’s brother Terrence Floyd’s encounter with the statue: “After seeing the statue he felt as if he was with his brother again. He said the fingers of the statue resembled George Floyd’s.” Armstrong, George Floyd Statue.

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Mark Morales and Lila Watts, NYPD Investigating Vandalism of the George Floyd Statue in Brooklyn as a Hate Crime, in: *CNN US*, June 25, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

8

For Price’s work, see Dan Hicks, Can We Imagine Public Art Beyond “Toxic Monumentality”?, in: *Artreview*, January 28, 2022 (September 9, 2024).

9

Anni Albers, The Pliable Plane. Textiles in Architecture, in: *Perspecta* 4, 1957, 36–41, here 36.





[Fig. 1]  
Screenshot from PIX11 News, George Floyd statue by Stanley J. Watts unveiled in Newark,  
[Youtube](#), June 17, 2021 (September 22, 2024), 00:00.



[Fig. 2]  
Screenshot from WION, George Floyd statue by Chris Carnabuci unveiled in Brooklyn,  
[Youtube](#), June 20, 2021 (September 22, 2024), 00:39.



[Fig. 3]

Chris Carnabuci, *Bust of Georg Floyd*, 2021, wood, height 1.8 m, vandalized, Brooklyn, New York © Meghan Heintz.

are veiled, the degree of recognition of what is hidden also plays a role.<sup>10</sup>

While some politically motivated coverings have occurred using whatever textiles were at hand, sometimes the textile covers themselves bear meaning. A prominent historical example is the covering of the head of a Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad with a U.S. flag to indicate victory and its tearing down [Fig. 4], which the Americans would carry out shortly thereafter. More recently, the bust of Leopold II in Ghent was covered [Fig. 5]: Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists wrapped its head in a white fabric drenched in red paint and inscribed with Floyd's final words: "I can't breathe."<sup>11</sup> Here, while the words point to the death of Floyd, the red paint refers to protest, and also signifies the blood on the hands of the Belgian colonizers who were led by King Leopold. In this way, a current protest against racism is reconnected to its historical origins in colonialism and slavery.

The number of examples of textile interventions within the current debate has led us to ask how the ephemeral qualities of textiles serve as a prominent model for the critique of monuments: how are key qualities of textiles, such as flexibility and transitional temporality, employed to intervene in monuments; to hide, distort, and reconfigure well-known figures in public spaces? How do trans-cultural histories and handicraft modes of production enmeshed in fabrics create temporary layers of meanings in an ongoing "controversy of remembering and forgetting"?<sup>12</sup> According to Henri Lefebvre, "monuments constitute the strong points, nexuses or anchors"<sup>13</sup> within the *texture* of space. *Texture* here refers to the fabric mediating between structural properties of space and the practices that produce and reproduce space. As we will see in these interventions, textiles also texture the texture of space.<sup>14</sup>

Before tracing these questions, to further contextualize the following analyses, we will look at two aspects of the monument debate, the cycle of *de/constructing (contested) images* and *the additive and subtractive strategies* involved in dealing with contested

<sup>10</sup>

Cf. Britta Szidzik, *Verhüllung als Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert*, Dissertation, University of Göttingen, 2015, chap. 3.

<sup>11</sup>

"I can't breathe" has, in fact, already been used by civil rights protestors and the Black Lives Matter movement since the death of Eric Garner in 2014. They were his last words when he was suffocated by a police officer employing a forbidden stranglehold. See Henry Kaap, «I can't breathe!» Polizeigewalt und anti-rassistischer Protest in den USA, in: *kritische berichte* 1, 2016, 86–95.

<sup>12</sup>

Thomas Macho, Die Bedeutung von Denkmaldebatten, in: *Deutscher Kulturtrat*, September 2, 2020 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>13</sup>

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford/Cambridge 1991 [1974], 221.

<sup>14</sup>

"When formal elements become part of a texture, they diversify, introducing both repetition and difference." *Ibid.*, 150.





[Fig. 4]

Jerome Delay, Cpl. Edward Chin of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines Regiment, covers the face of a statue of Saddam Hussein with an American flag before toppling the statue, Firdos Square, Baghdad, Iraq, on April 9, 2003 © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS, Jerome Delay.



[Fig. 5]  
The attacked bust of Leopold II in Ghent, 2020 © Wannes Nimmegeers.

monuments. The three case studies – while being situated in different regions and carried out in different modes – outline the field of textile interventions in the process of decolonizing monuments. They stretch from planned interventions on Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, VA, to the spontaneous veiling of a statue in the London Docklands, to a piece carried out by a Dominican-American artist in Hamburg, Germany, as part of a curated exhibition in public space. This selection not only reveals the globality of the current monument debate and occurrences of textile interventions, but also traces its most recent history starting from the incidents in Charlottesville in 2017, continuing with a veiling at the height of the BLM protests, and ending with an example in the realm of contemporary art.

## II. De/constructing (Contested) Images

The case of the already troubled short lives of the George Floyd monuments also illustrates the circular movement of monument cult and iconoclastic gestures: monuments are being erected while others are torn down, these new monuments are again contested and become targets. Smaller-scale cases of *damnatio memoriae* have occurred since antiquity: effigies, busts, inscriptions, and written names, such as those in annals, have been removed or erased to prevent commemoration. And the rise and fall of political regimes have always gone hand in hand with the erection and destruction of monuments – this cycle is a historical continuum. The mentioned actions often point to the core of fundamental societal conflicts (*soziale Grundkonflikte*<sup>15</sup>). The case of George Floyd highlights this.<sup>16</sup> When Floyd was killed in May 2020, two months of the COVID-19 pandemic had already served as a lens through which ongoing racial inequalities and injustices in the U.S. became dramatically clear: not only were African Americans more greatly affected by the virus for a variety of reasons,<sup>17</sup> but they were also more severely hit by the societal consequences of the lock-down, such as unemployment and poverty. George Floyd's death not only created new monuments but first and foremost fueled an ongoing debate about monuments underway since the aftermath of the Charleston church shooting in

<sup>15</sup>

Horst Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte. Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution*, Frankfurt a. M. 1975, 12.

<sup>16</sup>

In 2020 Caesar Alimsinya Atuire discussed the BLM protests after George Floyd's death as a *kairos* moment for the monument debate in this journal: id., Black Lives Matter and the Removal of Racist Statues. Perspectives of an African, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual – Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte und visuellen Kultur* 2, 2020, 449–467.

<sup>17</sup>

Maritza Vasquez Reyes, The Disproportional Impact of COVID-19 on African Americans, in: *Health and Human Rights Journal* 22/2, December 2020, 299–307.

June 2015.<sup>18</sup> Also worthy of note is that the Rhodes Must Fall movement had already begun at the University of Cape Town in March 2015, leading to the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes in April of that year and sparking a debate on the decolonizing of monuments and educational institutions across South Africa. The debate made clear that especially the cities of the global North are “inhabited” by a variety of statues that represent only certain social groups and classes and have a violent impact on others. It is not surprising that these monuments thus provoke counter-violence, attacks, or at least public criticism.<sup>19</sup>

Within our discipline these developments can be looked at under the term iconoclasm. Until the late 1960s, art historical research only rarely dealt with the *destruction* of images.<sup>20</sup> The early research on iconoclasm in Germany, for example by Martin Warnke and Horst Bredekamp,<sup>21</sup> is anchored in the general politicization of the discipline in the 1960s. The ontological question of what an image *is* became directly linked to why images have such strong power,<sup>22</sup> and it seemed more and more important to inquire into the downside of power, that is, when images provoke opposition, antipathy, or fear – and finally – violent acts of destruction. The term iconoclasm is not always applicable as it produces a dichotomy between “making and breaking”<sup>23</sup> and does not integrate the ambivalent, interstitial transformative processes.<sup>24</sup> Other terms were coined recently: the term posticonoclasm has been proposed as a cultural-theoretical post-concept, like postcolonialism, not only focusing on the aftermath of an iconoclasm, but alluding to the con-

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The Charleston church shooting served as a major catalyst in the discussion of Confederate memorabilia and monuments, because the perpetrator, Dylann Roof, had posted photos of the Confederate battle flag on his website.

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Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte*, 12–13.

20

David Freedberg, *Iconoclasm*, Chicago/London 2021, xiii. Research in this field has often focused on religiously motivated and historical forms of iconoclasm, but more and more contemporary iconoclasm are accounted for, cf. *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (exh. cat. Karlsruhe, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien) ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Cambridge, MA 2002; Uwe Fleckner, Maïke Steinkamp, and Hendrik Ziegler (eds.), *Der Sturm der Bilder. Zerstörte und zerstörende Kunst von der Antike bis in die Gegenwart*, Berlin 2011.

21

Martin Warnke (ed.), *Bildersturm. Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks*, Munich 1973; Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte*.

22

Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990.

23

Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, New Haven, CT 1997, 28–29.

24

Richard Wrigley, *Breaking the Code. Interpreting French Revolutionary Iconoclasm*, in: Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest (eds.), *Reflections of Revolution. Images of Romanticism*, London 1993, 182–195; Richard Clay, *Re-Making French Revolutionary Iconoclasm*, in: *Perspective. Actualité en histoire de l'art* 1, 2012, 181–186.



tinuation of effects of iconoclastic acts.<sup>25</sup> A more general approach offers the term “visual scepticism”.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, already in 1973, Martin Warnke remarked that the preconditions that had made iconoclasm a legitimate form of articulation for millennia had become obsolete in his day, because contemporary states and societies no longer fall back on visual practices of representation, which is what made iconoclasm possible in the first place.<sup>27</sup> As he states, a society based on idolatry seems to be “an anachronism”.<sup>28</sup> The latest removals and attacks, however, suggest that the status quo Warnke cited in the 1970s is no longer valid. In light of the current decolonization process, the continuation of these “visual practices of representation” become evident in many instances. They are perpetuated by the visibility of monuments honoring historical figures with their likenesses in public, but also by creating new “heroes” while the representations of old heroes are defaced or taken off their pedestals. A cursory overview of the recent monument debate shows what the case of the Floyd statues already suggests, that the iconoclastic cycle of destruction and construction deemed invalid by Warnke remains – or is again – underway. However, its modes vary greatly, as the overview in the next section will show.

### III. Dealing with Contested Monuments. Subtractive and Additive Strategies

In dealing with contested monuments some propose what we call “additive” strategies, that is, the monument in question should stay in place but with the addition of (more) educational context.<sup>29</sup> Another additive strategy that has become popular recently is to leave monuments of Confederate soldiers, colonizers, and slave traders in place, but erect new statues honoring women or BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).<sup>30</sup> Although this raises the

<sup>25</sup>

See Birgit Mersmann, Posticonoclasm. Image Controversies over Virtual and Physical Reconstructions of Destroyed Cultural Heritage, in: ead., Christiane Kruse and Arnold Bartetzky (eds.), *Image Controversies. Contemporary Iconoclasm in Art, Media, and Cultural Heritage*, Berlin/Boston 2024, 181–199.

<sup>26</sup>

See Margit Kern’s research project *Visual Scepticism. Towards an Aesthetic of Doubt* and her forthcoming book *Visuelle Skepsis. Wie Bilder zweifeln*, Berlin 2025.

<sup>27</sup>

Warnke, *Bildersturm*, 9.

<sup>28</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>

Cf. Katie McClymont, The Fall of Statues? Contested Heritage, Public Space and Urban Planning. An Introduction, in: *Planning Theory & Practice*, May 22, 2021, 767–795.

<sup>30</sup>

Striking examples are probably the 2013 placement of a monument of Rosa Parks in the United States Capitol’s National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C.; the addition of a like-

difficult question of *which* monuments should be added to “even out” the current situation, the strategy is championed by a surprisingly diverse group of people, from feminist writer Rebecca Solnit to historians of the American Civil War, such as D. Scott Hartwig.<sup>31</sup> The strategy is no less complicated than former strategies of subverting conventional modes of commemoration with so-called counter-monuments,<sup>32</sup> as is the strategy of adding an educational framework – discussed in the United Kingdom as “retain and explain policy”.<sup>33</sup> Who provides the framework and how? The sheer number of recent projects inviting artists to develop and propose interventions on contested monuments suggests that temporary alterations and additions are more popular options than the placement of a permanent, additional plaque.<sup>34</sup>

What we call “subtractive” strategies are those proposing the removal of the contested monument, partial demolition,<sup>35</sup> and so-called “de-plinthng”.<sup>36</sup> However, the mode of dismantling can vary; for example, it can be based on a democratic decision and carried out by government representatives – as has often been the case

ness of Black tennis player Arthur Ashe to Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, in 2015; and the Women’s Rights Pioneers Monument installed in Central Park in 2020. Here, Sojourner Truth was later added to the duo of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, after the responsible initiative, *Monumental Women*, received sharp criticism for only showing white women.

31

Rebecca Solnit, *Across America, Racist and Sexist Monuments Give Way to a New Future*, in: *The Guardian*, January 2, 2019 (September 9, 2024); one statement proposes Charlottesville should “preserve the statue, add panels discussing its history, rename the park, and commission a memorial to the more than 250 men born in Albemarle County who served in United States Colored Troops units”. Gary W. Gallagher, *Empty Pedestals. What Should Be Done with Civic Monuments to the Confederacy and Its Leaders?*, in: *Civil War Times Magazine*, July 18, 2017 (September 9, 2024).

32

Especially in Germany, counter-monuments or counter memorials emerged in the 1980s to disrupt dominant narratives and challenge the viewer’s perspective through an anti-heroic style, countering the monumental aesthetic used by the Nazis. Corinna Tomberger, *The Counter-Monument. Memory Shaped by Male Post-War Legacies*, in: Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (eds.), *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, Basingstoke 2010, 224–232. This was also mirrored in the arts, e.g. by Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Non-uments to counter grandeur and glorification*. Peter Muir, *Gordon Matta-Clark’s Conical Intersect. Sculpture, Space, and the Cultural Value of Urban Imagery*, Farnham, Surrey 2014.

33

McClymont, *Fall of Statues*, 768.

34

In Hamburg – to name but one example – several initiatives were founded (*Decolonize Bismarck*, *Intervention Bismarckdenkmal Hamburg*, *Bismarck’s Critical Neighbours*) to newly contextualize the local Bismarck Monument. Four workshops especially invited artists to propose temporary and permanent solutions. Cf. Behörde für Kultur und Medien, *Bismarck neu kontextualisieren* (September 9, 2024).

35

An example of a partial demolition is the “decapitation” of a statue of Christopher Columbus in Boston in June 2020. See Kelly Grovier, *Black Lives Matter Protests. Why Are Statues so Powerful?*, in: *BBC*, June 12, 2020 (September 9, 2024); another is the “unhorsing” of the statue of a British soldier in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, see Simon Tomlinson, *Memorials to British Colonials Attacked Across South Africa as Protesters Demand Statues Honouring ‘Racist’ Figures from its Past Are Removed*, in: *Daily Mail Online*, November 29, 2022 (September 9, 2024).

36

McClymont, *Fall of Statues*, 768.

since 2015.<sup>37</sup> In other cases, protesters topple statues without permission.<sup>38</sup> And there is a third option, namely, destruction by force of the people, controlled by the government. “On a scheduled day,” proposes Megan Kate Nelson, “a city government or university administration would invite citizens to approach a Confederate memorial, take up a cudgel, and swing away.”<sup>39</sup> As a group effort, the destruction would be “a way for an entire community to convert a symbol of racism and white supremacy into a symbol of resistance against oppression”.<sup>40</sup> The symbol would persist in the form of the “broken pieces left in situ”.<sup>41</sup>

This example points to further questions related to subtractive strategies: first, should plinths also be removed, or should they remain? The empty plinth, like the remnants of a destroyed monument, could serve as a new or transformed monument pointing to the former occupant. Second, what should happen with the removed statues? Here, many practices are known: removed statues have ended up in museums and in private collections, in parks and gardens.<sup>42</sup> A number of authors demand designated areas for the removed monuments following the example of former Soviet countries, which gathered the insignia of the former regime in the Fallen Monument Park in Moscow, the Memento Park in Budapest, and the Grutas Park in Lithuania.<sup>43</sup> The question of the empty plinths leads to a combination of subtractive and additive strategies, namely, substitution: for example, Mexico City announced in September 2021 that they would be placing a replica of *The Young Woman of Amajac*, a pre-Hispanic sculpture of an indigenous

<sup>37</sup>

An extensive list is provided by Wikipedia, see [Removal of Confederate Monuments and Memorials](#), February 17, 2023 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>38</sup>

A widely circulated example is the defacing and toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol on June 7, 2020.

<sup>39</sup>

Megan Kate Nelson, quoted in Empty Pedestals. In a similar way, the late historian Tyler Stovall compared a video of a crowd smashing a monument to Confederate soldiers in Durham, North Carolina, to “how the slaves gained their freedom: not through reasoned debate, but by the sword”. Id., *Irena’s Lamp*, in: [Perspectives on History](#), December 1, 2017 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>40</sup>

Nelson, Empty Pedestals.

<sup>41</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>

An example are the monuments honoring the colonial protection troops in Hamburg, which were brought to the so-called Tanzania Park, open to the public only on request. Project [afrika-hamburg.de](#), Tansaniapark, May 1, 2005 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>43</sup>

Radley Balko, We Should Treat Confederate Monuments the Way Moscow and Budapest Have Treated Communist Statues, in: [The Washington Post](#), June 26, 2017 (September 9, 2024).

woman, on a neoclassical plinth from which a statue of Columbus had been removed.<sup>44</sup>

While all these arguments are more or less situated within the cyclic order of iconoclasm, some radical subtractive arguments show that Warnke's prognosis of an end to this cycle was also partially correct. British sociologist Gary Younge explained "[w]hy every single statue should come down",<sup>45</sup> tackling the widespread claim that tearing down statues would lead to misunderstanding, disrespecting, or even altering history.<sup>46</sup> By provocatively adding "[f]rom Cecil Rhodes to Rosa Parks, let's get rid of them all", he takes Rosa Parks as a case in point to show how recently popular statues of women and BIPOC honor a single historical figure and therefore distort history to a narration of Great Men – or Women. He also questions the objectivity of the historical narratives embodied in monuments by pointing out that Confederate monuments were constructed mainly in the Jim Crow era,<sup>47</sup> and did not represent a public consensus at that time. He concludes that monuments contribute to a concept of history that "attempts to set our understanding of what has happened in stone", pointing out how this contradicts a view of history as "a living discipline" continuously changing and developing.<sup>48</sup> Younge's choice of words highlights the relation of the concepts of history embodied in monuments to the materials employed. He continues, the "statue obsession" would "*petrify* historical discourse, *lather it in cement*, hoist it high and insist on it as a *permanent* statement of fact, culture, truth and tradition that can never be questioned, touched, removed or *recast*".<sup>49</sup> The following examples will show how, by way of their materiality, textile interventions question these concepts.

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Johnny Diaz, Mexico City to Replace Columbus Statue with Indigenous Woman Monument, in: *The New York Times*, September 7, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

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Gary Younge, Why Every Single Statue Should Come Down, in: *The Guardian*, June 1, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

46

In several well-known tweets posted in the week after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, then-president Donald J. Trump equated monuments with "history".

47

Jim Crow is the name of a fictional black stereotypical figure – a so-called "blackface" performed by a white comedian – that also refers to the racial segregation laws of the American South, in place in the decades between the abolition of slavery in the U.S. and the official end of racial segregation through the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964. Cf. David Brown, *Race in the American South. From Slavery to Civil Rights*, Edinburgh 2022.

48

Younge, Why Every Single Statue.

49

Ibid. (emphasis added).

## IV. Meshing Southern Myths. The Kudzu Project in Charlottesville

The demand to remove Confederate monuments in the U.S. seems very recent due to the traction gained after the killing of George Floyd. Indeed, more than 200 monuments have been removed since then.<sup>50</sup> However, already in 2015 – in reaction to the Charleston church shooting – cities, including Charlottesville, Virginia, debated ways of dealing with Confederate heritage. Charlottesville appointed a special commission for the proposed removal of the equestrian statues of General Robert E. Lee from a public park and Confederate General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson from Court Square.<sup>51</sup> When early in 2017 the city council voted for their removal, a temporary injunction ensued, followed by rallies organized by neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. This culminated in the so-called Unite the Right rally, a gathering of far-right groups in Charlottesville on August 11 and 12, 2017, during which a man deliberately drove his car into the crowd, injuring thirty-five people and killing counter-protester Heather Heyer. In the aftermath of the attack, both statues were shrouded with black tarpaulin [Fig. 6]. The shrouding of the very monuments whose proposed removal triggered violent protests and the death of a person seems tantamount to forcibly dressing them for mourning. The Confederate heroes are denied visibility through the veiling and at the same time gain visibility as the black tarpaulin introduces difference to the familiar texture of park and square.<sup>52</sup>

In this context, The Kudzu Project, a group of knitters from Charlottesville, began their work, orchestrating the first intervention on the statue of a Confederate soldier in front of the Albemarle County Courthouse. The placement of Confederate monuments in front of courthouses exemplifies how statues, even if they might often be overlooked, are performatively “active” insofar as they constitute their own reality (the representation of a political power, a state, etc.). With Lefebvre’s words, one could say, spatial textures anchored by monuments imply “a meaning [...] for someone who lives and acts in the space under consideration, a ‘subject’ with a body”.<sup>53</sup> In this case, they continue to represent a former regime that enslaved Black people. Since the beginning of the monument

<sup>50</sup>

Very few monuments were removed before the 2010s. See [Removal of Confederate Monuments and Memorials](#) (September 9, 2024).

<sup>51</sup>

Until surrendering in 1865 Lee led the main military force of the South, the Army of Northern Virginia, and served as General in Chief of the Confederate States Army; Jackson is regarded as the second most important general after Lee.

<sup>52</sup>

Here Robert Musil’s often quoted claim that “there is nothing more invisible than a monument” is inverted. Id., *Monuments*, in: *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. by Peter Wortsman, New York 2006, 64–68, here 64.

<sup>53</sup>

Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 132.





[Fig. 6]  
Henry Shradly, completed by Leo Lentelli, The Robert E. Lee statue, 1924, bronze,  
7.9 × 3.7 × 2.4 m, covered in black tarpaulin, 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia © Agnostic-  
PreachersKid, [Creative Commons](#) (October 1, 2024).

debate, many Black people have shared how these strategically placed materializations “are physical reminders” of how they “do not belong and should not anticipate equity”.<sup>54</sup>

The soldier was covered with a knitted net of kudzu by the project: vines, leaves, and branches knitted from various shades of green wool, leaving only the rifle visible [Fig. 7].<sup>55</sup> The name *kudzu* is derived from that of a family of frugal plants similar to ivy, which can grow on barren soil, cover large surfaces, and climb as high as 30 meters.<sup>56</sup> The project was inspired by another example of questioning Confederate monuments by way of the plant: artist Dave Loewenstein’s image *Defunct Monument I – Racism* shows a pale photograph of the Jefferson Davis Monument in New Orleans covered in curled felt-tip-pen lines in two shades of green, depicting kudzu vines [Fig. 8].<sup>57</sup> Its format and framing with rounded edges suggest that of an old postcard, thereby alluding to the role postcards of monuments have played in practices of commemoration.<sup>58</sup> The actions of The Kudzu Project also circulate in the form of images: although the first veiling with kudzu was immediately discovered, removed, and discarded,<sup>59</sup> the November 9 incident was broadcast on TV and also lives on in photographs via the project’s homepage and social media. The removal must have been as hasty as the draping, as a single strand of kudzu vine was left draped over the soldier’s rifle.<sup>60</sup> This accidental leaving of a single tendril has served as a blueprint for the group’s subsequent interventions: they temporarily shroud Confederate monuments with knitted kudzu, take a picture, and leave behind a lone strand of kudzu together with

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Michael Dickinson, *Black Realities and White Statues. The Fall of Confederate Monuments*, in: African American Intellectual History Society (ed.), *Black Perspectives*, June 18, 2020 (September 9, 2024). Poet Caroline Randall Williams has pointed out how her body and those of many descendants of slaves are the genetic results of slaveholders raping Black women. Ead., *You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument*, in: *The New York Times*, June 26, 2020 (October 17, 2023).

55

Cf. *The Kudzu Project* (September 9, 2024). The statue was erected in 1909 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The date of The Kudzu Project’s first activist intervention was the first day of the trial of white supremacist Christopher Cantwell, who was convicted for assaults committed during the Unite the Right rally.

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In a similar fashion, Berlin artist Dior Thiam suggested the project *Let them grow* – a planted veil of growing ivy vines – for the Bismarck Monument in Hamburg.

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Cf. The Kudzu Project. The Jefferson Davis monument was one of the first to be removed after the Charleston church shooting, namely on May 10, 2017.

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See Sara Amy Leach, *Patriotic Postcards Sent with Memorial Day Greetings*, in: *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, May 27, 2022 (September 9, 2024).

59

The founder of The Kudzu Project in conversation with the authors, October 11, 2021.

60

Members of the project were able to retrieve the knitted ensemble, but to date, the project has never been installed atop a monument for a longer period of time.



[Fig. 7]  
*At Ready*, Statue of a confederate soldier in front of Albemarle County Courthouse (1909, bronze), covered with knitted kudzu, *The Kudzu Project*, 2017 © Tom Cogill.





[Fig. 8]

Dave Loewenstein, *Defunct Monument I - Racism*, 2016, inch print on archival paper,  
33 × 48 cm © Courtesy of the artist.

a few paragraphs about the project and the history of the monument in question.<sup>61</sup>

By showing a well-known monument covered in leaves or marking it with a single vine of kudzu the project raises the question of how to deal with contested monuments without taking them down. How can deconstruction occur without destruction or dismantling? The project itself offers answers: if monuments cannot be dismantled, “[p]lant kudzu around them and allow it to grow over and eventually obscure them”.<sup>62</sup> The proposal to “just not care”, to not tend to Confederate monuments but let them slowly be grown over by weeds and grass has been stated a few times since: journalist Graeme Wood suggested this for the Robert E. Lee equestrian statue in Richmond, citing the example of post-war Germany’s (non)treatment of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg.<sup>63</sup> The act of covering with knitted kudzu is even quicker than the growth of this fast-growing vine, which engulfs anything that is not constantly tended. The project’s ephemeral, nocturnal action declares the statue of the soldier a thing of the past for a few moments as captured in the documentary photos; something no longer taken care of, overgrown by kudzu. This suggestion – even as an interim solution before taking down the monuments – could also be seen as letting grass (kudzu) grow over the past. The project’s founder is very critical of this aspect. Like ruins covered in ivy, those covered in kudzu “elicit romantic notions about the past”, she says, drawing a connection to the romanticized ideology of the “Lost Cause”, which “claimed that noble Confederate generals and soldiers fought the Civil War to protect states’ rights rather than the institution of slavery”.<sup>64</sup>

It is worthwhile to focus on the materiality of the action: the material depicted, the kudzu plant, and the material used, wool structures knitted by a group of anonymous individuals. The choice of the plant is relevant for several reasons: kudzu (*Pueraria montana*) is a non-native, invasive plant. Arriving in the southeast of the U.S. in the late nineteenth century from Japan, it quickly spread, also because it was marketed as an ornamental plant for pergolas, as cattle fodder, and as a cover plant to prevent further soil erosion in the Southern states. For these uses it is highly suitable since it reproduces asexually without pollination, can root wherever a stem finds soil, and is parasitic, decreasing or suffocating the plants it grows

<sup>61</sup>

The founder of The Kudzu Project in conversation with the authors, October 11, 2021. In the winter of 2017–18, the project draped knitted vines over the Robert E. Lee High School sign in Staunton, the Confederate soldier statues outside the Nelson County and Albemarle courthouses, and the obelisk outside the Augusta County Courthouse.

<sup>62</sup>

Cf. The Kudzu Project.

<sup>63</sup>

Graeme Wood, A Solution to the Confederate-Monument Problem, in: *The Atlantic*, June 8, 2020 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>64</sup>

The Kudzu Project, *Toppling Monuments notes*, internal document shown to the authors.

on top of. However, kudzu is itself a transcultural product of global trade, and its spread is linked to the history of slavery in two ways. First, the plant – as slaves – was “imported”. Second, the erosion of soil that kudzu was meant to remedy had been caused by the massive cultivation of cotton.<sup>65</sup> The plant now predominantly grows in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, North and South Carolina, and Mississippi.<sup>66</sup> So, kudzu is a floral remnant of slavery. Thus, the artificial vines of The Kudzu Project have a triple function: they materialize a historical distance marking the statues as things of the past. By providing a romanticization of their own, they point to the romanticized ideology already encapsulated in the monuments, most of which were not erected directly after the Civil War, but in the Jim Crow era or even in the 1950s and 1960s, counteracting the developments of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>67</sup> Taking into account the history of the spread of kudzu, it is also a visualization of the impact that the slave-based economy had on the ecosystem.

The production of the kudzu vines must also be considered: the project started with a call to action by a knitter from Charlottesville stating her cause and providing knitting instructions. The fact that systematic textiles can be transferred into – and transmitted via – code is highly convenient here.<sup>68</sup> Information was disseminated via personal networks – not via social media, since confidentiality was paramount as the conflict in Charlottesville had already become violent. While The Kudzu Project itself speaks of “guerilla knitting”,<sup>69</sup> more broadly, the project can be subsumed under the term craftivism.<sup>70</sup> Its definition reveals a view of activism as related to an anonymous mass – such as a protest march – and blends it with

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The installations by the artist Precious Okoyomon, for example, employ kudzu because of its role as a (failed) solution to the ecological strain caused by excessive cotton cultivation. Cf. *Precious Okoyomon. Earthseed* (August 22, 2020–November 1, 2020), Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK), Frankfurt a. M. (September 9, 2024).

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It has therefore also been called “the vine that ate the south”. The Kudzu Project, Toppling Monuments notes. For a nuanced history of the plant and its relation to the South, see Bill Finch, The True Story of Kudzu, in: *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 1, 2015 (September 9, 2024).

67

Cf. Ryan Best, Confederate Statues Were Never Really about Preserving History, in: *FiveThirtyEight*, July 8, 2020 (September 9, 2024). However, more than thirty Confederate monuments were erected in the past twenty years, cf. Gesine Krüger, Denkmalsturz, in: *geschichte der gegenwart*, June 21, 2020 (September 9, 2024).

68

See Weaving Codes, Coding Weaves, in: *Textile Cloth and Culture* 2/2, 2017; for the history of the distribution of knitting instructions, see Lisbeth Freiß, Die Handarbeitsanleitung als Strategie zur weiblichen Produktion. Eine historische Studie bürgerlicher Frauenjournale des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: Critical Crafting Circle (ed.), *Craftista! DIY Aktivismus, Feminismus und Neue Häuslichkeit*, Mainz 2011, 29–42.

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Cf. The Kudzu Project.

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“Craftivism”, a blend of “craft” and “activism”, was coined by Betsy Greer in 2003. Ead., Craftivist History, in: Maria Elena Buszek (ed.), *Extra/Ordinary. Craft and Contemporary Art*, Durham, NC/London 2011, 175–183.

the proposed promise of craft as a personal gesture and rewarding pastime. An underlying aspect of craftivism is surely the soothing quality of crafting by hand, offering something to do in times of conflict to counteract the feeling of powerlessness.<sup>71</sup> In the case of The Kudzu Project, the domestic and peaceful quality of knitting served as a possibility to “take action” when the public debate had become violent and dangerous. The participants could literally partake in the activism from their sofas. Moreover, the clandestine, collective knitting served as a tool for intergenerational and communal communication, albeit mostly among women, thereby continuing the gendered history of handicrafts: as the initiators describe, since knitting expertise was found in older women of the local community, the task to knit kudzu also enabled a discussion about why the monuments that had been acceptable for so long should now be removed.<sup>72</sup> Thus, knitting kudzu collectively served as a vehicle to discuss contested heritage, and also to teach about the myth of the Lost Cause.<sup>73</sup>

## V. Layers of Colonial Trade. Covering Robert Milligan in London

While the ephemeral action in Charlottesville was taken note of mostly within the region and the U.S.,<sup>74</sup> other images of interventions on monuments have been spread through social media outlets, as was one of a textile veiling of a public sculpture at the West India Quay of the London Docklands. The photograph shows the bronze statue of Robert Milligan (1746–1809) with the head and chest covered by a patterned fabric, while around the figure’s neck and in front of the pedestal are two pieces of cardboard with the words “Black Lives Matter” painted on them [Fig. 9].<sup>75</sup> The image was presumably taken on June 9, 2020, the same day the monument

<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the project can be related to a tradition of wartime knitting in the U.S. Anne MacDonald has shown that women continued to knit in wartime, although it no longer contributed materially to the war effort due to faster industrial textile production. Ead., *No Idle Hands. The Social History of American Knitting*, Boston 1988, here 295.

<sup>72</sup>

Cf. Erin O’Hare, *Locals Craft Their Own Brand of Activism*, in: *c-ville*, January 17, 2018 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>73</sup>

The Confederate statues of Lee and Jackson in Charlottesville were removed in 2021. While the fate of the latter is unclear, the Robert E. Lee monument will be melted down and the material repurposed for a new monument for the same park. Its content and form is to be defined in public discussions, cf. Jasmine Liu, *Charlottesville’s Robert E. Lee Monument Will Be Melted Down and Turned Into a New Artwork*, in: *Hyperallergic*, 2021 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>74</sup>

This intervention and one at Staunton’s Robert E. Lee High School were covered by local TV, cf. *The Lone Strand*, in: *The Kudzu Project*, December 13, 2017 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>75</sup>

We have briefly mentioned the case of the shrouding of the Robert Milligan statue in a previous publication: Leena Crasemann and Anne Röhl, *Hard-Pressed. Textile Activism*,





[Fig. 9]

Richard Westmacott, Statue of Robert Milligan, 1809, covered with waxprint fabric in London, on June 9, 2020 © Chris McKenna, [Creative Commons](#) (October 1, 2024).

was removed by local authorities. The likeness of the Scottish merchant was sculpted in the year of his death by Richard Westmacott and erected at the West India Docks in 1813. Now, the Museum of London Docklands is based at these docks and houses the removed statue in its collection.<sup>76</sup> Milligan, who was significantly involved in the development of the Docklands,<sup>77</sup> was not only a slave trader, but also personally owned more than 500 slaves.<sup>78</sup>

The statue is what England's government heritage agency, Historic England, calls *contested heritage*. Contested heritage is described as:

[B]uildings, monuments and places [that] sometimes bring us face to face with parts of our history that are painful, or shameful by today's standards. We recognize that there are historic statues and sites which have become symbols of injustice and a source of great pain for many people.<sup>79</sup>

Regarding the concept of contested heritage, the whole ensemble – the warehouse now serving as a museum and the Docklands, completed in 1802 and until today an architectural trace of the country's former imperial power – can be described as such, with the statue of Milligan representing the pinnacle of this imperial harbor ensemble. The docks were built to unload cargo from the colonies and ensure the import and further distribution throughout the country of goods, such as sugar, rum, coffee, and cotton from the Caribbean plantations. At that time, Great Britain was a major participant in and profiteer of the transatlantic triangular trade.<sup>80</sup>

In dealing with contested heritage, Historic England proposes first and foremost what we call additive strategies, namely, not to remove statues and sites that have become contested,

1990–2020, in: *FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und Visuelle Kultur* 68, 2020, 29–51 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>76</sup>

The statue was moved several times before, for example in 1943, and re-erected in 1997.

<sup>77</sup>

Madge Dresser, *Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 64, 2007, 162–199. The plaque on the plinth reads: "To perpetuate on this spot the memory of Robert Milligan, a merchant of London, to whose genius, perseverance and guardian care the surrounding great work principally owes its [sic] design, accomplishment and regulation, the directors and proprietors, deprived by his death on the 21st May 1809 of the continuance of his invaluable services, by their unanimous vote have caused this statue to be erected."

<sup>78</sup>

Kristy Warren, *Slavery Legacies. Removing Controversial Statues in London*, in: *London Museum*, July 3, 2020 (September 9, 2024).

<sup>79</sup>

Contested Heritage, *Historic England* (September 9, 2024).

<sup>80</sup>

Cotton was a central material and product of colonial global trade. Sven Beckert, *King Cotton. Eine Geschichte des globalen Kapitalismus*, Munich 2019.

but to provide thoughtful, long-lasting and powerful reinterpretation, which keeps the structure's physical context but can add new layers of meaning, allowing us all to develop a deeper understanding of our often difficult past.<sup>81</sup>

The removal of the Milligan statue apparently contradicts this additive approach. Most likely, it was possible because it happened at the height of the heated BLM demonstrations, shortly after the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol. By temporarily veiling its head, an additive strategy was followed, if only for a short time. In that way, textile "layers of meaning" were added, which will be discussed in the following.

For the covering of Milligan, the protesters chose a fabric, a wax print or so-called Dutch wax print, that has its own colonial history. The technique goes back to a batik practice from Java, Indonesia, which was spread to Europe by the Dutch colonizers and adapted for industrial production, especially in England. In the nineteenth century, these fabrics entered the West African textile market.<sup>82</sup> The wax print itself can be understood as a cultural palimpsest, which bears its own history of transcultural exchange. However, today it is often seen as genuinely West African. Wax prints became known to a wider audience with the large installation by Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare at *documenta 11* in 2002 in Kassel, Germany. The textile intervention by the protesters in London not only emphasized the symbolic coding of the cloth as "African" to critique Milligan's involvement in British slavery, it also was clearly meant to be legible as an attack on the image and the depicted: Milligan's head was covered, as though he were being led to the executioner.

Especially in connection with the harbor location, the fabric points to the colonial history of this site and the construction of an essential "Africanness" that was at stake in the Western imperium at that time. The textile intervention therefore combines different layers already present in the texture of the given space: the history of the cotton used to create the textile cover as an important product of the former British trade at the London docks; the pattern of the wax print fabric, which symbolizes African design, while also being the result of a historical transcultural exchange; the clash of materials and their inscribed temporalities, bronze representing timelessness, while the textile is granted just a brief moment in the monument's history; and the current racist structures confronted by the BLM activists, including their roots back to Milligan's times. The textile, with its own colonial history, is used here as a materialized postcolonial critique.

<sup>81</sup>

Contested Heritage.

<sup>82</sup>

Ruth Nielsen, The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire, in: Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (eds.), *The Fabrics of Culture. The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, The Hague 1979, 467–498.

Significantly less known than the picture of the covered head before its removal is a previous shrouding of the same statue with black fabric. The occasion was the opening of the London Sugar and Slavery Gallery in 2007. While the statue was – at the time – not part of the Museum of London Docklands' holdings, the curators of the newly opened London Sugar and Slavery Gallery decided to cover it, thereby admitting that its visibility would have contradicted the museum's first permanent exhibition on slavery. Whereas the shrouding of the statue in 2007 during the opening months only seems like an erratic decision, the spontaneous wax print cover provides an additional layer of meaning.

The relationship of veiling and veiled can be compared to Ibrahim Mahama's dressing of buildings with jute bags. In the context of *documenta 14*, in the summer of 2017, the artist wrapped the two buildings of the so-called *Kasseler Torwache*, part of the imperialist layout of the city [Fig. 10]. The jute sacks are used as packaging for cocoa, coffee, rice, beans, and coal in Mahama's home country Ghana, but are imported for this purpose from India and Bangladesh, two countries that are known for their mass production of textiles. Mahama bought new bags and then exchanged them for used ones that show the traces of the transported goods they have contained and also the inscriptions of transport and handling during trade, such as stamps, discoloration, stains, and invisible marks, such as the touch of the workers, their sweat. Absolutist architecture thus appears in the mantle of its own preconditions: the labor and trade relations that were based on exploitation and (racial) hierarchies.

These textiles, the wax print on the one hand, and the jute bag on the other, both originate from a conventional context of use and were deprived of their original purpose in the public textile interventions. Wax prints have a widely ramified history in the field of clothing and fashion, and are related to colonial history and the global textile trade. Jute sacks, in turn, serve as utilitarian textiles for transporting goods within global trade routes that developed centuries ago and continue to this day. The visible traces to be discerned on the jute are materially deposited, indexical references that adhere to the individual object, but are also inscribed on the textile in a figurative sense – the jute bag as a medium of transport and global trade. And the wax print is a textile that emerged through and is marked by transcultural processes of exchange and appropriation. Both types of fabric thus figure as textile witnesses within constellations shaped by colonialism.

## VI. (Dis)covering Discoverers. Joiri Minaya's *The Cloaking in Hamburg*

In the harbor of Hamburg, two statues flanking the *Kornhausbrücke* (Kornhaus Bridge) over the *Zollkanal* were covered with colorful fabrics in 2021 [Fig. 11]. Rather than an unauthorized act by protest-





[Fig. 10]  
Ibrahim Mahama, The wrapped Kassel Torwache in the context of *documenta 14*, on  
July 11, 2017 © Muck, Creative Commons.



[Fig. 11]  
Joiri Minaya, *The Cloaking*, 2021, Kornhausbrücke Hamburg © Courtesy of the artist.

ers, the covering of these statues of Christopher Columbus and the Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama was an artwork by the Dominican artist Joiri Minaya. The fact that a textile wrapping or veiling offers a material appeal through the folds, adds volume, and transforms the object into a different form, has certainly contributed to the success of this artistic strategy, which has many precursors.<sup>83</sup> The intervention *The Cloaking* was part of the festival THE GATE curated by Ellen Blumenstein in Hamburg's so-called "HafenCity".<sup>84</sup> Minaya had already tried to realize her first cloaking in Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas in 2017: she proposed dressing the statue of Columbus in front of the city's Government House with a colorful flower design cloth. This intervention was not supported by the authorities and was never carried out.<sup>85</sup>

For her artistic interventions, she uses fabrics that she designs herself.<sup>86</sup> The light blue background of the fabric that covers the figure of Vasco da Gama can be associated with waves and the sea, and the yellowish-green fabric with the large overlapping leaf patterns covering the Columbus statue is reminiscent of lush vegetation. The patterns of the stretch fabrics are based on research in botanical collections and archives.<sup>87</sup> In addition to drawings, natural history specimens of herbaria provided a source of inspiration. The image repertoire points to former scientific practices in botany and their embedded colonial history, traceable in the collecting, naming, archiving, and displaying of plants and animals. Minaya added the adapted plant elements to brightly colored ornaments that are associated with the tropics and concepts of the exotic. The decorative patterns can be placed in an iconographic tradition that includes wallpaper patterns. In the eighteenth century, pictorial wallpaper visually transferred the exotic, wild landscape to the interior – initially as a silk wall covering.<sup>88</sup> Some of these refer back to even earlier baroque interior decorations, when luxury and exoticism were

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Britta Szidzik has discussed artistic practices of wrapping, covering, and encasing objects with textile materials, which range from liturgical contexts to the avant-garde to the wrappings by Joseph Beuys, Franz Erhard Walther, Christo, Jean Claude, and others. However, in most of these cases the semantics of the actual material used – burlap, plastic foil, cloth, tarps, and synthetic fabrics – seems to be secondary to material qualities such as color, density, weight, handling, etc. Cf. Szidzik, *Verhüllung als Kunst*.

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June 4–September 30, 2021.

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The reason given was that until then the statue was not a matter of national conversation, so Minaya started involving the public through postcards showing a photomontage of the planned cloaking, see *The Cloaking Series* (September 9, 2024).

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Interview with Joiri Minaya, October 4, 2021.

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Ibid.

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Cf. Katharina Eck and Astrid Silvia Schönhagen (eds.), *Interieur und Bildtapete. Narrative des Wohnens um 1800*, Bielefeld 2014.

combined in chinoiserie or grotesques [Fig. 12]. The patterns echo such iconographies.

The creation of a tropical, colorful pattern connotes exotic phantasies and is bound to cultural and scientific assumptions, which are challenged here. Elements of critique are embedded in the creation of the pattern for the cloaking of the statues, as the selected plants transport certain meanings: the yellow-green stretch cloth [Fig. 13a] shows the *Sansevieria* or snake plant and an aloe vera plant; in the blue pattern [Fig. 13b] we see *Ricinus communis*, the castor oil plant, from which castor oil and the highly toxic substance ricin can be obtained. While castor oil was brought to America by slaves, the snake plant was used for rituals by Native Americans in the South Florida region. However, the patterns Minaya creates can be traced back not only to botanical finds in herbaria. She also refers to a specific system of pictorial signs to create the patterns for her wraps, namely *Adinkra*<sup>89</sup>, a symbolic language of the Ashanti ethnic group that is widespread in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. In the case of the crossed leaves on the yellow fabric, the formation shown draws on the *Adinkra* symbol *Akofena*, the so-called “sword of war”, which was common in heraldic shields of former Akan states and represented legitimate state authority.<sup>90</sup>

The discourses about textile patterns linked to an ideal image of the tropics and to exotism are well known in many Latin American countries.<sup>91</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt already associated the tropics with a brightly colored, seemingly wild flora and fauna, which corresponded with the exoticist knowledge production of his period. Through strategies of appropriation and self-exoticization, such historical imaginaries merged with the production of a national, Brazilian identity in the development of Brazil's own cultural ideas and images of tropicality.<sup>92</sup> Minaya's textile pattern designs draw precisely on these themes to negotiate issues of cultural authenticity, exotic encodings, and processes of appropriation and re-appropriation. By covering the statues of Columbus and de

89

Kwesi Kumah, *African Familiar Proverbs & Quotes. A Collection of Wits, Wisdom, Phrases, Quotations, Proverbs and Adinkra (Cultural Symbols)*, vol. 2, Mauritius 2019.

90

Samuel Baah Kissi, Peggy Ama Fening, Eric Apau Asante, The Philosophy of Adinkra Symbols in Asante Textiles, Jewellery and Other Art Forms, in: *Journal of Asian Scientific Research* 9, 2019, 29–39.

91

See Alexandra Karentzos, Traveling Fashion. Exotism and Tropicalism, in: Elke Gaugele and Monica Titton (eds.), *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique*, Berlin 2019, 230–245.

92

During Brazilian modernismo the concept of *antropofagia* emerged in art and literature around 1928. Here, the transformative incorporation of dominant hegemonial designs, knowledge, and technology was elevated to a structural principle. See Rafael Cardoso, *Modernity in Black and White. Art and Image, Race and Identity in Brazil, 1890–1945*, Cambridge 2021, 172–208. This continued in the so-called *tropicalia* movement from the 1960s onward, influenced by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. The question of exotic consumption resonates here, which bell hooks summed up with the formula of “eating the other” in order to discuss processes of cultural encounter. Cf. bell hooks, *Eating the Other. Desire and Resistance*, in: ead., *Black Looks. Race and Representation*, Boston 1992, 21–39.





[Fig. 12]

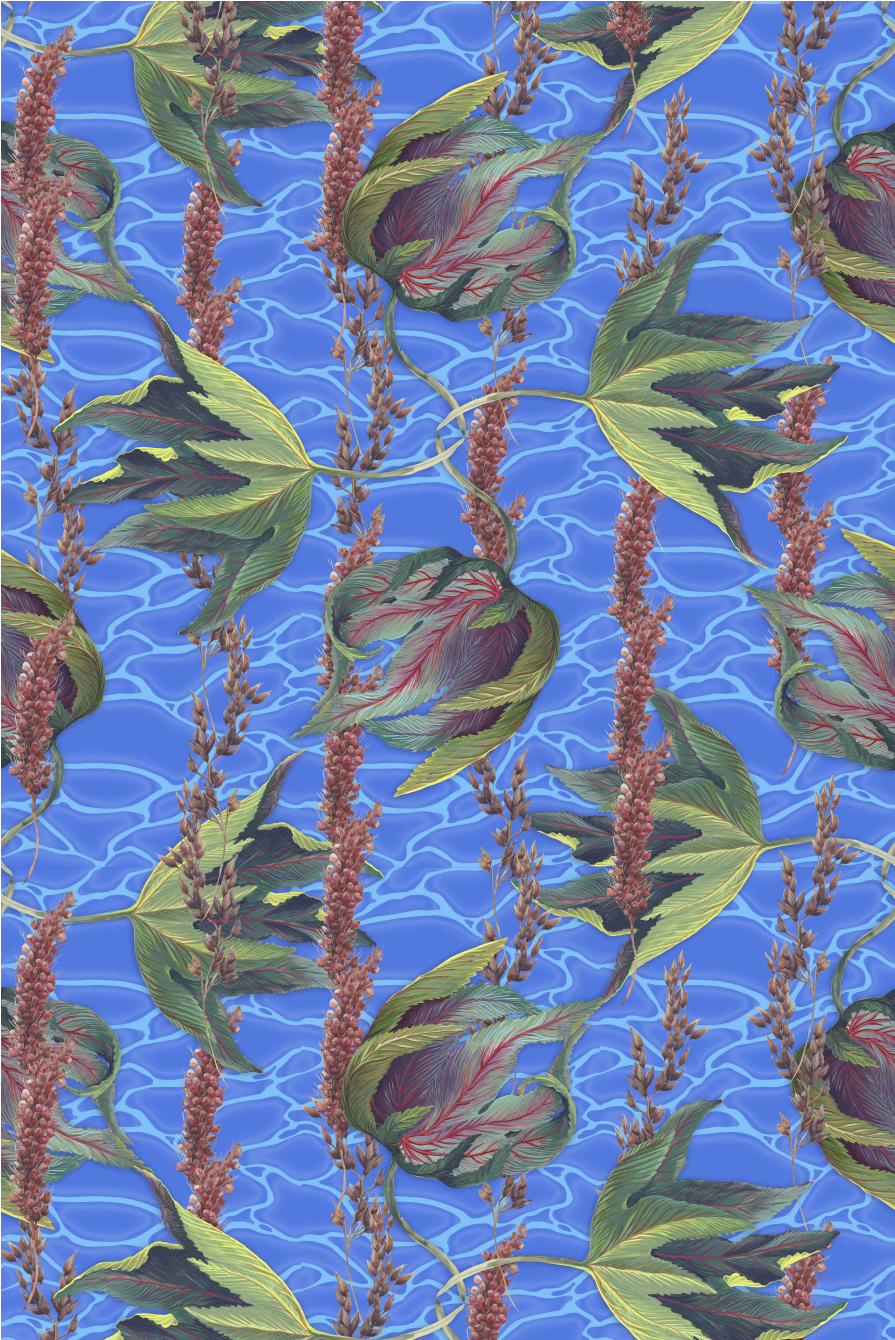
Unknown designer, *Wallpaper with heron*, ca. 1882, woodblock print on paper on linen, distemper, 49 × 52 cm, Chemnitz, Kunstsammlungen © Kunstsammlungen, Chemnitz, T3/24.



[Fig. 13a]

Joiri Minaya, Detail of the textile pattern used for *The Cloaking*, 2021, Hamburg © Courtesy of the artist.





[Fig. 13b]

Joiri Minaya, Detail of the textile pattern used for *The Cloaking*, 2021, Hamburg © Courtesy of the artist.

Gama with tropical-looking patterns, they themselves appear as “tropicalized”.<sup>93</sup>

The wrapping can be fully understood only in the context of its site specificity. Columbus and Vasco de Gama, two “symbolic figures of the conquest of the world”,<sup>94</sup> flank the passage to the so-called *Hamburger Speicherstadt*, the warehouse district of the harbor. The common metaphor of Hamburg as “gateway to the world” unfolds multiple levels of meaning, to which the festival title THE GATE also refers. On the one hand, the two statues function as symbolic door-openers to foreign continents – for which they are honored until today – while on the other hand, the metaphor of the gateway refers to the free trade that had arisen at that time and continued until its peak in the nineteenth century, when the city’s harbor was one of the largest European trading centers. By this time, the harbor was involved in the transatlantic triangular trade and shortly thereafter, Hamburg became the empire’s colonial metropolis.<sup>95</sup> Goods such as sugar and textiles were distributed and shipped via the port, and people’s migratory routes crossed in Hamburg; travelers, tourists, and researchers began their journeys to the colonies here, and indigenous people were brought to the Hamburg zoo as exotic objects of study.<sup>96</sup> The two statues show who was honored in public and who was made invisible and categorized as subaltern. In this way, the negative impact of the positive connotation of freedom and cosmopolitanism associated with the metaphor of the gate is emphasized.

Let us take a closer look at the textile design: accurate seams on the cloth show that the dresses were made explicitly for these figures and not simply thrown over as loose drapery.<sup>97</sup> Throughout the design process, Minaya first works with paper collage, so an imaginary wrapping in 2D precedes the actual on-site veiling of the statues. The connection to dresses and dressing is also indicated in the title, *The Cloaking*, which at its base refers to a piece of clothing, namely, the cloak. By cloaking the statues, they are indeed temporarily given a new costume, apart from their actual clothing carved from sandstone. The overlaid piece of textile, a proper enveloping, finds its appropriate reflection in the added layers of symbolic

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Karentzos, *Traveling Fashion*.

94

Hier schlägt das koloniale Herz der ‚Hafencity‘, Project [afrika-hamburg.de](http://afrika-hamburg.de), January 15, 2010 (September 9, 2024).

95

The founding of local institutions such as the Colonial Institute, the university, and the Ethnological Museum is connected to this role of Hamburg’s port.

96

Carl Hagenbeck opened the zoo in 1907, where he also staged ethnological shows. Cf. Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainment*, Seattle 2008.

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They were produced in collaboration with the Hamburg costume studio *Gewandwerk*. Interview with Joiri Minaya, October 4, 2021.



meaning since the cloaking re-contextualizes the statues as markers of a colonial city's history. In this way, Minaya presents a view of history as a palimpsest-like layering.

Due to the stretchy material the textile coverings have an exact fit so that the contours of the head, feet, and posture can be deduced. But some elements also appear alienated and are made unrecognizable, such as the rudder or the disk in Columbus's hand. Due to the thin folds of the stretchy fabric with its plant pattern, the figures undergo a transformation and, in their abstract plasticity, look almost like giant cocoons or – from a distance – undefinable objects growing on the two bridge pillars. With the covering, Minaya inverts the subject-object relation of modern science underlying colonial discoveries: while the statues of Columbus and da Gama are honored as exploring and conquering subjects gazing at the “other” – the sea, far away continents and their inhabitants, plants, and nature – the figures are now swallowed by their former object of exploration. At the same time, the palimpsest of indigenous botanical knowledge, symbols of empowerment, and colonial means of categorization and cataloging referenced in the patterns reveals the short-sightedness of the subject-object hierarchy in Western thought.

## VII. Gestures of Care and Carelessness

In contrast to previous research on iconoclasm, we are not concerned with the act of (permanent) destruction. Instead, we focus on textile gestures as critical temporary interventions on monuments that are still in place, operating within the given texture of space. Both the historical ideas and values as well as the stone- or bronze-built manifestations that have emerged from it have been repeatedly negotiated in the context of monument debates. Contrary to new fixed additions – like plaques – or subtractive strategies – like definitive dismantlings – the use of textiles allows new re-interpretations that are limited in time, but herein lies their critical potential. By way of cloaking and veiling, monuments are taken out of their static mode and are made flexible in their historical and political meanings. The textiles involved do not destroy, they provide another aesthetic layer, that is, they *add* and they *texture*. They reshape monuments and take them out of their material continuum without attacking their matter, serving as a slice in the field of visibility by means of a flexible response without immediate erasure. The textile layering takes a stand and provides new actualizations or even re-interpretations – if only temporarily. However, though ephemeral, these additions provide clearly visible and, to a certain extent, even touchable material interventions, altering not only the monument but the surrounding public space, an alteration more drastic and quicker to recognize – and maybe even to process – than a written plaque.

The discussion of the three examples outlines a field of textile interventions that evoke additive effects in the wider context of iconoclasm. They also show that while image-making is a cultural practice involving the site, the technique, and the body, the images of iconoclastic acts or interventions circulate widely on the internet and social media, making the actual site globally accessible. In this way the documented interventions – as much as iconoclastic gestures themselves – contribute to a political battle that is fought in part via images.

While in all three cases textiles are used to temporarily hide monuments that stood in plain sight for decades, there are differences in how their visibility is altered. While Minaya's *Cloaking* [Fig. 11] turns the statues of Columbus and da Gama as a whole into brightly colored patterned objects, the statue of Robert Milligan [Fig. 9] and the Confederate monuments partially covered in knitted kudzu tendrils [Fig. 7] are still very much visible. The different textiles here mark the monuments as disputed or even threatened. The relationship of cover and statue again differs: the single kudzu tendrils point to the material reality of the monument by indicating how they could be overgrown by the rampant plant. The way the wax print covers Milligan's head symbolically mirrors the process of wrapping the heads of accused persons who are soon to be hanged or beheaded in hood-like cloths. This form of attack on the statue aims at an "execution in effigy", that is, the attack is based on the imagined connection of image and body; the image becomes a substitute.

While the latter two show a more spontaneous handling than Minaya's bespoke tailoring, the prefabricated textile cloth itself is inscribed with its own layers of meaning, so the additive strategy differs. Both the wax print and *The Cloaking* disrupt the mimetic representation of the sculptures with an ornamental "all-over". The patterned fabric alludes to African fashion and culture, and the wax print technique, as such, signifies global trade and transcultural crossovers. In Minaya's work, the textile also bears meaning, as the plant motifs act as postcolonial re-appropriations of botanical collections. The contrast here is not only one of materiality, but also of different traditions of representation: the patterned fabric has just as much of a semantics as the sculpted likeness it momentarily covers.<sup>98</sup>

The textile interventions allude to the role textiles traditionally play in the course of a monument's life, they mark the moment of transportation, inauguration, or even dismantling but textiles are also employed to shelter a sculpture or clean it. In short, there is

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Modernity's relationship to pattern and ornament has been difficult. Around 1900, ornament became the "other" to abstraction, epitomized by Adolf Loos's infamous text *Ornament as Crime* (1908), which associates ornaments with cheap mass production, femininity, and indigenous cultures. Thus, unsurprisingly, Arthur C. Danto had to champion the ornament as a third category of art alongside representation and abstraction as late as 2007, cf. id., *Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement*, in: *Pattern and Decoration* (exh. cat. Yonkers, Hudson River Museum), ed. by Anne Swartz, Yonkers, NY 2007, 7–11.

an element of care attached to sculptures being veiled or cloaked. Monuments need to be cleaned, protected, and renovated, an effort, which in the case of Confederate monuments in the U.S., is costly for taxpayers.<sup>99</sup> While not focusing on textile interventions, Mechthild Widrich has titled her recent study on the current monument debate “monumental cares”. In her understanding the act of caring can be “literal and figurative at the same time”,<sup>100</sup> referring to the critique of monuments as much as their maintenance. In two of the examples in this paper, different ways of caring intersect: Minaya’s *The Cloaking* [Fig. 11] quasi continues an effort made to care for the material substance of the monument as it coincidentally acts as protective sheath for the statutes in question. The immense caring effort of knitting a pattern for statues carried out by The Kudzu Project, however, does not contribute to the statues’ well-being. Hiding monuments in knitted kudzu-leaves instead foreshadows the idea of not taking care of controversial monuments and leaving them to the forces of nature.<sup>101</sup>

Common to all three case studies of textile, monumental interventions is that they do not contradict a potential future demolition, but rather, mark a moment of negotiation. Textiles have great flexibility. Not only are they quickly on hand and reversible, but through their specific materiality they refer to a different time horizon beyond the spontaneous or planned moment of attaching. This “textile stage” of the monument debate marks an interim stage. However, the reversible flexibility of textile interventions could also serve as a model for new monuments adapting to the changing character of history. Younge asks us to imagine “concepts of monuments which refer to themselves as temporary”.<sup>102</sup> One way would be to make use of materials that are not meant to last forever, another would be to raise monuments that are maintained for a set term, similar to an election cycle, in which they are voted in as political representatives.<sup>103</sup> In this way, what is constant is not the monuments, but rather, the production of so-called cultural heritage and its mediation and negotiation.

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Taxpayers have directed \$40 million to Confederate monuments over the past ten years. Cf. Brian Palmer and Seth Freed Wessler, *The Costs of the Confederacy*, in: *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 1, 2018 (September 9, 2024).

100

Mechthild Widrich, *Monumental Cares. Sites of History and Contemporary Art*, Manchester 2023, 4.

101

The question of providing care or not was especially poignant for the local parish police jury of Lake Charles, Louisiana, where a Confederate monument was blown down by a hurricane two weeks after the jury had voted to keep it. Cf. Younge, *Why Every Single Statue*.

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Ibid.

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There is already a cultural tradition of creating ephemeral statues by way of delicate materials prone to visible signs of weathering and decay. Cf. Zoë S. Strother, *Iconoclasm by Proxy*, in: Latour and Weibel, *Iconoclasm*, 458–459.

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