

FILING THE STONE, WASHING THE FLAG

Bruno Oliveira

- *Notes on the ruining of
and dispute over monuments*

ABSTRACT

How do we dispute the given meanings of monuments, destabilize their foundations and create alternative grammars to restore meaning and agency to the collective memory? This essay presents reflections on the dispute over representations of power, especially in relation to the emancipation of politics, identities and struggles for human rights that have been dismantled and cynically shelved by the criminal governments on the rise in the Global South in the last decade.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary art | Decoloniality | Dispute | Monuments

*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.
They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game,
but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.¹*

1 • Introduction

“It is an attack on civilization,” exclaimed Victor Brecheret Filho on September 30, 2016 in an interview² about the intervention carried out the previous morning on the “Monumento às Bandeiras” (Monument to the Flags). This sculpture was designed by his father, Victor Brecheret, in 1920, and installed for the celebrations of the 400th Anniversary of the founding of the City of São Paulo in 1953. Of unknown authorship, the action consisted of covering the granite monument with pink, yellow and turquoise latex paint and was broadcast by the media during the televised debate between candidates for mayor of São Paulo the night before the municipal elections. On the occasion, actions targeting the “Borba Gato” statue, by Júlio Guerra, erected in 1963, and the building of the State Department of Education, inaugurated in 1894 as the headquarters of the Escola Normal Caetano de Campos, were also carried out.

Described as everything from a disgrace to barbarity, the intervention outraged the population and the officials responsible for the maintenance of public heritage. After the intervention that took place on the eve of the 2016 elections, it took about 10 days to clean the “Monumento às Bandeiras”. A specific chemical for granite had to be used, which was followed by the use of pressure washers.

In a statement to the press,³ the then director of the Office of Historical Heritage, an agency of the Municipal Department of Culture of São Paulo, highlighted the damage to the sculpture caused by such actions. He believes that the cleaning process poses a risk to the work, as its layers are damaged each time it is cleaned: “I’m outraged and upset. It’s sad to see our public heritage being damaged. We keep cleaning it and the monument gets more and more damaged. Soon, there won’t be any stone left.”

2 • Monuments, power and coloniality

Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein⁴ describe the world-system concept as the configuration of a historical pattern of power in which social and political relations are the result of the interrelation of fragmented and conflicting networks of dominance. This concept helps us understand the fundamental structuring of history in the Latin American context based on the dialectic complementarity of the dynamics between colonizers and the colonized.⁵ This modern/colonial notion gives rise to a series of

relationships and institutions of domination and exploitation that extend from the European Middle Ages to the present day.

Monuments, flags, the state and its insignia are all fundamental records of the ideas of the project for the future and the progress of the modern/colonial process. We can associate the consolidation of these images with the establishment of frameworks of subjectivity and collective memory aimed at perceiving a total, linear and hegemonic world. Here, it is important to emphasize that the coloniality of power, a term coined by Aníbal Quijano,⁶ includes processes that reproduce the logic of oppression, domination and exploitation and that go beyond the sphere of political-economic power and lead to the colonization of the imaginary. Thus, memory and monuments, especially in the Latin American context, were constituted through processes of continuous and permanent epistemological violence.

3 • Documents-monuments

To reflect on the dispute over the meaning of a monument, a brief digression is first needed to recognize, in the practice of building such works, how monuments are configured as devices of the coloniality of power in their territories of insertion. We should assimilate them as images that perform memorial and educational functions in cities. It is understood that every monument has intrinsic and mutual elements of civilization and barbarity.⁷ Monuments are, therefore, elements of transmission, allegories of a triumphant notion of continuity and historical evolution, “spoils whose function is to confirm, illustrate and validate the superiority of the powerful.”⁸ Once we understand the documents-monuments as images of this modern/colonial culture-barbarism diptych, we can move on to the question of the purposes of their constitution.

According to Georges Didi-Huberman,⁹ in the European origins of monuments as we know them today,¹⁰ we see that they are perceived as a kind of common good: the use of the term *imago* and its approximation to the ideas of possession and restitution evoke a “genealogical and honorific transmission function” of the images produced by death masks.¹¹ This was when monuments (from the Latin word *monumentum*: memorial, building or even tomb) appeared; they were initially attributed to individuals and private funeral memorials and closely linked to this notion of image. Furthermore, in ancient Europe, another category of monuments also emerged as an advertisement of power, a symbolic device of domination or a product of the interests of groups or associations, which were usually of a commemorative and testimonial nature and that evoked pasts and perpetuated memories (voluntarily or involuntarily). The two classes of monuments, however, share the purpose of ensuring the strategic survival of memories of modernity and, above all, images of civilization – and barbarity.

In general, monuments, museums, galleries and cultural spaces, their collections, exhibitions and constituent and associated documents, as well as universities, their

buildings and the discipline of the history of images (and art, by extension) can be understood as a fundamental part of a set of institutions that are responsible for structuring and maintaining stable and homogeneous memories and social representations. Mastering the narratives and images of a given territory, culture and society, especially in the Global South, was (and still is) vital to the organization of modern states.¹² Such institutions and disciplines occupy contradictory and complex positions. This makes it essential to understand how they are connected and operate, given that “they are important because they still maintain a symbolic position apparently supported by democratic culture, at the heart of which lies the very notion of citizenship.”¹³

How, then, do we restore emancipatory meaning to monuments? This is mainly an exercise of finding, in the instability of its given meanings, the possibility of manipulating and creating another grammar and other meanings and agencies – ones that are not based on the idea of completeness or even returning some privilege or private right to someone or to a social group. This devolution of meaning does not entail appropriation or possession, nor reproducing the structure of dominance; but it does necessarily question its assumptions. It is precisely about reaffirming the instability of the strategies of dominance and hegemony in power, *desecrating the power of its representations* and returning the possibility of use and collective agency to whomever is entitled to it. It involves reconfiguring memory and renouncing narrative rigidity, while stripping “[...] devices – all devices – of the possibility of use that they themselves captured. Desecrating what cannot be desecrated is the political task of generations to come.”¹⁴

4 • Restitution (1)

Officially opened in March 1970, the headquarters of Paço das Artes¹⁵ were located in the vicinity of the University of São Paulo for many years. Owned by the Butantan Institute, the building was requisitioned at the end of 2015 to make way for laboratories and a factory that produces vaccines against dengue fever, an epidemic that had reached alarming levels that year.

To mark the end of activities in the Paço das Artes building, one last event was held at the venue, which included a presentation by the group Ilú Obá De Min¹⁶ and an intervention by an artist from Minas Gerais, Néle Azevedo.

Initially developed by Néle Azevedo in 2001 for the thesis of her Master in Visual Arts degree from the Institute of Arts of Universidade Estadual Paulista, the series of interventions entitled “Minimum Monument”¹⁷ are characterized by an ephemeral action that subverts the very foundational notions of monuments: it is a record of memory; a small, temporary, itinerant document made up of anonymous bodies – as opposed to the grandiose solidity of the stone and the heroes of history found in major public monuments. According to the artist herself,¹⁸ until 2004, the interventions

consisted of one or two ice sculptures placed in different locations of the cities that would melt and disappear over time. From 2005 onwards, Azevedo began concentrating small anonymous bodies of ice in one place, deliberately chosen in the urban space, and also allowed them to melt over time. She relied on the collaboration of volunteers to make ice sculptures from ready-made moulds.

The document generated by Néle Azevedo's intervention focuses on the experience of participants and spectators and, therefore, on audio-visual recordings of the action. The proposed action does not allude to the great heroes of Western modern/colonial history, as indicated by the call for volunteers to help carry out the intervention in March 2016:

In an act that lasts a few minutes, the monument's official canons are reversed: in the place of the hero, the anonymous; in place of the solidity of the stone, the ephemeral process of the ice; instead of the grandiose scale of the monument, the minimal scale of perishable bodies. [...] It loses its static condition to gain fluidity in urban displacement and the changing state of the water. They focus on small sculptures of small men, ordinary men.¹⁹

These *minimal documents-monuments*, created through the inversion of perspective, not only capture the reciprocity of culture-barbarism, but also seize this place and make it a permanent message between the lines. At the limit of becoming a *damnatio memoriae* sentence,²⁰ Azevedo's intervention restores the remains to the public sphere, performing a gesture similar to the montages of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, interpreted by Didi-Huberman as “[taking] from the institutions what they do not want to show – the rubbish, refuse, the forgotten or censored images – to return them to those to whom they belong – that is, the ‘public’, the community, the citizens.”²¹

At the final event at the Paço das Artes, the “Minimum Monument” (and the presentation of the group Ilú Obá De Min) creates a monument to erasure, that of the life-cycle of a public space. Azevedo staged her intervention on the building's staircase and started at 2 pm on March 16, 2016. The audience accompanied the intervention, performed with 1,000 ice sculptures that lasted only a few minutes due to the blazing sun, as a sort of ritual, a gesture that the artist herself described as political/aesthetic.



Documentation of the media coverage of the work “Minimum Monument.” Archives provided by the artist Néle Azevedo.

5 • Restitution (2)

Founder and leader of the “Cambio 90” party, the Japanese-Peruvian engineer and mathematician Alberto Kenya Fujimori won his first presidential election in Peru in 1990 with the slogan “Honradez, Tecnología, Trabajo” (Honour, Technology and Work). The candidate, until then little known, would also win the following elections, held after a broad constitutional crisis shook the country and he enacted a self-coup with the support of the Armed Forces. The coup involved the organization of a new Constituent Assembly, the dissolution of Congress, taking control of the media, the persecution of opposition groups and people, and systematic human rights violations.

Fujimori enjoyed high approval ratings up until the middle of his second term. The silence, fear and even widely disseminated discourses of apathy towards politics was finally broken at the end of the decade. Several social mobilizations, from 1996 on, were guided precisely by the exercise of imagination of other forms of the public sphere. One or a few protests, actions or uprisings alone are not enough to establish a shared notion of a democratic society: it is through continuity and permanent vigilance that alternative collective and public consciousnesses are forged.

The public imaginary was established as a crucial battleground for Peruvian social movements, especially in the last year of Fujimori’s decade-long dictatorship. Disputing

control of national symbols led to an individual and collective liberating process for Peruvian citizens that went beyond the established notions of nation and state. The critical trigger for the intensification of protests was the successive corruption scandals, political persecution and especially the fraud used by Fujimori to get re-elected for the third time in April 2000.

The first performance that inaugurated the work of the Colectivo Sociedad Civil, a group formed by Peruvian artists who played a key role in the year 2000, took place precisely at the end of the first round of the national elections: equipped with candles, crucifixes and black fabric, a large group of artists proposed to hold a long, formal funeral ceremony for the Fujimori government in front of the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales (ONPE, National Office of Electoral Processes). Local and international media outlets broadcast footage from the protest, which stimulated the group to continue staging actions and developing its language.

From that moment on, the members of the Colectivo, in collaboration with other groups and movements, began to develop public strategies to mobilize and transform the national imaginary. Among the highly impactful performances that began on the eve of the second round of the 2000 elections was “Lava la bandera” (Washing the flag),²² a collective and collaborative ritual for the symbolic and affective cleansing of the national flag. For weeks after the first national cleansing rituals were held in a public square, in May 2000, several autonomous, independently organized and equally political reinterpretations were recorded in public squares in other Peruvian and foreign cities.

The weekly repetition of the ritual of washing the national flags with water, soap and red basins throughout the year produced an image of rescuing the national identity that had been hijacked by the Fujimori dictatorship. Variations of the subjection of these symbols of power to the daily gesture of being washed, hung up on large clotheslines stretched across public squares and drying in the wind soon appeared, some incorporating military uniforms and robes. The repetition of the gesture and the collective and daily incorporation of the protest in a common and ordinary way by the people also indicate the importance of the need for a long restitution of citizens’ kidnapped identities in individual and collective spheres. One of the Colectivo’s founding members sums up the country’s ritualization process as follows:

But such surprising political effectiveness is rooted in pre-existing moral authority, the symbolic capital accumulated from the sacrificial energy of thousands of washing rituals. The collective identification matrix at work here is both religious and patriotic. A domestic, daily, locally made religiosity, which is almost irreverently pop in its liturgical informality, but no less sublime for it. It is through its accessibility and immediacy that Lava la bandera ritualizes the country. (God moves among the pails. And the soaps). Perhaps this is where its ability to become registered in a distinct mnemonic record, in the emotional memory of a citizenship under construction, comes from.²³

At the end of that year, the accumulation of accusations of corruption and human rights violations led Fujimori to take refuge in Japan, where he stayed until he was captured in Chile in 2005. Back in 2000, Colectivo Sociedad Civil organized an act to finalize the cycle of cleaning and cure. With the change of government, the flags would be clean again: the call was one of celebration, and for the flags to be ironed, folded, handed over to the new government and stored so that they could be maintained and cared for, until further cleansing is necessary to uphold democracy.



Media coverage of the actions of the Coletivo Sociedad Civil.

Archives provided by artist Claudia Coca.

6 • Conclusion

The director of the Office of Historical Heritage’s fear that Brecheret’s sculpture in São Paulo will be filed down to the floor until there is no more stone left because of the recurring need for restoration reminds us, in an inverted and accidental way, of the artistic/political gestures of Néle Azevedo’s “Minimum Monument” and “Lava la Bandera” by the Colectivo Sociedad Civil.

The repeated polishing of the stone points to a possible path for understanding the ritualistic and permanent exercise of reappropriating democracy. The dispute for representations of power – and the politicization of these images – can help reinforce demands for emancipatory policies, identities and struggles for human rights that have been dismantled and cynically shelved by the rhetoric of the criminal governments on the rise in the Global South.

Here, it is interesting to imagine that perhaps the emergence of another society, or another democratic agreement, will only be possible when the ruining of the monolithic and impenetrable documents-monuments that structure cities, politics and memory is

incessantly repeated: whether it be through the collective reconstruction of temporary monuments, the public cleansing of national flags or, even more radically, by repeatedly causing documents-monuments to be polished.

The image of the gradual ruining of the monument by its successive cleanings performs an ongoing funeral ritual, in the long term, that restores agency to the *vanquished* and structures another social pact by constantly and gradually chipping away minute pieces of the great modern/colonial history of the great heroes. Always the same, but a little different.

NOTES

- 1 • Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017): 19.
- 2 • Adriana Farias, "Filho de Brecheret vê ligação entre pichação e último debate eleitoral." *Veja*, September 30, 2016, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://vejasp.abril.com.br/cidades/filho-de-brecheret-ve-ligacao-entre-pichacao-e-debate-eleitoral/>.
- 3 • Juliana Diógenes, "Dois monumentos e prédio da secretaria de Educação amanhecem pichados." *Estadão*, June 20, 2020, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://sao-paulo.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,monumento-as-bandeiras-e-estatua-doborba-gato-amanhecem-pichados,10000079134>.
- 4 • Aníbal Quijano, "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina", in *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, comp. Edgardo Lander (Buenos Aires: CLACSO - Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2000).
- 5 • Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, "Americanism as a Concept or the Americas in the Modern World-System," *International Social Science Journal* 134 (November, 1992).
- 6 • Luciana Ballestrin, "América Latina e o giro decolonial," *Revista Brasileira Ciência Política* no. 11 (2013): 99, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://www.scielo.br/j/rbcpol/a/DxkN3kQ3XdYYPbwwXH55jhw/?lang=pt>.
- 7 • Walter Benjamin, *Passagens* (São Paulo/Belo Horizonte: Imprensa Oficial/Ed. UFMG, 2006).
- 8 • Michael Löwy, "'A contrapelo' - A concepção dialética da cultura nas teses de Walter Benjamin (1940)", *Lutas Sociais* no. 25/26 (2nd sem. of 2010 and 1st sem. of 2011): p. 22
- 9 • Georges Didi-Huberman, "Devolver uma imagem," in *Pensar a Imagem*, org. Emmanuel Alloa (São Paulo: Autêntica, 2015).
- 10 • Other meanings and practices similar to the monuments discussed here were and are developed by various peoples, in different times and territories.
- 11 • Didi-Huberman, "Devolver uma imagem," 205.
- 12 • Benedict Anderson, *Comunidades imaginadas: reflexões sobre a origem e a expansão do nacionalismo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2008): 30.
- 13 • Maria Angélica Melendi, *Estratégias da arte em uma era de catástrofes* (Belo Horizonte: Cobogó, 2017): 20.

FILING THE STONE, WASHING THE FLAG

14 • Giorgio Agamben, *Profanações* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2007): 79, quoted in Didi-Huberman, “Devolver uma imagem,” 2015.

15 • In December 2018, new headquarters were announced and inaugurated in 2020. The concession of the Casarão Nhonhô Magalhães mansion, in the Higienópolis neighbourhood, was the result of an agreement between the State of São Paulo Department of Culture and Shopping Higienópolis, the private company that owns the mansion. “Em 2019 Paço das Artes terá nova sede,” Department of Culture of the State of São Paulo, December 12, 2018, accessed December 31, 2022, <http://www.cultura.sp.gov.br/em-2019-paco-das-artes-tera-nova-sede/>.

16 • Ilú Obá De Min is an Afóxé group, composed only of women, founded in the city of São Paulo in 2004.

17 • Images of the intervention can be seen in *Sur Journal's* art gallery.

18 • “Minimum Monument,” Néle Azevedo, [n.d.], accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.neleazevedo.com.br/monumento-minimo>.

19 • *Ibid.*

20 • *Damnatio memoriae* is the sentence of “condemnation of memory” applied by the Senate of the Roman Republic. The punishment for this was the deletion of all public appearances and records of a person’s existence so that they would be forgotten by future generations.

21 • Didi-Huberman, “Devolver uma imagem,” 2015.

22 • Images of the intervention can be seen in *Sur Journal's* art gallery.

23 • Gustavo Buntinx, “Lava la bandera: el Colectivo Sociedad Civil y el derrocamiento cultural de la dictadura en el Perú” (manuscript), 9.



BRUNO OLIVEIRA – Brazil

Bruno Oliveira is an educator and visual artist. He is a PhD candidate in Visual Arts at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). He has a Master in Interdisciplinary Latin American Studies (UNILA/PR), is a specialist in Plastic Arts and Contemporaneity (UEMG/MG) and graduated in Computer Science (FUMEC/MG). Oliveira is a researcher of MALOCA - Multidisciplinary Study Group on Urbanism and Architecture of the South of UNILA, where he conducts research on Latin American visual expressions. He is an educator and visual artist at Jardim Miriam Arte Clube (JAMAC), a visual arts and citizenship centre in the South Zone of São Paulo, and a researcher at Acervo Bajubá, a community project that records the memories of Brazilian LGBT+ communities.

email: brunogomesoliveira@gmail.com

Received in October 2022.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Giovanna Cardoso Pereira.

Proofread by Karen Lang.



“This journal is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License”