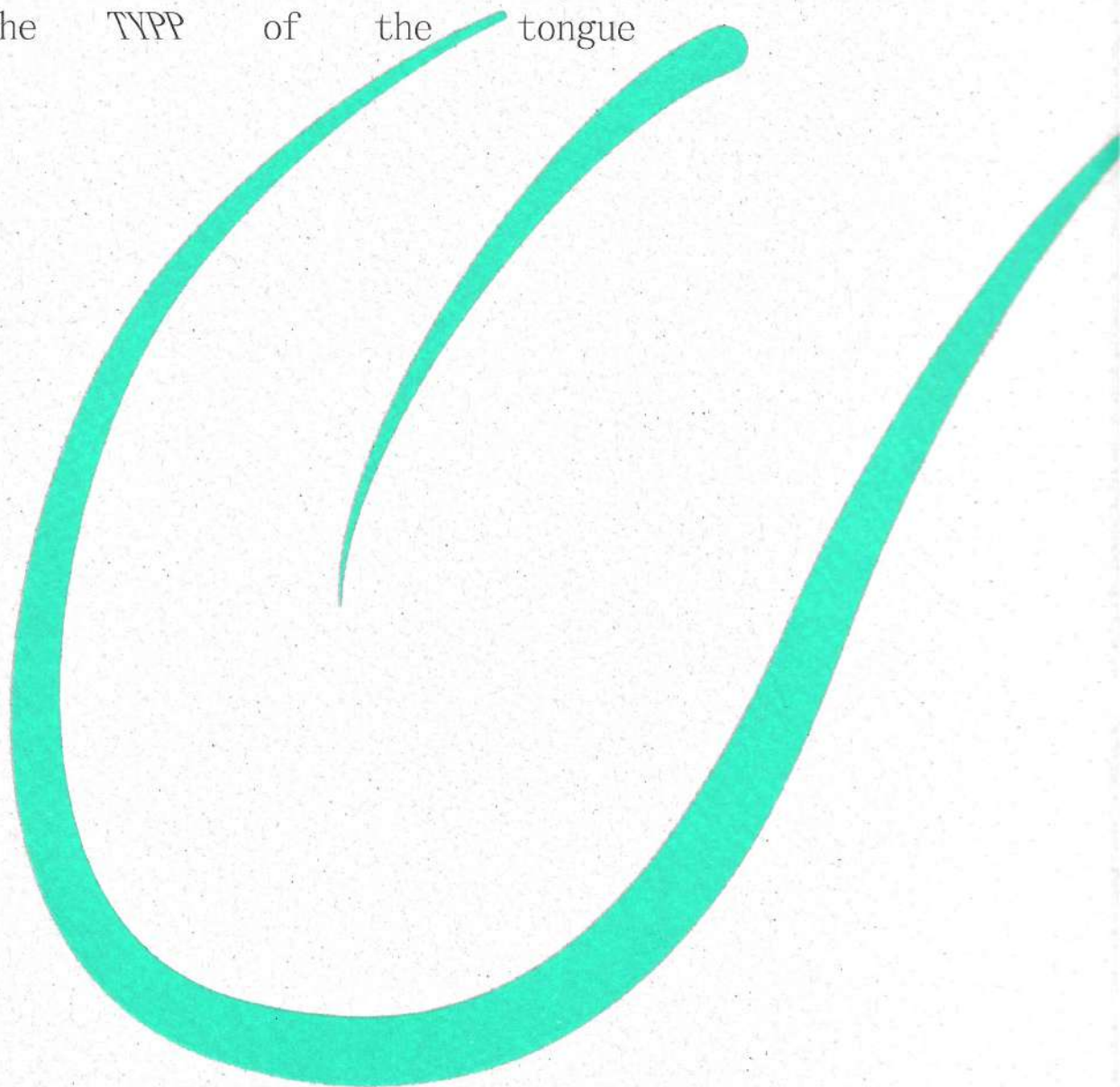


On the TYP of the tongue



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Voices from Bronze and Stone

SIMONA DA POZZO

On the WPP of the tongue

In the last decades, activists have been dealing with the legacy of power by interrupting the narrative flux of monuments. My research focuses on interventions that have a transformative impact on the monument: actions that use the status, the visibility, the shape, the characters, the history and the stories of monuments to subvert the narratives encoded in the object, to enlighten issues, to create a space of confrontation or sharing. Within my *Hacking Monuments* project, I explore

this phenomenon by hacking and weaving multi-layered connections between monuments, citizens, activists and artists. My hacks question and articulate two dimensions: the temporal, where there is a glitch between the permanent and the ephemeral, and the discursive, where I focus on the relational through conversation and transitional objects.

After a series of interviews with artists engaged in hacking monuments, I wanted to have an

exploratory conversation with someone to understand my work-in-progress and bypass my difficulty with writing. Because of the colonial nature of many of the monuments I was talking about with the artists I interviewed, I thought that the perspective of a contemporary feminist and anthropologist, with whom I also have a personal and working relationship of trust, could be a good way to share the fragility and potential of the project. So, I invited Valentina Mutti to have a conversation.

Contemporary studies on material culture invite us to question the subject-object relationship, and it seems to me that that's what hacks on public monuments do. The monument and the artist/activist define themselves mutually, just as in itself the production of material culture defines the subjectivities that produce it. The act of producing a series of objects, whether they are design, art or simple objects, enters into a dialogue with those who make them. This aspect of mutual definition, of the monument object and the artist/activist subject, I believe is at the heart of the actions you study and should always be kept in mind. Marcio Carvalho, for example, the artist who put his belly on the head of a monument, is somehow shaped by the object, showing how materiality is not only of the monument but also of the artist.

In your process, the aspiration is actually to create connections, for example when you link two monuments between Naples and Rotterdam. I would extend the theme by referring to connectivist thinking, i.e. the principle that there are no closed categories or relationships: not only in terms of concepts but also the objects that we use have wider connections than we are used to attribute to them. It seems to me that this has something to do with your work.

How was your sound project Maasgod Voice (2020) born?

There was an artist residency in the middle, between me and the Nile I mean. While I was on residency in Rotterdam, I wanted to develop a sort of connection and extension of what I was doing here in Naples. I was looking for a counterpoint to the Nile, and in Rotterdam I found the Maas river, and I was found by the Maasgod. The monument is the head of the god of the river, indeed it is a little less than a half-bust. My residency overlooked the harbour, the water of the (Nieuwe) Maas. For four months, we (Nicola, my partner, Cosmo, our son, and I) were 5 metres from the water: we spent hours watching the water breathe, watching the Maas swell and recede according to the tides, the flow of the river and Dutch water management technologies. We heard very industrial noises suddenly broken by animals and birds that in Italy we are not used to finding in an urban context. It made me question what the coexistence between species sounds like. I invited Roberto Fiorentini to work on the project with me, and we studied the history of the river, its deviations and containment, and industrial noise and its impact on the animals that inhabit the water... We wanted to understand what kind of acoustic environment the river had become. The river as an entity contaminated by humans, both as an anthropomorphic character and as an anthropic environment and water as a memory device. The duration of the audio that resulted from our process is equivalent to the time taken by a sound emitted at the farthest source to reach the mouth of the river. The process of composition developed around the positioning of the listener, which we identified is that of a body suspended halfway between the bottom of the river and the surface, in the middle of the two banks, at night.

In relation to this I want to share with you a short quote from Making (2019) by Tim Ingold: 'The paradox of monuments is that they can serve as



↑ Simona Da Pozzo and Roberto Fiorentini, *Maasgod Voice* (2020), sound, QR code, stickers and existing monument

memorials only because they have failed the objective set for them by those who originally established their construction. If they had in fact achieved their goal, (...) that is, to limit memory to its beyond, thus guaranteeing immortality to themselves, then there would be no future generations turning back on them and reeling over how they might have been built (...). The monumental structures were designed by their creators to confer precisely this immortality, yet, for those who rediscover them later, they are nothing more than irrefutable proof that the past is finished, dead and buried.'

The hack goes against this idea that the past is dead, that it no longer concerns us. But, at the same time, the hack revitalizes this dialogue between permanence and something that by its nature is ephemeral.

SDP:

Hacks in fact could be seen as Temporary Autonomy Zones (Hakim Bey): gestures of momentary subversion rather than revolutionary acts. The latter tends more towards the destruction or annihilation of the disputed monument. The hack is a proposal more of transformation than of eradication. I'm interested in the phenomenon of monument hacking as a space of interconnection and encounter. A space to play with the voice of the monument; to create new narratives that contaminate the object with the words created around it (the words of passers-by, newspaper articles etc.) because the violation of the monument engages the attention, the gaze, the dialogue of the public.

The riots in Chile in 2019 and the mass media's focus on the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 have given new impetus to the urgency to make the narratives of monuments explicit. The debate on cultural heritage that has resulted from these events has two main approaches, maintaining monuments or removing them, but the act of hacking is also being used by individuals or communities as a third way to manage the heavy legacy of monuments. I'm interested in the hack putting the history of the 'winners' under pressure, as a daily pillory against denial.



Through multiplying and archiving hacks, I would like to share possibilities and visions about the alternative paths and narratives that produce these hacks.

In Milan, the global conversation has created local impetus for a series of important actions, speeches, articles and daily debates around the monument of Indro Montanelli. The monument was dedicated in 2007 to Montanelli, one of the most popular Italian journalists of the 20th century who, in the '30s, as he himself admitted, married a 12-year-old girl from Eritrea during the Italian Fascist colonialist campaign. Most of the current debates have been triggered by the action done by the collective Non Una Di Meno in 2019. The first time we talked about the project you mentioned how the context of their action was part of its outcome.

VM: Yes, it was on 8 March 2019. I joined the International Women's Day demonstration in Milan and amongst many others I attended the action by Non Una di Meno activists when they covered the Montanelli statue in pink paint. Since I was still on the road to the right side of the monument, from my position what struck me most was the sound: I heard an activist read into a megaphone the story of Montanelli's underage wife during the Italo-Ethiopian war. At the same time, I distinctly heard the noise of the pink paint thrown by other activists on the monument, which released a sound amplified throughout the garden. The day after Milan woke up remembering Italy's colonial past.

SDP:

Black Lives Matter's latest actions had a strange retrospective impact on what Non Una Di Meno did in 2019, as the effects of their action have now resurfaced from their state in memory. In the last few weeks, you've been chasing information on the actions and articles related to that hack.

VM: The debate about the Montanelli statue has been revitalized in the last few weeks: a civic group asked for its removal, a student group claimed the act of throwing red paint on the statue in June 2020 and the artist and activist Cristina Donati Meyer added a puppet of a girl in his arms, changing the title of the monument to: 'The elder and the child.' Many articles from different

SIMONA DA POZZO

Until now, Donati Meyer is the only artist who has attempted a hack on the Montanelli monument, but she was very criticized by the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhoods: they found the hack disrespectful because of its sloppy appearance. The monument is in my neighbourhood, Porta Venezia, the district of the Eritrean, Somali and Ethiopian diaspora in Milan. Communities who descend from countries where Italian soldiers used chemical gases against people during the fascist colonizing war. Montanelli took part in this war both as a journalist and a soldier. Today journalists and politicians continue to defend the monument to Montanelli as a tribute to the greatest journalist of the 20th century. So work still needs to be done around it! It would be interesting to invite some of the artists I have known in the last years, often oriented towards serial actions of decolonizing monuments, to hack the Montanelli monument. In most cases, hacks are impromptu acts, but the actions of 'serial hackers' often have a slower pace or a prolonged approach over time. I am interested in understanding if and how a slow and structured practice of hacking and reflection on monuments creates a specific critical approach. What changes in their relationship with the area, in their *savoir-faire* with communities, in their confrontation with dominant narratives? I'm getting in touch with artists (and activists) who work in a more serial way, Like Kiluanji Kia Henda, Sophie Ernst and Christian Jankowski.

SDP:

Yes! Carvalho, who you mentioned, works in series too. Last year he also curated the exhibition 'Demythologize That History and Put it to Rest' for which he invited artists from Angola, Cameroon, Gabon, Iraq, Mozambique and Portugal to create hacks on two monuments: the statues of Otto von Bismarck in Berlin and King Charles I in Lisbon.

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SDP:

For me the difference is strong, both for the repercussions on the hacker and in terms of how the hack takes shape. Activist Therese Patricia Okoumou went to prison when she tried to climb the Statue of Liberty in New York in 2018: she was protesting against Trump, against the kidnapping of the children of 'illegal' migrants. Photojournalists portrayed her under the statue's heel, with the police trying to bring her down, a very iconic image. The legality or illegality of the hack affects its size and duration, both in terms

of production and permanence. Legal hacks, for example, tend to have a longer duration and use formats like installation rather than having a performative nature.

VM: So you mean that legality has to do with temporality?

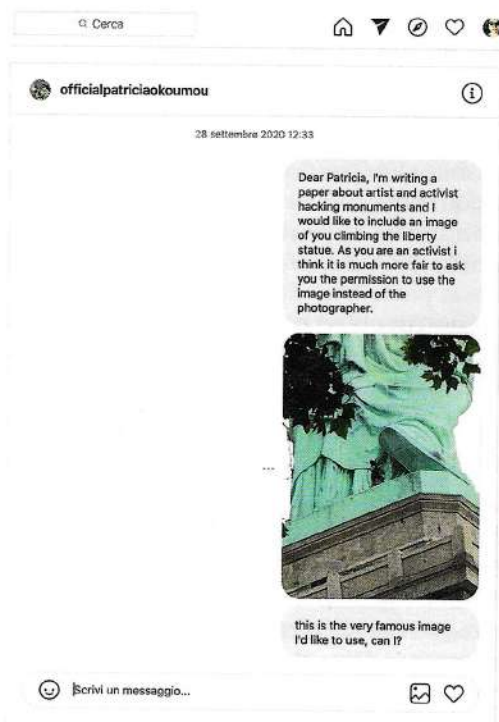
SDP:

The link between legality and temporality is something I would like to reflect on more in the future. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Daniel Buren have done legal, installed hacks. For example in 1970 in Milan, Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the monuments to Vittorio Emanuele and Leonardo Da Vinci and asked permission to do so. In this case, the hack on the Leonardo monument remained for the planned time while the other was contested and sabotaged by citizens because they found the intervention offensive. The relationship between 'respect' and 'offence' deserves deepening because it has many political, legal, aesthetic and community connections!

Buren's hack *Sculpture Contre-Sculpture* (also called *Touroscope*, Rotterdam 1988) on the Calandmonument (1907), which brought visitors at eye level with the winged figure on the stone obelisk, consisted of scaffolding that concealed and at the same time made the monument accessible (scaffolding is a device that is widely used in legal hacks). The installation remained for three months, it was a commission from the city, and from the material in the BKOR archive in Rotterdam you can see what kind of control the city can have on these kinds of events, i.e. the possibility of bargaining on the final result. Negotiation is interesting in itself because it can be the ground for developing projects that precisely reflect on institution-artist-citizen bargaining.

I am very interested in the gap between the two types of hack, the legal and the illegal. The former involves a dialogue with institutions and representation, whereas the latter more often takes the form of a dispute with an ephemeral attitude. In the specific field of interventions considered as artworks, I am interested more in hacks where the performative and processual dimensions stress the temporal dimension of the monument. Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Segundo Regicídio* (*The Black Square*, Lisbon 2018) is

← Screenshot of a private conversation with Patricia Okoumou on Simona Da Pozzo's Instagram account





an example of that approach. In this intervention three levels of temporality overlap: that of the monument, that of the installation and that of the performance. The artist places a cube on the head of the statue of Charles I in Lisbon while a group of women perform a decolonization ritual in which singing is an important part: the voices are the performers' own, and are not attributed to the statue, and the percussion of their hands on their skirts creates a rhythm. This ensemble of costumes, singing and percussion quotes the liberation and the communication strategies used against slave traders.

VM:

Also, it would be interesting to explore the topic of the voice that you cover in your work: Do other hackers use sound? Do they give voice to monuments? Apart from metaphorically, do they use voice in a literal sense?

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SDP:

In many interventions on monuments, the voice is at the centre of the action. With *Little Figures* (2003), Sara Vanagt created a screenplay for three monuments in Brussels which is performed by three children that the artist met in the square where the monuments are located.

The screenplay is inspired by the biographies of the characters represented by the monuments (Godefroid de Bouillon, King Albert I and Reine Elisabeth), by the vicissitudes of the objects and by the square both as a scenography and as a panorama of daily life. The dialogue passes from French to Dutch, from one century to the next.

There is also the series of interventions in which artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, through video projections and audio, makes people he interviews give new identity to monuments: with

Monument for the Living (2020) he amplifies the voices of refugees and created a site-specific intervention at Madison Square Park in New York.

VM: And how did you work on the voice in your practice? How did the subject of sound emerge for you?

SDP:

Conversation has an important role in my work, and the voice is the way in which I'm touched by words. The voice is an ancient sensory reference point, but also a coding space for meaning. I'm very fascinated by how the voice is born around different languages; I can feel in myself how much each language I speak lives in a specific resonant cavity of my body. It is a way of making the body vibrate, to live it, and a way to expand the body in space and to empathize (or not) with others. The voice can be a space for critical thinking about power and how it manifests in forms of discrimination, and I'm thinking a lot about this in relation to my next hack focused on the voice of the Nile monument.

Corpo di Napoli (the body of Naples) is what inhabitants have called the Nile monument for the last five centuries. When the monument was found under the remains of an Egyptian temple in the 16th century, the breastfeeding gesture of the figure meant that the inhabitants thought the statue represented the body of the mermaid Parthenope, from whose remains, according to myth, the city rose. So Napoli and Parthenope are synonymous. The monument represents, at least since then, both the God of the Nile and the mermaid Parthenope, and I'm currently looking for their voices in collaboration with local inhabitants. We are searching for voices in which the categories of gender, species and kingdom lose their power to create hierarchies.

About the contributor:

Valentina Matti is interested in internal and international migration, higher education in Africa and forms of association and participation of migrants and civil society in Italy. She is based in Milan and works as a consultant for different research institutes and organizations dealing with African diaspora communities in Italy, asylum seekers and refugees in reception centres, universities in West Africa and the ethnography of audience participation in artistic performances.