

Cop to Conductor: Negotiating and Remapping Meaning in Existing Public Art

Todd Berreth

ABSTRACT

There is a crisis in our communities about the tributes to a shared civic life represented in existing public artwork and monuments. Culture wars are being waged herein and appear increasingly unreconcilable. This paper discusses this moment and describes the range of strategies artists and designers have used to remediate these works. It presents a project description of an interactive artwork that suggests innovative approaches in this realm. The author introduces a conceptual model which served as inspiration for the piece that may be useful when discussing and designing such interventions.

Todd Berreth

Department of Art + Design
Visual Narrative Cluster
North Carolina State University
U.S.A.
<todd_berreth@ncsu.edu>

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Background

There is a crisis of public perception in our communities, about the material tributes to a shared civic and cultural life, its heroes and their narratives. Historian Paul Farber, director of the Monument Lab, notes that “monuments are always products of their time (and) always reflections of power” [1]. Considering the shifts in political and cultural power across all strata of the United States in the twentieth and early 21st centuries, it’s no surprise that the monuments of past generations no longer have a presumed sanctity and inviolability, faced with diverse populations of growing agency, who now question the legacies and forces that kept them down, and any perceived “false idols.”

We are reminded of this fact with the flashpoint attention being given to civic artifacts in the Southern United States in 2017, referring of course to the monuments of the region’s Confederate and Civil War past, statuary and the like. In the moments before and after contentious episodes in Charlottesville, Virginia [2], and Durham, North Carolina [3] (Fig. 1), among others, activists demanded a range of responses regarding these works, on a spectrum from destroying them to leaving them untouched, to a multitude of interventions in between. This phenomenon is certainly not limited to the South (or the United States).



Fig. 1. Charlottesville and Durham Confederate statues. (Photos left © 2017 Reuters/Justin Ide; right © 2017 Kate Medley)

Currently, New York City has numerous existing public memorials and artworks under reevaluation. Some of these are nearly universally condemned; a bronze depicting J. Marion Sims, the “father of modern gynecology” (who barbarically practiced on unanesthetized black female slaves) was relocated without protest [4]. Others are more contentious and have diverse groups of antagonists. What to do with the form of Christopher Columbus, who presides over Columbus Circle, a cultural icon who once led a wave of systematic racial genocide? Former president Theodore Roosevelt is memorialized astride a horse at the entrance of the American Museum of Natural History. At his heels and walking, are an African American and Native American—to some, representing white-supremacist imagery and unjust social hierarchies [5].

Such examples of community re-appraisal and conflict, where changing dynamics force a “coming to terms” with symbols of a factious history, is nothing new. What is unique is the technological and media landscapes we live in, where citizens’ thought-space increasingly exists in digitally mediated spheres, and people live in their own virtual realities, disconnected and alienated from a diversity of neighbors. It hints at an overall decrease of social capital in American culture, a phenomenon described by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*, where “the fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted” [6]. There is no doubt that as we collectively re-approach existing public artworks, literally or figuratively, we often arrive there from separate places, foreigners to each other, seeing differing things and speaking different languages.

Motivation

In this environment, it is difficult to negotiate a path forward. What are we to do as artists? Is there any chance to participate in this effort and perhaps design interventions that might build bridging languages, help generate a productive and respectful public exchange, provide insights, and ultimately be healing?

I approach this question as a computational artist, where the medium we work with is rarely as weighty or enduring as bronze or stone. The digital medium has its strengths, one of its most useful being its ability to remap meaning, through the superimposition or juxtaposition of media artifacts. Can we build new visions that trace a future geologic change in culture, aspire to transform the aggregate community’s view of the contested artifact, and suggest a constructive mutual future?

Spectrum of Interventions

We should ask ourselves: Does an existing public artwork continue to serve a useful purpose, can it be redeemed and made relevant (if it needs to) or should it be dismantled? It is helpful to look at a few precedents, to discuss the continuum of responses.

At one extreme is an intervention that is not artful, except arguably in the performative sense—that of civil disobedience, resulting in the destruction of the contested artifact. The earlier mentioned action in Durham is an example. Here activists chose not to pursue legal remediation of their grievances, but instead transgressed to make an aggressive unilateral political statement (pulling the statue down). The result is noted by the void left by the disputed work. In some cases, it can be argued that the void is ultimately a positive and healing thing.

The next category involves relocating of the work, spatial recontextualization. An important project in this vein is designer Ákos Eleőd’s *Memento Park* in Budapest, Hungary. Monuments from Hungary’s Communist era (1949–1989), Lenin, Marx and others, are moved from their original locations and resited together as an interpretive experience (Fig. 2). The repositioning depowers the original artifacts by segregating them into a more powerful interpretive space, attempting to overwhelm whatever influence the original piece sustains [7].

Other approaches address these works in situ. Some of these involve clandestine or unauthorized interventions—defacing the object, staging protests, mapping other associations onto the artifact and site. The J. Marion Sims statue attracted activists and performance artists, reenacting gruesome tableaux that highlighted disturbing histories. The Theodore Roosevelt statue was vandalized and coated with fake blood. The artistic collective The Illuminator has worked with guerrilla projections, staging protest interventions to sometimes illicitly intervene on a diversity of issues and landmarks, including NSA whistleblowing exploits (Fig. 3) and the Occupy Wall Street Movement [8].



Fig. 2. *Memento Park*. (Photo © 2003 Szoborpark. CC-BY 2.0 license.)

There are numerous efforts that instead cooperatively worked with community leaders and monument stewards. One seminal example is Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Bunker Hill Project*, staged in 1998. Here Wodiczko collected stories and imagery, illuminating a decades-long epidemic of unsolved murders and police/community dysfunction that occurred in Charlestown, Massachusetts. He then projected these narratives onto the Bunker Hill Monument, a famous 221-ft obelisk in the city (Fig. 4). As the artist explained, "We should be able to call these monuments into question, to ask them what they think about what is happening today and ask ourselves if we still believe in the ideals of these monuments. We should even be able to shock and astonish these monuments" [9].

In these examples, we might examine the net benefit of the intervention. Does it create a space for dialogue, inject meaningful contexts, allow the participation of missing voices, defuse tensions and ultimately bridge the distance between disaffected parties? The validity of any of these aspirations is up for debate, depending on the circumstances and artifact. That said, any approach that unilaterally asserts power, without space for mutual respect, a shared history or the potential for dialogue, risks exacerbating whatever conflict is at play.

Project

I recently completed a work with two collaborators, Patrick Fitzgerald and Emil Polyak, that involved an intervention with an existing public sculpture. While the site in question is not actively contested, there are enough parallels to much of the previous discussion that the work might be a useful example.



Fig. 3. The Illuminator, *Edward Snowden Intervention*. (© 2015 Kyle Depew)



Fig. 4. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Bunker Hill Project*. (© 1998 Krzysztof Wodiczko)

The location of the project was Richmond, Virginia. The context was a curated one-night light-art festival hosted in the city's downtown in November 2017. Our chosen site was the side of the Richmond Police Headquarters Building. Featured on a gray exterior wall is an existing monumental sculpture of a police officer's head, created by artist Michael Stutz in 2005, titled *A Thin Blue Line* (Fig. 5). We proposed transforming the figure into a train conductor, through projection mapping, and surrounding the head with an interactive pachinko game and other generated digital media. The piece would be titled



Fig. 5. Michael Stutz, *A Thin Blue Line*, 2005. (Photo © 2017 Google)

“Mr. Conductor,” a playful reference both to the beloved Thomas the Tank Engine children’s television character and to electricity, connecting the piece to Richmond’s history as a regional leader in the rail and electrical production industry. With some assurances and negotiation, the police department and festival approved the piece.

Consider, for a moment, Richmond’s other histories. The city was the short-lived capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War. The contested statue of General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville was largely paid for by the Sons of Confederate Veterans, an organization established here in 1896 and still existent. Like other southern cities, Charlottesville has a long history of Jim Crow–era injustices and continues to be relatively racially segregated.

One can’t help but wonder what a diversity of communities sees in the *A Thin Blue Line* sculpture. It is at turns evocative and beautiful, yet also looms over the street with vacant eyes, a vaguely menacing and fascist-looking figure. The idea of “a thin blue line” imagines the police as a fiercely loyal brotherhood, the symbolic boundary between order and anarchy, and the protector of the people against victimization. Considering that the police traditionally enforce prevailing power structures, it’s likely that historically marginalized communities approach this figure warily, remembering painful legacies. The opportunity for intervention here was irresistible, if only to alter, mediate and soften this image.

Pachinko is a gambling game, and the tension between chance and fate, and (unreasonable) hope confronting a rigged system, is implicit. Visitors propelled a ball into the works, which was eventually funneled one of two places, either into the head of the conductor or through gates, which triggered graphics and video loops seen at street level. The imagery represented the range of railroading history in the South—the manufacturing process, commercials of 1950s white passengers served by black porters, trains’ mechanisms, black Gandy Dancer work crews laying track (sometimes forced labor), railroad tycoons, segregated rail cars and so forth, presenting the true gamut of the era (Fig. 6). Once the conductor’s head filled up with balls, it then dumped them onto the street, exclaiming “All Aboard!” with a paired train whistle. A soundtrack cycled through a range of train songs and related African-American spirituals.

The work is a computational generative system, where interactivity, curated algorithms and media meet with intrinsic randomness and happenstance. The meaning of the piece arises emergently, through the visitor’s interaction with the entire system—the existing/alterd sculpture, the interactive pachinko game, the video imagery and soundtrack, and the unpredictable frame of reference each viewer brings to the experience (Fig. 7).

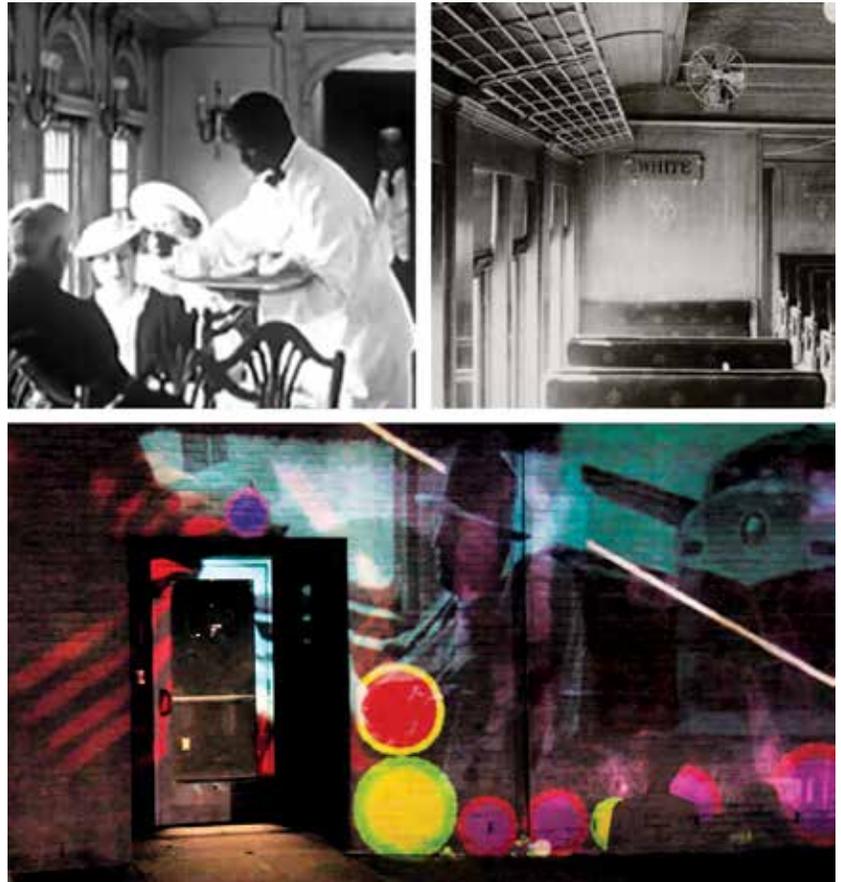


Fig. 6. Railroad media and generative collage. (Top © Smithsonian, public domain. Bottom © 2017 BFP)



Fig. 7. Todd Berreth, Pat Fitzgerald and Emil Polyak, *Mr. Conductor*, 2017. (© 2017 BFP)

Nearly everyone loves trains and carnival games (at least as a child), so a breadth of community could approach the work with a sense of interest, nostalgia and even wonder. It was playful and whimsical, and encouraged visitors to drop their guard.

The piece didn't present an explicit indictment, was open to alternate readings, and created a common space for engagement, emergent storytelling and dialogue, where a multitude of parties could approach the same artifacts and ponder a shared history. What we expected was that the context (the police building and sculpture) were part of the dynamic of the piece. The image of the police officer or railroad conductor would at turns assert itself, influencing the viewer's reading of the work.

Cop to Conductor

I sketched a conceptual model for myself which began to articulate a range of design responses to contested public artworks—this served as an artistic inspiration in the piece's evolution. We might imagine the polar conditions of a continuum of intervention strategies, considering how any art piece addresses questions of power. I'll term these *cop* and *conductor* modes.

I use the terms “cop” and “conductor” in the most inclusive (including multiple meanings) and non-pejorative sense. *Cop* would include the noun definition *police officer* and *law enforcer*, as well as the verb definition, *to catch or arrest* and *to strike (an attitude or pose)* (“I copped an attitude, acted tough”). Likewise, *conductor* would include a *train agent*, an *electrical conduit*, a *facilitator on a mutual journey*, and a *musical conductor*.

This dichotomy is interesting, as it forces a mapping of behavior that doesn't mirror existing preconceptions of action (reactionary/progressive). Any response to a contested artifact or situation, regardless of political persuasion, will approach the questions of power on this continuum.

Cop modes tends toward overt expressions of unilateral power, black and white thinking, opposition (us versus them, "a thin blue line") and aggressive reactions to perceived offenses. Conductor modes try to divert oppositional power into mutual constructive avenues, search for common ground ("all aboard") and build bridges. Interesting analogues of this polarity abound—impede/facilitate, enforce/persuade, intimidate/reassure, dissipate power (a resistor)/carry and route power (a conductor), and others.

Both modes are used to a greater or lesser extent in all the interventions discussed, and the effectiveness of each strategy is worth studying. I would argue that when addressing sites that are heavily contested, emotionally charged and have painful legacies, it's not always constructive or effective to be a cop. We should be looking for more opportunities to be conductors—to design interventions that allow oppositional communities to look at the same thing and, if only for a moment, drop their guard and start a dialogue.

There were a breadth of reactions to our artwork, but the most consistent, heard from both police representatives and a diversity of local residents, focused on the alteration of the police image—first, that it was wonderful to transform a stolid (and menacing) figure into a delightful one, and more unexpectedly, that both the police department and the community began to see the police as participating in, and not just policing, the festival. Such altered perceptions and coming together (if for a night), and the potential they represent, instill anticipation for other positive exchanges—this seems a promising and hopeful path forward.

References and Notes

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