

# Contemporary Approaches to Commemorative Public Art Monumental Developments

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## Chapter 9

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### The Ephemeral as a Strategy of Intervention

Reframing the Columbus Monument  
in Madrid

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## 9 The Ephemeral as a Strategy of Intervention

### Reframing the Columbus Monument in Madrid

*Johanna Spanke*

On a bright winter morning in January 2022, passers-by in Madrid witnessed a strange spectacle: suddenly, the statue of Christopher Columbus, a familiar fixture of Madrid's cityscape, was on the move. Or rather, it was being moved. Dangling from a crane, Columbus – separated from his supporting column and massive pedestal – was lifted high into the sky, where he hovered above the heads of bystanders (Fig. 9.1). Moments later, onlookers saw Columbus being deposited, now lying flat, onto the back of a truck. There, he was secured with transport straps and then driven through the Spanish capital. What was happening to one of the city's most famous monuments? people viewing this unusual spectacle must have wondered. Had the Madrid City Council finally decided to dispose of the statue in response to recent worldwide protests against racism? And how would the Madrid public react to the possible removal of the figure of Christopher Columbus, once celebrated as a Spanish national hero, but portrayed more recently as a brutal coloniser and initiator of a history of genocide and slavery? According to the Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, immediate reactions were mixed, some passers-by were



Figure 9.1 Iván Argote, *Paseo*, 2022, video still.

Courtesy: Iván Argote. Reproduced with permission.

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astonished, and others were amused or reacted with concern at the possible removal of their national hero:

A mother on her way to school asks: ‘Excuse me, which statue is it? Ah, it’s Columbus. Look, children, Columbus is leaving’. ... A woman in her thirties who arrives in a hurry to work wants to know: ‘And where are they going to put it?’ Another one takes pictures non-stop and says: ‘How funny!’ Cars slow down as they pass; some stop, mobile phone in hand. A woman rolls down her window: ‘Take good care of it’. ‘I hope they never take that statue away, we’re proud of Columbus’, says another, a little uneasy.

(Bas 2022)<sup>1</sup>

In all likelihood, few of these passers-by would have even noticed the monument during their daily walks through the city had they not observed the statue dangling from a crane or lying on the back of a truck on that winter day. In 1927, the Austrian writer Robert Musil famously remarked on the paradoxical invisibility of monuments, writing that

what strikes one most about monuments is that one doesn’t notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments. There is no doubt they are erected in order to be seen, indeed to arouse attention, but at the same time they are somehow impregnated against attention: it runs down them like water on oilcloth, without stopping for an instant.

(Musil 1986, 320)

Like everything that is designed to be permanent, according to Musil, monuments eventually lose their “ability to impress” (Musil 1986, 321).

Although, as Alois Riegl (1982, 21) wrote in his text “Der moderne Denkmalkultus”, originally published in 1903, they were built to serve “the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events ... alive in the minds of future generations”, monuments have the habit of receding into the background of awareness. They blend into the cityscape, becoming habitual features of the everyday environment where more than ever, in this age of big city traffic, glaring advertisements and neon signs, they must compete for our attention.

Moreover, monuments that were self-explanatory for contemporary audiences are often no longer comprehensible from a present-day perspective. The further we are removed from the represented subjects, the more remote their stories become. Likewise, we no longer grasp the intentions of the individuals who long ago sanctified these individuals in monumental form, and who attempted to make sense of the stories of earlier centuries and to interpret them for the sake of nationalistic myths. Originally, these monuments were built to communicate, to convey a message “by means of inscriptions, gestural representations or attributes” (Polzer 2023, 22).<sup>2</sup> And yet they cease to speak to us at some point, as they fade into oblivion. For many people, the recent protests in favour of the removal of colonial monuments from public display, many resulting in their toppling, vandalism or even destruction, have presumably provided a stimulus to notice them in the first place.

These protests have raised the question of whether and in which ways these monuments still have any real function at all. Should all of them be removed? Or are there ways of contextualising and critically addressing monuments that are linked to problematic

aspects of history – strategies that neither erase history nor leave such monuments in public space unquestioned? What might an active engagement look like that calls attention to these monuments through practices of critical reframing? What solutions have been proposed that – contrary to the tendency to replace or counter these monuments by responding to them with comparable levels of monumentality – challenge the notions of monumentality and permanence altogether through the use of contrasting materials, temporary interventions or performative strategies? In this chapter, I explore these questions with reference to the Columbus monument in Madrid and two interventions that can be understood as artistic strategies for countering monumentality.

Neither of the two interventions has yet been extensively discussed in any scholarly literature. Fabiola Arellano Cruz recently analysed the Columbus monuments in Madrid and Barcelona in the context of the “counter-memory activism” of various decolonial collectives, which primarily campaigned for the removal of the monuments (Arellano Cruz 2024). In her analysis, however, she did not take into account the artistic interventions discussed in this chapter, which in my opinion contribute important perspectives that go beyond the impulse of removal and, as ephemeral, performative and time-based acts, also broaden the view of what has been discussed previously under the concept of counter-monumentality.

### **Iván Argote’s *Paseo***

To draw public attention to Madrid’s Columbus monument by means of an ephemeral performance was the objective of Colombian artist Iván Argote, who sent a cork replica – not the real marble statue – on the above-mentioned journey across the city. Argote filmed Columbus’ trip for his video *Paseo* (Stroll). In post-production, he deleted the original, three-metre-tall statue that stands at the top of the column, creating the illusion of its removal by showing the seemingly empty base in the background of the frame. Included in the film are the reactions of stunned witnesses to the performance, who can be seen looking or pointing at the replica of the statue of the Italian navigator, filming or photographing him as he is taken on this expedition. Through Argote’s performative intervention, Columbus – who was transformed during the nineteenth century into a larger-than-life historical figure – experiences a twenty-first-century devaluation: “Hanging there, he looks like a little man”, a passer-by, quoted in *El País*, remarked about the spectacle (Bas 2022).<sup>3</sup> The artist sought to provoke what he calls “a moment of speculation. ... A performance on wheels that generates that little electric shock in people who see it, my way of considering what happens if public space is different. An issue that generates a real confrontation, because there are those who are so attached to things as they are, or believe they will last forever” (Bas 2022).<sup>4</sup>

The way in which Argote stages this “journey” of a fallen hero in his film is reminiscent of a scene in the 2003 German comedy *Good Bye, Lenin!*, directed by Wolfgang Becker.<sup>5</sup> Here, another replica of a statue can be seen in an airborne state, this time the upper segment of a portrait of the former Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, shown in the process of removal from the Berlin cityscape after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. Tied to a helicopter and appearing almost weightless, Lenin seems to wave goodbye to the protagonist’s mother, formerly a dedicated socialist, as he is carried down Karl-Marx-Allee.

Theo Angelopoulos’ 1995 film *Ulysses’ Gaze*, whose plot leads through the crumbling post-Cold War Balkan region, also contains a central scene depicting the removal of a monumental statue of Lenin. Here, the dismantled figure is lifted by a crane into the sky

piece by piece and then reassembled and tied horizontally to a ship, which can be seen later travelling along the Danube. The statue's arm is still raised imperiously in the air. Now, however, Lenin gestures into the void, not unlike Columbus, whose previous vertical, statuesque posture with the upwards-striving flag is neutralised when he is laid down horizontally in Argote's performance.

*Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Ulysses' Gaze* both use sculptural representations of Lenin, who "has become symbolic of the spectre of communism" (Brock 2021, 46), in attempts to visually capture the climate of ambivalence that prevailed towards the end of the Cold War. Staged here in place of a violent toppling of symbols is a melancholy send-off. In Angelopoulos' film, the inhabitants of the villages on the banks of the Danube greet Lenin not with aversion but instead with awe; some cross themselves or even kneel down. The enormous power that still emanates from the former Soviet leader is palpable and calls attention to a complicated transitional period that, as Svetlana Boym emphasised in her seminal study *The Future of Nostalgia*, was shrouded in a sentimental yearning for what had been (or might have been). Boym (2001, 41) distinguishes between what she calls "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia: "Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time". While the latter may take a playful, humorous approach, the former, according to Boym, is a form of dangerous desire, a rigid insistence on reinventing what has purportedly been lost on the basis of imagined nationalist narratives.

The Columbus monument in Madrid can be situated in Boym's category of "restorative nostalgia". Its erection was an expression of Spain's endeavour to reinvent the glorious era of imperial expansion at a time when it had already lost nearly all of its colonies (see Krauel 2013, 16–17). During this period, Spanish historiography underwent a nationalist revision. While the image of Spain as a colonial power had been negatively characterised for centuries by the "Black Legend", which had portrayed Spain as the cruellest of all of the European nations that conquered the Americas, this depiction was literally whitewashed by nineteenth-century Hispanism – an ideology that asserted a transatlantic unity between Spain and Latin America – through the counter-narrative of the "White Legend of Spanish imperialism" (Feros 2005, 111). This "White Legend" portrayed Spain's conquest and colonialism as beneficial, and the civilising aims of the Spanish Crown were emphasised over commercial interests. However, the Hispanism of the late nineteenth century served precisely a commercial purpose, since one of its main aims was to ensure continued access to trade (see Arbaiza 2020).

As a unifying bridge, Columbus stood for this claimed "fraternal harmony between Spain and the Americas" (Schmidt-Nowara 2006, 52). He ascended now as a "symbol of Spain's reinvented colonialism and national history" and, although his foreign birth and affiliations with rival nations made him a "vulnerable symbol" (Schmidt-Nowara 2006, 64) within this nationalist narrative, he became the central figure of the Spanish national imagination during the late nineteenth century. Columbus veneration reached a climax during the 400th-anniversary celebrations of this "discovery", which took place in Madrid in 1892. These observances included a parade that re-enacted Columbus' arrival in the Americas and the subsequent conquest. While Columbus himself was present only in the form of a bust, his first expedition was represented by replicas of his three ships, with the actors representing members of their respective crews parading through the streets of the capital (Blanco 2012, 100–1).

It was on this occasion that the *Monumento a Cristóbal Colón* was handed over to the city. The 17-metre-tall monument (Fig. 9.2), which shows Columbus standing at the top



*Figure 9.2* Arturo Mélida (pedestal) and Jerónimo Suñol (sculpture), *Monumento a Colón*, 1881–1885, inaugurated in 1892, Carrara marble, Plaza de Colón, Madrid.

*Courtesy:* Javier Perez Montes, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

of a towering column, was intended to convey Spain's sense of superiority as the nation of discovery. The figure of Columbus, carved from white Italian marble by the sculptor Jerónimo Suñol, holds the Royal Standard of Castile in his right hand. Visible near his feet, below the standard, is a globe that rests on a mooring bollard that is wrapped tightly with a rope. The pedestal was designed by the architect Arturo Mélida. Strongly dominant, it catches the eye immediately when we view the monument, for it breaks "with the traditional idea of the pedestal as a mere support, and to such an extent that the sculpture of Columbus appears almost secondary" (Reyero 2003, 51). The architectural elements of the base of the column echo the Isabelline Gothic style that was dominant during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, a period that laid the foundation for the Spanish colonial empire, recalled as a glorious era during the late nineteenth century, when the empire was in decline.

In high relief, the four side panels of the column's base illustrate various episodes through which Columbus' biography and the history of Spain are intertwined. While two scenes depict events that culminate in his first journey (Columbus is shown presenting his plans to Diego de Deza and being received by Isabella I of Castile), the southern and northern sides of the pedestal feature Columbus' expedition itself. The relief on the southern side bears an image of the Madonna of the Pillar together with the date of his "discovery" (12 October 1492) at her feet, and below this, the names of the crews of the *Pinta*, the *Santa Maria* and the *Niña*, the three ships with which Columbus set out on his first voyage. The north side features a depiction of Columbus' ship, the *Santa Maria*, whose deck carries a globe with a ribbon reading "Nuevo Mundo". Together with the inscriptions above and below the ship, this side of the pedestal bears the text: "Columbus gave Castile and León a New World".

Brought into focus in the pedestal reliefs – installed at eye level with pedestrians – in this way is Columbus' voyage as the achievement of a determined and visionary navigator, the embodiment of the Renaissance man, who triumphed over the sceptics of his time. While the two scenes show preparations for the voyage and highlight Spanish participation through the figures of Isabella and Diego de Deza, the others refer to the voyage itself. Columbus' ship, which literally carries the "New World" homeward on its deck in the name of the Spanish crown, is highlighted here, but all three ships and the members of their all-Spanish crews are mentioned by name. While Columbus crowns the monument as their visionary leader, its foundation pays tribute to the Spaniards who contributed to the success of the enterprise, to whom national pride extends here, just as it did during the celebratory parade of 1892.

Argote's video *Paseo* takes up the motif of the journey. This voyage, however, is not a triumphant one. Columbus is presented here not as an active pioneer of progress, but instead in a passive state, lying down on the truck, which functions here as his *Santa Maria*, his Modern-day vessel. The trip through the city referred to in the title of Argote's video is forcibly imposed on Columbus. At the mercy of others, he is hung from a crane and tied to a truck, alone now, separated from the crew that supported him on his expedition, commemorated so prominently on the monument's pedestal.

Without the pedestal, Columbus is deprived of the primary stabilising element. Exceptionally imposing and visually dominant, the pedestal of the Columbus monument in Madrid is an integral part of the larger conception, an expression of the edifice's endurance and longevity, as well as of its political agenda. The pedestal as the "epitome of immobility" (Springer 1987/88, 369) and the solid, often stone materials used for it preserve and support the concept of the monument as a timeless memory on a formal and material level.

The pedestal also defines the viewer's relationship to the monument. The higher the base, the further away the sculptural figure is from the viewer. The statue on the pedestal is elevated visually and hence invested with a higher authority. This authority can also be experienced physically: the typical direction of the viewers' gaze is diagonally upwards – in the case of the Columbus monument in Madrid, visitors gaze upwards at the top of an extremely tall column – and hence must tilt their heads backward (Springer 1987/88, 370).

With *Paseo*, Argote dissolves this hierarchy. Columbus is – at least seemingly – taken off his pedestal and placed on the truck at eye level with passers-by (Fig. 9.3). This offers spectators a close-up view of the statue, enabling them to study its details, something otherwise impossible given the height of the column. Now, they can discover the discoverer. Columbus is presented lying on his back, rather than standing, as though incapacitated. Again, this encourages spectators to move, to engage in an active form of viewing. This time, however, they have to tilt their heads not backwards, but to the side to follow the positioning of the figure. In this way, they are invited to engage with the monument actively, and with their own attitudes towards it.

By allowing Columbus to dangle in the air, by tilting, moving and hence destabilising him, Argote encourages viewers to question the monumental fixity of history. He achieves this not least of all by incorporating the statue's fixation into his performance. Columbus is lashed to the truck – clearly visible to passers-by – and held in place by thick transport straps. The staging of the tied-down figure thus demonstrates precisely the moment of instability, the danger of Columbus potentially rolling away, which is forcefully prevented by the transport straps. The performance therefore exposes a pseudo-stability that is achieved by artificial means. Columbus' fixation at the top of the column, a function of its massive base, on the other hand, which gives the figure weight and hence stability, appears ostensibly natural and is therefore not questioned



Figure 9.3 Iván Argote, *Paseo*, 2022, video still.

Courtesy: Iván Argote. Reproduced with permission.

by viewers. But as we have seen in recent years, when many statues have been toppled around the world, this stability is deceptive. Suddenly, these statues too no longer stood far above viewers, but lay at the feet of their pedestals, having been forcibly brought to the ground – often with surprising ease. At the start of his film, Argote holds Columbus in suspension. He has not yet fallen, but no longer stands upright on his column, at a height that removes him from any criticism.

In the Albarrán Bourdais Gallery in Madrid, Argote's replica of the statue – along with his video of the performance – was subsequently presented in a recumbent position, as though it had been toppled and fallen into a basement where, in a state of ruinous decay, it had been overgrown by vegetation. The gallery space thus resembled a warehouse or even a graveyard, where Columbus was laid to rest as an outdated symbol, together with the ideas he once embodied. The plants overgrowing Argote's Columbus are so-called "invasive alien species", aggressive types of vegetation that are non-native to the local ecosystem. According to the artist, Madrid's city council spends more than five million Euros annually to eradicate these types of rapidly proliferating plants, which reached Europe as a consequence of colonial trade. Argote explains: "In this installation, nature retakes power over the symbol, reminding us how futile and childish our ideas of eternal civilisations are" (Argote 2022).<sup>6</sup>

The fixing of history in monument form is particularly interesting in relation to Columbus, since even before his resemantisation in the twenty-first century, there already existed multiple versions of the navigator, through which he was repeatedly reconstructed and adapted. After having fallen into contempt at the end of his lifetime and then into oblivion, Columbus was revived by the nineteenth century as a heroic figure, when he played an important role for several countries seeking to define themselves as nations with unique national characters and identities. Given the extremely fragmentary historical evidence concerning his biography, which gave rise to speculation regarding the year and place of his birth, his nationality and appearance, and even his place of burial (Rahn Phillips 1992, 494–7), Columbus was especially susceptible, as an empty vessel, to being invested with numerous projections. Against the background of these historical uncertainties, Matthew Dennis has spoken of the "utility of mystery" (Dennis 2002, 120) in connection with Columbus. Columbus' "vagueness" (Dennis 2002, 132) made him available as an identity-forming figure in various directions.

### **Luzinterruptus' *Colón lava más blanco***

The second temporary intervention, discussed below, addresses this notion of Columbus as an empty vessel. With *Colón lava más blanco* (Colón Washes Whiter), erected in 2013, and hence prior to the Black Lives Matter protests drawing renewed attention to these types of statues, the collective Luzinterruptus had already set up a temporary counter-monument alongside the Columbus monument in Madrid (Fig. 9.4). Like Argote, the aim of the group was to challenge the stability of such stagings of national identity and of dominant historical narratives. Cristóbal Colón is the Spanish version of the Italian explorer's name. Colón is also the name of a well-known brand of Spanish laundry detergent. To realise their project, Luzinterruptus obtained 50 white, recycled detergent containers. They affixed labels to the containers and inserted interior lighting, using them to construct "a simplified version of the monument" (Luzinterruptus 2013).

The impetus for the installation of *Colón lava más blanco* was the second relocation of the Columbus monument in Madrid, which took place in 2009, and returned the



Figure 9.4 Luzinterruptus, *Colón lava más blanco*, 2013, artistic intervention next to the Columbus monument in Madrid.

Photo and courtesy: Gustavo Sanabria and Luzinterruptus. Reproduced with permission.

monument from the Plaza de Colón to its original location, a traffic island between Paseo de Recoletos, Paseo de la Castellana and Calle de Génova, from which it had been removed in 1977 (Bécares 2009). The stepped platform, surrounded by a fountain, vacated by Columbus, remained empty for several years until the sculpture *Julia* by Jaume Plensa was installed there in 2018. This emptiness represented a vacancy, a visible gap in public space that served almost as an invitation to fill it through artistic interventions designed to counter the monumental rhetoric of state-sponsored heritage. Luzinterruptus therefore erected their installation on the platform that had been left empty when the Columbus monument was relocated.

Their project can be understood as a dialogic type of “counter-monument”, a term originally coined by James E. Young, who referred to the emergence of a new type of monument that appeared in the 1980s in the context of Holocaust commemorations (Young 1992, 1994). This type of monument was designed to “counter – and thereby neutralize” (Young 1992, 271) already existing monuments, or to oppose the monument concept as such without however exhibiting a dialogic structure. Young’s definition departs from Peter Springer (1989) and Dinah Wijzenbeek (2010), who consider a dialogue-based relationship to be of fundamental importance for counter-monuments. Starting from these considerations, Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazakerley (2012) have outlined several characteristic features of counter-monuments that are either dialogic or anti-monumental: counter-monuments oppose a specific memory rather than affirming it; they invert traditional monumental forms, embrace impermanence,

employ alternative or contrasting materials and, finally, invite close viewer engagement or participation.<sup>7</sup>

*Colón lava más blanco* was intended both as an impermanent intervention and as the antithesis to the original Columbus sculpture. It was, to begin with, a protest against what the collective regarded as the enormous waste of resources required to relocate the monument again, at a cost of almost four million Euros, an unnecessary expense at a time when an economic crisis in Spain was already well advanced. The group saw their work, topped by a Spanish flag, as a symbolic conquest (Luzinterruptus 2013), and they designated the empty pedestal in the centre of the fountain as reclaimed territory, claiming it just as Columbus had once claimed America. “For one night”, the collective stated, “it imposed its luminous presence, creating competition for the grey stone of the original sculpture” (Luzinterruptus 2013). Some of the group’s photographs, moreover, create the illusion that the two monuments compete in height as well: the flag that crowns the plastic structure seems to just overtop the Columbus monument. A tower constructed from cheap white plastic, *Colón lava más blanco*, stands opposed to the precious marble, not just in terms of value, but in terms of weight as well. Mere plastic packaging that can be carried and piled up effortlessly when empty, the individual containers are almost weightless. Normally, however, they are filled with heavy washing powder, of which viewers are inevitably reminded. In this way, the installation oscillates between lightness and heaviness, just as it sets up a tension between its luminous and radiant appearance and the cheapness of its material constituents. The plastic containers and their loose stacking convey an impression of impermanence. But, in fact, plastic is in reality almost imperishable. While its durability is highly valued during usage, this blessing becomes a curse after disposal. Once a driving force of democratic mass consumption, plastic is now at the centre of critical debates about the health and ecological consequences of consumerism. Its use in this installation in the form of recycled containers reminds viewers of the current ecological crisis.

Although it plays with the permanence that is inherent to plastic as a material, the installation was dismantled only 16 hours after it was put in place. It was not removed by the authorities, however, and instead by a passer-by, who used it for his own purposes “as an improvised bed in which he took a good nap, dismantling part of the construction without much trouble”. This created the impression of “a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island, with a large flag and surrounded by water” (Luzinterruptus 2013) (Fig. 9.5). One particular viewer thereby became an active part of the monument, and took the opportunity to inhabit it and to modify it according to his needs. In the background, the photograph of the dismantled installation shows the almost comically huge *Bandera de España* – the largest Spanish flag in the world, which has been displayed on Plaza de Colón as an emblem of national pride since 2001. This flag also contains an illusion to Columbus: one element of the coat of arms are the so-called Pillars of Hercules, together with the inscription “Plus Ultra”, a reference to the role Columbus played in expanding the borders of the known world (Jochum 2017). To this day, this motto serves as an expression of Spain’s imperial self-image, which is exposed by Luzinterruptus’ installation as an empty, plastic shell, devoid of its former potency.

Luzinterruptus have conjectured that its resemblance to an advertising campaign probably explains why the installation was not removed immediately. They speculated that “if the piece would have had a more artistic look, it would not have lasted even half the time in one of the more visible spaces in the city” (Luzinterruptus 2013). But I cannot help but



Figure 9.5 Luzinterruptus, *Colón lava más blanco*, 2013, artistic intervention next to the Columbus monument in Madrid.

Photo and courtesy: Gustavo Sanabria and Luzinterruptus. Reproduced with permission.

wonder whether the installation temporarily escaped destruction precisely because it recalled works familiar from art history, such as Andy Warhol's famous *Brillo Boxes*, and was hence positioned within an established framework that allowed its recognition as a work of art, as having value and significance. In 1964, when Warhol presented replicas of Brillo boxes as artworks in a gallery exhibition, it triggered discussions about what can or cannot be art (Golec 2008). Luzinterruptus, on the other hand, with their stacked replicas of detergent containers, so reminiscent of Warhol's installation, encouraged viewers to ask: What is a monument? For unlike nineteenth-century monuments, the detergent containers do not pretend to represent Columbus as a historical personality. They focus instead on a specific conception of him: "Colón" as an empty, white container, a vessel filled with projections and fantasies that became an embodiment of the construct of white supremacy. According to its advertisements, *Colón* laundry detergent claims made the claim to "wash whites whiter". Historically, the figure of Columbus also served to "whitewash" people who shared the same ethnicity. In the United States, where race has functioned hierarchically ever since the inception of mass migration, ethnic groups were ranked according to their proximity to whiteness. Italians were initially classified as non-white (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005). Claiming the Italian-born Columbus, supposedly the "first American", "as an ethnic particular hero" (Loock 2014, 244) gave legitimacy to Italian-Americans.

The whitewashing – or “white-washing” – to which the installation refers is however multi-layered in meaning. According to the group itself, *Colón lava mas blanco* refers to the whitewashing of “Spanish dirty money” (Luzinterruptus 2013), to centuries of wealth built on colonialism, and represents a denunciation of Spain’s political elite as corrupt and wasteful. The term “whitewashing” can also refer to what is left out of historical narratives, to the elevation of one version of history above others, not least of all by erecting monuments that eternalise them, and to those voices that are concealed as a result.

But this installation also encourages us to reflect on which *memories* we elevate above others. In its statement, the collective mentions that generations of Spanish children have used *Colón* packaging to hoard their most treasured toys (Luzinterruptus 2013). The iconic detergent container is hence also an element of shared collective memory, and while, with its childhood associations, it might be seen as having only marginal significance, it may in fact harbour significant unifying potential for contemporary audiences. For the use of detergent containers, often associated with female activities and domesticity, counteracts the stereotypical image of heroic masculinity. The “great men of history” narrative embodied by Columbus is transformed now into something that is accessible to ordinary people.

## Conclusion

Luzinterruptus’ installation was effective in countering monumental rhetoric precisely because of its ephemeral nature, its choice of material and the way it dissolved the authority generally associated with monuments by allowing the viewer to actively participate, that is, to take apart and use the installation. Through their choices of forms and materials, through their impermanent character and altered relationship with viewers, both interventions involving the Columbus monument in Madrid invert the traditional concept of the monument. Rather than prescribing or spelling out exactly what is to be remembered, and how, which is the case with the original monument, these interventions encourage viewers to discover these meanings for themselves. In discussions about the removal, destruction or artistic reframing of colonial monuments, they exemplify the ways in which temporary interventions may function as highly effective counter-strategies – perhaps more effectively than responses that revert again to monumentality and permanence. While such enduring responses are again exposed to the danger of falling out of favour or slipping into oblivion, ephemeral interventions function as short-lived, thought-provoking impetuses that wrest the original monument temporarily from invisibility. Through such ephemeral interventions, the original monument is reactivated and made to speak to us again – but not only about the past, about the purpose and context of its erection, about the individual and the events it is meant to commemorate. These interventions represent opportunities for us to reflect on the hierarchical structures, institutions and politics, that shape our reality today. However short lived, both interventions are also endowed with permanence, since, in each instance, a medial accompaniment serves as a fixed component, whether in the form of video or photography. In both instances, these interventions were documented and made available by the artists on the internet, which functions as a contemporary form of public space. As memories, they are hence retrievable and accessible without limit to an even larger public.

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## Notes

- 1 Translation by the author.
- 2 Translation by the author.
- 3 Translation by the author.
- 4 Translation by the author.
- 5 I would like to thank Gül Kaçmaz Erk and Christopher S. Wilson for pointing out the similarities to Becker’s film.
- 6 Translation by the author. At the 60th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2024, Argote showed a further developed version of this work under the title *Descanso* (Rest). The reclining statue of Columbus was presented in the heart of the Giardini, this time together with the fragmented column, overgrown by migrant invasive plants as well as local indigenous species, which were to develop into a garden by the end of the exhibition.
- 7 “Anti-monumentality” can be expanded to include performance and participatory aesthetics that blur the line with political protest. Susana Torre (2006, 20) has also included “ceremonies and rituals” under this category, for example, the commemorative march enacted in Argentina since 1977 by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

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