

Einar Grinde

## Death to all dead men on a plinth!

A critical view on anything on a plinth

Master's thesis in Master of fine arts

May 2023





Einar Grinde

# **Death to all dead men on a plinth!**

A critical view on anything on a plinth



Master's thesis in Master of fine arts  
May 2023

Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Architecture and Design  
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art



Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology





I want to thank some professors, the cleaning staff and the whole weird gang that is my class.

Thank you.

Dedicated to Elli, Idi and Torgrim Granskogen

Index

Introduction..... 3  
Adolf Gustav Vigeland ..... 4  
Dos and don'ts in the usage of history donts ..... 7  
Anti-monumentalism ..... 8  
The evaluation of the past..... 10  
The hollow monument ..... 11  
An offering or execution – Master project..... 13  
Devils and details ..... 16  
Conclusion ..... 18  
Reference library ..... 19

Death to all dead men on plinths!

Death to all dead men, especially those on a plinth. Our cities are littered with individuals how are immortalized in bronze or stone. We have erected monuments of kings, victors, lords, sirs, madams, missionaries, conqueror, conquistadores, merchants, pioneers, explorers, world leaders, pharaohs, high priests, philanthropists, thinkers, gods and queens. Statues of individuals, glorifying them. Monuments are built by the people for the everlasting few selected. The ruler overlooking its underlings. They benefit of a barbaric system, looking down on their underlings.

In recent years the debate of which of these monuments we keep and which we have topple. Some argue we should re-evaluate history and its loss and victories. Others argue that the monuments are what keeps history in our recent memory. But where do we draw the line. What parts of history should we elevate onto a plinth, and what should we tear down? The monuments are an aestheticization of politics, they are here to keep status que. Can we make one last monument to end all monuments?

Through my practice I have, mostly by accident, made monuments. Hollow monuments. Mostly depicting fallen horses. Coinciding with my master's graduation I have been invited to participate, with four other artists, in an exhibition at the Vigeland museum in Oslo. This is a celebration of Eckbo's Foundation, a dead rich man and philanthropist who was one of many investors in the Vigeland park. With this planned for an opening 1<sup>st</sup> of June, my masters project was set. I want to topple every monument.

Clarifications:

When I talk about monuments, I mean those representing an individual and or a political belief or system. I do not intend to include memorials or non-figurative or architectural objects. There will be many aspects of monumentalism and the aesthetics of idealism I will pass by in silence. I will also focus, in a eurocentric manner, on mostly monuments of the west.





Gustav Vigeland never officially sympathized with the nazis, but he never spoke up against them either. He remained impartial, neutral. When the nazi party of Norway, National Samling, was planning a big rally, a riksdag, reichstag, in the Vigeland park 1942 Gustav Vigeland send a letter to the mayor of Oslo Fritz Jensen asking him to stop the rally. He did oppose to the rally, but maybe not because of content and political agenda, but more against any political agenda or idea manifesting itself in his sculpture park. He thought of himself as above politics. Beyond ideology. Transcending into something universal.



In a letter to the national ministry of culture (now known as the ministry of culture and equality), he wrote.

“Since I have regularly seen that the German military has a strong interest in my sculptures on the Bridge in Frognerparken. I have thought whether it would not be possible to open the studio for these in suitable numbers every time on one or the other Sunday. The workshop can accommodate around 500 people. I can safely let the German, with his distinct discipline, move between my works in the workshop without being afraid that something will be damaged”.

The death of Gustav Vigeland, 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1943, might have kept him out of the history books as a nazi sympathizer or a traitor. His likeminded peers how lived to see a better world got just that label, traitor. Vigeland spent his last good years in a nazi-occupied country, and kept his mouth shut towards the oppressors. He might have acted neutral in feared for his fundings, or for his reputation. He never lived to see a world without the third reich. We can give him the benefit of the doubt and

After his death, his political stance has been debated in the press. This mostly revolves around his vague statements, not about the aesthetics. Gustave Vigeland died in a nazi-occupied Norway. He never claimed to support the occupying forces. But he never spoke up or condemn the oppressors. Some argue that he never took part in any politics and was only completely consumed to his work. Others argue that those who remain silent give consent. The park is his grand opus that he gave to the people, financed by the Oslo commune and investors. There is no doubt about what a technical skilled sculptor, and the park as a public space is a great gift to any city. The dispute in my view is around the aesthetics. The neo-classical sculptures, portraying the struggle of the classical heteronormative family lives. Huge men fighting babies. Chubby women on all fours surrounded by children. The neo-classical style can remind you of anything from nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy.



*Man fighting babies!*

## Dos and don'ts in the usage of history

German philosopher Walter Benjamin saw the rise of the fascist movements in Europe. He developed the concept of "aestheticization of politics." This describes movements or ideologies uses aesthetics, images, rituals or symbolism to create a unity among the masses. Benjamin saw the danger of these political movements using this kind of propaganda to create a false sense of unity and identity. In this way the aestheticization of politics was a form of fetishism where people became more attached to the aesthetics, the symbolism, rather to the ideal the movement stood for. Benjamin also argued that the aestheticization of politics lead to politicization of aesthetics, where the arts and culture became instruments for political power rather than an independent form of expression. A world where the autonomy of the arts was forced to serve the interests of political power.<sup>4</sup> This politicization of aesthetics don't have to be explicit. It can also be obscure intentions, favorizing or just the flow of fundings.

In Nietzsche's essay "On the use and abuse of history for life" he describes three usages of history.

Antiquarian history is history for history's sake. A curiosity and general fascination of the past. Not something to learn from or investigate but a view into the past. Know your heritage. This usage of history is great to build cultural or national identity. We can treasure the past's victories and losses as a collective identity. This can lead to loving anything just because it's historical, is our heritage, and can lead to a small-minded view of history, and a suspicion to anything new that does not fit in to this historical identity.

The monumental use of history is the way we use history to inspire us to achieve great things. This can be historical events as revolutions and wars, or the idealization of pioneers or past ideologies. Our triumphs and cautionary tales. We use these stories to stride for a better future, for our self and others. This is a safe path to glorifying the past and full-on nationalism.

Critical history is the interrogation of the past. Mostly used by scholars and activists critical history interrogates and evaluates the past. Not to recount past events, but as lessons to guide present and future. The dangers of both antiquarian and monumental history are that they reinforce the status quo. Critical history lets us re-evaluate our past's losses and victories constantly. We might think some past event is our greatest achievement, but then we must investigate it, dissect it, over-evaluate it. Only then we can learn from the past<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 1969, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay New York: Schocken Books, 1969

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2019, *The Use and Abuse of History*, N.Y. USA, Dover Publications.



## Anti-monumentalism

Anti-monument is a term that is widely used in the art-world. First coined by the linguist and Jewish studies scholar James E. Young. He used the term describing young German artist after the second world war. He described the movement anti-monumentalism as “a deep distrust of monumental forms in light of their systematic exploitation by the nazis, and a profound desire to distinguish their generation from that of the killers through memory.”<sup>6</sup> Anti-monumentalism uses the critical view on history. Always interrogating the past. A deep distrust to the past.

It is often used to describe contemporary monuments. Monuments that don't follow the usual tropes or theme. One example of this is the Monument against fascism, by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, visible in Hamburg 1986 - 1993. The monument was a big obelisk, one square coulomb in lead. The residents of Hamburg were invited to write or draw on the monument. Under the monument there was a room similar to the structure. Over the years the monument was lowered in this room. In eight intervals it slowly sank into earth.

To have such a tangible solid object slowly `wannish` is interesting. To make a column as a room for the people to freely express themselves, and then wannish the whole monument makes it in some way a double anti-monument. The participation from the people to write on it in public space makes the monument accessible to everyone. It's not an untouchable dead guy on a plinth, it's the people's monument, yours to in some way vandalize. By lowering the monument, you make more room accessible to write on, while erasing the already written. Then to submerge the whole monument to bout encapsulate and hide the monument for all foreseeable future.



*Monument against fascism, 1992*



*Monument against fascism, 1986*

---

<sup>6</sup> Young, James E. 1992. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 2. “The German Counter-Monument,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 2. p. 271-295.





*Platz des unsichtbaren mahnmals*

Place of the Invisible Memorial in Saarbrücken, Germany, is another example of an anti-monument. This project was initiated, 1990 secretly by then arts professor Jochen Gerz, and his students. During the summer they went into the courtyard of Saarbrücken Castle, a former headquarters of the Gestapo, and dug up selected cobblestones. Then they engraved each stone with the name of a Jewish cemetery and laid the stones back. A graveyard for graveyards. The memorial has no visual attributes. It is the invisible memorial.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Daniels, Dieter, *As If Nothing Happened*, Hg.: Famed Books, Leipzig 2013. P. 67-71

## The evaluation of the past

After the second world war Germany and its third reich countries had a collective destruction of fascist monuments. The monuments like swastikas, bautas and eagles where blown up and tore down. The destruction of the most prominent monuments was documented to send as message to fascist sympathizers. Tearing up the past by its roots. Deleting the fascist aesthetics. Contrary to this Italy kept their monuments.

Italy did not come to terms with its past. They didn't have the same defeat or surrender as the third reich, they kept on for a while, still going. Italy still has fascist parties, and some have seats in their parliament. Italy still has around 1,400 fascist monuments still standing.<sup>8</sup> Many of them have been restored and are under continuous maintenance.

Germany and the occupied countries were quick to cleanse their aesthetics of fascist symbolism, but we still have some more critical hindsighting to do. The Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the killing of George Floyd in 2020, sparked interesting questions on where we draw this line. The Americas have a different historical heritage than the post-fascist Europe. They have confederate generals, colonists, and conquistadores on plinths in plenty in the states and Latin America. The spark of protests after the killing of George Floyd lead to demonstrators tearing down monuments of confederate generals with their own hands. This global happening spread to other parts of the world. In Bristol, England, demonstrators tore down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston and threw him in the harbour. In Nuuk, Greenland they vandalized the statue of the Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede. In Trondheim, Norway, columnists wrote about the nazi sculptor who made the statue of Olav Tryggvason in on the town square. This event is what I would call efficient critical history. There is no news that slavery is bad, or that missionaries and colonist were war criminals. The critical scholars have been talking about this for years. It was just now, in the heat of this moment action was needed.



*Fallen confederate statue, Atlanta, 2020*



One year after the statue of Edward Colson (left) was toppled and thrown in the harbor it was on exhibition alongside postcards from the protestors<sup>9</sup>. On the right; the vandalization of the statue of Hans Egede.

<sup>8</sup> [Map of fascist monuments in Italy](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Edward Colson on display - BBC](#)

## The hollow monument

Throughout my education, bachelors, and masters, I have developed a temporal approach to sculpture. To make a sculpture that does not only occupy the spatial dimension but also the timely dimensions. A structure that moves through time and space. By sewing thin plastics together and inflate and deflate them in a loop would create a tangible object that would move through time and space.

What interested me with this in the beginning was my obsession over spacetime. That nothing can be only in time or in space. The fourth dimension. Also, on our perception of time and history. How we often are blinded by the present and only clearly can see near future and past. This technique also allows, as a poor student, to make things in the larger spectrum. The motion creates an organic motion, contrary to other, more mechanical, kinetic sculptures. My earliest iterations of this concept were more abstract. Shapes taking space, deflating and giving it back. As the technique developed, I figured I could make some more recognizable shapes. Some years into this practice I got into making some objects that leaned more towards the monumental. A monument that would fall and rise in a never-ending loop. A sculpture breathing. Falling and rising. The rise and fall of.... The hollow monument.



*Hest nr. 42, Museet, Trønderlagsutstillingen 2022, Musset Midt*

For the last part of my bachelors and though the masters I have been focusing on the horse. The symbolism of the horse. The power symbol. The horse has followed us humans throughout history and been a loyal companion. The horse has been our plough, our transportations of goods, communication and people, our war machine, and a measurement of power. Our symbol of power and victory.



*Triumf, Høstutstillingen 2021, Kunsternes Hus*

Throughout my obsession of the horse, I have also gathered a quite significant amount of horse data. Small and big stories revolving around the horse. Stories of our loyal companion, and how we have left the horse behind. Stories of suffragettes jumping in front of the king's horse, a horse named pot-8-o's, the great horse manure crisis of 1894 in New York, Caligula keeping his horse Incitatus in his bed and the Vogelherd horse, one of the earliest humanmade figurines. There is an inexhaustible number of stories and symbolism revolving around the horse.



*Horsetalk, Galleri KiT, 2022*

I feel, in many ways, that I am stuck with the horse. I have chosen my narrow path with the horse and had some success with it. I don't know if I am a coward for just sticking with my horse or if I am just riding a wave. Beating the dead horse or fighting the elite. I come from a background of counterculture, d.i.y. and rebellion. I do in fact intend to smash capitalism. But when you stick it to the man and get applauded by the elite it gets a bit confusing.



*Vogelherdhesten med protese og fjøll, 2022*



## An offering or execution

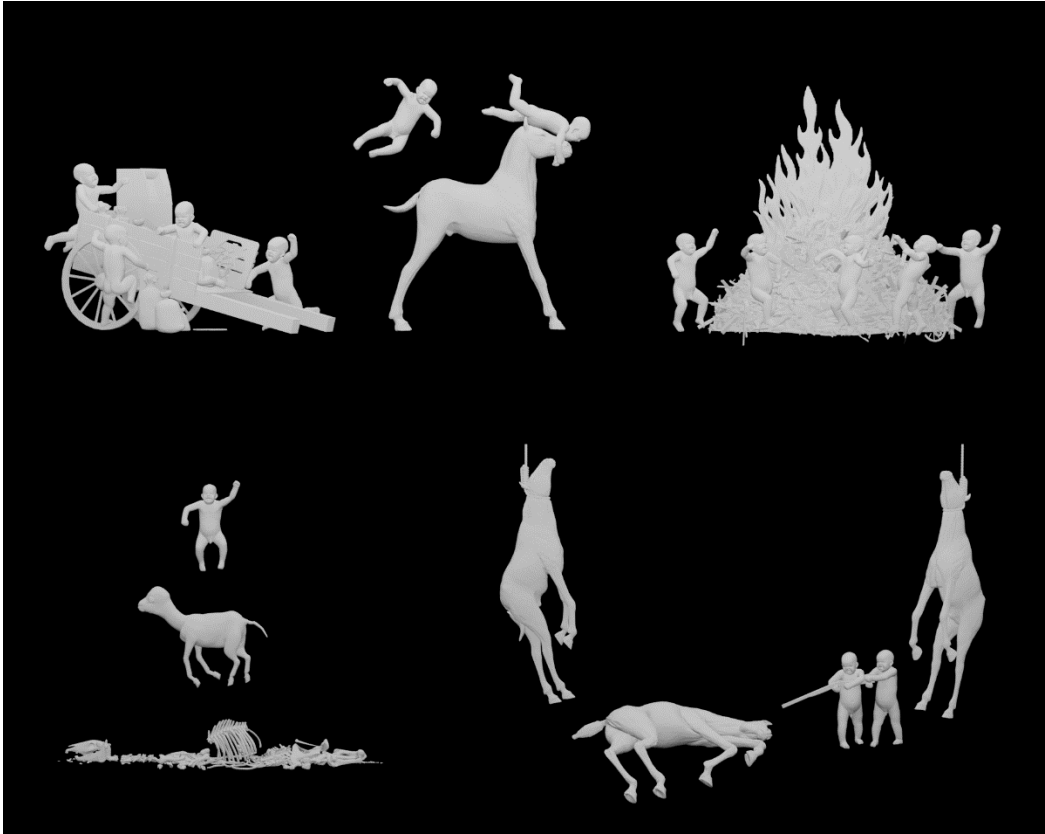
My masters project will be an extension of my Vigeland exhibition, or rather a prequel. This because I can't have two major projects at the same time and the Vigeland project became my masters project. The links between them are suitable for me about in theme and structure. My history with the horse, and Vigeland's grandness. As any great neo-classical sculptor Vigeland's works also depicts a lot of horses.

The main piece at the masters exhibition will be a temporal sculpture on a stable base. The sculpture is based on one of Vigeland's plaster models. The model depicts a horse impaled on two stakes. It can resemble about an offering or an execution. This is a model that drew my attention early on. The horse impaled is a vast contrast to the classical horse on a plinth. A majestic creature with a more majestic person on top, elevated on a plinth. In Vigeland's model the horse is nothing but tortured. A face of agony and dead limbs hanging. The plinth as a sacrificial altar with logs to light the fire.



*Model 240. 3D-scan of Vigeland's original model*

My piece at K-U-K will be a significantly scaled up version of Vigelands model. The base will be approximately 1,5 x 1 meters. To emphasize the grandness, I will play with the neo-classical style with panels and moldings. The plinth will have a plaster finish. Replicating the origina. On the sides of the plinth there will, in Greek-roman stile, be reliefs. The motives are collected form Vigelands imagery. I intend to extend his narrative of the reliefs. Some of his imagery is babies attacking a horse, and the horse fighting back. In my story the babies execute the horse, take the loot form the carriage and set fire to the remains. A narrative where the neo-classical stories die, the bad guy wins.



Model of the four reliefs



Vigelands originales

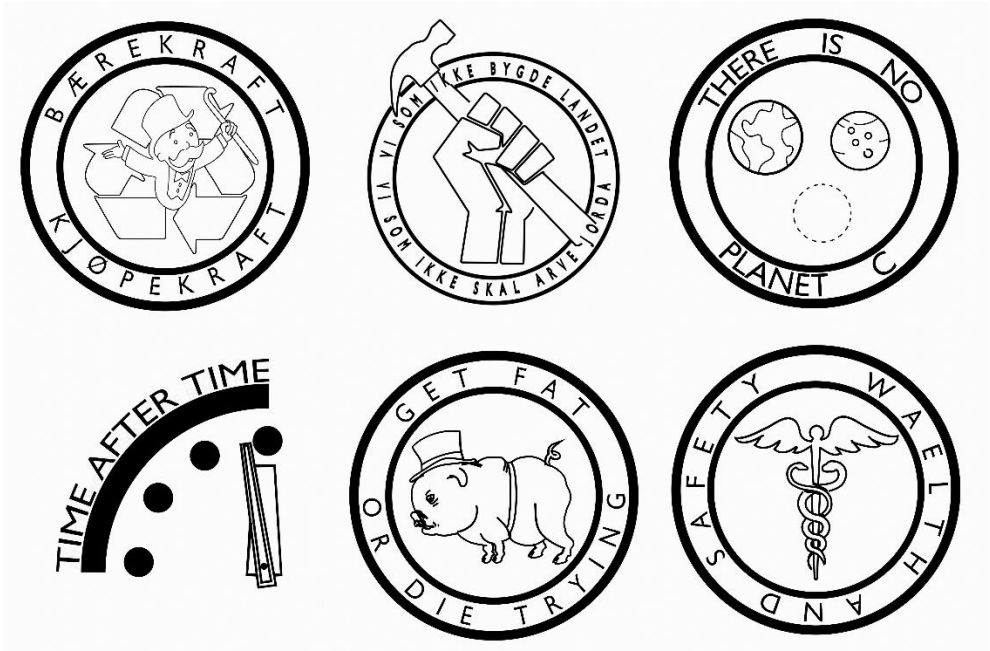
The horse itself will be made by my usual material, plastic. In a non-decided time loop the horse will inflate and deflate. Collapsing and rising in an everlasting loop. Making the dead horse more dead. The shell of a dead horse.



*3D-model Model*

My monument can be described as an anti-monument, but it might me too monumental. Playing too much with the neo-classical traits. And it's not an anti-anti-monument, it might be too satirical. The duality between the offering and the execution makes it so that it is not a memorial, it might also be too humoristic. Is it a monument to end all monuments or only a homage to the classic statue.

I am planning to incorporate iron brandings on the horse, or on the plinth. Iron brands were used to imprint the ownership on horses or cattle. In this iteration I want the brandings to be some sort of idioms or slogans as if they were made by an elite. To get the aesthetics of left-wing politics but flipping it. As if the elite needed to fight for their rights and existence.



Examples of iron branding



Test iron branding



For the catalogue text I am leaning more towards the poetic rather than art speak,

Death to all dead men on a plinth!

The horse; a symbol of freedom, victory and oppression.  
Humanities loyal friend. The plough in our fields, our transport of  
goods, humans and communications, our war machine.

The dead rich white man on a horse on a plinth. The victor, the  
oppressor, the colonist. Those who got it all. We who shall share  
the remains. This monument is here to destroy all monuments. The  
last monument. Tare them all down, by bits and pieces.

Let's start anew.

I do intend this to be the last monument ever. I do, as E. Young put it, have a deep distrust of monumental forms. And I do believe we should topple every statue of a dead man. So be it, Ronaldo, Marx, the bull on Wall Street, Nils Arne Eggen, Orwell and Einstein, down with´em. I believe we could demolish the Vigeland park and make something better. I do not claim that Vigeland was a nazi, but I do strongly believe that he was a coward. Though his impartialness he approved. In this matter silence gives consent. Something that we all could stand for. Monuments are here to keep status que. Keep the classes in line. The rulers on top, the ever growing middleclass in the middle, the working class at their breaking point, and the poor as the poorer. The rulers are no longer kings and lords, but businesspeople and politicians. When we know how powerful aesthetics can be as a political tool, we need to evaluate it constantly.

Maybe this master´s degree is my plinth. Maybe it´s easy to rebel when everything goes your way. Maybe I am just as much of a pompous prick as Vigeland. I fare, for me an anyone else, that one day, we will be on a plinth. A statue eventually toppled, vandalized and destroyed.

What I truly believe in is the discussion we have around these monuments. A critical view of history. An evaluation on what we put on the plinth. Who we will lift into the future. Every monument represents an unjust past. Every monument is an edited version of history. A summary putt in to one individual. We can´t take down every monument all at once. We must do it in bits and pieces. We don´t know how the future will evaluate our monuments.



Reference library:

Vigeland:

[Gustav Vigelands letters- The national Library archive](#)

Public debate about his stance on fascism

[Aftenposten 25.04.2019](#)

[Aftenposten 12.04.2019](#)

[Kunstavisen 11.12.2022](#)

[Kunstavisen 19.12.2022](#)

Wikborg, Tone, Gustav Vigeland - en biografi, Oslo 2019, Vidarforlaget

Dos and don`ts

[Walter Benjamin- The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)

[Friedrich Nietzsche - On the use and abuse of history for life](#)

[Daniels, Dieter, Eine kurze Geschichte des Nichts / A brief history of nothing, Leipzig 2013](#)



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology