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# THE STATUESQUE IN THE HEADLIGHTS

HOME  
MCR.  
ORG

JAY BERNARD

"I pride myself on being careful." - Cassils

Just outside of Home, the arts venue in Manchester, is a large statue of Friedrich Engels, Prussian writer, factory owner and accomplice to Marx. It stands there as a result of the artist Phil Collins travelling to the Ukraine and finding it defaced and fallen. He decided to bring it back to Manchester, where Engels lived and worked on improving the conditions of working class people at the advent of capitalism. The statue itself retains the marks of its near-destruction: blue and yellow paint, the colours of the Ukrainian flag, stain his coat and leg. The original sculptor is unknown. It does not sit easily in a square characterised by modern, wavy architecture, chain restaurants, late capitalist promises of freedom.

In a time of fierce debates around statues, around monuments, around who dominates the historical narrative, there are two main points of opposition. First, there are those who believe in erecting statues of a different nature – those who fought repression, rather than enacted it. Second, there are those who believe that monuments and statues are null and void in themselves – that they represent an unmoving, unthinking idea of history that is anything but fluid and therefore not reflective of the political modes and ideals espoused. Gary Younge, in the Guardian, described figurative memorials as lazy distortions of the historical narrative. Indeed the act of erecting a statue might be defeating the object, if the object is to *change* how we interpret and understand history, the present and ourselves. To say that only one change is permissible flies in the face of future desires to *change again*.

In that respect, it is not a stretch to speak of a transgender bodybuilder and Prussian communist in the same breath, not least because they will, for a time, be performing themselves in close proximity. Both are in the business of change – one, to change the social relations between capitalists and the working class, the other embodying the right to transition, to modify and *become* themselves, to transform, as an individual and in the collective sense. Ironically, the statue of Engels is in Manchester precisely because Communism collapsed; Collins went looking in the debris for something he could take home. The question then is what does it mean for his statue to be re-erected in England, the west, the beating heart of the old empire, when those who lived under his ideas, as enacted in the Soviet Union, tore it down in search of something different? What does this say – in this specific case and generally – about the consideration given to i) the ideas embodied in the statue, and ii) the realities of those who lived in its shadow? Collins' efforts are laudable: the point is that Engels' ideas are still badly needed. Yes, but can the erection of a statue, properly articulate or bring about these ideas?

Collins documented the transfer of Engels from the Ukraine to Manchester in a BBC documentary *Ceremony (2017)*, in which he says, "Like everybody, when I look at a statue, I ask myself ... what does the onslaught of the decades feel like?" In the idea of the statue there rests not only what he earlier terms the "Memorialisation of a nation's ideology", but the idea of endurance — physically and metaphysically. In other words, *struggle*, links Cassils, performing inside Home, and the statue

outside, of Friedrich Engels. What's interesting is that there is always a threat of collapse in Cassil's work. Whether that be from exhaustion, from something being suspended, from something being pummelled beyond recognition, from the endurance test of pressing the body against ice. Not easy. But the tantalising thread in all of these labours, is the statuesque appearance of the body that performs them.

Aesthetically, this body ranges from fifties beefcake to Dying Gaul to poster of socialist-realist health. Physically, if not symbolically, this body is *extremely capable*. To be a bodybuilder requires extreme care and regard for one's body; yet the presentation of strength is always in an unstable relation to the threat of injury, the realities of ageing, the possibility of failure. There is a fine balance between rising and falling, it is usually only a matter of time. The bodybuilder/performance artist appears as a classical hero conquering the primordial world: Cassils swinging from wall to wall, or fighting an intractable opponent, or pushing a very heavy monument up a hill. They seem to have jumped from the ledges of Europe's ancient architecture into a fire retardant jump-suit.

Yet when speaking about their practice, they describe themselves as being "careful." They mean that everything is well researched, safety-checked, considered and re-considered. They are vigilant. This duality, between capability and care, complicates the question of whether or not we memorialise history in a figurative way. Statues are about human capacity, both in their production and in their presentation. They embody a kind of quasi-legal-cultural space as i) mandated and (ostensibly) immovable civic furniture and ii) fully realised political assertion. In all cases, stasis.

So what does it mean to have a statuesque figure who moves as intensely, as intentionally as Cassils? What does it mean to posit care as an aspect of (a) movement? To put in motion the statuesque, particularly in favour of lives that are considered disposable, is very different to how we ordinarily encounter it. Once erected, most statues pale into irrelevance – the only discernible motion by the time they hit the village green being the one passed by the board who have approved the materials, plaque and base; the guest of honour to cut the ribbon; cheese and wine...

Although nothing new, it remains an intriguing thought that we might tell history not in grand narratives, but in terms of the margin, the local struggle. That we might take our references not from the rise and fall of empires, but from the microcosm of the same drama that happens in the workplace, the bedroom, the public loo. A very small story contains the dimensions of an epic, if well told. Wasn't this the turn that theatre made, from royalty to kitchen sink? Why not the same with monuments?

Fluidity is key. What follows are a few tableaux in this vein.

### The Moving Monument

*Monument Push*, in which Cassils and friends push a very heavy artwork, *The Resilience of the 20%*, through the city of Omaha, New England – 20% being the increase of transphobic murders in 2012. This has long been an interesting idea: remembrance as movement through the streets. Here in the UK, we have had silent marches after the monumental tragedy of Grenfell. The physical exertion needed to turn the political-cultural juggernaut as crucible: even if you fail – if you do not pass, if you do not

change the law, if you do not live, if you are not remembered – you are not the same afterwards.

*Becoming an image*, the performance in which the monument was first created is both a record of the performance itself and a site of visible struggle, an almost forensic computer model of outward violence on the trans body. The trans body is made visible via the indentations directed towards its erasure; the trans body is therefore invisible.

## Tiresian motion

In the documentation video for *Tiresias*, the ice torso finally melts to the point where it breaks away. Throughout, Cassil's body was visible behind the ice. Breasts where there are breasts, abs where there are abs. So the idea of female / male, the idea of transformation, is also the idea of potential; the female form that Tiresias assumes was there all along, he had in fact already possessed it. This process of transformation reveals what was never concealed.

## Motion as decay <> accumulation

When displayed in a grid, the mustard yellow gallon bottles Cassils used to collect their urine in *Pissed* appear as poems. As a piece, the minimalist cube that contains all of the urine collected is striking in its willingness to be square, to be cumulative, to be vertical in its inquiry. It brings to mind *Ozymandius* – that archetypal, horizontal poem of the colonial gaze – which looks at a fallen statue. "Lone and level sands" – yellow-piss-gold, sand-timer, hour glass – put me in mind of the yellow bottles and the ale-coloured heft that represent the time trans people wait to urinate because of nonsensical bathroom laws being passed across parts of the US. *Pissed*, as in pissed off; as in drunk, having drunk, drinking; as in *piece*, an artwork; as in *psst*, hey you, should you be in here?

Behind the glass, the urine is unsettlingly alive – it is a biohazard, but it has been abstracted from the body that produced it. By writing large this non-genital, non-gendered, aspect of our biology, we see that transphobia is really the *refusal* to move on from ideas of gender essentialism, from the primacy of secondary sex characteristics, from the idea of visual difference as a sound basis for ordering society. Just as racist thinkers believe the visual verity of phenotypic difference validates their pre-existing, or economically necessitated worldview, so a barrel of piss – as would a barrel of hearts – proves that they cannot *actually* make any distinction between human beings.

An extremist position remains static precisely because it is extreme; it has nowhere to go. If you believe that the truth is fixed unchanging law, this lack of movement feels like the truth.

## Sisyphean motion

If you imagine the artwork *Pissed* on Cassils' shoulders, then you see a kind of Sisyphus at play. Despite the punitive and absurd nature of his task, Sisyphus would have been hench. Rolling a ball up a hill that only comes back down again – isn't that most marginal movements? Most art? As long as we are alive, we are all at our Sisyphean task, not solely in terms of physical exertion but in terms of memory. In one work, *Up to and including their limits*, Cassils swings. If you turn the scene on its side, so does the boulder that Sisyphus pushes. It is more pendulum than anything.

## Oscillation

In *The Powers That Be*, Cassils fights an invisible enemy, played out between two cars and designed to be watched on a mobile phone. It is the work that most clearly plays out this relationship between care and motion. Here, the sculpted, capable body shows itself, naked and under duress. There is a battle for supremacy and survival. In *Ceremony*, Collins speaks of how a homeless protest in Oxford Road "Made [him] think about the magnetic power of simple everyday resistance and its immediate abstraction into spectacle." Cassils is made spectacle, a Christian in the Roman amphitheatre – the buff mythic underdog who overpowers the lion. To what end? The piece speaks back to our engagement with violence, the replication of death, how it galvanises resistance but also re-enforces the image of violent state representative as supreme. The statuesque in the headlights: not just a re-enactment of violence, but a struggle with all of the invisible (or merely unseen) forces that are yet palpable, and which tell us a lot about the principles governing our collective space.

Cassils changes moment to moment in this piece. They are not solely the victim here, but could just as well be the perpetrator. Their oeuvre is intricately entwined with the struggle for social justice – that makes it worthy; what makes it *notable* is this openness to interpretation, this willingness to momentarily present themselves as violent, as canonical, as imposing; to be careful is to be vigilant around the dangerous and undesirable. This invisible opponent could just as easily be [insert dead black / trans person / sex worker / migrant / freedom fighter here]. Uncomfortably, the white transmasculine body, briefly – stealthily – occupies a position of absolute power, could be mistaken for something else, is blurred in motion.

Such a performance sidesteps the monolithic vigour of the statue towards an ethics and practice that acknowledges a multitude of possibilities for the future – a vision that includes our complicity, carelessness and unseeing complacency; but by including them continually presents them *as things that must always be examined and reconsidered*, thus enabling, encouraging, ensuring movement.

Text commissioned upon the occasion of Cassils:  
Human Measure at HOME, Manchester (2021),  
Cassils' first UK solo exhibition and 10-year survey.  
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