

Overlooked, forgotten, avoided: The LGBT community and public art

ELIZABETH NEWTON-JACKSON

Abstract

In the same way that public consciousness has long overlooked and avoided the LGBT community, public art reveals a complementary evasion. A sparse production of LGBT public art has followed a total drought prior to the late-twentieth century. The LGBT public art that does exist can be sorted into four categories: memorials to notable LGBT individuals; ‘pink triangle’ memorials to gay victims of Nazi persecution during the 1930s and World War II; public art which commemorates events in LGBT communities’ struggles for justice and equal rights; and alternative forms of LGBT public artworks which embed elements of previously overlooked LGBT history into public memory. In this article I analyse a number of LGBT public artworks which fall into these four categories, exploring what the existing works have achieved in terms of LGBT visibility, as well as highlighting their limitations. I note particularly that, in attempts to be publicly palatable, the sparse amount of LGBT public art that does exist falls short in commemorating diverse communities, who are, instead, often left to fill this gap with spontaneous decorations and alternative forms of commemoration.

Keywords

Public art, LGBT, memorialisation, marginalisation

If history is written by the powerful, art is a supplementary channel through which individuals can express dissent and negate the creation of a homogeneous historical narrative. Knocking down the gallery and museum walls and exposing art to the unwitting public can, however, dilute unrestrained expressions of protest and nonconformity (Senie, 2014, p. 240). Patrons who enter galleries acquiesce to the (at times) confronting experiences promised them by designated exhibition spaces. Public art, by contrast, involves a sudden and non-consensual exposure to an artwork (Senie, 2014, p. 240). Consequently, provocation cannot always be the key objective of public art, especially if the work is to enjoy a permanent public existence. Unfortunately, however, provocation is often an unwanted by-product of artworks that memorialise or celebrate marginalised communities. The limitations of public art, and its conservatism compared to gallery art, are abundantly obvious in works which commemorate LGBT concerns.¹ Due to past and current marginalisation, much LGBT history has been purposefully erased from public memory (Dunn, 2011, p. 40). For those who have historically been placed in ‘the class of the terrible tabooed’, commemoration is complicated (Katz, 1983, pp. 10-11).

Cher Krause Knight asserts that public art is subject to the ‘ebb and flow of public sentiment and will’ (2008, p. 24). Marginalised groups, like LGBT communities, suffer as the result of these whims of the public. Just as public consciousness has long overlooked and avoided the LGBT community, public art reveals a complementary evasion. A sparse production of LGBT public art has followed a total drought prior to the late-twentieth century. The LGBT public art that *does* exist can be sorted into four categories. These categories are not exhaustive but allow a methodical evaluation of issues relating to LGBT public art. The first category includes memorials to notable LGBT individuals; those who are commemorated for their queer identity and those whose queer identity is only alluded to. The second category relates to

'pink triangle' memorials to gay victims of Nazi persecution during the 1930s and World War II. The third category incorporates public art which commemorates events in LGBT communities' struggles for justice and equal rights. In lieu of a final thematically cohesive category, I include alternative forms of LGBT public artworks which aim to embed elements of previously overlooked LGBT history into public memory. In this article I analyse a number of LGBT public artworks which fall into these four categories, exploring what the existing works have achieved in terms of LGBT visibility, as well as highlighting their limitations. In its attempts to be publicly palatable, the little public art that does exist to celebrate LGBT identity or memorialise LGBT trauma falls short in commemorating diverse communities, who are, instead, often left to fill this gap in public recognition with spontaneous decorations and alternate forms of commemoration.

Memorials to notable LGBT individuals

Memorials are erected to those deemed worthy of occupying long-term public memory. Memorials to queer people *do* exist, but rarely is their queer identity explicitly celebrated in these memorials. For example, the *Alan Turing Memorial* (Glyn Hughes, 2001; Fig. 1) is seated on a bench in Sackville Park in Manchester. The work was paid for by private donations and fundraising by Gay Awareness Manchester. This connection to Manchester's LGBT community *does* suggest an intention to celebrate Turing's sexuality (Cooksey, 2013). Alan Turing (1912–1954) was condemned and punished for his homosexuality during his lifetime, while his queer identity was obscured after his death (Hodges, 2014, p. 574). Turing has only been properly re-established in public memory within the last twenty years, and only with great effort, much of it on the part of Manchester's LGBT community, as well as MP John Leech, who campaigned for an official pardon for Turing that was finally granted in 2012 (Cooksey, 2013).



Figure 1: Glyn Hughes, *Alan Turing Memorial*, Manchester, 2001. Image courtesy of Chris Skoyles.

The *Alan Turing Memorial* is a sedate and sober object. The mathematician, cast in bronze, sits rigidly. His rough-hewn face is impassive, his lips pursed. Alan Turing, as a gay man, is barely alluded to in the work. A plaque at his feet identifies Turing as the ‘Father of computer science, mathematician, logician, wartime codebreaker, victim of prejudice’. The reason for the prejudice is not revealed. In 1952, Turing confessed to having a sexual relationship with a man and was charged with ‘Gross Indecency’ (Hodges, 2014, p. 576). He was placed on probation for a year and made to submit to oestrogen treatment (Hodges, 2014, p. 595). To refer to Turing as a ‘victim of prejudice’ is an inadequate nod to the queer identity of a man who was as much a ‘gay martyr’ as he was a pioneering mathematician (Hodges, 2014, p. 596).

The commemoration of Turing’s gay identity merely in terms of victimhood also does little to celebrate a man who, according to his biographer Andrew Hodges, was by no means ashamed of his sexuality (2014, p. 577). Alan Turing’s queerness appears to *only* require reference in the memorial because he suffered for it. It is referenced out of guilt, as an apology. Probably because of the lack of explicit allusion to Turing’s queer identity, the *Alan Turing Memorial* is often decorated with the Pride flag during annual Pride events or other public celebrations. In 2012, when the Olympic torch was passed between runners across the memorial on Alan Turing’s 100th birthday, the statue sported a Pride flag folded over his arm (Fig. 2). The enhancement of existing memorials is a recurring theme in the reception of LGBT public art by LGBT people. With his statue holding a rainbow flag, Turing is proudly reclaimed by the LGBT community. I am reminded here of Kendall Phillips’ observation that public memories are ‘multiple, diverse, mutable, and competing accounts of past events’ (2004, p. 2). The *Alan*



Figure 2: Glyn Hughes, *Alan Turing Memorial* on Alan Turing’s 100th birthday, Manchester, 2012. Image courtesy of Cen2s2s.

Turing Memorial assisted in reviving the memory of Alan Turing, offering an account of him as a distinguished contributor to his fields of study and a victim of prejudice. Temporary additions to the memorial go further, rehabilitating Alan Turing in public memory as a gay man whose queer identity should be celebrated.

The *Alexander Wood Memorial* (Dell Newbigging, 2005, Fig. 3) in Toronto, Canada, is a rare example of a work intentionally erected as a queer memorial to a queer individual. The bronze statue was commissioned by the Church Wellesley Business Improvement Area to decorate the Church Wellesley Village, a district known for its LGBT culture and nightlife ('Welcome to Church-Wellesley Village!' n.d.). Alexander Wood (1772–1844) is colloquially referred to as Canada's 'Gay Pioneer' (Dunn, 2011, p. 60), not by virtue of pioneering activism for LGBT rights, but because he was an early settler in Toronto who was posthumously assigned a queer identity. Thomas Dunn extols the potency of the statue as an openly gay commemorative work (2011, p. 73). Wood's connection to the LGBT community is, however, tenuous at best. Whilst investigating a rape accusation, city magistrate Alexander Wood examined the penises of several suspects. Rumours of this unorthodox investigative method flew across the city, as did the ruinous rumour that there had been no rape victim at all; Wood had carried out the examination for his own pleasure. Alexander Wood was driven out of the city with a tarnished reputation (Dunn, 2011, p. 61).

Figure 3: Dell Newbigging, *Alexander Wood Memorial*, Toronto, 2005. Image courtesy of Real-2Reel.

Alexander Wood's revered gay identity is based entirely on what could generously be called an abuse of power – if the incident happened at all. Dunn argues that the *Alexander Wood Memorial* affords an opportunity 'for queers to disrupt the forgetting and erasure that has so contributed to GLBTQ marginalization' (2011, p. 62). This opportunity, however, resulted only in ennobling a white man with a highly dubious claim to a queer identity. Alexander Wood has no substantial (or substantiated) part in the history of Toronto's LGBT community. But perhaps factuality is unimportant. It may be enough that the statue is intentionally and unambiguously queer. Just as forgetting in the hands of a conservative public



can be used as a weapon to diminish the status of a marginalised group, remembering can restore value and legitimacy (Phillips, 2004, p. 7). Publicly characterising Alexander Wood as

a queer historical figure provides ‘an official stamp of approval by the state on a queer public memory’ (Dunn, 2011, p. 73). On a plaque below the statue, Wood’s ‘homophobic scandal’ is chronicled, with Wood as the victim and heroic protagonist. On his grand pedestal, he marches forward, bronze cloak flying. The drama of the billowing cloak borders on camp. Shown as a handsome and flamboyant figure, his pants are a touch too tight and one loose lock of hair curls at his forehead. Although in appearance he is camp to the point of stereotype, Wood is designed to respond to the community that surrounds him, as an object which reaffirms the queerness of the space this memorial occupies (Dunn, 2011, p. 61).

Honouring Alexander Wood as an LGBT hero is celebrating a white and gender-conforming ‘conservative image of homosexuality made “safe” for public consumption’ (Dunn, 2011, p. 74). Helene A. Shugart proposes that ‘safe’ representations such as this allow the structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy to ‘reinscribe’ themselves in marginally revitalised forms (2010, p. 67). The cost of queer visibility is a conformity to this ‘safe’ image, and the cost of this ‘safe’ image is the continued overlooking of alternative and diverse queer identities. Alexander Wood’s bold inhabitancy of this public space comes with the implicit suggestion that he is the best representative of the LGBT community.

The *Alexander Wood Memorial* undoubtedly serves its purpose as a queer memorial. Just like the *Alan Turing Memorial*, it sports a rainbow flag during Pride celebrations as Alexander Wood is claimed by the LGBT community as a hero (Dunn, 2011, p. 63). The *Alexander Wood Memorial* is more explicitly queer than the *Alan Turing Memorial*, yet it still reveals the limitations of LGBT public memorialisation through a portrayal of the most acceptable representative of the LGBT community – the gender-conforming, white, gay man – no matter that his queerness is unsubstantiated.

Figure 4: Russell Rodrigo and Jennifer Gamble, *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial*, 2000, Sydney. Image courtesy of Koala: Bear.



Pink triangle memorials

Pink triangle memorials to the gay victims of Nazi persecution comprise the largest category of LGBT public art (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019, p. 63). The pink triangle motif features prominently in the *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Holocaust Memorial*, created in 2000 by Russell Rodrigo and Jennifer Gamble (Fig. 4). This work consists of a large steel triangle with a pink enamel coating, overlaid with the distorted image of a row of men wearing pink fabric triangles at their breasts. The men are unknown prisoners of a concentration camp, the pink triangles identifying their homosexuality and the reason for their incarceration (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019, p. 64). According to Marnie Rorholm and Ken Gambrell, the pink triangle is a transformative symbol, which acts as ‘an interruption to the spread of hatred’ (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019, p. 64). It is a motif that has been reclaimed from its history as a label of condemnation, becoming instead a symbol of commemoration. By referencing a symbol once full of such potent hatred, collective memories of atrocity are evoked, affording viewers a more intense emotional response.

Figure 5: Karin Daan, *Homomonument*, 1987, Amsterdam. Image courtesy of Adam Carr.



To date, there are twenty-eight memorials dedicated to gay holocaust victims, the earliest being Amsterdam’s *Homomonument* by Karin Daan (Fig. 5) erected in 1987, and the most recent being Barcelona’s *Pink Triangle Memorial* (unknown artist; Fig. 6), erected in 2011 (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019, p. 64). Rorholm and Gambrell argue that these memorials not only memorialise victims of Nazi persecution, but condemn all violence perpetrated against LGBT people, by referencing atrocities that are universally known and abhorred. Barcelona’s *Pink Triangle Memorial*, a grey concrete work framed in pink and set just above pavement level, was unveiled on the 20th anniversary of the murder of transgender woman Sonia Rescalvo (Rapp, 2015). The connection drawn between this incident and the pink triangle motif shows an awareness that violent hate crimes did not simply stop after World War II ended.

Figure 6: Unknown, *Pink Triangle Memorial*, 2011, Barcelona. Image courtesy of Elliot Brown.

Pink triangle memorials far exceed any other category of LGBT public art (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019, p. 66). Perhaps this is because communities are more comfortable memorialising victims of Nazi persecution. Memorials to these victims provide a ‘non-threatening’ platform for the condemnation of homophobic violence in which viewers are safely unimplicated. The atrocious events of World War II occurred long enough ago and, in such a specific set of circumstances that viewers are not forced to face distressing thoughts about their *own* complicity in societal apathy toward LGBT discrimination. Referencing an uncontested example of cruelty and homophobia affords distance from accountability for instances of LGBT violence that are geographically and ideologically ‘closer to home’. This may be confirmed by the distinct *lack* of memorials to more recent examples of hate crimes against members of the LGBT community (which unfortunately are not lacking) (Orangias et al., 2018, p. 708). The 49 victims of the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting are yet to be publicly and permanently memorialised. However, just as LGBT communities embellish and adorn the Alan Turing and Alexander Wood memorials, thereby expressing queerness publicly, Amsterdam’s LGBT community was able to utilise the existing *Homomonument* to mourn the Pulse nightclub hate crime, filling one of its pink triangles with lit candles, cards and flowers (Fig. 7). Closer to the scene of the tragedy, the nightclub itself was used as a shrine for mourners to leave their own visible memorials to the tragedy (Fig. 8).

Figure 7: *Homomonument*, used as shrine for Pulse victims. Image courtesy of JPbio.



Figure 8: Pulse nightclub used as a shrine. Image courtesy of Dannel Malloy.



Commemorating LGBT struggles for equality

There is a major dearth of public artworks which pay tribute to specific events in LGBT communities' struggles for equality. Joseph Orangias, Jeannie Simms and Sloane French's (2018, p. 713) survey of LGBT monuments and memorials identified George Segal's *Gay Liberation* (erected in 1992; Fig. 9) as the only artwork in this category. *Gay Liberation* was commissioned by the Mildred Andrews Fund in 1979 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots (Disponzio, 2014, p. 199). The 1969 riots were instigated by those arrested in a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York. The riots acted as a catalyst for the establishment of LGBT activist groups.

Figure 9: George Segal, *Gay Liberation*, 1980 (erected in 1992), New York. Image courtesy of Ted Eytan.



In both preceding categories of LGBT public art, *victims* were memorialised. *Gay Liberation*, by contrast, aims to celebrate ordinary queer people by identifying a historical event as an LGBT triumph. A figurative bronze work, it features two women on a park bench and two men standing nearby. All the figures are painted white. Although completed in 1980, *Gay Liberation* was not installed until 1992 due to fierce public backlash. A prevalent

argument against Segal's sculpture was that the park next to the Stonewall Inn was too small for the work. Joseph Disponzio, however, argues that it was the *content* of the work the local community took issue with, not the proposed location (2014, p. 205). Local residents' objections that the work promoted 'special interests' confirms this, as *all* memorials promote special interests (Disponzio, 2014, p. 206). What was implied, then, was that LGBT interests *in particular* were deemed unworthy of commemoration.

Although members of the local LGBT community took issue with the selection of a heterosexual artist to create this memorial, George Segal's name held weight (Disponzio, 2014, p. 206). However, Segal's renown and the stylistic traditionalism of the figurative bronze sculpture did not sufficiently outweigh public disquiet caused by the subject matter. One of the more overtly homophobic concerns was that the work was pornographic (Disponzio, 2014, p. 206). Yet as Disponzio notes, this is a preposterous argument against a work which displayed no more than friendly interaction between four clothed adults (2014, p. 206). Segal's figures do not embrace, yet their mere closeness, in combination with the title *Gay Liberation*, was deemed too bold a display of (homo)sexuality. This 'antidisplay' attitude towards LGBT representation divulges a public desire to avoid queer bodies, designating queer love and sexuality as only appropriate for private spaces (Disponzio, 2014, p. 206).

Members of local LGBT communities also took issue with *Gay Liberation*. Craig Rodwell, owner of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Book Store in Greenwich Village, objected to the sculptor's use of Caucasian models (Disponzio, 2014, p. 207). And art historian James Saslow described the 'blank stares, narcissistic isolation and awkwardly hesitant contact' of the figures as cold and far from celebratory (cited in Disponzio, 2014, p. 208). Certainly, there *does* seem to be tension in the artfully casual arrangement of the four figures. Their faces are set, their brows furrowed. Their conversation appears serious, rather than jubilant, victorious or even nonchalant. Moreover, as a celebration of queer identity, *Gay Liberation* looks severely dated now, only portraying white, gender-conforming men and women. And even when it was completed, the work did not accurately represent its community. Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992) was a transgender woman of colour who was a key instigator of the Stonewall rioting, as well as a notable figure in New York's LGBT community. She and other transgender women of colour are conspicuously absent from the work. Segal has opted for a 'safe' representation of the queer community, and as a result, real, rich stories involving less publicly 'acceptable' queer people are overlooked and gradually lost from memory.

Perhaps these issues of representation can be attributed to the early date of this project; perhaps the public were simply not ready for a celebration of queer identity, even one that reduced a diverse community to its more 'respectable' members. However, very little LGBT public art has been created in the forty intervening years. No additional monuments have been erected to commemorate the Stonewall riots. Even recent strides made in queer rights movements, including the legalisation of same-sex marriage, have not been celebrated in public art.

Alternative forms of queer public art

The previous sections have discussed categories of LGBT public art, focusing on traditional forms of commemoration, such as bronze memorials to historically significant figures, and abstract memorials honouring the victims of war. In these categories, conventional forms of public art were altered to represent LGBT people and interests. *Gay Liberation* is an outlier, yet still did not stray far from convention. The work is figurative, the material is bronze. Audre Lorde cautioned that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house',

suggesting innovation in place of assimilation to overcome oppressive structures (1984, p. 110). Non-traditional methods of commemorating LGBT communities offer alternative ways for queerness to penetrate public memory. For example, the *Gay Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Leonard Matlovich, 1988; Fig. 10) displays a uniquely queer narrative in a traditionally heteronormative site: a cemetery. This tombstone, created by gay veteran and activist Leonard Matlovich, bears not a name, but the heart-rending epitaph: ‘When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one’. The small headstone makes for a subtle and poignant memorial, and because it straddles private and public space it could not be thwarted by public backlash.

Figure 10: Leonard Matlovich, *Gay Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1988, Washington DC. Image courtesy of Ryanhwu.



Patricia Cronin’s *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002) is another example of public art queering the cemetery.² In Cronin’s marble sculpture, two naked women lie in each other’s arms. The work imitates the angelic or allegorical female forms often displayed in cemeteries and transforms them into loving, queer human bodies. This is a political work, created before the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the United States. Located on Cronin and her now wife’s actual burial plot in Woodland Cemetery in the Bronx, the work defiantly makes the private public, normalising queer intimacy (Watson, 2010).

‘Posting’ is another method of bringing LGBT issues into public spaces. Daniel Faria calls publicly disseminated posters a ‘hybridization of activism and contemporary public art’ (2009, p. 185). Since the 1980s, AIDS-awareness group ACT UP has interrupted heteronormative space during the AIDS crisis with their production of politicised poster

campaigns. *Kissing Doesn't Kill* (1989) was a work dispersed via post cards and on New York city buses (Faria, 2009, p.188).³ The posters forced queer issues into the public consciousness, depicting three couples otherwise overlooked in public spaces: interracial, gay and lesbian. This poster campaign was also an effective way of dispelling harmful myths about HIV that government agencies had only perpetuated (Faria, 2009, p. 189).

Although Segal's *Gay Liberation* appears to be the only LGBT public artwork to pay tribute to a key LGBT event, there *are* plans to revive diverse queer memories. Marsha P. Johnson is set to be memorialised near the site of the Stonewall Riots at the end of 2021, and Latina transgender activist Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002) will be memorialised by her side (Jacobs, 2019). These memorials, the first to celebrate transgender identity, will be a step towards diversifying public space and providing a comprehensive and intersectional queer history (Jacobs, 2019). In the interim, LGBT communities continue to participate in the curation of public spaces, providing queer visibility in their cityscapes. The adornment of the Alan Turing and Alexander Wood memorials with Pride flags, and the utilisation of the Pulse nightclub as a shrine, are spontaneous decorations of public spaces which provide ways for LGBT individuals to contribute to public memory.

Figure 11: One of the pylons in the Legacy Walk, 2012, North Halsted Road, Chicago. Image courtesy of Gerard Farinas.

The decoration of public spaces with the Pride flag has been carried out on a larger scale – across whole streets and neighbourhoods – to identify spaces in which queer identities are acknowledged and celebrated. The *Legacy Walk* project (2012; Fig. 11) combines bibliographical memorial with education and city scaping. Twenty steel pylons, each seven-metres high, adorn a section of North Halsted Street in Chicago. Each pylon is painted a bold colour of the rainbow and displays a plaque with the biography of an LGBT historical figure. Thirty-six plaques are rotated amongst the twenty pylons with the potential for new plaques to be added (Gomez et al., 2013, p. 201). The adjustability of the *Chicago Legacy Walk* allows



for a diversity that *Gay Liberation* lacked. Queer identities are in a constant state of flux, and as LGBT movements progress, new figures will warrant commemoration. Meanwhile, in the Sydney suburb of Darlinghurst, the Pride flag flies all year round; it is even painted across one of the suburb's busy streets. Closer to home, many storefronts along Auckland's Karangahape

Road display small Pride flags or other easily identifiable messages of alliance to the LGBT community. Although these easy-to-produce symbols are more removed from the definition of public art than a bronze memorial, they offer cheap and relatively uncontroversial ways for a marginalised group to claim public space. The Pride flag acts as a universal signal of LGBT acceptance. As an unambiguous symbol, it occupies a position that LGBT public art still struggles to fulfil.

Figure 12: Rainbow crossing on Oxford Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney, 2013. Image courtesy of Bidgee.



There does not appear to be a single public artwork in Aotearoa/New Zealand in which LGBT history or identity is memorialised or celebrated. This shameful absence testifies to the neglect of LGBT identities in public art, both here and overseas. Extant LGBT public artworks frequently avoid the explicit celebration of diverse queer identities. Of these works, some reduce LGBT identities to a publicly palatable but inadequate representation of a deeply diverse and intersectional community. Others reduce the LGBT experience to victimhood. Although public tributes to victims of war and discrimination are of value, and offer victims a rightful place in public memory, the memorialisation of historical instances of violent prejudice remove a contemporary public from possible implication. This is a distancing tactic which eliminates an element of discomfort from the viewing experience of LGBT public art. It appears that, at least where public art is concerned, the public would rather queerness was not flaunted. Due to the scarcity of LGBT public art, non-traditional and alternative methods of restoring and cultivating LGBT memories have taken shape thanks to members of LGBT communities embellishing existing memorials, creating their own, and publicly disseminating LGBT symbols. These actions and interactions attest to a keen yearning within LGBT communities for physical and visual representation in public spaces.

ELIZABETH NEWTON-JACKSON is completing her Honours degree in Art History at the University of Auckland.

Notes

1. For consistency, I will use the acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) as shorthand to refer to a community identified by a varied combination of the letters LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Plus). I will also use the word 'queer' in the same context as LGBT.
2. A Creative Commons image of Patricia Cronin's sculpture in its graveyard location was not available, but you can see a photograph (and read more about it) on this website.
3. The Kissing Doesn't Kill poster can be viewed on the V&A Museum website.

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