

Monumental Remix: Subverting the Monument in Canada's Public Spaces

Brandon Vickerd

Brandon Vickerd is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Visual Art & Art History, in the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design of York University.
—bvickerd@yorku.ca

Introduction

The current debates regarding contested monuments across Canada, as well as the violence erupting in opposition to Civil War monuments across the United States, make it important to recognize that the process of removing monuments and reconstructing shared history is not new. Recent controversies surrounding the removal of the statue of Edward Cornwallis in Halifax and the Sir John A. Macdonald monument in Victoria, as well as the violent toppling of the John A. Macdonald monument in Montreal, are largely concerned with correcting or preserving historical facts, as well as determining who has ownership of—and who has been historically excluded from—Canada's collective memory. Disputes concerning monuments represent an urgent attempt to control specific historical narratives regarding Canada's history and Canadian identity.¹ Those opposed to the removal of monuments maintain that removing them is an attempt to rewrite history,² while those in favor of removal argue that these monuments celebrate figures whose actions do not reflect the changing values of society. To varying degrees, both positions fail to acknowledge that history is constantly rewritten, edited, and recontextualized.³ Shared histories are a means of constructing identity, a process that is in constant flux: facts are forgotten, edited, omitted and (re)discovered in an ongoing process of constructing history. While the debates currently being played out across Canada focus on heroic figurative bronze statues perched on stone plinths, we must acknowledge a broader issue about who may claim the authority to determine history.

In this context it is worth exploring the events of July 12, 1963, when the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) placed dynamite at the base of a statue commemorating Queen Victoria in Quebec City's Lower Town. The resulting explosion irreparably damaged the three-metre-tall monument, blowing the head off the body and causing fractures throughout the surface of the bronze sculpture. Instead of repairing the fractured monument, a decision was made to place the figure in storage, and it was eventually transferred to the temperature-controlled conservation centre of the Musée de la Civilisation in 1988. Now monitored by a team of conservationists, the headless statue is held in institutional stasis. With a forceful act of removal, the monument was transformed into a tangible reminder of the violent upheavals of nationalism in 1960s Quebec, a message arguably more relevant to

Canadians than the monument's original intent. The FLQ's purpose was to destroy the monument; however, its action resulted in a transformation of the object that holds specific relevance to current debates surrounding the management of colonial and contested monuments. Could the FLQ's action be considered an unintentional remix of the monument? In popular culture the remix is understood as the alteration or appropriation of existing material to create something new. Most commonly a strategy employed by musicians, it is worth investigating its application to contested monuments as a method of recontextualizing our understanding of Canadian history.

It is my contention that contemporary art practices and processes may serve as a means to reframe the debates surrounding contested monuments. One of my priorities as an artist who regularly works in public space is to engage in this process of reframing in ways that attend to the complicated (and often controversial) social and cultural circumstances of a specific site. In this article, I will discuss my project *Wolfe and the Sparrows* as a case study in the use of remixing as a subversive stance toward the culture of the monument. One of my intentions in this project was to investigate the potential of remixing to expand the political and cultural discourse surrounding Canadian history, but within the context of single community-driven public art project. Commissioned by the City of Calgary and installed in 2019, *Wolfe and the Sparrows* speaks to that intention. While it may initially seem like a traditional bronze statue, as the viewer approaches *Wolfe and the Sparrows* the upper body transforms into a flock of sparrows that appear to be scattering. The work is meant, in part, as a response to *Monument to Wolfe* (1898), a sculpture by the Scottish artist John Massey Rhind which currently stands in South Mount Royal Park in Calgary.

Approaching the Monumental Remix

In 2016 the City of Calgary Public Art Program and the Transportation Department released a Request for Qualifications (RFQ). They were seeking an artist or artist team with established public art experience to develop and execute a permanent public art project adjacent to the site of the new 12 Street S.E. Bridge that spans the Bow River from the community of Inglewood to the Calgary Zoo. The original bridge was constructed in 1908 to carry horse and buggies and pedestrians to St. George's Island. Over the last century it developed into an important link for vehicles, cyclists, and pedestrians, providing access to and from 9th Avenue S.E. to points north of the Bow River. The decision to replace the bridge was met with considerable resistance from the tightknit and socially active Inglewood community who viewed the design of the existing structure as a community landmark. The neighborhood of Inglewood comprises the eclectic collection of shops and galleries populating 9th Avenue S.E., with walkable residential areas extending east of the Elbow River. It was decided that the associated public art project should involve a large degree of community engagement in the generation of the design. Artists were asked to apply by describing their general approach to community engagement in lieu of a refined concept for the

1. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
2. Thomas J. Brown, *Civil War Canon: Sites of Confederate Memory in South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
3. Kelsey Blair, Sandra Chamberlain-Snyder, Katrina Dunn, and Julia Henderson, "Memory, Milestones, and Monuments: A Peripatetic Exploration of the West Side of UBC Campus," *Canadian Theatre Review* 174 (2018): 31–37.



Figures 1–2. **Brandon Vickard, *Wolfe and the Sparrows*, 2019. Bronze and concrete, 488 × 152 × 182 cm. Calgary, City of Calgary Public Art Collection. Photo: Perry Thompson Photography.**





Figure 3. Brandon Vickerd, *Wolfe and the Sparrows*, 2019. Bronze and concrete, 488 × 152 × 182 cm. Calgary, City of Calgary Public Art Collection. Photo: Perry Thompson Photography.



Figure 4. John Massey Rhind, *Monument to Wolfe*, 1898. Bronze and concrete, 470 × 152 × 160 cm. Calgary, City of Calgary Public Art Collection. Photo: Brandon Vickerd.

artwork, and to “consider the full spectrum of users and the demographic of both the geographic communities adjacent to the bridge and the users of the bridge.” The RFQ went on to state: “The artist will collaborate with stakeholders to ensure that the required functionality and overall context of each site is considered in the concept, design and placement of the art” (from the RFQ issued December 16, 2016).

I was awarded this commission in March of 2017, partly due to my experience with community-based, collaborative approaches to public art. Through the community engagement process, I attempted to identify key themes that the community desired the resulting artwork to reflect. I approached the three-month consultation process with the citizens of Inglewood and neighbouring area as a means of connecting with the surrounding population through organized and informal events. From the start, I structured the community engagement process as a series of informal discussions. This included events designed as “intercultural spaces”⁴ to help ensure inclusiveness and diversity among participants, including BBQs, information nights, and stakeholder meetings organized by the City of Calgary, as well as meetings that I organized independently. During this preliminary phase of the project, I speculated about “sited communities,” a term that art historian Miwon Kwon (2002)⁵ coined to refer to social groups that have established identities linked to locational bases and a genuine shared sense of purpose. This strategy meant seeking out diverse spaces for discussion—such as social clubs, business organizations, and community centres—which were casual and conversational compared to the relatively formal consultations organized by the city at community centres. Anecdotally, many citizens were resistant to the rebuilding of the bridge, as they felt this change was emblematic of the larger process of gentrification taking place in their neighbourhood. At formal city-organized events it was common for residents to repeat the slogan KISS—an acronym featured in recent campaigns that stood for Keep Inglewood Slightly Sketchy. This slogan encapsulated the desire of many Inglewood residents to resist the forces of gentrification and change taking place in their neighbourhood.

Despite resistance to the rebuilding of the bridge, I found that participants in the casual consultations were open to discussing the potentially positive effect that this public art project could have upon their neighbourhood. While a public art officer representing the city was present at these events, there was a noticeable lack of hierarchy and I decided to forego any formalized presentation in order to help maintain an atmosphere in which opinions could be freely shared. In addition to larger meetings, there were several targeted conversations with community leaders who had long-term investments in the community or who had a specific perspective on the concerns of local citizens. This included exchanges with members of the Inglewood BIA, members of the Inglewood Community Association, the Aboriginal Issues Strategist for the City of Calgary, local entrepreneurs, the staff of the Esker Foundation, as well as with community members serving on the art selection committee. Often impromptu and unstructured, these

4. Phil Wood and Charles Landry, *Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (London: Earthscan Publishers, 2007).

5. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).



Figures 5–6. Brandon Vickerd, *Wolfe and the Sparrows*, 2019. Bronze and concrete, 488 × 152 × 182 cm. Calgary, City of Calgary Public Art Collection. Photo: Brandon Vickerd.

exchanges had a social feel and often began with a reflection on how the community of Inglewood had changed, as opposed to what a work of public art could contribute to the community. Community members proved to be generous during these consultations, with clear opinions on the direction the public art should take. Many expressed an earnest desire to foreground themes and ideas that addressed the complex history of the site and Calgary.

The consultation process resulted in the identification of three key aspects to be considered in the final work of art. First, the community desired an artwork that appeared “traditional.” When asked to define this term, many participants highlighted an interest in something that was representational and could be readily understood by the public. References were also made to the use of specific materials usually associated with conservative statuary, such as bronze and granite. Through prolonged conversation it became clear that this desire for a “traditional” motif was partially rooted in the public outcry directed towards recent City of Calgary public art projects, with specific reference made to controversy surrounding the *Traveling Light*⁶ (2013) and *Bowfort Towers*⁷ (2017) projects.

The second theme was a desire to have a work that was simultaneously humorous and critical. The stated aspiration was to promote speculation about the faults and shortcomings of public art itself, while introducing a self-deprecating element that could be read as irreverent. It is worth noting that the terms “critical” and “humorous” were almost always mentioned in connection with each other during the consultation process. I observed a tension between these first two themes, as the term “traditional” seemed to connote a conservative, monumental approach, which would arguably be opposed to the notion of humour in art.

The third theme identified by the community was the desire to address issues of reconciliation between First Nations peoples and settlers, as well as addressing Canada’s contested colonial history. These subjects were

6. “Mayor calls \$470k blue ring billed as public art ‘awful,’” *CBC News*, October 8, 2013, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/mayor-calls-470k-blue-ring-billed-as-public-art-awful-1.1930104>.

7. Anna Junker, “Artist behind controversial artwork says he’s sorry if anyone feels offended,” *Calgary Herald*, August 6, 2017, <https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/artist-behind-controversial-artwork-says-hes-sorry-if-anyone-feels-offended>.

Figure 7. Brandon Vickerd, *Wolfe and the Sparrows* (in progress), 2017. Foam, wax and wood, 488 × 152 × 182 cm. Photo: Brandon Vickerd.



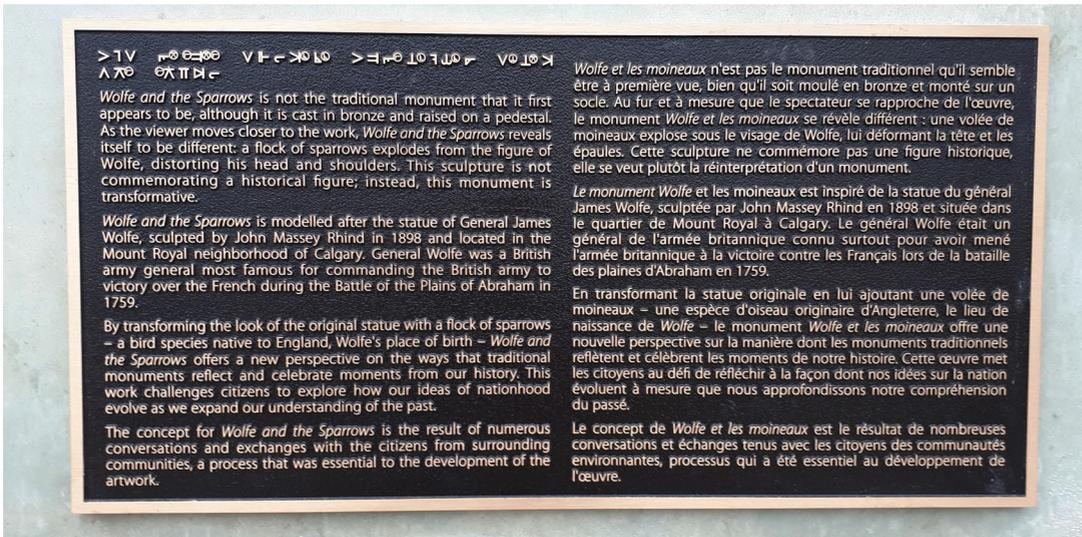


Figure 8. Brandon Vickerd, *Wolfe and the Sparrows* (information plaque), 2019. Bronze and concrete, 488 x 152 x 182 cm. Calgary, City of Calgary Public Art Collection. Photo: Brandon Vickerd.

prioritized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, demonstrating a cross-cultural desire to address the failures of the sanctioned historical narratives that are often represented in Canadian monuments. As an artist of European heritage whose ancestors settled on land once inhabited by indigenous people, this theme required great reflection in order help ensure that the project not further enshrine colonial perspectives. Building on the desires of community members, it was clear that the resulting artwork must contribute to a decentering of values that supported the colonization of Canada and facilitate dialogue from multiple sides.

The Process of Remixing

At the conclusion of the community engagement period, it was clear that a greater understanding of existing public art in Calgary was essential in order to proceed. As part of this research, I visited monuments and public works in the City of Calgary’s collection, including John Massey Rhind’s *Monument to Wolfe*, which is located in South Mount Royal Park. *Monument to Wolfe* was one of four bronze monuments originally adorning the third-floor façade of the Exchange Court Building (now known as 52 Broadway) in New York City, along with statues of Henry Hudson, Peter Stuyvesant, and George Clinton. *Monument to Wolfe* was removed from the Exchange Court Building sometime between 1945 and 1950, along with the other three monuments. It is unclear where it was relocated to, but documentation at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary indicates that John J. Cunningham, educational director of the National Sculpture Society, attempted unsuccessfully to move the monument to London, UK. Eventually Mr. Cunningham brokered the sale of the sculpture to Eric Harvie, a Calgary-based collector and businessman, for \$8,000 (USD).⁸ Harvie arranged for the monument to be installed in front of the Calgary Science Centre⁹ where it stood for 43 years before a period in

8. “Where They Are Known; Why They Went, Isn’t,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/01/realstate/01scap.html.

9. Re-branded as Telus World of Science in 2005.

storage. Eventually *Monument to Wolfe* was re-installed in South Mount Royal Park in September 2009.

General James Wolfe (1727–1759) is best known to Canadians as the British Army officer who led British troops and Indigenous allies to victory over the French general Louis-Joseph de Montcalm in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759. Wolfe's death in the battle was famously depicted in Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770). The picture vividly portrayed Wolfe as a martyr and became one of the best-known images in English art. A highlight of the National Gallery of Canada's collection, the painting was gifted to Canada by the British government in 1921 as recognition of Canada's commitments and losses during the First World War. According to art historian Ruth Phillips, "the transfer from England to Canada of important paintings related to its settler history can be read as an official recognition of Canada's 'coming of age' as a nation."¹⁰ Rhind's *Monument to Wolfe* is a colonial monument, made by a Scottish-American artist, which elevates and mythologizes a British General, whose role in Canadian history is problematic, specifically in Quebec and Indigenous communities. When I viewed the monument, I realized that with its complex history and its subject matter, *Monument to Wolfe* presented an opportunity for an act of monument remixing.

I began to develop a strategy for *Wolfe and the Sparrows* that drew upon the process of remixing as applied in the music industry. This process involves taking a familiar song that serves as a source and then separating the song into individual components or tracks; at this point new instruments, vocals, or layouts are added in order to produce a new composition. Employing this strategy in the creation of a new artwork would obviously require the ability to breakdown the components of the existing monument. While actually dissecting *Monument to Wolfe* was not possible, I was able to create a nearly perfect 3D digital model by scanning the original artwork. I used a device which employs focused light and digital cameras to analyze and map the surface of the monument, eventually generating a highly detailed rendering. Once the 3D model was produced, I used a Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) milling machine to reproduce a replica of the monument in Styrofoam. In order to ensure that the surface was detailed accurately, a 5-millimetre layer of clay was applied to the surface of the Styrofoam and was modeled by hand to replicate the surface of the original monument. The next stage in the process involved removing the top third of the replica (at mid-chest) which permitted the addition of new elements. A series of scale models of sparrows were then created and cast in multiples from modelling wax. I then reconstructed the top portion of the monument using approximately 300 wax sparrows. Once cast in bronze, the intent of the design was to retain the shape and profile of *Monument to Wolfe* when viewed from the front; however, the shape would become more diffuse and less defined as the viewer circled toward the rear of the artwork.

Through the transformation of the figure, *Wolfe and the Sparrows* is an attempt to subvert the authority of the monument, while suggesting an alternate understanding of our relationship to history. Visible from several

10. Ruth B. Phillips, *Settler Monuments, Indigenous Memory: Dis-membering and Re-membering Canadian Art History from Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

blocks away, the bronze figure is immediately recognizable as a monument that relies on the viewer's inherent familiarity with traditional figurative memorials: a bronze colonial general perched on a tapered plinth. The viewer's familiarity with the stylistic devices used in monuments becomes the entry point that draws the viewer to the sculpture; however, as viewers move closer to the artwork, they quickly realize that the sculpture is not intact, but is in fact morphing into a flock of birds that are taking flight and dissolving the monument. The work uses identifiable imagery to lead the viewer into a discussion about authority, monuments, and Canada's colonial past. Given the nation's recent 150th anniversary and the recent findings of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, this is an ideal time to question the role of the monument in narratives about our colonial past and present. While the sculpture takes *Monument to Wolfe* as the starting subject, it presents a reimagined post-monumental understanding of history, signaling a reluctance to assume the authority derived from colonial enterprise, and instead embraces our post-modern age that recognizes the validity of multiple histories and narratives.

Ongoing Engagement with Indigenous Stakeholders

Much of the public engagement took place prior to the design of the artwork. However, because of the conceptual direction of the artwork and the complex history of the site the sculpture would stand on, it became clear that it was necessary to further engage with Indigenous stakeholders during the development and fabrication of *Wolfe and the Sparrows*. Early in the planning process the historic significance of the location for the artwork was highlighted by Lorna Crowshoe, the Aboriginal Issues Strategist at City of Calgary.¹¹ Due to its proximity to the convergence of the Bow River and the Elbow River it was noted that this location held historic importance to the Blackfoot Confederacy and other Indigenous Nations in the Calgary area as it was an important trading and meeting destination. Furthermore, the conceptual direction of the work explicitly engaged with Canada's history of colonization and violence, and as a settler artist I felt that further consultation with Indigenous community members was necessary.

One particularly valuable engagement during the process of designing and fabricating the artwork happened with the City of Calgary's Moh'kinstis Public Art Guiding Circle, which included a visit to the future site of the artwork followed by an extended discussion of the project. The role of the Moh'kinstis Public Art Guiding Circle is decolonizing the processes of public art in Calgary as well as supporting increased relationships between Indigenous artists and the City's Public Art Program. This meeting was an opportunity for a diverse range of Indigenous artists, elders, and community members to provide input and opinion on the developing artwork. During the conversations that occurred during this meeting, I was aware of a shift in my approach to community engagement. Rather than explaining the proposed artwork and answering questions about it, I actively listened to the complexity of perspectives that were offered by Indigenous community members.

11. Conversations and consultation that took place with Indigenous community members were instrumental to the final artwork. I was honoured that Lorna Crowshoe, members of the Calgary's Moh'kinstis Public Art Guiding Circle and Sheldon First Rider reviewed this article prior to publication in order to ensure my accuracy.

My fundamental concern was ensuring that the remixing of Rhind's monument did not repeat or amplify colonial ideals, regardless of my intentions as an artist. This meeting included in-depth considerations of the species of bird to be used in the artwork, with the sparrow highlighted as the preferred species due to its symbolism as an invasive species and its non-heroic status (as opposed to a hawk or a crow). Members of the Guiding Circle highlighted that the sparrow provided symbolic context: it is often referred to as a bird native to North America, but in fact it is a species imported from England because settlers found it attractive and hoped it would be a pest suppressant. In a nod to the British origin of the sparrow and Wolfe, I was encouraged to model the flock of birds emanating from the back of the artwork to provide the impression they were travelling in the direction of England. Further conversations with the Guiding Circle revolved around *Wolfe and the Sparrows* being a symbolic decapitation of Rhind's *Monument to Wolfe* and its relevance to ongoing activism related to other colonial monuments. The ensuing conversation about accountability and openness in public art resulted in consensus that a *Siksiká* (Blackfoot) text should be included as part of the artwork.

Conclusion of the Remix

Historically, the role of the monument has been to perpetuate a monoculture, where the repetition of a story through monumental depiction fixes it as a truth. Across Canada we are subject to numerous monuments that attempt to reinforce and celebrate our colonial past, almost always depicting white European men in stoic or heroic poses meant to reinforce the mythology and inevitability of a historical truth tied to colonialism. The simple act of rendering a historical figure as a commemorative bronze monument signals the importance of the individual in a dominant historical narrative. When the majority of our monuments depict European males, they silently and persistently reinforce a mythology that is damaging, problematic, racist, and colonizing. Upon the installation of *Wolfe and the Sparrows* it became clear that the aesthetic decapitation of Rhind's *Monument to Wolfe* draws parallels to many historical decapitations of public monuments throughout history, such as the attack perpetrated by the FLQ described at the beginning of this article. The decapitation of a monument can be understood as an attack on the symbols of a regime by those who lack the power and ability to change established power structures.¹² The decapitation and (literal) defacement of heroes can be described as a symbolic gesture that confronts a nation's past in the hopes of correcting its future. *Wolfe and the Sparrows* is not limited to a critique of Rhind's *Monument to Wolfe*, but a critique of the larger culture of Canadian monuments. More importantly, it builds on the desire of the community of Inglewood to establish new narratives and address the shortcomings of Canada's official narrative. Researched and constructed while many high-profile stories of removed monuments were featured on Canadian news, *Wolfe and the Sparrows* is the result of applying methodologies of community engagement, intervention, and subversion (as artistic tools) to the largely conservative concept of the monument.

12. Erin L. Thompson, "What's the Point of Beheading a Statue?" *Art in America*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/beheading-monumental-statues-protest-history-1202691924/>.

Wolfe and the Sparrows is accompanied by a plaque that explains the work. In addition to English and French versions, at the suggestion of the Moh'kinsstis Public Art Guiding Circle the plaque also includes a *Siksiká* (Blackfoot) interpretation of the text which poetically distills the pseudo-monument in a sparse twenty-seven characters. Eloquently rendered by Sheldon First Rider who has spearheaded a Blackfoot Language program at Glenbow Museum, the text can be translated as:

This Warrior
Sparrow
Was his guardian and guiding angel
They flew away with his soul
He is with his ancestors now

Epilogue

While the community of Inglewood embraced and celebrated the artwork, a few months after the installation, the base of *Wolfe and the Sparrows* was painted with stylized pink text that read "Decolonize Canada." Members of the community noted that the graffiti artist took particular care to avoid painting the bronze plaques as well as the sculpture itself, speculating that the text may be understood as amplifying the intent of the sculpture. From another perspective the graffiti may be understood as a hostile gesture towards the artwork, but as an artist interested in the remix, I would consider this a valuable addition that potentially expanding the opportunity for discourse. The resulting media coverage¹³ and online response centered on the need and desire for decolonization and conversations surrounding Canada's colonial history. Perhaps the graffiti can be understood as another step in the remixing of the monument. ¶

13. Helen Pike, "Defaced art generates conversations about decolonization," *CBC News*, August 19, 2019, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/wolfe-and-sparrows-vandalism-1.5251684.