Monument Lab: A Citywide Public Art and History Project operates around a central guiding question: What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia? This line of inquiry is aimed at building civic dialogues and stoking historical imagination as a force for social change at a moment of tremendous uncertainty and transition.

Philadelphia is a city full of monumental histories.

To begin responding to this reflective question, the Monument Lab curators and our partners at Mural Arts Philadelphia turn to artists, students, educators, civic leaders, and members of the public as stakeholders in an engaged study of our collective histories and possible futures. In so doing, Monument Lab is a project to imagine a city designed and upheld through the democratic visions of its residents.

This fall, Monument Lab and Mural Arts will stage temporary public monuments from over 20 artists across ten sites in Philadelphia’s iconic public squares and neighborhood parks. These site-specific, socially engaged artworks will be extended by adjacent “labs,” or community research hubs, where creative monument proposals generated by citizen-participants will be collected toward a dataset of public speculation and deposited as forms of civic knowledge. The dialogue between temporary monuments and research labs will be enriched through public discussions and community events, all culminating in a final Report to the City.

Monuments are statements of power and presence. Since antiquity, monument builders have raised obelisks, statues, and arches in cities as a way to elevate human achievement to the sublime, a call to memory and meaning in perpetuity. Authority is often embodied in monuments by the few with the time, money, and resources to build them. Artists who construct contemporary monuments have pushed against this status quo, reinventing inherited traditions with newfangled and/or temporary installations. Similarly, activists who seek redress from repression work to transform both systems and sites of memory, often as simultaneous acts of revision. In other words, if you don’t have the power to build a permanent monument, you can stand next to an existing one to amplify your presence and make your voice heard.

And yet, the story often remains: Authority is embodied in monuments by the few with the time, money, and resources to build them.

Philadelphia is a city full of monuments and memorials. Philadelphia is also a city full of monumental histories, some little known or forgotten, continued on page 2.
The Monument Lab History Project is an initiative by Mural Arts Philadelphia to engage Philadelphians in a citywide conversation about history, memory, and our collective future. This project aims to address themes present in the layers and contours of the city. As curators and organizers of this project, we seek to better understand the ways we live together, with our histories, our ideas for uplift, and our urgency. The project seeks tangible and meaningful modes of social engagement through creative expression. It is an invitation—very much to not only answer a shared question but to question, inquire, excavate, and reflect multiple forms of knowledge. Rather than asking for only the feasible or practical, Monument Lab seeks ideas that speak to the working core taken of a city founded on principles of freedom, justice, and tolerance.

Philadelphia boasts one of the most storied and celebrated collections of public art. As a city, we are keenly aware of our historical inheritance. The city’s recent distinction as a UNESCO World Heritage City—the only one in the United States—affirms a status long known by its residents. While the city’s historical consciousness runs deep, it is not without contest. As a recent Philadelphia Inquirer article titled “Why Philly has one of the nation’s largest public art collections—and two statues of real, historic women” suggests, the official historic landscape is teeming with a giant globe to inspire people to feel united and inspire good in the world. It says “The Future is Ours to Create.”

Monument Lab is defined as a monument that commemorates something or someone, in order to uplift and keep it in public memory—an enduring symbol. A monument can be a status or structure, erected to honor a famous person or event. It might be a building of historical importance. Here in Philadelphia, our city is full of monuments, many crafted in bronze and marble. These are monuments to war, to culture, and to individuals. Murals can be monuments, too—areas that speak to people in personal and intimate ways. In Philadelphia, our collection of murals has become a growing map of human experience, representing our heroes, our struggles, and our aspirations. A mural has power, and when paired intelligently with programming, it can change the conversation, unearthing underrepresented histories, experiences, and perspectives, and inspiring new advocates for social justice.

It is precisely our love for the power of art that drew Mural Arts to Monument Lab when curators Paul Farber and Ken Lum approached us three years ago. As they explained, Monument Lab invites artists and citizens to re-imagine what an appropriate monument looks like in today’s world. So, we asked ourselves: How do we look at the core values of Mural Arts, our deep-seated belief in art and social change, and apply it to the definition of a monument?

A common definition states that a monument commemorates something or someone, in order to uplift and keep it in public memory—an enduring symbol. A monument can be a status or structure, erected to honor a famous person or event. It might be a building of historical importance. Here in Philadelphia, our city is full of monuments, many crafted in bronze and marble. These are monuments to war, to culture, and to individuals. Murals can be monuments, too—areas that speak to people in personal and intimate ways. In Philadelphia, our collection of murals has become a growing map of human experience, representing our heroes, our struggles, and our aspirations. A mural has power, and when paired intelligently with programming, it can change the conversation, unearthing underrepresented histories, experiences, and perspectives, and inspiring new advocates for social justice.

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Monument Lab will challenge and invite Philadelphians to think about monuments and to speculate—together—about the future of our city. We’ll ask: Who do we want to honor? What values do we hold dear? What are the untold stories that need to be told, and who are the storytellers? During this challenging time in our country, when there is a great debate about our beliefs and our values, it is imperative to ask these questions. As James Baldwin once said, “Not everything that is fused can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Monument Lab, created in collaboration with citizens across the city, is steeped in complexity and nuance, much like the Mural Arts’ larger portfolio of work. For over 30 years, we’ve worked with countless communities, building connections, stimulating creativity and action, and using art to recognize diversity within our city and America. Something that has brought us here—and tells those who fought they didn’t do so in vain.

We asked Instagram & they did not disappoint.

@sethrdgers, Seth Rodgers
I’d love to see something truly monumental. Philadelphia could use a monument that inspires hope in a brighter future for the city and America. Something that celebrates pain and struggle that has brought us here—and tells those who fought they didn’t do so in vain.

@katy_leigh,
Kat Campell
A monument to great Philly women of all backgrounds!

@dickeyp,
Mark Potter
Hall & Dates monument, Nothing brings people together better than music. Philly’s most famous duo.

@tomurtagh,
Tom Murtagh
A literal cheesesteak monument would be amazing and hilarious.

@maryswee,
Mary Sweeney
I’d like to see a monument that says “The Future is Ours to Create” with a giant globe to inspire people to feel united and inspire good in the world.

Tell us your own vision of a monument for Philadelphia, and we might feature it on our social media accounts! Tweet us at @muralarts and @monumentlab or use #monumentlab!
Tania Bruguera
Havana, New York City, Cambridge

Mel Chin
Egypt, North Carolina

Kara Crombie
Philadelphia

Tyree Guyton
Detroit

Hans Haacke
New York City

David Hartt
Philadelphia

Sharon Hayes
Philadelphia

King Britt & Joshua Mays
Philadelphia / Oakland

Katyil Pomerantz
Philadelphia

RAIR
Recycled Artist in Residency
Philadelphia

Alexander Rosenberg
Philadelphia

Shira Walinsky & Southeast by Southeast
Philadelphia

Karyn Olivier
Philadelphia

Marisa Williamson
New York City

PREVIOUS WORKS
For full details on Monument Lab artist projects in Philadelphia, see Fall Newspaper arriving this September.

1. Tania Bruguera’s Típico Hexagono, 2006. Photo by Brian Manner, courtesy of Tate Modern and Studio Bruguera.

Hank Willis Thomas
New York City

Jamel Shabazz
New York City

Zoe Strauss
Philadelphia

Marina Abramović
Venice, Italy

Michelle Angela Ortiz
New York City

Shahzia Sikander
London, England

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Kaitlin Pomerantz
Philadelphia

RAIR
Recycled Artist in Residency
Philadelphia

Alexander Rosenberg
Philadelphia

Notes

Zoe Strauss
New York City

#monumentlab

monumentlab.muralarts.org
Monument Lab asks a fundamental question: What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia? The more you think about it, the tougher the question is to answer. What would it mean for a monument to be appropriate to the present moment? Might we imagine new kinds of monuments for our city? Who should decide?

For every monument installed in public, there remain hundreds uninstalled, resulting in a vast, unknown backlog of stories untold and moments uncelebrated. By posing this question, we invite a fresh look at our monuments today, and at what they might be in the future. The 21 artworks created for Monument Lab will inspire us to imagine new ways of seeing our city and different ways of remembering and acknowledging our past. As a partner with the artworks, the research portion of Monument Lab is designed so that many voices and approaches can amplify, scale up, and break open the opportunities to imagine our monuments. We ask: What can we learn if we ask everyone in the city to offer their ideas? What can we learn from each proposal, and what can we learn from the collection taken as a whole from the data of our shared imaginations?

During the Monument Lab discovery phase in the City Hall courtyard in spring 2015, we placed an open shipping container next to a temporary monument by artist Terry Adkins to serve as a lab. As a college student researcher who worked with participants during Monument Lab’s discovery phase in 2015, this quote resonated with me in a number of ways. My work as a researcher offered a relief from the ache Angelou describes, providing the space for me and many others to feel safe to express and imagine in our project site the City Hall courtyard in relation to the current state of Philadelphia transformed by the movement of creative individuals. Whether a participant proposed a monument of William Penn or another imagined some permanent display memorializing the 1985 MOVE bombing, the process of retrieving an answer to the open research question required one to tap into their memory of the city. Given a brief moment, participants were invited to dwell on places of familiarity or journey to sites that required a reach beyond the private, protected, and secure. This act of honesty introduced a wide range of creativity that peaked in a vibrant dialogue about public space, inclusion, and ownership of historical memory.

As a member of the research team for Monument Lab, I experienced conversations around the urban and rural landscapes, everyday life, and a city door through which many, myself included, could step in and imagine what home looks like in Philadelphia. When it comes to art, particularly public art, so many people are excluded from the conversation. Traditionally, what is remembered and rendered permanent in the public realm falls into the hands of a select few. By engaging temporary and site-specific work, Monument Lab seeks to invite more into this conversation and create a space of collaboration, innovation, and transformation.

Monument Lab pushes against the norms of public art and expands the range of contributions in the name of public expression. While each monument proposal is in open data, the collective conversations and intentions are historicalized by the single act of writing down one’s thoughts on a clipboard. Here, memory becomes legible, accessible, and we invite participants to figure the future ways we might choose to remember our stories.

To close, I return to Maya Angelou. I find that this space she speaks about is more than just a physical location. The feeling she describes is more like a journey, one she can go to and think or reflect, and step out to learn and grow. Before Monument Lab, I didn’t know much about Philadelphia, except what I may have read in a book or novel. Working with this team on this project allowed me to understand people, space, creativity, art, and myself on an entirely new and intertwining level. I realized the brief and sometimes longer time I shared with different Philadelphians while talking about monuments. I got a sense of the various ways they envision “home” and was able to open up my definition as well.
The public will make a major contribution to the project, thanks to interactive pop-up "labs," where visitors can write or draw their own ideas for Philadelphia monuments. Staff will be present at all labs to distribute information, answer questions, and prompt participation.