

# The New York Times

## What Should Monuments Look Like Now? 25 Artworks Reveal Some Ideas



“Reclaimed-Water-CC’d,” a poster design by Nicole Awai reimagining a contemporary monument to Columbus — not on a pedestal, but at our feet. Credit Credit Nicole Awai

**By Sophie Haigney**

Nov. 28, 2018

A street drain in the shape of a man's torso and face — quite the manhole — that reads “Reclaimed Water.” With it, carved into the metal at the bottom, a plaque of sorts, reading “Christopher Columbus”: This is a poster design by the artist [Nicole Awai](#), titled “Reclaimed-Water-CC'd.”

The work is for a project called New Monuments for New Cities by the nonprofit Friends of the High Line. It is a public art exhibition in which artists were asked to imagine new monuments. Their designs, on posters or on renderings that will be projected, will travel to five cities in the United States and Canada next year, to be displayed in industrial reuse spaces, beginning in Buffalo Bayou in Houston in April, and ending on the High Line in New York in October.

“This was conceived of last year, during the removal of Confederate monuments, and after what happened here in New York with [the commission that evaluated the monuments](#),” said Cecilia Alemani, who is the director and chief curator of High Line Art. “It really felt like there was something in the air worth capturing.”

What should a contemporary monument look like? Who deserves to go up on a pedestal? Should there be a pedestal at all? Five artists, or groups of artists, from each of the five cities involved in New Monuments for New Cities were invited to respond to the questions and to create a poster or projection of their ideal monument. The same 25 designs will travel to each location: Houston; Austin, Tex.; Chicago; Toronto; and New York.

The national debate about monuments, plaques and memorials has often centered on Confederate figures like John C. Calhoun and Robert E. Lee. In the wake of [a violent white nationalist rally in Charlottesville](#), Va., dozens of monuments [ultimately came down across the United States](#). In New York, the most heated debate was about the statue of Christopher Columbus that towers over Columbus Circle. Many [called for its removal](#) because of Columbus's exploitation and brutality toward indigenous peoples, but it was defended by some Italian-Americans as an important part of their heritage. Mayor Bill de Blasio decided that the monument would stay. Ms. Awai's design is a humorous, provocative reimagining of what a contemporary monument to Columbus could look like — not on a pedestal, but at our feet.

Some participating artists are well-known, including the feminist activist group [Guerrilla Girls](#), famous for provocative art in public space, and Hans Haacke. Mr. Haacke designed a poster that features the phrase “We are all people” in different languages. Others are younger, emerging artists, which Ms. Alemani said was part of the goal of the project.

Some works, like Ms. Awai's, engage head-on with the context of monument removal. Some artists propose alternative people to memorialize, like the anarchist and labor activist [Lucy Gonzales Parsons](#). Other works, including one titled "Angry Edit of a Wikipedia Page" by the artist duo [Life of a Craphead](#) (Amy Lam and Jon McCurley), also broaden the definition of what a contemporary monument can be.

"There is so much hope and optimism of the Friends of the High Line project, of wanting to create green space out of nothing or out of something that was supposed to be demolished," Ms. Alemani said. "And art is now an important component of that experience."

Haigney, Sophie. "What Should Monuments Look Like Now? 25 Artworks Reveal Some Ideas." *The New York Times*, 28 November 2018. [online]