

Threshold Concept: DH is About Human and Extra-Human Subjectivities

Eng 217 Anne McGrail “Reading, Writing and Culture in a Digital Age”

Assignment: “Synthetic Selfies”: Jena Osman’s *Public Figures*¹

Osman investigates non-human observation in monuments as a way of rethinking the act of looking and seeing. This assignment asks you to occupy several subject positions: that of the student of history with the monument as artifact and that of the monumental subject—viewing the world through its eyes.

1) Conduct an observational study of the monument as an historian of the artifact:

Physical Description: How tall is it? What material is it made of? What does it look like? What is the figure depicting (and, aside from knowing what it is supposed to depict, what does it look like to you?). Is there wear & tear/decay? Is there a base/foundation/pedestal? Is there any language on it?

Physical Context: Where is it located in the city? What is the space like (is it in a park? An intersection? Etc)? Describe it. Do humans move among it? Is there foliage? Buildings? How does the monument/fountain mesh with its surroundings?

Social Context: Look out at the city from the monument’s vantage point; consider what it sees. Take a picture of the view from the monument if you can. Spend some time around the monument, noting if or how people interact with it, notice it, ignore it, move around it, etc. Come at different times of the day; does the action or interaction change?

2) Conduct a historical study of the monument as an historian of the artifact:

Visit the City Archives to browse the “Property Control File” on your monument, and synthesize your findings into a short paper (400-500 words) describing a historical context for your monument. Search electronic databases (such as LexisNexis, Ebsco, ProQuest) to find out more (the moment it was chosen, etc.) If possible, include a photo from the archives.

Some questions to guide you: How was it acquired? When? Who was the architect/builder? Sculptor? Do you know anything about either person? Why was this particular figure selected? What do you know about the actual history of the figure depicted? Do you know why it was acquired/sited there? Is there record of more history after the monument was acquired? Were there controversies?

Finally, consider what has changed from the time of its installation – in the city or the neighborhood, to the monument, about the relation between the two?

Write an observation of your surroundings from the position of the monumental subject.

This assignment component asks you to develop an alternative point of view: that of the figure in the monument. What does the monument “see” each day? What might such a monument “think” about what it “sees”? How is this different from what you see and think as you stand next to/walk around it?

¹ This assignment was taken in part from a course designed by professor Kaia Sand (Portland State University). You can view Jena Osman’s presentation on *Public Figures* here: http://www.asu.edu/piperwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/public_figures/ch2.html

Think about the monument's place in the park or public space. What do others think as they walk by it? What fantasies would such a monument have?

Synthetic selfie: Take a selfie with the monument and then *attempt to take a selfie as the monument*. Compare the two in a brief (500 word) reflection.