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Saturday Extra: Guerilla Civic Engagement on the Landscape

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Saturday Extra: Guerilla Civic Engagement on the Landscape

Abstract

Over at [Civil War Memory](#), Kevin Levin brought the community's attention to some installations placed on the fences surrounding a few of the statues along Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. The signs are a redress of sorts to the Confederate narrative told through granite, marble and bronze on the massive monuments. They highlight black citizens of Virginia who challenged the racist establishment of the state throughout its history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Civic Engagement, Richmond, Virginia

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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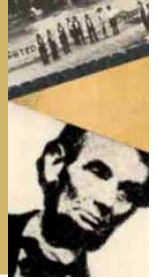
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Saturday Extra: Guerilla Civic Engagement on the Landscape

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2011



WTVR-TV in Richmond has [all the details and more photos](#) of the "vandalism"

Over at [Civil War Memory](#), Kevin Levin brought the community's attention to some installations placed on the fences surrounding a few of the statues along Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. The signs are a redress of sorts to the Confederate narrative told through granite, marble and bronze on the massive monuments. They highlight black citizens of Virginia who challenged the racist establishment of the state throughout its history.

Levin characterizes the signs as "vandalism," while the local CBS affiliate WTVR calls the signs, "street art." So which are they?

The incident reminded me of a clear-cut instance of vandalism which happened back in April on the same street in the same city. On the night of April 6th, someone spray-painted "NO HERO" across the bases of both the Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis monuments. This was a destructive act at its core, attempting to permanently change the landscape.

But this type of vandalism is weird and different than a simple tag in an alley behind a 7-11. There was true, deep meaning behind both the act in April and the most recent one. The spray painting in April was not a tag or a gang sign. It was simple black block letters, with two words. Those words spoke to the monument. The vandal was having a dialogue with the monument. Yes, that dialogue was destructive, but the thought and meaning behind that act was pure and deeply intellectual. The person working the spray-can could not find themselves represented in that place. They found a way to talk back to it in their own language.

They were engaging with the meaning of the place. The medium they chose was destructive and illegal, but the engagement with the place and the thoughts behind the act



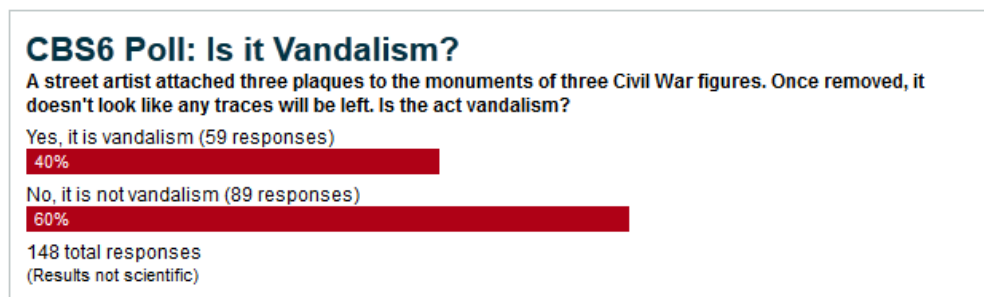
rvanews had [excellent coverage of the vandalism](#) in April.

were deep.

Fast-forward to this week. Another voice entered the dialogue. The same deep thought took place, the same pure sentiment was expressed. This new artist chose a different mode of expression, that of wood, cheap hardware and mixed-medium. The installations were bolted to the fences surrounding the monuments, not leaving a mark on the outdated marble and bronze. They serve as stark counterpoint to the Confederate narrative. They plaques speak to Davis, Jackson and Stuart. They hold a dialogue with the historical landscape. And, most importantly, they do so without destruction of the landscape.

Are the plaques vandalism? No. They could be best classed, if called a crime at all, as littering.

The newest actions are truly civic engagement through constructive artistic expression. They begin a discussion on the landscape, shift its meanings and help the citizens of Richmond see multiple perspectives in sharp, geographic contrast.



Poll results on wtvr.com as of 12:01am seem to show the community at large sees the tablets as harmless expression, not vandalism.