

feminist visions

redesigning
the
mary woolstonecraft
statue



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Since its unveiling in November of 2020, there has been a lot of chatter about the statue of Mary Wollstonecraft in North London. The statue is of course long overdue as it has been 200 years since Mary's un-timely death and a result of a long and arduous ten year campaign to have the writer and philosopher's contributions to feminist thought and actions remembered. She has served as an inspiration to many for her determination to promote education and rights for women; opening a girls boarding school at just 25 years of age. However, we note that the decision to manifest a (highly expensive) statue of 'every woman' rather than of her specifically, and the physical manifestation of this 'every woman' as a naked person on top of what looks a bit like a silver wave, is not welcome. This has come as a disappointment and a shock to those involved in donating to the £143,300 fund that could make her image a reality. While we acknowledge representation is a small achievement for ensuring the rights of women and girls, it is part of a larger spectrum of measures that seek to dismantle the hegemonic dominance of male thought and action represented across our cities.

After seeing the silver statue, our first thought was that we wanted to make some clothes for Mary, and to give her a hat! But alas, we live in the North East and at the time it was not safe (nor legal under then lockdown rules) for us to travel down South to put those clothes on her. We've seen photos of Mary wearing a cape made of face masks, so we're glad to see that others had similar ideas to us. There are no faster workers than angry

women after all.

With this zine-project, we take a feminist approach to the reproduction of the statue, giving artists and non-artists alike the chance to re-design Mary's statue. We particularly want to welcome design fictions of what this statue *could* be in alternative futures. Using the existing statue as a starting point, how would you alter, adapt, de-construct, or re-construct this silver wave of the 'every woman'? How would you best respect the legacy that Mary has provided in material form, using the existing statue as a starting point?

After receiving quite awe-inspiring support on social media for this project, we received seven submissions for our zine. We have collated these in the following pages.

Thank you so much to everyone who has shared this call, to those who messaged us in support without being able to submit their own piece; and of course a huge thank you to those who took the time to think about and develop ideas of how the Mary Wollstonecraft Statue could be changed to more realistically depict the power that she embodied.



Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum? 1989

© courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com

As far as I know,
she's more or less
the shape we'd all
like to be.

Maggi Hambling, Artist, 2020¹

"Nameless, nude and conventionally attractive is the only way women have ever been acceptable in public sculpture."

Imogen Hermes Gowar, Writer, 2020²

Of the **828** public statues recorded, **174** of them are female. **80** of those are named women, **15** of which are allegorical, mythical or otherwise fictional. And **38** of them are royal.

April 2018³

1. www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/mary-wollstonecraft-naked-sculpture-maggi-hambling-b63158.html
2. www.theconversation.com/mary-wollstonecraft-statue-a-provocative-tribute-for-a-radical-woman-149888
3. www.bbc.com/news/uk-43884726

My response inspired by the 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster.
Photo credit 'Mother of feminism' © Paul Childs/Reuters

By Caroline Claisse

Knowledge & Moonglasses:
indispensable tools for looking at
things in the right perspective

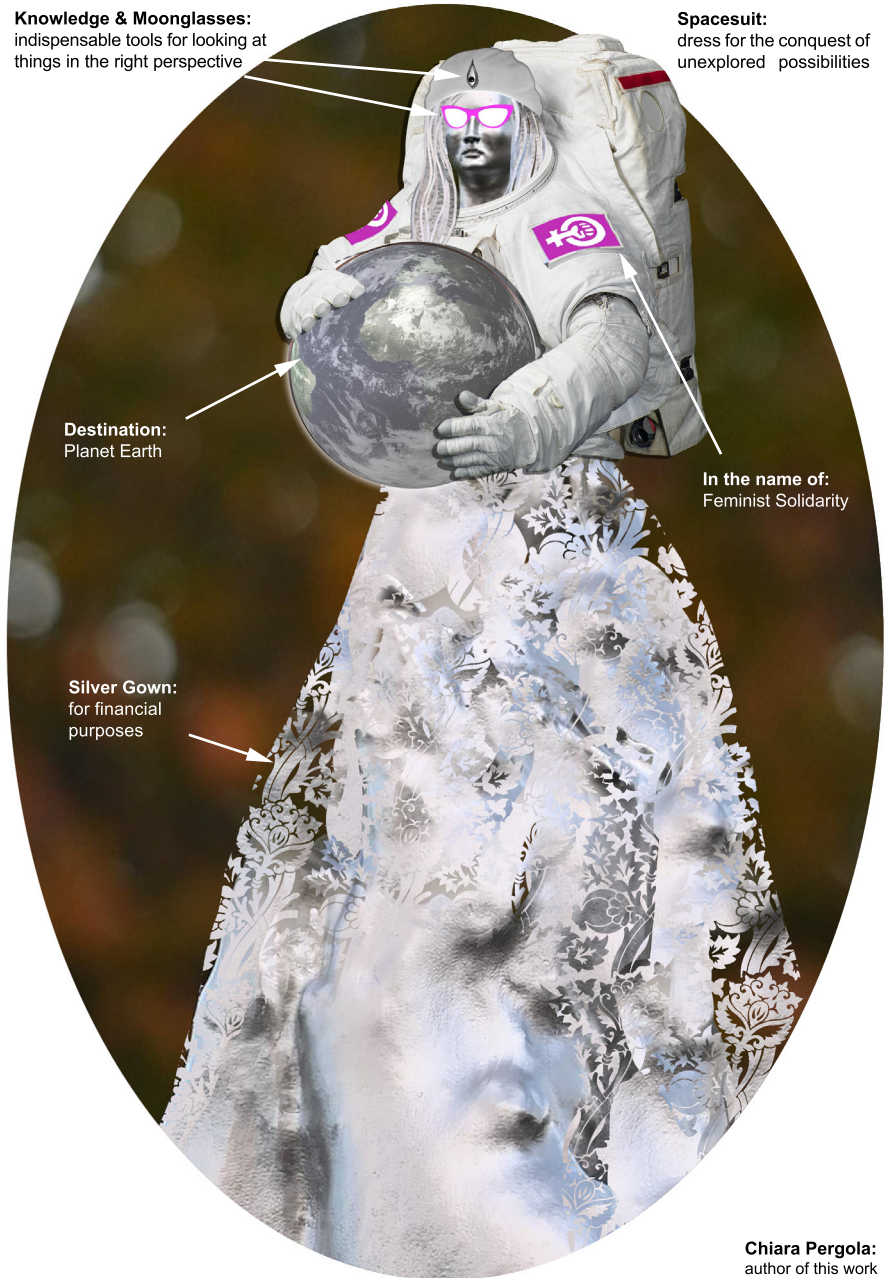
Spacesuit:
dress for the conquest of
unexplored possibilities

Destination:
Planet Earth

In the name of:
Feminist Solidarity

Silver Gown:
for financial
purposes

Chiara Pergola:
author of this work



Here is our zine for #MaryWollstonecraft statue, also a repres



independent of men, strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind she trusts herself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I do not know my own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them (like rational creatures) as if they were men, instead of fobbing their fascinating graces and bewitching smiles upon me, only to seduce to adorn, its prison. It is vain to expect virtue from women, till they are in some degree

presentation and manifestation of our ideas of future public art.

WE DREAM OF ARTISTIC WORK THAT IS NOT LIMITED BY ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES OF CLOTHING OR NUDITY, NOT FIXED IN OLD FORMS AND MATERIALS WITHOUT CONTEXT. BODILY REPRESENTATIONS CAN BE NAKED AND UNCOVERED, AND NAKEDNESS IS NATURAL IN ALL WAYS. THOUGH, A HUMAN, LIKE MARY, SOMEONE WE VALUE FOR THEIR THOUGHTS AND LIVES CANNOT BE REDUCED TO A FIXED FORM OF A NORMATIVE "WOMAN" BODY, NOT IN PUBLIC ARTS, NOWHERE. WE ARE ALL DIVERSE. WE DO LOVE OUR BODIES AND THOUGHTS, AS DIVERSE AND IN A CONTINUOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS AND NATURE. THEREFORE WE CHOOSE TO REPRESENT THE BODY OF MARY, THROUGH CREATING A PILE OF BOOKS - THAT IS TO BE EVER-CHANGING LIKE A PUBLIC LIBRARY - FULL WITH REFRESHING AND INSPIRING WORDS, FROM OTHERS MARY INSPIRED, AND TO WHOM MARY WAS AN INSPIRATION. MARY HAS HER WORDS COVERING THE BODY, LIKE A SKIN. IF THIS WERE TO BUILD ANEW, WE WOULD IMAGINE PEOPLE FROM WOMEN LIBRARIES, NGOs, AND ARTISTS AND ALIKE CAN GET TOGETHER AND THINK OF A LIVING STATUE THAT CONNECTS YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW. THEY CAN BE THE INITIATORS TO COLLECTIVELY DECIDE WHICH BOOKS, SLOGANS AND REPLICAS OF ART PIECES TO INCLUDE TO THE BASEMENT ON WHICH MARY WOULD RISE (IN SOME MATERIAL FORM, NOT NECESSARILY A BODY). THE ORGANISATIONS WOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANISING WHO WOULD SUSTAIN THE STATUE IN THE LONG TERM, A PAID LABOUR THAT ACCEPTS IMPERFECTION AND CONTINUOUS CHANGE. WE IMAGINE THE FUNDING OF PUBLIC ART CAN BE SPENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY. WE WANT PUBLIC ART TO BE A SUSTAINABLE, ONGOING CONVERSATION IN TERMS OF THE MATERIALS, REPRESENTATION AND COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION.

image sources:

[book pile:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/booksandarts/book-pile/9249776>]

[sculpture:<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medusa>]

[Dollface, Freya

Jobbins:<https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/02/dollface-bizarre-portraits-made-from-repurposed-toy-parts-by-freya-jobbins/>]

futurewell 2020, istanbul

So Long As People Are Talking About It

by Madeleine Kay

It was unsurprising that the Mary Wollstonecraft statue caused some controversy, given that the commission was given to an artist who has a reputation for being controversial. The reaction on Twitter was entertaining to say in the least; a lot of the debate on social media centred around individual interpretations of the artwork's meaning. There was widespread objection to the statue's nakedness, with popular author, Malorie Blackman, putting it bluntly, "I've seen many statues of male writers, rights activists and philosophers and I can't remember any of them being bare-assed".

Others contested that the statue was empowering to women, and its defiant posture and expression represented women overcoming the struggles they have faced (represented by the steel blob the figure is emerging from). Some suggested that the presentation of the idealised female form was actually demeaning to women, insinuating that we should aspire to this beauty aesthetic, above other achievements. One of my Facebook

followers provided my favourite description of the sculpture, "a heap of amorphous aluminium slag with a naked size 10 hottie balanced on the top".

Nonetheless, Maggie Hambling's sculpture did achieve one unquestionable success; it got us all talking about Mary Wollstonecraft. "It's an interesting piece though and has done what good art should do, it has got people discussing it." Malorie Blackman added to her thread on Twitter. And as an artist myself, I agree that the best artwork attracts publicity by provoking debate. As Oscar Wilde said, "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." Good art is widely seen and shared because it engages people's attention by resonating with them on a meaningful level – whether they appreciate the work aesthetically is largely irrelevant.

However, I think issue we need to address is whether Maggie Hambling was the right choice

to deliver the original agenda of the commission. The 'Mary on the Green' campaign took ten years and had to raise £143,300 for the sculpture. On their website they state "Over 90% of London's monuments celebrate men. This is set against a population of 51% women." Which infers that the purpose of the campaign was a "levelling up" agenda – to acknowledge more historic female figures in equal standing with their male counterparts. From this perspective, it seems to me that the artwork created does not deliver on the primary objective of the campaign. Perhaps there will be a time for alternative, "Avant Garde", commemorative sculptures, but given that the current disparity is so stark, I think the priority should be to create sculptures which put women on an equal pedestal with men; that means the same size, stature and fully clothed and an actual representation of the person themselves (not a generic figure dedicated to the person). I feel like Hambling's work is more about herself as an artist, than it is about recognising Mary Wollstonecraft and her life's work as a pioneering feminist. After all, when visitors go to Parliament

Square to see the statues of Winston Churchill or Millicent Fawcett, they will rarely be talking about the artist who created the sculptures.

In this sense, the commission should have been given to a "craftsperson" not an "artist", because what we needed was a commemorative sculpture not an interpretative artwork. As it turns out, one of the designs proposed for the commission was a dignified, full-sized, fully clothed, bronze statue of Wollstonecraft with her left hand placed on a pile of books - which is befitting of the Wollstonecraft Society's objectives, "To promote the recognition of her contribution to equality, diversity and human rights. And to promote equality and diversity in education, and stimulate aspiration and thoughtful reflection." The problem with this design was that it was created by a man, and so the design submitted by a female artist was chosen in preference. This could be seen as an example of positive discrimination, but if so, it is short-sighted and based on the false assumptions that there is no such thing as a male feminist and that women can't reinforce

the patriarchy.

The result of this decision-making process by the selection committee is that we are presented with a sculpture which is focussed on the “struggles” women have faced, not their achievements, and all women are being represented by a miniscule, idealised female figurine in gleaming silver.

Perhaps it would provide some insight to reverse the situation, and envisage an equivalent, “modern art” sculpture, of a famous British figure. Imagine a commemorative sculpture of Boris Johnson: the figurine is not actually representative of the

prime minister (who is somewhat over-weight), but an idealised, male form; naked and muscular with a large erect penis. Evoking a Roman warrior or a Grecian God, surely this is befitting of Boris who studied Classics at Oxford and has a reputation for cavalier ambition? The figure emerges from a huge turd to symbolise the challenges he has overcome during the delivery of his life’s greatest achievement: Brexit. Of course, the statuette might cause controversy, as some people might have an alternative interpretation of its meaning ...

But so long as they are talking about it, that’s the important thing. Right?



Big Johnson, 2020. Sculpture by Madeleine Kay.

Great Tits

Do they know the history, are they aware of it?
as they share their pics of this lady, bare, with "great tits"
nothing else to make of it. No debate on this
inspired generations but it's like the creator never gave a shit
not contemplating their actions.. the weight of it
much uproar has been caused, raging fits
is this really what a lady is?

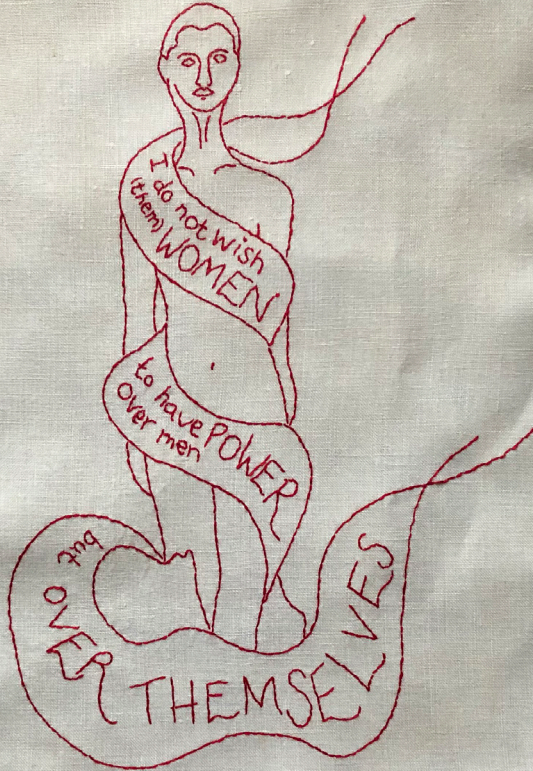
This does not educate the kids
educate them by saying this lady didn't know the way to quit
she heard the male narrative and engaged with it
unveiled it as a tale of shit
revolutionary status.. fit
what a cause for celebration is
what it was and should get carried away with it
.. she gave the world an inseminating kiss

Yet today it is
the most insane remiss
a knife with a disabling twist
kids will play a bit
and say with grit
"let's go see Mary in the park.. that lady with the great tits"

Niam Dodd

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A VINDICATION FOR THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN



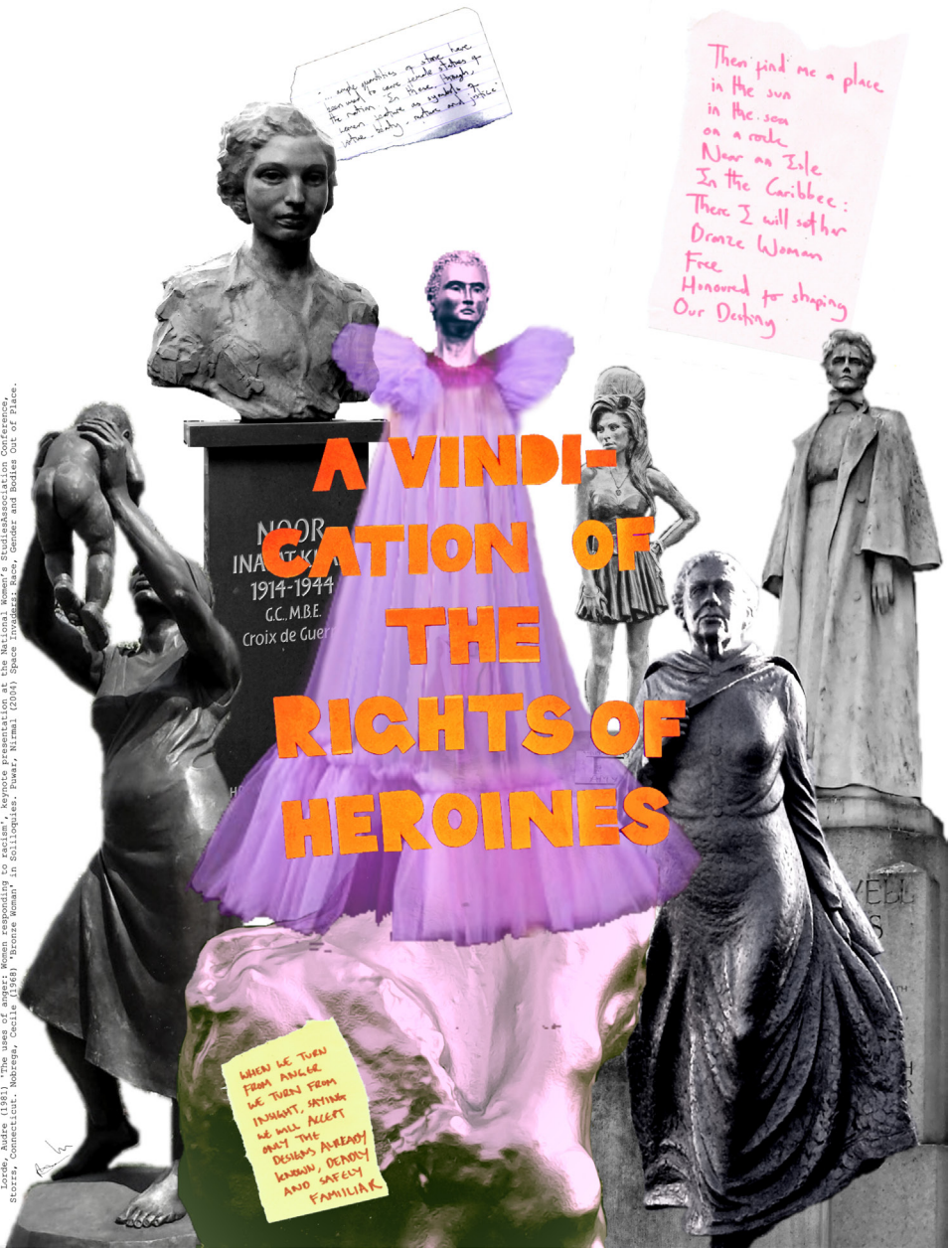
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

FEMINIST WRITER

1759-1797

By Louise Rondel & Rosie Martin

London, Audrey (1981) 'The uses of empire: Women responding to realism', keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut. Moberg, Cecilia (1989) 'Dance Woman' in *Solliloquies: Power, Ritual* (2004) Space, race, class, gender and bodies out of Place.



... empty positions of a white face
... and to see white bodies of
the nation. So these things
... women's bodies as symbols of
white body - nation and white

Then find' me a place
in the sun
in the sea
on a rock
Near an Isle
In the Caribbee:
There I will sojourn
Dance Woman
Free
Honoured for shaping
Our Destiny

A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF HEROINES

WHEN WE TURN
FROM ANGLE
WE TURN FROM
INSIGHT, SINCE
WE WILL ACCEPT
ONLY THE
DESIGN, ALREADY
KNOWN, OF READY
AND SAFELY
FAMILIAR

“It is justice, not charity, that is
wanting in the world!”
— Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication
of the Rights of Woman*

“My dreams were all my own; I ac-
counted for them to nobody; they
were my refuge when annoyed -
my dearest pleasure when free.”
— Mary Wollstonecraft

redesigning the mary woolstonecraft statue

*made lovingly by
rosanna bellini and
angelika strohmayer*



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