

MONUMENT VS SHRINE by Zedeck Siew

In “Replica, Aura, and Late Nationalist Imaginings”, the political scientist Benedict Anderson (most famous for his Southeast Asia scholarship and that definitive critique of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*) muses on the Lincoln memorial:

- Within a temple explicitly mimicking “the religious edifices of a safely pagan Greece”;
- Mazda Corp floodlights designed “to ward off unnatural, indifferent sunlight”;
- The abstract enshrinements of “Lincoln’s memory” in the “hearts of the people”, while neither Lincoln’s actual remains or any rites for people to perform are present;
- The sense that ultimately the most reverential thing to do there is to take photographs.

The Lincoln Memorial; the Jefferson memorial next to it; both figures repeated again on Mount Rushmore; both figures repeated *ad nauseum* on dollar bills.

The very format of monument-building got copied:

Post-colonial countries, in need of new myths, choose to manufacture national cenotaphs of their own, in imitation of Western models.

Malaysia has Putrajaya, a federal capital sprung *ex nihilo* from palm-oil agricultural land, its buildings all arches and onion domes and imitation arc de triomphe in inhuman scale, its avenues broad and utterly unwalkable in the tropical heat.

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Of this state-sanctioned object of devotion you are encouraged to take photographs, sell merchandise—ie: continue the process of replication. With every copy nationalism is reified. God forbid you tweak the official monument with your own meanings, though! While writing this, I found the following headline, from December 2023, on ABC News:

“Lincoln Memorial temporarily closed after being vandalized with ‘Free Gaza’ graffiti”

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And yet Anderson’s essay cites instances where the personal and irreproducible sneak back into, or leak out from, or vandalise, national monuments:

“Early in the 1910s,”—in Manila’s Cementerio del Norte, a municipal cemetery planned by an American urban designer—“a small pantheon was constructed for the interment of Filipino national heroes.”

This monument was to emulate the Pantheon in Paris, where “great Frenchmen” of the national canon are memorialised.

But the Filipino version failed.

“Today, hardly anyone in the Philippines is aware of this dilapidated pantheon’s existence ... What has happened is that the Filipino Voltaire and Rousseau have managed to escape, summoning devoted, often familial bodysnatchers, to convey them to home-town **shrines**.”

(Emphasis mine.)

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For SHRINESHARE: our stamp-art folio project, we asked sixteen artists from Malaysia, Thailand, the UK, and the US to think about shrines:

- datuk kongs;
- sacred wells;
- flowers left at places of tragedy;
- Geocities fansites.

They answered with images of personal sites of devotion—literal, imagined, figurative, true. We turned their shrines into rubber stamps. The result is a seventy physical folders: each containing sixteen handmade prints, variously inspired by family and culture; home and travel; seeking and hope.

These shrines are framed by ASCII-art designs, the aesthetic of the early Internet. We recall the promise of unexpected, sincere, peer-to-peer connection.

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Sadly, that Internet is gone.

Like the nationalisms of the material world that Anderson described, our digital lives are shackled by the predatory mediation of FYP algorithms and subscription services. We live within platform monopolies whose monuments are Elon’s giant X; Amazon’s all-encompassing “convenience”. The radical economist Yanis Varoufakis styles our coming age as techno-feudalism—a system “worse than capitalism” that owns our dating patterns, our opinions, our art.

So we attempt our escape. We enact a peer-to-peer spirit in the material world. We think of SHRINESHARE as a DVD we’ve burned, pressed into real hands, passed on hand to hand. Open the file and connect to sixteen real persons; sixteen genuine acts of faith.

Despite nationalism's efforts to centralise a national identity, despite techno-feudalism's efforts to turn us into data serfs—still we mutate, still we bootleg, still we graffiti, becoming once again ourselves.

And—particular to post-colonial societies—in doing so we casually continue the work of liberation, sneaking the idea of freedom away from our own architects and elites and prime ministers, who would seek to seize its meaning for their own purposes.

The temples to *demos* that the federal government builds are ours to transform. We can put down our phones, ignore the unholy feed for a day.

“No need. We've got our own shrines at home.”

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We hope these shrines find a place within you, and prompt you to seek out your own peers. Unzip the folio; present the shrines in an open art exhibition. Follow the prompts, build shrines of your own, share these with the places and persons you love.