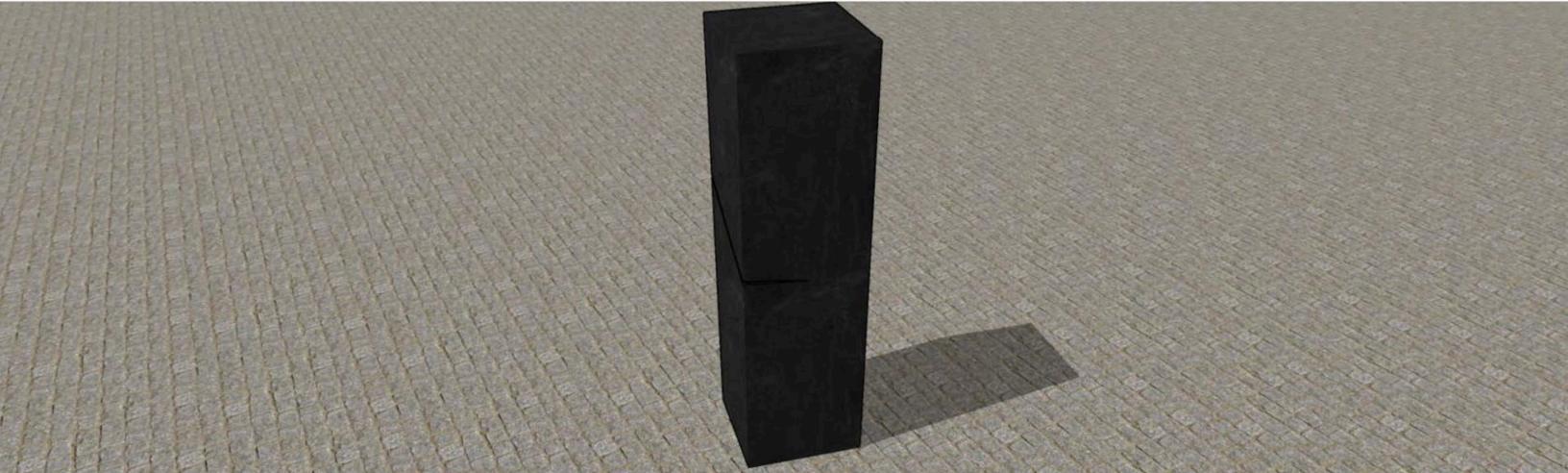


Aria Dean on Designing an Anti-Monument

The artist on her proposed *New Monument for Franksa Tomten* and how minimalist aesthetics speak to the complex history of Sweden's colonial past

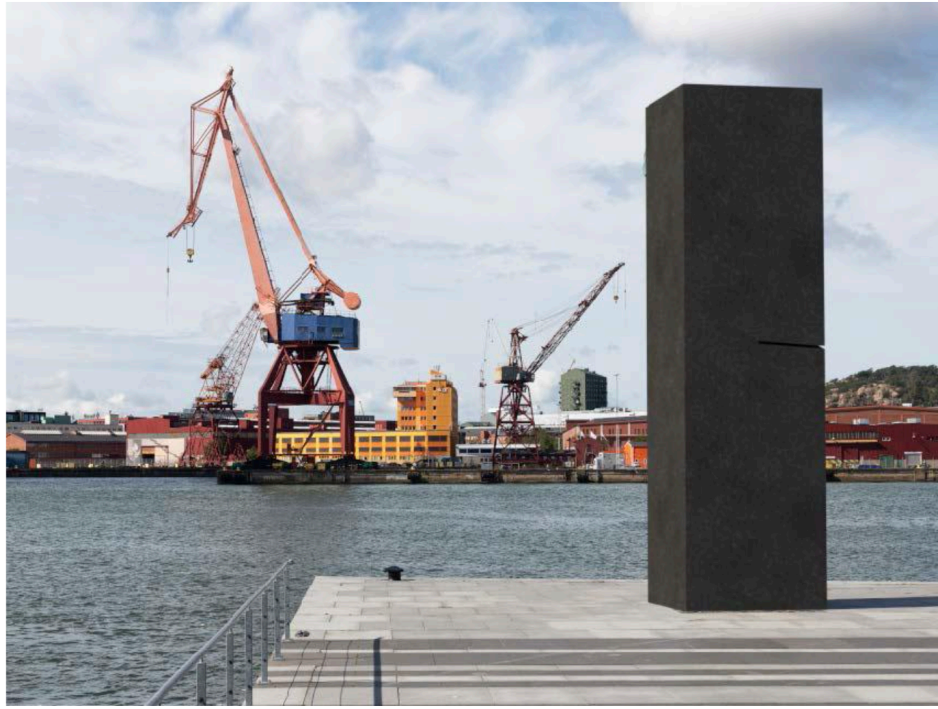
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BY TRAVIS DIEHL AND ARIA DEAN IN INTERVIEWS | 06 APR 21



Travis Diehl Your proposed *New Monument for Franksa Tomten* (2020) would replace a pair of granite and bronze sculptures commemorating Swedish settlers in Delaware – a 1938 monument designed by Carl Milles that sits in Fort Christina Park in Wilmington and a replica installed 20 years later at Stenpiren in Gothenburg – with seven-metre-high monoliths of solid iron. To these would be added a third on the Caribbean island of St. Barts.

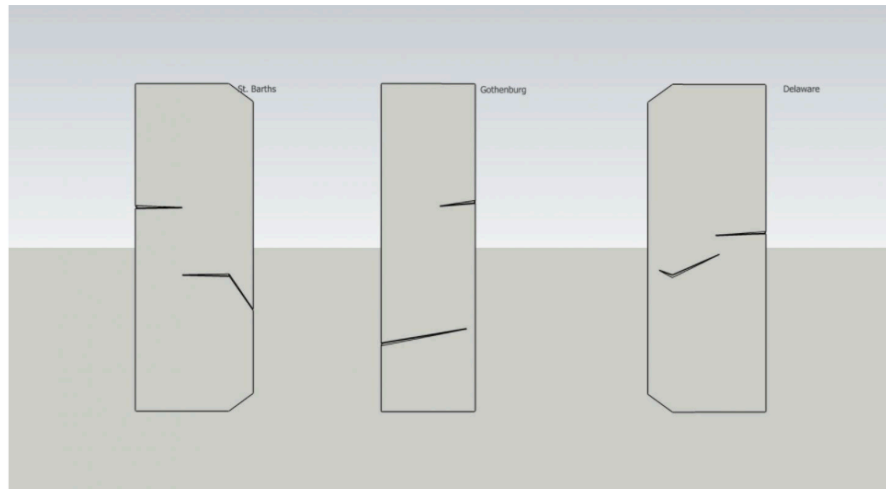
Aria Dean I identified three key dates in Swedish colonial history: the departure of the Swedes for America, the transfer of the then-colony of St. Barts from France to Sweden, and the establishment of the Swedish West India Company. People talk about Scandinavia with this sense of exceptionalism regarding colonialism and the slave trade, but Sweden did get involved in the movement of goods, and people, to the 'New World'. In 1784, Sweden traded France a small plot of land in the port of Gothenburg – Franksa Tomten means 'French Plot' – for the island of St. Barts, and this foothold imbricated them in the global system. So, my proposal is for a network of physically identical monoliths, with a line engraved on each that marks where sunset falls on those specific dates, so that the sun draws these moments in linear history into a cyclical relationship with those places.



Design renderings for Aria Dean's *New Monument for Franksa Tomten*, 2020.
Courtesy: the artist

TD It also establishes the colonial economy itself as something that has recurred throughout history. I wonder how these temporal cycles relate to minimalism. For example, in 'Entropy and the New Monuments' (1966), Robert Smithson describes 'new monuments' as monumental in time rather than in space. In your project, how does minimalism, as a formal idiom, relate to time?

AD The musician and artist Mayo Thompson once told me that the thing few people seem to understand – but what all these minimalists understood – is that sculpture is simply about time. I was like: 'Yes!' Insofar as space itself is also time-bound. That's the pithy version. To me, what's most interesting within the arc of history are the structural shifts. We can talk about people who made reprehensible choices, but then the system that those people set up continues. There's an essay by Anna Chave called 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power' (1990), which essentializes how power operates and turns the brute force of minimalist sculptures into a totally ideological thing. But she makes the useful argument that minimalism is the face of capital and these artists are uncritically engaging the processes of capitalist production. While minimalism certainly isn't critiquing capital from the outside, I don't think it's totally uncritical. If we want to monumentalize structures like slavery or capital – as with *New Monument for Franksa Tomten* – in the hope of creating cultural memory around the violence, the lives lost and so on, then the way to do that is to make a structural monument.



Design renderings for Aria Dean's *New Monument for Franksa Tomten*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist

TD Which shifts the emphasis from individual actors to this monolithic, inhuman formalism.

AD Exactly. The minimalists were trying to get at some better understanding of the actual structures of existence. What does an object do when it's placed in front of you, when you interact with it? Those questions are incredibly useful for an inquiry into Blackness because capital, through slavery, equates Blackness and objecthood, which results in a slew of philosophical, legal, political and aesthetic premises. That's why Afropessimism is so interesting to me, because it's a structural analysis of Blackness and anti-Blackness, when Black art is often talked about purely in terms of the many *experiences* of being Black. There's something that necessarily undergirds those experiences. So, *New Monument for Franksa Tomten* ventures to do away with the cloud of representation surrounding the history of the transatlantic slave trade, the conversation about whose voices are heard, retracing and re-narrating their traumas. Instead, it proposes a discussion about irreversible metaphysical violence – a difficult but necessary endeavour – by accessing the very structure and material of the relations at play: time and iron.



Carl Milles's Fort Christina granite monument, Wilmington, Delaware, 1938. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

TD Is abstraction able to represent the unrepresentable?

AD I'm interested in finding some third term beyond 'abstraction' and 'representation'. When dealing with Blackness, these categories blur even if you don't want them to – as do 'material' and 'symbolism'. I believe a minimalist framework allows the artist to condense a lot into a single object. For example, with *New Monument for Franksa Tomten*, the monoliths would be made of iron – one of Sweden's main exports – which was used to make shackles and served as a currency in the form of 'voyage iron'. During World War II, supposedly neutral Sweden provided the Nazis with iron and other support. Representational strategies lend so much specificity, there's no room for how these things interlock more ambiently. But minimalism allows me to speak to complex histories without having to enumerate and fix every element.

This interview is part of a series on public art that will appear in the May issue of frieze.

Main image: Design renderings for Aria Dean's New Monument for Franksa Tomten, 2020. Courtesy: the artist