

## **The politics of Art Displacement and human migration**

A Dialogue between Olu Oguibe's 'Monument to refugee and strangers' in Kassel Germany and the Ancient Egyptian Obelisks transplanted to Europe over the centuries.

There seems to be metaphoric links between political and cultural circumstances around Olu Oguibe's<sup>1</sup> 2017 controversial Obelisk in Kassel Germany and those that characterize the *Montecitorio Obelisk* of Ancient Egypt, which is the Obelisk of Pharaoh Psammetichus II (595-589 BC). This monument was transplanted to Rome in 10 BC by Emperor Augustus Caesar and was placed in Campus Martius<sup>2</sup> to act as the gnomon<sup>3</sup> of the Solarium Augusti<sup>4</sup>. This Ancient Egyptian relic is now in the Piazza Montecitorio. To date there are eight Ancient Egyptian Obelisks in Rome a number of them seized as trophies of conquest by Rome from Egypt. In this article I will focus on referencing the *Montecitorio Obelisk* and the trio known as *Cleopatra's needles* in relation to Olu Oguibe's *Monument to Refugees and Strangers*.

The *Monument to Refugees Strangers* is a 54-ft concrete monument made by the artist Oguibe commissioned at Documenta 14 in 2017 in the city of Kassel, Germany. The artist's choice to use the potent form of the Obelisk was not only a charge of historical and political relevance but an extremely poignant gesture in a period where migration and displacement politics are critical topics in Europe and around the world. Europe's relationship to the Global south and the middle East in regards to migration has been a complex area of engagement in the 21st century. The highest number of refugees to arrive in Europe was at 1,015,078 in 2015 as reported by the UNHCR, (the UN Refugee Agency). The refugee crisis has since divided Europe into several political and ethical camps. Oguibe's Monument to refugees and strangers bears the Inscription "I was a stranger and you welcomed me", the timeless words of Jesus to his disciples. The Inscription is placed on all four sides of the 54 ft concrete monument in four languages, English, German, Turkish and Arabic in Gold letters.

The history of *Cleopatra's needles* (The three Egyptian obelisks displaced and placed in Europe in the 19th century) lingers in the shadows against the light of Oguibe's monument which was located in Königsplatz, Kassel before it was displaced due to right wing pressure. While the displaced Ancient Egyptian obelisks in Europe occupy contestable spaces as exotic wonders from Ancient Africa the presence of displaced Africans in some parts of Europe presents a political conundrum. Of these Obelisks, one is In Central park, New York another at the Place de la Concorde in Paris and the last of this trio is in the city of Westminster, on the Victoria Embankment near the Golden Jubilee Bridges, London. This trio have different stories of how they came to Europe as compared to the Montecitorio Obelisk in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Olu Oguibe is a Nigerian-born American artist and intellectual. Professor of Art and African-American Studies at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Oguibe is a senior fellow of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School, New York City, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. He is also an art historian, art curator, and leading contributor to post-colonial theory and new information technology studies. Oguibe was honored with the State of Connecticut Governor's Arts Award for excellence and lifetime achievement on 15 June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Campus Martius is the historic center of Rome. Various tourist attractions such as the Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps are all found in this area. Previously called the Mars Field, the Campus runs from the east and west of Quirinal and Tiber and its north-south axis at the Capitoline hills and Porta Flaminia. Formerly a great neighborhood, the Mars Field was later divided into several smaller neighborhoods.

<sup>3</sup> Is the part of a sundial that casts a shadow

<sup>4</sup> The Solarium Augusti (also called Horologium Augusti) was an ancient Roman monument in the Campus Martius constructed during the reign of Augustus. It functioned as a giant solar marker, according to various interpretations serving either as a simple meridian line or as a sundial.

The one in London was gifted to the British by Muhammad Ali Pasha, the founder of modern Egypt, in 1819. The one at the *Place de la Concorde* in central Paris was gifted to France in 1833 again by Muhammad Ali Pasha for their support of Egypt against the Ottomans (Brier 2016). In 1879 the one in Central Park was given to The US by the Egyptian Khedive (a title equivalent to a viceroy) Ismail Pasha (grandson to Ali Pasha) as a gesture of gratitude for the US remaining neutral while Great Britain and France vied for control of the Egyptian government. Egyptologist Bob Brier in his book *Cleopatra's needles, The lost obelisks of Egypt*, writing about the New York Obelisk records that a decorated Navy Commander named Henry Gorringe transported the obelisk from Egypt on a ship and when it reached the US, with the aid of railroad Magnate, Cornelius Vanderbilt, transported it via railroad until it reached New York. This massive monument is 70 ft tall and weighs 2200 pounds (Martin 1987). Brier postulates that the Obelisk was given not out of friendship by Egypt but out of desperation.

In a series of interesting political events, the present-day Obelisk by Oguibe in Kassel managed to agitate right wing German party *Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD)* until its removal in October 2018. Events around Oguibe's Obelisk are suggestive of historical relationship patterns of Europe and art objects from Africa in comparison with her relationship to the humans of Africa. This is further suggested by the curious collection and of Objects from Africa by European (Western former Colonial powers) which is in stark contrast with the historical treatment of African humans by some of the same collectors who cherish objects but despise the humans. This ascription of sacred value to objects from Africa whilst withholding the same from African human life continues to mark the conflictual nature of Western morality. I suggest the chief reason for Oguibe's monument removal was because it unsettles the moral status quo of the West in this particular case Germany. Oguibe reminds Right Germany entity of how far it has fallen away from its professed Christian roots and altruism and has slipped down an abyss of hyper nationalism and toxic autochthony. The artist uses text in the Bible that speaks of acknowledging and embracing the sacredness of human life regardless of race and origin. He places his monument in the background of a national moral standard set centuries ago by Martin Luther German Theologian and philosopher a well-known advocate of altruism and of loving one's neighbors.

The monument in Kassel however reveals a complex right-wing fear of polarization of the German culture, this fear in contemporary times in Germany could be several historical shades away from Aryan and Eugenic philosophical misgivings. Olu Oguibe manages to tap into this history of value, objects and people by proposing the obelisk as a powerful symbol and a centerpiece to Europe's historical relations to African Objects and people. He complicates the narrative in what seems to be a play of wit and advanced mind and culture games. He does this by locating this charged object in Germany at the climax of the refugee and Immigrant crisis that has torn Europe's socio-political conscience apart.

The artist seems to present here a living process of socio-cultural negotiation around the issue of displacement and migration. In other words, Oguibe's Obelisk is performative in the sense of, what it does culturally and what it makes people do politically. The idea of 'performativity' and 'performatives' of Art as explored by Alejandro Madrid in his paper *:Why Music and Performance Studies? Why Now?*,<sup>5</sup> Seems to ask the question "what does art do?, as opposed to what is art?". The same performativity can be ascribed to The Montecitorio Obelisk as we look at how the Object performed itself in its first life in Ancient Egypt but more so in 10th century BC Rome and how it is even more performative now in its

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<sup>5</sup> L. Madrid, Alejandro. (2009). Why Music and Performance Studies? Why Now? An Introduction to the Special Issue.

current location in Italy. Oguibe's monument thought removed from its original place is still very performative in its own right.

In his account 'Natural History' Pliny the Elder seems to suggest the crux of the story concerning the Montecitorio Obelisk as lying in the process of removal of the obelisk from Egypt by Augustus. The events and politics around the transplantation of the Montecitorio Obelisk from Egypt to Rome are very telling of the nature of the ancient Roman politics and culture at that time. Pliny records that Augustus moved the Obelisk by use of custom designed ships made only for this sole purpose. Through the rivers and the seas, the monument was placed in Augustus' Meridian at the center of the city he build using marble.

The monuments also highlights an aspect of cultural and historical appropriation as Augustus added a Crest unto the ancient relic and a base that took almost half a decade to design and execute. The size of the obelisk was then altered precisely to allow it to function as a calendrical instrument. The base of the Montecitorio Obelisk was made from rose granite, the same stone that was used to make the rest of the Obelisk. Augustus had this stone mined at the same place from which the Obelisk was hewn out of in ancient Egypt. On this stone this stone he Inscribed in Latin the words

IMP. CAESAR DIVI F.  
AVGVSTVS  
PONTIFEX MAXIMVS  
IMP. XII COS. XI TRIB. POT. XIV  
AEGVPTO IN POTESTATEM  
POPVLI ROMANI REDACTA  
SOLI DONVM DEDIT

Imperator Caesar, son of the deified (Julius Caesar), Augustus, Supreme Pontiff, proclaimed Emperor twelve times, Consul eleven times, holding Tribunician Power fourteen times, having reduced Egypt into the sovereignty of the Roman people, gave this gift to the sun.

It's Interesting to note how Olu Oguibe, more than 2000 years later from this Roman feat of conquest would erect the same form in Germany and inscribe not in one language but in four languages words not of conquest and self-glorification but of altruism, empathy and the sacredness of human life.

“I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME”

Words that transcend geopolitical borders and ethnicity, that call to mind and heart the interconnected nature of humanity and the universal noble virtues of welcoming strangers and refugees. This poetic gesture by the artist, located in history but also pinned in contemporary cultural politics, reveals the

powerful nature of art and how in the present it reminds of history but suggests alternative future trajectories.

The Objectification of the African human and the ‘other’ is not necessarily a new phenomenon in some parts of European Socio-cultural circles it is as old as the 16th Century beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade not forgetting the colonial matrix: the Berlin conference of 1884. This is however not a Blanket statement that characterizes political and cultural attitudes of Europe in relationship to Africa and African objects. There has been tremendous present-day hospitality towards African and Syrian refugees in some parts of Europe In 2015 Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that Germany would welcome nearly 1 million migrants and refugees as part of what she had christened Germany’s “Willkommenskultur,” or culture of welcoming. This statement triggered right wing opposition who believed that this move would polarize Germany. Two years later Andreas Hollstein mayor of the western German town of Altena would publicly welcome refugees further inciting German angst over the refugee issue at one point he had stopped at a kebab stand when he was approached by a drunken man who yelled, “You leave me to go thirsty and bring in refugees.” and was stabbed with a footlong knife in the neck. This incident reveals Europe (in this case Germany) is not out rightly anti-immigrant. Oguibe’s monument is located right in the center of this complexity.



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<sup>6</sup> The monument was removed on October 3 (Unity day commemorating the fall of the Berlin wall) by order of the Kassel City Council after, it is presumed, mounting pressure from Germany’s anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party



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<sup>7</sup> The Monument is a concrete Obelisk standing nearly 54 feet tall, was inaugurated in June 2017 as part of the quinquennial exhibition designed as a site-specific work for Königsplatz (King's Square), a pedestrian zone in the city center, the 16-meter concrete obelisk reads: "I was a stranger and you took me in," a verse from Matthew 25:35, inscribed in gold letters in German, English, Arabic, and Turkish.



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<sup>8</sup> The **Luxor Obelisk** is a 23 meters (75 ft) high Ancient Egyptian obelisk standing at the centre of the Place de la Concorde in Paris, France. It was originally located at the entrance to Luxor Temple, in Egypt. The Luxor Obelisk was classified as a historical monument in 1936.



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<sup>9</sup> The Montecitorio Obelisk, a Late Period Egyptian monument brought to Rome in 10 BCE by the emperor Augustus and placed in the Campus Martius, formed a centerpiece in the city of brick that Augustus remade in marble.<sup>1</sup> The monument, long thought to commemorate the emperor's defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, continues to attract attention in the modern city, where it stands in the Piazza Montecitorio, in front of the Camera dei Deputati. Just under 71½ feet (21.79 meters) high, the obelisk is carved with hieroglyphs, many rendered illegible by extensive repairs



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<sup>10</sup> **Cleopatra's Needle** in London is one of three similarly named Egyptian [obelisks](#) and is located in the [City of Westminster](#), on the [Victoria Embankment](#) near the [Golden Jubilee Bridges](#). It is close to the Embankment underground station. It was presented to the United Kingdom in 1819 by the ruler of Egypt and Sudan [Muhammad Ali](#), in commemoration of the victories of [Lord Nelson](#) at the [Battle of the Nile](#) and Sir [Ralph Abercromby](#) at the [Battle of Alexandria](#) in 1801. Although the British government welcomed the gesture, it declined to fund the expense of transporting it to London.

Made of red [granite](#), the obelisk stands about 21 meters (69 ft) high, weighs about 224 short tons (203,000 kg)<sup>[1]</sup> and is inscribed with [Egyptian hieroglyphs](#).

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