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Essay

A homeless sculpture?

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A homeless sculpture?

Have you ever thought that when you come near a sculpture in an open public space you might have just entered its home? Or do you regard every sculpture as homeless, a beggar for attention, or a refugee from the past trying to escape the strong hand of evanescence? Well, I have. I was strolling through Halle and I found myself gazing at sculptures in the open air I had been reading about over the past weeks. Suddenly I realized that they all differ from one another. But it is not their material, art form, location, or colour that divides them, but just one single point of reference - it seems that some are at home, while others are homeless. This might sound strange. How can sculptures occupying an open public space have a home, let alone dwell in it? Before I continue I want to highlight that I am not trying to establish a new criteria in fine arts, it might be that my argument cannot count for all sculptures, but that is okay because I do not want to write about art itself, but how the city and its citizens relate to sculptures in regards to un/making, un/naming, and un/racializing the city. Doing this for all of Halle's statues would certainly go beyond the scope of this essay, therefore I chose one example. The statue "Freies Afrika" has a long political history and aftermath, because it is often linked to Anton Wilhelm Amo, Germany's first African Professor. The sculpture is located between the Robertinum and the street "Universitätsring" in a small green area. To find out rather or not the sculpture is at home I first define a few important terms, namely being at home, homelessness, space, and place. Second I reflect on the history of the sculpture and its location in the city, third I take advice from the non-representation theory and not only look at history and linguistics but also try to understand a place by how people relate to it, forth I conclude.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary refers to home as a defined space made visible by a surrounding material construction, but it can also mean a less materialistic place, like one's family, home country, or comfort zone[i]. However, I want to look at a sculpture in the open air that is standing alone without its family around it. I understand that the term home means more than just a house. Having traveled much in my life I know how it feels like to live in a building without feeling at home. A home does not start or end at the threshold but includes the surrounding environment. At the same time, the term turns to the interior of a place. A home is made by or at least for those who dwell in it. This means that a piece of me is made visible by how I adjust my place to me. I fill it with life, people, paintings, pictures, the kind of furniture I like, memories, etc. If the environment

changes dramatically or the inside of the home is turned upside down, the home-dweller can lose the feeling of being at home. I think the same can be true for sculptures. Because sculptures are unanimated, they cannot willingly and directly choose their place of residence, nor can they adjust it in any way. Therefore the people, who inhabit the place around the statue day and night play a vital role in creating this home. I find my definition of home not far off from how Katrien Geenen defines the term when she describes street gangs constructing their homes on streets in Kinshasa[ii]. Also, Maria Malmström includes this notion when she outlines how Tahrir Square in Kairo during the uprising in 2011 became home to the protesters[iii].

Next, I shortly want to look at the terms space and place. Commonly space refers to a scientific and physical concept, it is often referred to as public and dynamic. Place on the other hand is connected to cultural meaning or activities people attach to a specific area.

Linking this to my above-mentioned understanding of home and homelessness, a home is a place, and being at home means being in accordance with the place. Homelessness then becomes the stage in which somebody or something is not in a place or is not in harmony with this place. To find out rather or not the sculpture is at home, we need to find out if it is in a space or a place and if the sculpture and the place are in harmony.

With these definitions and questions in mind, I arrive at my destination. The site is just a little green area, too small to be considered a park and too open and wild to be a garden. A few trees, almost three stories high, have their roots here and spread their canopy over the area. The Robertinum, a historical university building from 1891 and home of Classical Philology, also casts its shadow on this small place allowing only for a few beams of light to penetrate the canopy. Deprived of sunlight the grass cannot fully cover the ground leaving big patches of bare brown soil. The wall of the building is painted beige, but the base of the building is covered in a greyish-brown tone, making it look like the ground. Amidst the similar colored thick tree trunks, a plastic art is to be found. On a cloudy day, the bronze sculpture showing an upright man and woman blends in with its environment, becoming almost invisible to the unaware passer-by, like I was. The only thing that might still call his attention to the presence of the stature is a memorial tablet with golden protruding letters dedicated to the first recorded professor of African origin in Halle (Saale), Anton Wilhelm Amo, from 1727-1747. Based on this plaque a pedestrian might draw the quick conclusion that it and the sculpture belong together and that the man standing on the plinth is A.W. Amo. Indeed not only pedestrians, like me, make this reference, but also the city of Halle and the biographer Burchhardt Brentje succumb to this seduction. However, something seems wrong. If

the sculpture represents Amo, who is the woman? His wife? Why is she unnamed? Besides this, something else feels off. I am standing with my bike on the sidewalk in front of the plaque and the sculpture. My eyes climb up the walls of the Robertinum. In the windows, I see the backside of white busts – many scholars from of old watching over the students in the classrooms. But one bust is turned around, I can see a pale face of an experienced man. His view is stoic and earnest. His look does not touch the green area, it goes straight into the distance, probably looking at a philological problem. His hair curls down to his shoulders wrapped in fine cloth both indicating his affiliation to the upper class. It hit me at this moment. A scholar is usually represented by a bust or a clothed stature, a thoughtful gesture, and an attribute to his or her discipline. But the man on the plinth is only dressed in a skirt and sandals, revealing his muscular upper body. Surely this man represents strength and his upright position and confidence. But nothing about him says: I have studied philosophy, law, and medicine and hold a doctorate of philosophy at this university. It is not possible that the plaque and the sculpture are one, surely the artist wanted to express something else. I turn my attention to another much simpler tablet. It reads “Freies Afrika (1965) by Gerhard Geyer (1907-1989)”. It shortly explains the intention of the sculpture and the misleading connection to the memorial plaque of Amo which was installed in 1975. The proximity of the sculpture and plaque caused many to believe the sculpture represents Amo or at least was raised as a memorial for him. But can we still find the actual story of this sculpture?

A university committee was formed to remember Amo and his legacy. In the course of this work, they have also unveiled the history of the sculpture. Almost a decade before the sculpture was erected at its current location Ghana was the first African state to gain independence from the English Empire in 1957. The newly found government was driven by socialist ideals. The leader of the independence movement and the first prime minister of Ghana was Kwame Nkrumah. He was a respected politician in other sub-Saharan countries, for he envisioned a free and united Africa, but under his rule. The GDR was at that time a newly found communist state faced with the challenge to be recognized by other countries (apart from member states of the Treaty of Warsaw) and tying new foreign relationships. That Ghana wanted to be a socialist country was well perceived in the Soviet Union and a good chance for the GDR to start good relationships on the African continent. In 1960 16 sub-Saharan countries gained independence, too. It was time for the GDR to extend the hand of friendship to Ghana since this meant sympathetic relations with Nkrumah, and this in turn led to better chances for cooperation with other newly found African countries. The collaboration of Ghana and the GDR included among other things exchange in the

areas of science. Students from the GDR went to Ghana and vice versa. In this spirit of friendship Gerhard Geyer, a plastic art artist from Halle was sent to Ghana in 1961 on a study trip with the goal to create a sculpture for the Trade Union Congress of Ghana[iv]. Geyer was impressed by the colours, the people, and the rhythms of the country. He came back with a book full of sketches which he turned into pieces of art over years to follow. The sculpture “Freies Afrika” was also built in this way and finished in 1964. As it was common for socialist realism the statues do not represent an aristocratic high class in fine cloths but give credit to the people. Therefore the sculpture intends to represent an independent, confident and strong Africa, which is built by ordinary people, men and women alike. Unfortunately, the state gift could never be sent off for an unknown reason. In this sense, the sculpture could never truly serve its intended purpose. But in 1965 a new chance arose to make good use of it. The university announced Nkrumah “Ehrensator” (honoured senator) of the University of Halle. He had planned to receive this honour in October 1965, but because of a political coup, he was unable to attend the ceremony. During the event, visited by government officials and university representatives the sculpture was unveiled and titled “Freies Afrika” in reference to the independence of Ghana and its anti-colonial, socialist way. The space in front of the Robertinum was chosen because the building hosted the African Studies at that time. Also, a reference to A.W. Amo was made, because Nkrumah had studied Amo’s philosophy and published about him[v]. In this light, Geyer’s sculpture was standing in a place loaded with meaning. First the meaning of the sculpture itself. Second, the political relationship with Ghana. Third, the hope for increasing collaboration with sub-Saharan Africa and the improvement of the GDRs international reputation. The sculpture was of interest and importance to the people who studied in the Robertinum and to the professors who might have witnessed the unveiling ceremony.

At first, even the memorial plaque seems to contribute to this set of meaning. It was installed ten years after the sculpture in the presence of political leaders, like the ambassador of Ghana. But soon enough the linkage between Amo and the sculpture became tighter. And instead of seeing a socialist fine art of equality, people connect it with the slave trade and colonialism. The statue’s confidence and pride in one’s own traditions, now look like examples of white imaginations of the wild savages on the black continent – simple, regressive, and in need of modernization. This case is a palimpsest in its own right. The plaque overwrites the title of the sculpture and even worse caused its mental removal. It entered the minds of people like Brentje’s. His biography of Amo from 1976 titles the picture of Geyer’s sculpture “The statues of two Africans dedicated to the

memory of Anton Wilhelm Amo in front of the University in Halle”[vi]. Also, the city's official interactive art routes, which lead spectators to some of the most important art in Halle’s public space, still connect the sculpture and Amo in a misleading way[vii]. Furthermore, the local newspaper of Halle “Du bist Halle”[viii] and the magazine “Spektrum” succumb to this seduction[ix]. In this light, the tablet installed by the university reminds me of how K. Geenen describes the supremacy of mental buildings (e.g. language, re-naming places) over the material. The thought that the African man on the plinth is Amo dominates the public perception of the sculpture. In this way, Amo’s memorial replaced the interpretation of the sculpture with a new story. While the connection to Amo remodelled the meaning of the sculpture, the next events dramatically impacted its environment. The African Studies were dissolved and the sculpture was now standing in front of the Classical Philological Studies. This event caused a change in who would be passing the sculpture daily, what kind of discourses it would trigger (if even noticed), and how it would be seen (as in place or out-of-place). Next, the Reunification of Germany ended the communist area in Halle. The ones so important political meanings and places lost their brilliance. Halle went from being the 4th biggest city in the GDR to somewhere around place 25th in reunited Germany. And because the Federal Republic had good-standing relations with Ghana, Halle’s legacy, especially being connected to a communist one, was not regarded as highly anymore. The bronze sculpture suffered under such neglect and maybe never really recovered. Tim Edensor argues, too, the loss of statures meaning, because of changing “forms of knowledge, aesthetic conventions and political contingencies”[x]. In the 1990s the interest in this place rose again, but not because of Geyer’s art. The university became very proud of Amo and refers to him with terms like equality, social tolerance, and inclusion. It installed the Anton Wilhelm Amo Award to bestow an extraordinary thesis each year, a special lecture series, called Amo lectures, and a committee, which researches Amo and keeps his legacy alive on campus and in the public. Nevertheless, the history of why Amo was in Germany, why he had to go to the new-found liberal university in Halle, and why he returned to Ghana are not being presented in big letters. A.W. Amo is not just a figurehead of diversity in Halle, but his story is an example of racism and discrimination in Halle and in our education system in the 18th century and today.

Also, the city of Halle could find in this little green area a start to talk about decolonization. But the officials are rather silent about it. Even though officially the city is part of the mentioned committee, it did not adjust the description of the sculpture “Freies Afrika” on its website. There is also no street or square named after Germany’s first African professor in Halle, yet. Why is that?

The green area in front of the Robertinum seems to be public, there are no fences, no signs that highlight its owner, anybody could just come and walk across it. But this discrepancy of effort in commemorating Amo between the university and the city makes the invisible border visible. The sculpture and the plaque are part of the university campus, they are not located on city property. Because the city shows no response to the issue around Amo, it feels like the border between the city and the university hardened. Looking at the political meaning of the sculpture, the plaque, and even the study on Amo it could be expected that this green area becomes a shared place between the university and the city to commemorate Amo and communist history. This place could be an opportunity for Halle to speak about its colonial past, but for now, it did not take it. Also, the university used Amo more as a representative of diversity and inclusion, than to try to investigate more the colonial history of the university, the way knowledge is managed, and why so many white Germans and only a few immigrants pass the stature on their way to class. Furthermore, in connection to the colonial history and the history of the GDR, we can question our relationship with the African countries and how we perceive them today.

In summary, I would like to emphasize the historical setting of the location of Geyer's sculpture made the site a place. The political meaning and action attached to the sculpture roll across the little green area distinguishing it clearly. The sculpture also fit in with the activities performed in its proximity, namely the study of the African continent, its people, and culture. Finally, the statue was erected in a place in the down area of Halle, reflecting how central the political friendship between Ghana and Africa had been to the German government. Therefore I conclude "Freies Afrika" was at home. However, the placing of the plaque for Amo remodelled the meaning of this place and the sculpture. And at the latest after the dramatic changes in the surrounding of the sculpture, I do not consider place and sculpture to be in harmony. It is taken into a discourse that the stature is not quite made for. The questions about the woman next to "Amo" on the sculpture or why Africans are being depicted in this elementary way reflect well, that its location supports it being misunderstood. I also like to highlight that despite the political history of this place, the city seems to stay out of the discourse because the stature and plaque are part of the university. The shift of responsibility is based on borders on a map. Lastly, the one-sided reference to Amo as an example of diversity cannot be his only legacy. His philosophy and his engagement to fight for the rights of slaves should call our attention to rethink our social structures which are highly influenced by those who bullied Amo and not by the people who stood by him. At the end of this essay, I like to invite you, the reader, to look at the sculpture yourselves. What do you see?

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Statutory Declaration

I herewith declare that I have composed the present thesis myself and without use of any other than the cited sources and aids. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted literally are marked as such; other references with regard to the statement and scope are indicated by full details of the publications concerned.

The thesis in the same or similar form has not been submitted to any examination body and has not been published. This thesis was not yet, even in part, used in another examination or as a course performance.

Halle (Saale), 13.09.2022
Place, Date


Signature