4. Postclassical Marble: Reclaiming Flux in the Reception of Marble in Contemporary Art

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Classicizing Marble

Perhaps no other material has been more closely associated with ancient Greco-Roman culture than marble. One can even argue that marble is a prime material connector between the Greek and Roman worlds, instantiating the hyphen used to bind Greco to Roman. Only sparingly used in earlier ancient worlds, like Mesopotamia or Egypt (Waelkens et al. 14–15),[1] it was in archaic Greece that marble became a privileged material, first for sculpture and later for architecture. The figurines of Cycladic sculpture, dating from 3000 to 2000 BC and among the earliest examples of Greek art, were made from marble. The stone was a natural resource relatively easy to quarry on the Cycladic islands of the Aegean Sea (Marthari et al., esp. 468–82). The perfectly white marble from the island of Paros later became in high demand for sculptures from archaic Greek to Roman times. The so-called Pentelic marble, from Mount Pentelicon near Athens, was used from the sixth century BC onwards, for instance, for buildings in Athens as well as for triumphal monuments in Rome (Bernard), when Greece had fallen into the hands of Roman imperialism. At the same time, Rome, according to the Roman poet Horace's famous saying, was captured by Greek culture.[2] That marble connects Greek and Roman material culture is also because many of the Greek statues that we know of today are Roman marble copies or adaptations, usually from Greek originals in bronze (Anguissola). Nearly all of these bronzes have been lost since bronze decays faster and is more easily recycled than the crystalline limestone that is marble. Along with the fact that it is relatively easy

1 According to Hochscheid (117–19), the Greeks adopted not so much the use of marble but most probably the use of monumental stone and the quarrying and carving techniques of stones from the Egyptians and the Hittites. See also Rohleder; Spier et al. 107.

2 The saying is from Horace's *Epistles* (II.1). It goes as follows: "Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit" ("Captive Greece conquered in its turn its savage victor"), meaning not by military force but with its culture.

to carve, marble's durability is an important reason why it became a mnemonic device par excellence. In a sense, the age of classical marble began with this material used by people to make monuments that could outlast their generation and do their specific cultural work: temples, busts, palaces, votives, fountains, churches, gravestones, and political buildings.

Marble also plays a central role in the imagination of what Greco-Roman culture looked like, both during and after antiquity. Marble became one of its most imitated aspects, a paradigm to be followed. There is a dual mnemonics at play here: as a material, marble helped to stand the test of time; as matter used in and for an object, marble also became a cultural marker, a visual and material reference to Greco-Roman culture and the classical tradition anchored in that culture, especially in Europe. Among the more iconic statues in European art history is Michelangelo's *David*, a classicizing sculpture from around 1500 made in white Carrara marble. As of the Early Modern period, marble and marble imitation became in vogue outside Europe and the Mediterranean. This was partly due to the use of marble in Byzantine and Islamic art and partly because Europeans decided to stretch their wings and claws to other parts of the world (Barry 1–2). Among the more iconic buildings in world history is the White House in Washington DC from around 1800, which has the classicist look of a temple and is painted white to give it the semblance of classical marble, a tactic of *faux marble* that was already in use in antiquity.

Revisioning Marble

Given this longstanding status of privileged material, it is a surprise that a history of marble as a material of culture has not yet been written.[3] Such a study of marble would be all the more welcome since the cultural work of marble as a privileged material is currently being questioned and reconfigured by contemporary artists. The Barcelona-born artist Sergio Roger, for one, produced an extensive series of what he termed "soft statuary," which was on show during the 2021 Milan Design Week.[4] Roger's statuary plays with the imaginary of classical marble: his busts look like white marble, some mimicking the style of Cycladic sculpture, but they are made from recycled natural textile fiber. These soft statues elicit a markedly different feeling from the robust marble meant to cross the ages in an immutable form. The American artist Kara Walker made a similarly subversive gesture to marble in

3 It has been done for many other materials and resources, like steel (Fry et al.), porcelain (Marchand), and nutmeg (Ghosh). Barry comes closest with his history of the poetics of marble in architecture from antiquity to the Enlightenment. See also Rohleder; Goldhill, "Marmoreal."

4 For Roger's portfolio, see https://www.sergioroger.com/augusto-1.

Fons Americanus (2019), a commissioned art installation for the Turbine Hall at the London Tate Modern (fig. 1) that takes the marble Queen Victoria Memorial (1911) in London as its point of reference. Continuing the memorial's nautical theme, it highlights its imperialist background as it commemorates the naval power of the British Empire. Walker radically changes the narrative as well as the material of the memorial. Instead of Queen Victoria and the personifications of her virtues and imperial achievements, Walker's working fountain commemorates the people involved in the transatlantic slave trade, linking Great Britain and Europe with Africa, America, and Asia. She does so through running water and the depiction of emblematic slavery scenes, such as the racist practice of lynching, which persisted in the USA after the abolition of slavery until deep into the twentieth century.

Fig. 1: Kara Walker, Fons Americanus, Sculpture, 2019, Tate Modern, Hyundai Commission, London, UK, Main: 73.5 x 50 x 43 feet, Grotto: 10.2 x 10.5 x 10.8 feet, Artwork © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co. and Sprüth Magers. Photograph: © Tate (Matt Greenwood)

On top of the memorial stands not a winged Victory like in the Victoria Memorial, but the large figure of a black woman from whose breasts and a slit in her throat burst piercing streams of water. Whereas the Victoria Memorial uses 2,300 tons of white Carrara marble, nicely polished, Walker's memorial consists of heaps of non-glazed white clay of officially unknown weight. The clay gives the semblance of marble from a distance. However, closer inspection reveals a rough and unwrought material, prone to wear and transformation, less refined in its finish but sensually much more present, also in its earthly odor. The whiteness of the clay makes the bursting streams of water look like milk, turning the female figure on top into a revision of both the Victory figure and the mother figure, also featured in the Victoria Memorial. Walker's revision raises the question of who gave life to whom and who gave her life for which victories.

The soft statuary and the fountain invite spectators to see marble even if it is not there. The objects are "anchored" (Sluiter) in marble in that these works draw upon the expectation that this type of artwork—white statuary with a classicizing look—is, as a rule, made from marble. In a second gesture, as the audience sees the marble replacement, it is invited to reflect upon why the marble has been suggested in the first place and why a different material replaces it. Marble here is as much a material as a code, a relatively established set of experiential features that makes these objects meaningful and valuable to those expected to be familiar, and perhaps also to agree, with this code.[5] From a material-discursive point of view, these artworks attempt to reconfigure the experience of marble. They work with and intervene in the material-discursive practice of boundary-drawing (e.g., marble means civilized culture as opposed to primitive cultures, which typically do not (know how to) use marble) and meaning-making (e.g., marble mimics human skin) that is produced by the use of marble through the apparatus of an artwork. By artistically rewriting this code (i.e., by reiterating, differentiating, and redrawing recog-

5 See Brown: "As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts" (4). Precisely this "discourse of objectivity" and its universalist pretensions are what is being questioned today, for instance in colonial cultural studies: "Such a system of knowledge, referred to here as the 'Western code', serves not all humanity, but only a small portion of it that benefits from the belief that in terms of epistemology, there is only one game in town. The 'code' has been preserved in the security box since the Renaissance" (Mignolo xii). In this essay, I adopt a material-discursive approach to the concept of code, partly by drawing upon the work of Karen Barad. This means that "codes," as I tentatively and heuristically envision them here, are not imposed upon marble by (Western) humans; rather, marble co-produces this code: "Matter is always already an ongoing historicity . . . [Matter is] not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (Barad 151).

nizable boundaries made by prior art), contemporary artists are reviewing marble as a cultural marker, raising different sorts of issues, including questions about materiality, aesthetics, tactility, provenance, history, and memory. In what follows, I will succinctly discuss these questions by highlighting two of marble's distinct but interrelated features that are part of its transhistorical code: luminosity and luxury. These features share a duplicity that is aesthetic and political: marble's luminosity involves the social issues of whiteness and monoculturalism, and marble's luxury recalls colonialism and imperialism. These questions are timely: they are part of an ongoing reparation work between and within present-day social groups and individuals that urges us to reconsider the role of classical traditions in global history and to attend to the material, aesthetic, social, and ethical effects and relationships that the use of marble may establish.

Marble's Luminosity

One distinct feature of marble is that it can reflect light. According to ancient popular etymology, the Greek word for marble, *marmaros*, goes back to the verb *marmairein*, which means to shine, gleam, and twinkle (Chantraine 643). Marble owes this capacity to its crystalline structure, making it more luminous than limestone, which is also used to construct buildings. Marble is a type of limestone in which the calcite has been transformed by intense heat or extreme pressure. This has changed the texture of the original porous rock into a dense network of crystals. Possible sediments like clay minerals, fossils, or iron oxides rend flashes of color to the stone. These sediments are called "impurities," qualifying the monochrome white marble as the "pure," telluric product. Especially when polished and waxed, the stone, of whatsoever color, adds luminosity and depth to an object by reflecting and refracting the light in its crystals. No wonder, then, that architects of buildings that were to express a sacred connection with the world started to deploy this natural feature of marble. The importance given to luminosity can already be found in the whitewashed limestone temple in Uruk, dedicated to Anu, the Mesopotamian god of the sky, and built around 3000 BC. This so-called White Temple stood on a platform similar to how ancient Greek temples or the Roman-Jewish Temple of Jerusalem, for instance, were constructed in marble and located on heights, seeking to express their intimate connection with the cosmos (Goldhill, "Temple" 71; Stewart 1). Alongside marble's capacity to reflect light, marble in antiquity was also believed to add cosmic force to an artefact because of its provenance, being quarried from Mother Earth.[6] Marble connects the below and the above, which can explain why the translucent

6 E.g., Pliny 33.1.

stone was used to materialize, or generate experiences of, transcendence. It connects across time and space.

Alongside white marble, many types of colored marble were in use, too, such as the popular *rosso antico* (red marble) and *giallo antico* (yellow marble) in Roman culture. Ancient marble does not necessarily equal whiteness, even more so since marble temples and statuary were usually lavishly painted in different colors and covered with precious metals. The strong emphasis on whiteness as part of marble's classical code characterizes European classicism much more than Greco-Roman antiquity, even though the latter was believed to be classicism's paradigm. Today, we know that the whiteness of the remnants of Greco-Roman buildings and statues was not an aesthetic choice of ancient artists and architects but has been accidentally caused by external conditions that have worn off the colors over time. This means that the paradigmatic whiteness of marble is the result of a process of material flux. Rather than a cultural idea, for instance, the presumed "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of ancient Greek civilization, an often-quoted dictum from the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (21),[7] it was the impact of weathering and erosion that has established the white image of Greco-Roman culture. This cultural debt to nature is seldom acknowledged as such.

In place of the historical polychromy of the ancient marbles, whiteness became, in the words of Philippe Jockey, a *rêve occidental* ("Western dream") in the reception of Greco-Roman culture until today. Alt-right meme culture, for instance, still uses pictures of white ancient and Renaissance marble torsos to propagate masculinist and white supremacist ideals of beauty (Jockey). Although people have been aware of the original polychromy for centuries, some of them, like Winckelmann (Manfrini 24), have refused to accept it. Interestingly, specialist scholarship on ancient color use began to grow only at the end of the twentieth century (Ostergaard and Nielsen; Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann), as if correcting the monochrome white image of ancient Greco-Roman culture was no priority for a very long time. Already in the nineteenth century, Nietzsche capitalized on ancient polychromy to criticize the mindset of his time (Babich). He took the historically mistaken white monochromy of classicism as a telling example of the dominant mode of monotheist and monocultural thinking among his contemporaries that his philosophy strove to counteract by mobilizing the idea of *poikilia* ("variegation," also used for colors) of the ancient Greeks (Grand-Clément). The British artist Sonia Boyce vented a similar critique of white monoculturalism as she perceived it in the Victorian imagination of classical mythology that dominates various British museum collections. Her video installation *Six Acts* (2018) captures a performance in which she introduced various cross-cultural and cross-gender mythological characters replete with color and glitter into

7 For Winckelmann's legacy on classicist thinking, see Harloe; Moormann.

the Manchester Art Gallery. As a guest curator, Boyce explicitly questioned the museum's collection by temporarily removing A.W. Waterhouse's popular painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896). By doing so, she called attention to its representation of the heterosexual gaze on the marble-white bodies of the nymphs. Her intervention confronts the audience with how museums' historical collections continue normalizing white monoculturalism. Marble here is a cultural reference that links whiteness to idealization, like in the idealized white bodies of the nymphs. Color has been given value, and therefore, it can also be used, as Walker does, to reassess traditions and question underlying power structures.

Marble's Luxury

Augustus is said to have boasted that he had found Rome a city of bricks and left it of marble (Suetonius 28.3). The ruler who transformed the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire made no secret of what symbolized wealth and power best: marble. As Clayton Fant explains: "Marble made a particularly appropriate symbol of wealth and power because it was expensive, imported, and unnecessary (especially in a land endowed with good building stones like perperino and travertine)" (149). Although Roman Italy had its own resources (the Carrara marble quarries, for example, were opened just before August's reign), a special imperial quarry system delivered marble from conquered regions all over the Empire to Rome. Of different colors, these marbles represented the vastness, diversity, and opulence of the Roman Empire, as viewers were expected to recognize that the yellow giallo antico, for instance, came from Numidia in Northern Africa, and the white Pentelic marble from Greece.[8] It has even been claimed that "colored marble from conquered lands was especially popular for thresholds, enabling the Romans to walk over the territory of their defeated enemies each time they entered their houses" (Stewart 34). The symbolism of imperial power was thus firmly anchored in marble's use, both in its colored and white versions. As to the latter, it has been argued that it was not so much the hue of the white color as its luminance that defined white marble's capacity to evoke wealth and luxury (Sassi).

The global marble trade also had its critics in antiquity. Pliny the Elder famously described the Roman marble craze as an ecological and moral daze. He regarded the removal of the marble support from below the earth's crust and the shipping of the quarried marble "mountains" across the sea as profoundly contranatural. Marble trade brings the Earth and people's lives out of balance: people would live happier

8 "The employment of colored marbles from Africa and Asia Minor as well as the expensive white marble from Mount Pentelicon in Greece . . . reflects the Roman supremacy over the Mediterranean world in the early imperial period" (Van de Liefvoort 66).

without this luxury, so he claimed (Pliny 36.1–3). In a gripping essay on Walker's *Fons Americanus*, Zadie Smith points to a saying that she attributes to the Athenian ruler Pericles in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*: "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others" (Smith 33). In other words, the Augustan rhetoric of the shining Eternal City, which, it should be mentioned, is not unlike the rhetoric—and the use of marble, for that matter—of Pericles' building programs in his metropole, is not adequate to the historical bloodshed, the abused lives, and the social violence, as enacted by Walker's *Fons Americanus*. Walker's use of clay rather than marble recalls the creation myths in which clay is the primary matter from which the world was molded. Walker's material selection turns the depicted scene into a primary scene, showing "the lives of others" that were violently used to harvest natural resources that have produced a world of luxury for those living in the shining white classicist metropoles which emulated Rome and Athens. It is a sidenote but a telling irony of history that there has been a discussion about whether the ancient Greek term *lychnites* for the most refined white marbles of Paros has to be interpreted as a testimony to its luminosity or as a reference to the lamplight in which the enslaved worked in the marble mines (Barry 44). In Roger's soft statuary, the act of replacing marble with textile also involves a reference to labor. His textiles are recycled historical linen and silk that the artist collected from antique shops. The work foregrounds re-use rather than use, and in so doing, it also honors the quality of the historical craftwork, usually done by anonymous women. Roger's techniques to create his statuary merge the world of sculpture with the world of fashion, two worlds that have been strongly gendered throughout history. Rewriting the code of marble, Roger tries to position the old world of masculine monumental stone against his new world of gender-inclusive fabric by making his soft statuary "perform" memory (Plate and Smelik) rather than monumentality. Recalling past and neglected historical moments of labor, Roger and Walker replace marble to introduce flux and highlight its social significance.

Postclassical Marble

The Swiss artist Urs Fisher recently explained why he finds it difficult to create new art with marble: "The problem is that it [marble] is very dominant—there's a lot of history there that weighs things down. . . . [T]o bring your voice into that conversation you have to have a very clear way of expressing yourself" (Holmes 68). Fisher captured the spotlight during the 2011 Venice Biennale with an untitled sculpture that copied Giambologna's sixteenth-century marble statue *Abduction of a Sabine Woman* in wax. He made the statue slowly burn away, along with a statue portraying the artist, as if they were candles in a church. It is one way of bringing flux into conversation with marble, using the warmth of the fire to deform the suggested image

of marble and make it permanently vanish. The work tries to twist the ambition for permanence that is deeply ingrained in the code of marble and criticize its masculinist history by making the figure of the male artist disappear. As such, it creates room for something and someone else at the expense of what and who appeared destined to remain. The flux introduced here, however, is relative: the work does not erase itself since it remains a concept invented by the artist that can be—and has been—repeated.[9] Also, photographs officially document its Biennale materialization. The work does not represent a tabula rasa; it is an artistic intervention in the ambition to make a statement. As the expression of flux, seeking to destroy the code of marble's desired timelessness, fire is a destructive force that, in Fisher's mind, appears to be necessary to find "a very clear way of expressing himself." It is not a careful act of "gentle imitation" (Prettejohn 14–15) but a grand gesture reproducing the desire for artistic grandeur that is also part of the code of marble. By adding the elemental violence of fire and turning the work into a concept, the installation does not depart from but varies upon and problematizes the paradigm of marble sculpture. Walker's fountain uses this grand gesture to send its message, replacing the well-known monumental queen with a monumental anonymous woman. Roger places his statuary on pedestals. All these artworks rewrite and retain, including the potentially damaging and socially exclusive components of the classical marble code. What they have in common is that they can be seen as mindscapes, mental or psychological scenes that stage a contemporary conversation with the cultural legacies of marble.

In this sense, these works of contemporary art are "postclassical" (The Postclassicisms Collective): they do not take classicism for granted and try to position themselves vis-à-vis this cultural repertory in a global world with violent histories that need to be dealt with. For sure, classicism has been successfully deployed to create art that explores various sorts of questions, feelings, thoughts, ambitions, and experiences by, at times, resourcefully, carefully, beautifully, or violently making variations on what is offered from a "collective tradition" (Settis 63; Vout).[10] This repertory not only consists of artistic formulas (such as the kouros figure, the nymph, or the Corinthian column) but also of materials like marble, which has become a weighty cultural marker in itself, encoding objects with aesthetic, cultural, social, and historical features and legacies. Contemporary artists struggle with how to relate to these

9 As Holmes puts it, "A conceptual sculpture basically doesn't age, because you can always redo it" (68). The installation was repeated for the opening of the Pinault Collection in the Musée Bourse de Commerce in Paris in 2021.

10 I am grateful to my colleague Anneke Smelik for giving me this book and various other moments of inspiration, pleasure, and guidance. I would also like to thank Ann Demeester, Eric Moormann and the editors of this volume for their useful advice and suggestions while writing this essay.

legacies, to marble's luminosity, luxury, permanence, and materiality. They continue the task of classicism to the extent that they not only deconstruct the artistic language of classicism but also try to "perfect" it by making postclassical marble do the social and cultural work beyond and against the grain of the traditional code, reaching out to a shinier future.

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