

Jens Galschiøts “Pillar of Shame”

An exploration of meaning and interpretational perspectives in an activists sculpture

Introduction

"The Pillar of Shame" is an artwork created by the Danish artist Jens Galschiøt which exists in four versions distributed across Asia, South America, and Europe. When combining articles written about "The Pillar of Shame" over the years it appears as one of Denmark's most famous sculptures ever¹. However, the artistic assessment itself has been meagre and superficial—this article aims to address this disparity.

The text incorporates ancient and modern art history and theory in an attempt to contextualise "The Pillar of Shame". Additionally, I argue for a spiritual reading of the sculpture, intended as a vaccination against previous purely materialistic interpretations. Due to space and relevance considerations, I will focus on the earliest produced version, exhibited in Hong Kong, with occasional references to the other versions in the section 'Social Sculpture - Joseph Beuys and "The Pillar of Shame"'. My hope for the text is that it may serve as the starting point for a professional dialogue about one of the most widely discussed and diligent artists of our time.

Jens Galschiøt as Part of a Generation

Galschiøt was born in 1954 in Frederikssund, chronologically locating him within a generation of artists that includes Michael Kvium, Christian Lemmerz, and Claus Carstensen, among others. Unlike the aforementioned artists, Galschiøt has no connection to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, the movement "vilde maleri" (wild paintings (own translation)), or "Værkstedet Værst" (the workshop worst (own translation)), which, possibly influenced by Kvium's fame in the 2000s, has gained focus in contemporary art discourse. Instead, Galschiøt's artistic endeavours, in a pragmatic sense, originate from craftsmanship, stemming from his education as a coppersmith and his work as a silversmith².

Although Galschiøt lacks a social connection to the mentioned art groups, his practice reflects both the motives and aesthetic choices of contemporary artists and the zeitgeist. For instance, looking at Galschiøts sculpture "Den indre svinehund" ("The Inner Beast", 1993), there is a connection, in terms of motif, to Bjørn Nørgaard's sculptural tableau "Thorvaldsens portrætbuster/Wasserspiegel" from 1976 and to contemporary works by Christian Lemmerz, such as "Franki I & II" (1992-93) and "Legeme" ("Body", 1993-94).

When addressing the early Nørgaard, another parallel unfolds regarding artistic strategy. The early Nørgaard's practice was characterised by critical performances that, through artistic means, provoked the power elite, of which the later Nørgaard has now become a part. In Denmark, the most famous example is "Hesteofringen" ("The Horse Sacrifice" (own translation), 1970), where Nørgaard and others ritually slaughtered and subsequently dissected a mare as a symbolic protest against the Vietnam War. Interestingly, Nørgaard

¹ A google search for "The Pillar of Shame" results in 5,4 million hits (2023).

² Although an artistic starting point in crafts has become an increasing rarity, it is more common when moving backwards in the history of art.

stages the severed head of the horse on a platform during the process, creating a modern example of 'nidstang'³.

A nidstang is a magical object from Norse-Icelandic antiquity used as a curse or psychological terror against enemies. The intention was to frighten the enemy with the ugliness of the pole and the creator's transgressivity, and also to scare away spirits protecting the enemy.

The purpose of highlighting Nørgaard's gesture is twofold: firstly, it signifies a kinship between "Hesteofringen" and "The Pillar of Shame" as protestings artworks containing ritualised elements reaching back to antiquity. Secondly, I suggest a connection to the spiritual realm, as the nidstang is a pagan curse and thus a subset of magical incantations.

"The Pillar of Shame": Formal Analysis and Interpretation

In 1996, Jens Galschiøt completed an eight metre tall sculpture called "The Pillar of Shame" (The Pillar of Shame). The sculpture is slightly narrower at the top than at the base, creating a pyramidal or concave expression.

The content side of the sculpture can for clarity be divided into a base and the column itself. The base is a classic cube, providing physical weight to the sculpture. Simultaneously, it contrasts with the column, making it appear narrower and less mechanical than it would have been with a slimmer and/or smaller geometric base. The inscription on the base dedicates the sculpture to the victims of the uprising in Tiananmen Square in 1989, with the text: 'THE OLD CANNOT KILL THE YOUNG FOREVER. THE TIANANMEN MASSACRE June 4th, 1989.' Allegedly, the quote is one of many slogans used by Chinese students in their demonstrations⁴.

The column consists of human and occasional animal figures, seemingly melded or woven together. The contours of the figures are intentionally blurred, shifting the perception of the multiple figurations away from the individual and towards a mass. The fact that the figures are overlaid with an organic, vein-like structure⁵ supports such an interpretation. Looking at the facial expressions and body language of the human figures, expressions of strain, exhaustion, and pain can be observed, contributing to the overall sombre tone of the work⁶.

The patina of the artwork, in its raw form, appears corroded, signalling transience or pointing towards the existence of dirt. This pushes the interpretation more towards impermanence and an imperfect being in the world than if we were presented with a polished, shiny statue. The "original" pillar of shame was painted orange as a performative act during an event associated with a demonstration during the Beijing Olympics (2008)⁷. This development, of course, alters a formal analysis of the sculpture's surface but simultaneously adds its own symbolic content⁸.

As a final consideration in the movement towards interpretation, the reference to totem poles should also be included. As previously mentioned, the support has been stripped of its

³ Thesaurus: Salmonsens Konversationsleksikon. Article: "Nidstang".

⁴ This understanding of the art pieces is repeated in The Standard (<https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/4/237589/Artist-dismisses-> (18-12-2023))

⁵ Has also been read as a fungal mycelium.

⁶ #3, p. 5-9

⁷ <https://galschiot.com/dk/vaerker/the-color-orange> (08-10-2023) - after this another version of the sculpture has been painted orange.

⁸ I will return to the transitional as a characteristic of Galschiøts praxis in the section "Relational Aesthetics".

function as a building element, leaving behind a cylindrical form with figurations and faces—closely related to the totem pole⁹. If one delves into the history of totem poles, an interesting sub-variant emerges: the shame pole¹⁰. Similar to the Nordic concept of 'the nidstang', Native American tribes used art as a way of applying political pressure¹¹. However, the shame pole as cultural artefact appears more pacifistic and civilised compared to the violent acts surrounding the nidstang¹².

If one further investigates this kinship in formal design and artistic gesture, it would be logical to move towards a spiritual and shamanistic interpretation of "The Pillar of Shame", and here the animal figures return. In the shamanistic perspective, animals are highly respected as messengers of the spirit world or symbols of specific qualia. "The Pillar of Shame" contains three types of animals: snakes, lizards, and a fledgling bird. In Western symbolism, the snake holds a special status due to the biblical myth of the expulsion from Eden (Genesis) - but in a shamanistic perspective, the snake is a symbol of change due to its ability to shed its skin. The lizard also symbolises the ability to leave a part of itself behind (the tail) in the process of making a clear choice. The fledgling bird has no specific meaning in shamanism, but birds represent insight, peace, healing, and other beneficial qualities due to their mastery of the air element. Shaping a fledgling bird fallen from the nest appears as a negation; what could have become a free bird died in the making.

Comparison with Vigeland's "The Monolith"

"The Pillar of Shame" did not emerge out of a vacuum but has Norwegian, symbolist relatives. In the 1910s, there was a copyright dispute between Edvard Munch and Gustav Vigeland¹³ concerning Munch's painting "Menneskeberget" ("The Human Mountain" (own translation), 1909)¹⁴ and Vigeland's sculpture "The Monolith," which was exhibited in 1944.

Since Vigeland's artistic contribution, like Galschiøt's, is a sculpture, it makes more sense to base a interpretative comparison on "The Monolith" rather than "Menneskeberget". There is an obvious conceptual kinship in the idea of creating a column consisting of human bodies, but this is also where the similarities end. Vigeland's sculpture is 14 metres tall and carved in stone, while Galschiøt's is 'only' eight metres tall and cast in cement. Looking closer at the bodies in Vigeland's monolith, they appear idealised and fleshed out. There is a vitality in the way the muscles tense to raise the column towards the sky, signalling modernist optimism. The message seems to be that as humanity¹⁵, we support and carry each other in a continuous progression towards better times. However, in "The Pillar of Shame", the bodies are emaciated and tormented; the vitality and the baroque game of slowly transforming the hard material of stone until it simulates the soft folds of flesh is abandoned. While Vigeland's subjects willingly throw themselves into the struggle for humanity's development, Galschiøt's subjects are stretched in a composition reminiscent of torture. Here, Galschiøt aligns himself

⁹ This text's treatment of totem poles as a North American cultural artefact will not be exhaustive, but briefly described a totem is an object which, through religious rituals, becomes emblematic of a concept, a tribe, an event, a person or such.

¹⁰ Also known as ridicule-pole.

¹¹ See p.ex. "The Seward Shame Pole".

(<https://alaskahistoricalsociety.org/about-ahs/special-projects/150treaty/150th-resource-library/new-articles/the-seward-shame-pole-countering-alaskas-sesquicentennial/> - 10/12/2023)

¹² See Grammaticus, Saxo "Egils Saga", 2nd book, 5th paragraph.

¹³ Nielsen, T.O.B. "Vigeland + Munch. Behind the myths" (2015).

¹⁴ Later exhibited with the title: "Mod Lyset" (Towards the Light, own translation)

¹⁵ Albeit a humanity consisting solely of caucasians.

with a modernist tradition where various artists critically engage with the techno-cultural upheaval of which they are themselves a part¹⁶.

Because of this "The Pillar of Shame" appears as a negation or rejection of Vigeland's monolith. The existential angst one experiences in Munch's "The Scream" (1893), to stay within the cultural context, has infected the motif^(B), and just like with the fledgling bird, Galschiøt delivers a transformation of a well-known symbol.

Social Sculpture - Joseph Beuys and "The Pillar of Shame"

In the 1960s, Joseph Beuys developed his poetics through a blend of anthroposophy and magical idealism. The phrase "Everyone is an artist"¹⁷ remains a synecdoche for this work, encompassing thoughts about society perceived as an artwork¹⁸ and the transformative potential of art.

With the artwork "7000 Oaks" (1982), Beuys introduced a new approach in political conceptual art. Originally, the piece consisted of a pile of boulders made from basalt. When observed from above, it became apparent that the stones formed an arrow pointing towards an oak tree. Beuys himself had planted the oak tree, and in the subsequent years, with the help of many volunteers, Beuys planted 7000 oak trees around Kassel, each with an accompanying basalt stone. "7000 Oaks" is significant because Beuys succeeded in creating something that can be read as an independent work while simultaneously serving as an exemplary concept of 'social sculpture'. Interdisciplinarity and participation are core concepts in this sculptural series.

Now, let's return our focus to "The Pillar of Shame"; As mentioned, the sculpture was created a total of four times, with the first iteration being exhibited in Rome and then sent to Hong Kong as part of protests against human rights abuses. This sculpture featured in a demonstration in Victoria Park, through a collaboration with the Democracy Movement in Hong Kong¹⁹. That same night, it was moved to 'Hong Kong U', where it stood for 24 years until the university removed it. Later, in 2023, it was confiscated by the Hong Kong government. Over the years, several shame pillars have been erected, including one in Brazil in collaboration with MST²⁰ (2000) protesting the murder of farmers, one in Mexico in collaboration with a local theatre group which protested the decimation of indigenous people, and finally one in Oslo, moved to Berlin and later Denmark (in front of Christiansborg).

Similar to Beuys' "7000 Oaks", "The Pillar of Shame" would not be the same without the movements and individuals who, over time, have embraced the sculpture as a symbol for their specific causes. And just like "7000 Oaks", "The Pillar of Shame" has been copied and spread worldwide, becoming a symbolic diaspora that in actuality marks collaborative efforts – between Galschiøt and, for example, MST.

Relational Aesthetics

The above represents a trend in contemporary art that Nicolas Bourriaud attempts to capture with his work in the book "Relational Aesthetics" from 1998. Many techniques and artistic

¹⁶ German expressionists of the 1930ies come to mind.

¹⁷ A translation of Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg) "Jeder Mensch sollte Künstler sein. Alles kann zur schönen Kunst werden." (Glauben und Liebe, 1798).

¹⁸ "Das Wagnersche Gesamtkunstwerk" which was a core concept of the Bauhaus movement.

¹⁹ The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Movements in China.

²⁰ Landless Workers Movement or Movimentos dos Trabalhadores Rurats Sem Terra.

tendencies from the protest art and collective happenings of the 1960s can be traced in the works Bourriaud mentions. However, a difference is that the partisan political affiliation has disappeared. Instead, Bourriaud highlights works that aim to make human relationships the essence of the artwork.

According to Bourriaud, artists working within the aesthetics of relations seek to learn how to inhabit the world in a better way, rather than constructing the world based on a predetermined idea of historical evolution²¹. Here, we find the postmodern cessation of 'the grand narratives' as described in the 1980s²², but without the apathy experienced, for example, by the Danish labour unions in the same period.

Under the concept of 'relational aesthetics,' individualization and individual approaches to the institutional become two interconnected cardinal points. 'Relational aesthetics' due to its focus on the immaterial or ethereal, comes to resemble the conceptual art of the 1970s²³. However, a crucial difference is that relational aesthetics does not operate with the same (neoplatonic) division of idea and execution as in conceptual art. According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics challenges our linear, progressive perception of time, as artworks constantly renegotiate their meaning, become forgotten, get rediscovered with renewed attention and so on. Bourriaud terms this the 'transitional'²⁴ aspect of a work.

The phase before the actual manifestation of the work takes a backseat to the connections that a work can continuously create. The connections that tie a work to something outside the art world, according to Bourriaud, becomes a tool to describe contemporary art²⁵, and I will now use this tool to describe "The Pillar of Shame" using a transitional perspective.

Bourriaud vs. "The Pillar of Shame"

In its conception the sculpture is directed towards China²⁶. Galschiøt personally financed the creation of the sculpture, after which he contacted the Democracy Movement in Hong Kong himself. According to Galschiøt, the association needed to be convinced that "The Pillar of Shame" was relevant to their struggle - a tone that has changed now that the pillar has become a symbol for this fight. Galschiøt paid for the sculpture's transportation, and its maintenance has been funded by the Democracy Movement²⁷.

Since the work was not commissioned or tied to an exhibition, there was an economic risk in its creation and unveiling. The early scepticism of the Democracy Movement is not unnatural, considering the colonial history of the West, but the fact that the movement could still associate itself with the work can be connected to the minor tactical victory the democracy movement achieved at the unveiling of the artwork.

It is interesting to observe how the interpretative adoption of "The Pillar of Shame" takes place in a cultural community where the work is, to put it mildly, in unfamiliar territory. In Wing Kin Tsoi's "Pillar of Shame: the underlying meaning beyond the sculpture", referenced in my formal analysis of the work, it is stated that the sculpture has become a symbol in the fight against autocracy²⁸. There is a hermeneutic alignment between democratic criticism of a

²¹ #1, p. 16, ll. 26-27.

²² Jean-François Lyotard: "The Postmodern Condition" (1979).

²³ See: Sol Lewitt's "sentences on conceptual art", specifically sentence # 28.

²⁴ From Latin: *transit-* meaning: 'gone across'.

²⁵ #1 p. 26, ll. 26-28.

²⁶ As mentioned the quote was expropriated from the slogans of the Democracy Movement.

²⁷ #4, p. 1, ll. 11-37.

²⁸ #3, p. 8, ll. 15-19.

one-party rule and the aforementioned relation of the totem pole to hierarchy, but at the same time, this reading expands the gesture of the work from the shame pole/nidstang to a more regular satire. The people's suffering, symbolised by the body horror contained in "The Pillar of Shame," here transforms into moral suffering caused and experienced by politicians and statesmen who use the one-party system as a platform for their selfish elevation. This reading may prove to be problematic²⁹, but it is not the intention of this text to make a comparative quality assessment of different interpretations. It should be noted that "The Pillar of Shame" on one hand brings economic value and symbolic potential, which along the way is reclaimed through political capital. It becomes a pawn in a power game, thus eliminating the artist's control over interpretation. On the other hand, the work receives a dissemination and attention that only a few artworks are privileged enough to receive; Becoming one of the most discussed sculptures of our time (2023). According to Bourriaud, this transaction is the actual work.

Reception of "The Pillar of Shame" - A Discursive Section

In his e-flux article "On Art Activism" (2014) German art theoretician Boris Groys defines activist artists as individuals attempting to change political systems or social circumstances outside the professional art world³⁰. In this process, activist artists often face two forms of criticism: internal criticism from the art world regarding the work's quality and external criticism concerning the ethics of "aestheticizing" often severe conflicts³¹. As this article's purpose is to examine "The Pillar of Shame" from an art-historical perspective, I cannot address external criticism questioning the political legitimacy of Galschiøt's way of organising his practice. Therefore, I maintain the focus on internal art criticism.

Author Ulrikka S. Gernes provided an example of internal criticism when she wrote in the Danish newspaper *Information*, 1997: "The Pillar of Shame is a strange sculpture - more an idea than an artwork - an object that, for better or worse, has assumed a life of its own...[it] has found its meaning as a metaphor for the democracy movement's...struggle for freedom of expression". Here, Gernes points to the work's relational qualities but confers them as conceptual attributes ("more an idea than an artwork") read in opposition to the elevated status of the artwork. There is a logic associated with seeing the sculpture's 'life of its own' as part of the work's conceptual essence - relations can in a way be described as thoughts that at least one person has about something or someone. However, it is difficult, while referencing the section on Bourriaud, to illuminate an artistic perspective where any post-inventive conceptual development detracts from the quality of the artwork³².

Continuing, Gernes writes: "If you want to see the work independently of its metaphor, you now have to strictly separate symbol and art, and when you remove the symbol [SIC], the question is how much art is left.". I assume that by "symbol," she refers to political symbols (e.g., a rose for social democracy) read differently than artistic ones. The attitude seems to be that the more a work of art is used politically, the less artistic quality the work will contain.

²⁹ Intuitively it seems likely that the comparison between hierarchy and totem pole to a higher degree describes how the West reduces the meaning (as in the idiom: "who sits on top of the totem pole.") of a religious artefact created by Northamerican indigenes.

³⁰ #2, p.1 ll.10-15.

³¹ #2, p. 1 ll. 32-57.

³² It should be mentioned that the news-article uses most of its space to describe the political situation and relaying an eye-witness account of a protest. The two quotes drawn from the article are the only examples of artistic criticism provided.

Groys categorically rejects this criticism, referring to the abandonment of all artistic quality criteria (including negatively defined ones) in the 20th century³³. Through Bourriaud, we can nuance this; in adherence to the theory of transitional artworks, it is not fruitful to separate the work from its metaphor or political symbol - but to embrace the whole, where the object or gesture itself becomes an inherent part of the language describing the work³⁴.

Understanding attention as a finite, limited quantity is a materialistic assumption that leads to the notion that all political art operates on a precarious basis. If there is only a finite amount of attention to be had, a political artwork will either overshadow its purpose or transform into a political symbol, depending on which side (the work or the political cause) receives the most attention. However, with a more idealistic approach, where art is believed to be able to generate attention, the quality of an art piece becomes dependent on how/for how long one can maintain the work in the aforementioned ambivalence. This challenge involves ensuring sufficient uniformity in the cases to where the pillars are sent.

The discussion about whether a particular use of a work diminishes its quality touches on previous art historical demarcations regarding the nature of art versus design. According to Groys, all art before the French Revolution can be seen as design in the traditional sense; objects that beautify (aestheticise) and make the object more attractive to a user. After the revolution (in the transition from Rococo to Classicism), the French bourgeoisie chose to keep Louis XVI's palaces and monuments, displaying them to the public - now devoid of their former administrative function. The gesture emphasised that the nobility belonged to a past that was now only showcased through museums and could never reappear³⁵. It was a turning point in art history and between art and design, where the idea of fine art as a symbolic act separated from the functionality of design originated. Concepts like "l'art pour l'art"³⁶, 'the artist in the ivory tower', and art as autonomous stem from this period. Later, Beuys fought against these ideas from the 1960s, followed by Bourriaud describing contemporary art³⁷ where Beuys' institutional critique seems to have gained ground.

This brings us back to "The Pillar of Shame"; As previously described, the artistic strategy can be seen as an extension of the shame pole or shame totem; a protesting eye-catcher that disrupts and intensely stimulates one's senses. On the other hand, I have highlighted how the Democracy Movement in Hong Kong has embraced the sculpture as a symbol in the fight against autocracy, using it as a focal point. The two sides are not mutually exclusive, but they point to a contrast in the work, which may be the cause of its global success; Shame is a universal human emotion that connects us across cultural boundaries.

One can easily pose criticisms; who actually feels represented by the contorted figures in "The Pillar of Shame"? If they are not a symbol for the demonstrators, are they a symbol for the souls of the powerful? And regardless of whom the bodies symbolise: where is the ethics in freezing their degradation? But the obscure and paradoxical are in this case qualities of the sculpture, forcing the viewer to take a stance and draw their own conclusions. As an artistic strategy, there are similarities with the contemporary phenomenon of internet trolling, as we here explore binary extremes using emotions as bait. But unlike trolls, there is neither

³³ #2, p.1, ll. 42-44.

³⁴ #1, p. 47, ll. 25-27.

³⁵ #2, p. 5, ll. 2-32.

³⁶ Now more clearly defined as separate from art which takes a starting point in craft.

³⁷ Here attributed to Théophile Gautier (1811-1872).

irony nor anonymity to be found. The project is *not* a malicious worldwide joke but reads more like an unfocused primal scream; a kenosis³⁸ or emptying of the soul.

The action contains apparent senselessness: just as the French bourgeoisie's defunctionalization of the palace in the 1870s was not the end of colonialism and hegemony, neither will the shame pillars solve the conflicts they mark. The shame pillars negating Vigeland's "Column of Humanity" even appear prophetic - we cannot be sure of a happy ending. To change the present, one should be in the present, but simultaneously consider the present as eternally changing - and thereby dead. Just as in Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus", art moves backwards into the future³⁹. This approach to art is, regardless of the viewer's specific interpretation, spiritual rather than political, idealistic rather than materialistic, and undoubtedly the result of an artist playing on political fields and not the reverse.

A

The prefix *nid-* originates from the Old Norse *níð* meaning mockery or taunting (https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o56949&fbclid=IwAR3_RZVh_zgVXA24csh1illEdco-tfnbksAQNqis_XQX3AzLFNhRS7dH8cl, 27/09/2023). A reconstruction of the protogermanic *nīpa* reveals a connection with the proto-indo-European **neyH-*: "to be angered" related to the proto-irish *nith*: "struggle, anger". Related to the European etymology is also **nīpingaz* meaning "a wicked person". (https://en.m.wiktionary.org/wiki/Reconstruction:Proto-Germanic/n%C4%AB%C3%BE%C4%85?fbclid=IwAR3NLmXnl7IOc0LNylo2bNXr-KRwKIK2hQbUm_zz2EzapcnXABXsTAZonAc, 27/09/2023). For an in-depth discussion of "nid" vs. "ergi" I recommend: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C4%AB%C3%BE?fbclid=IwAR2rILE1jvZvQF2Ld0bJ3oP5DlwJuzRnovVnKf8LXjyrRvmFcDIO0BTlq6l>, 27/09/2023.

B

Also on a material level it is contrasting that Vigeland's sculpture stands as a monument for the victory of mankind, while recent research has revealed that two out of the three stonemasons, who were responsible for "The Monolith", died of silicosis, popularly known as 'iron lung' (Nielsen). "The Pillar of Shame" points towards the suffering of the people and their possible doom, but no one was injured or contracted disease in relation to the construction of the piece.

³⁸ From Greek: *kenoin* = to empty out. #2, p. 13, ll. 18-24.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin: "On the Concept of History" (1940) described in #2, p. 10-12.

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