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Kade McGrail
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Art & Oppression: “Thin Blue Line”

Humanities

By Kade McGrail
Virginia Commonwealth University

ABSTRACT
In 2005, a sculpture titled “Thin Blue Line” was installed on the side of Richmond’s new Police Department Headquarters. The piece is made of metal bands woven together to resemble a giant face that looms a story above the road below it. Considering Richmond’s past use of public art as expressions of power, alongside the political evolution of the term “thin blue line,” this article seeks to deconstruct what this work conveys to its community and how it is received by its community. The aesthetic tradition both the piece and the artist evoke is Italian Futurism—a movement proven to be closely linked with fascism. Furthermore, its installation as a large face on the side of a state-sponsored headquarters has an uncanny resemblance to the cult of personality created around various dictators of the twentieth century. Finally, negative interactions with the piece during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 make it clear that the sculpture is not approved of by the community. Despite the claim that the piece was supposed to convey a sense of protection, much of the evidence proves the contrary—it is received as a symbol of intimidation and oppression.

KEYWORDS
Thin Blue Line • Public Art Defacement • Policing Intimidation • Black Lives Matter Movement
Richmond is a city well-known for its expansive and eclectic collection of public artworks. From statues of long-dead Confederates created to legitimize the Lost Cause, to more recent “counter monuments” made to ameliorate the racist connotations of older works, the art of this city is highly politicized (Cox 134). Many would assume that Richmond’s shrines to white power stopped being constructed nearly a century ago with Monument Avenue’s final Confederate addition in 1929. Yet, in 2005, Thin Blue Line was installed by the city of Richmond on the side of its new police department headquarters. This reportedly “big brother-like,” metal sculpture has become exponentially more controversial over time, considering the political evolution of what the ‘thin blue line’ as a motto represents and the increasingly negative perception of police in America (Slipek). The city of Richmond has a particularly fraught history of violence inflicted upon people of color by its police authority. Such a monument, made for an institution that facilitates violence against its community, is the result of state action taken without the consideration or inclusion of the public in that decision-making process. This dissonance between the state and its community demonstrated by the piece is best analyzed in relation to the following: the aesthetic tradition it evokes, its installation on a headquarters for state authority, and its defacement during the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. These all converge to prove that Thin Blue Line is a symbol of oppression, regardless of the original intent of the monument.

In 1997, a “Call to Artists” was sent out by the Public Art Commission (PAC) of Richmond for “qualified artists to create commissioned artwork for the City of Richmond Public Safety Headquarters” (“CALL FOR ARTISTS”). This was a requirement for any qualifying Capital Improvement Project (CIP) based on a 1997 ordinance. The Percent-for-Art program mandated that one percent of an eligible project’s budget be put toward public art related to the project (Letter to...
Susan Glasser). Michael Stutz was one of many artists to submit a design application for the new headquarters on West Grace Street, and six years later, his design was reviewed and unanimously approved by a site selection team. This team consisted of three members of the police department, four from the PAC, the city architect for this project, a local representative from Monroe Ward, and the Chief of Police (“Public Art: Police Headquarters Exterior Sculpture”). The endorsement of Thin Blue Line was a ratio of 9:1 state authority figures to community members. The city paid $140,000 for a sculpture that only one member of Richmond’s community without a government position had any say in. As Erin L. Thompson points out in her book, Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America’s Public, community agency over monuments within a given city is often denied by undemocratic legislation that protects problematic monuments from being removed (Thompson 138-139). In this case, a twenty-first-century monument that “is indicative of a surveillance state” was both protected and constructed by the government (Interview with Rebecca Shields 25:58).

The paradox of any monument is its purpose as both an “objective” memorial to the past and a representation of the power dynamic between commissioner and audience. If confronted directly, most tend to treat such a contradiction as a binary, one aspect or the other must be true. A potential recalibration can allow for both to be partially true. A monument is both an expression of power and a reflection of the past; but this still allows for one to acknowledge the hateful legacy of a monument while also believing that "removing Confederate statues amounts to whitewashing our history, turning our heads away from the inconvenient truths of our past" (Kuznar). This is not true for many reasons. It assumes that monuments are the only preserved sources of historical opinion from those in power. More importantly, it implies that the historical value of a problematic monument must be worth more than ending the hatred it perpetuates. Karen L. Cox, writer of No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice, disagrees with these notions. She instead expands upon what a monument is or could be to account for what many overlook (Cox 13). A monument is an alteration of history that benefits the commissioner. At its best, a monument can provide a unique perspective when supported by facts, and at its worst, it can fabricate a new historical canon, commemorate mythology, and inspire hate (Cox 172).

Thin Blue Line is a sculpture that operates in the same way as older monuments in Richmond. It is a manifestation of power with strong political implications. “Everything that is created by a person is political in nature... [Thin Blue Line] is political, because it is art” as said by Rebecca Shields, a VCU art history professor (6:33). To elaborate upon that notion, it follows that the political implications of a work can be purposeful on the part of the artist. Yet, just as often, it is the audience’s interpretation of a piece which decides its meaning, regardless of the artist’s ideological message (or lack thereof). Whether it was coincidentally or purposefully, Thin Blue Line bears a notable resemblance to art from the Futurist movement. Futurism was one of the most politicized artistic and social movements of the early twentieth century.
and was established in Italy in 1909 as an ideology that glorified speed, industry, violence, youth, and strength (Marinetti). The founder, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, believed that “Fascism was the natural extension of Futurism” and would later join Benito Mussolini’s National Fascist Party along with his fellow Italian Futurists (“Futurismo e Fascismo.”). Futurism was explicitly and undeniably connected to fascism from its conception (Felix). Even after the death of Marinetti in 1944, Futurism would go on to influence many later movements, including Vorticism, Constructivism, Surrealism, Dada, and Neo-Futurism (Hewitt 49).

Aesthetically, the artists of the Futurist movement took influence from Neo-impressionism and Cubism. Thematically, the artwork itself was focused on machinery, motion, masculinity, and power (Brenson). The “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture” was published in 1912 by Umberto Boccioni, who remains one of the most influential Italian Futurists to this day (Interview with Grubb Grubb 12:36). The manifesto contains guidelines that explain Futurism’s ideological and technical goals in sculpture. For example, “Sculpture should give life to objects by rendering their extension into space palpable, systematic, and plastic... by

Figure 2. Examples of Futurist Works. From top to bottom and left to right: *Sintesi Fascista (Fascist Synthesis)*, Alessandro Bruschetti, 1935; *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, Umberto Boccioni, 1913; *Velocità Astratta (Abstract Speed)* by Giacomo Balla, 1913-1914.
forming an arabesque of curves and straight lines” (Boccioni). The sculpting of objects into "an arabesque of curves and straight lines" is exactly what Stutz did with Thin Blue Line and his ribbon-like style of metallurgy. Boccioni wrote that “Futurist sculptural composition will contain in itself the marvelous mathematical and geometric elements of modern objects... they will be embedded in the muscular lines of a body” (Ibid). The symmetrical but still figural nature of Thin Blue Line also adheres to this tenet of the manifesto.

Stutz’s smaller, non-commissioned works in Figure 3 contain similar abstracted qualities as the Futurist works shown above them in Figure 2. According to Grubb Grubb, a senior in VCU’s painting and printmaking program with an art history minor; any of Stutz’s sculptures would look exactly like a Futurist painting (such as Abstract Speed shown in Figure 2) if flattened (3:10). This is mainly because of how the bands of metal are woven and overlap to create sharp contrast between light and shadow. It is impossible to know how aware Stutz is of his imitation of the Futurist style without a statement from the artist himself, but he was unresponsive to attempts to contact him. Regardless, within the modern era it is expected that an artist has knowledge of and takes into consideration the political implications and history of the style they’re working in or adjacent to (Interview with Rebecca Shields 19:16).

Even without knowing the artist’s intentions, the Thin Blue Line—especially in the context of Stutz’s other works—has an undeniable Futurist influence and projects similar ideas surrounding power and intimidation.

Beyond the aesthetic of the sculpture itself, its location and the context of this location call upon a related architectural tradition. The Thin Blue Line looms over the pedestrians of North Jefferson Street approximately one story above the ground. The blank...

concrete wall it is attached to serves as an effective platform for the monument’s domineering presence. Of course, the Brutalist style of the headquarters is not an issue on its own, but in combination with the colossal head mounted on the wall and the purpose of the building, the monument’s aesthetic connections to fascism only intensify. Shields was the first to bring up fascist Italy and the various Eastern European dictators of the twentieth century in relation to the Thin Blue Line during the interview. The comparison is best illustrated by Figure 4 and Shields’ analysis. “It’s that combination of the brutalist style with… a colossal face that is often used to represent the cult of personality. That is not what was intended here. But it is something that is almost like a vessel for it—it has the capacity to become that” (Interview with Rebecca Shields 16:52) While the intent of the piece may not have been to resemble monuments of autocratic regimes, it has an uncanny resemblance to the power differential between state and citizen. This major oversight may have been caught if the relevant experts had been included on the PAC site selection team. Unfortunately, this invidious historical parallel went undetected or unacknowledged by the PAC, Michael Stutz, and the general Richmond community.

There was minimal recorded public reaction when Thin Blue Line first debuted in 2005. It is possible that some articles or announcements were not archived or were not archived in an accessible place. A handful of later articles do reference quotes from the artist on the piece but include no citation or indication of where the interview was published, which suggests the latter is possible (Riggan). Additionally, the location of the sculpture is rather
awkward and almost hidden from view—as both Grubb and Shields stated in separate interviews—on the east side of the building overlooking a parking lot (Interview with Rebecca Shields 1:21; Interview with Grubb Grubb 5:49). However, between approximately 2009 and 2015, articles on or including mentions of Thin Blue Line do surface. Every mention of the piece is positive, with various journalists describing it as “compelling [and] ribbonlike,” striking, and unique (Riggan; Slipek; Downing). Even the instances describing it as intimidating or “big brother-like” are not intended as critical; the consensus seemed to be that it was a positive addition to Monroe Ward’s landscape (Riggan; Slipek).

Negative sentiments toward the monument would not be made explicitly clear to the public until the summer of 2020. Amid the 2020 BLM protests, sparked by the murder of George Floyd, direct action was taken against Thin Blue Line and what it represents to Richmond’s community (Cox 6). Figure 5 shows graffiti which unknown community members left on both the building and sculpture itself, labeling it with terms such as “FAS-CISTS” and “ACAB” (an acronym for All Cops Are Bastards). The different handwriting styles, colors of paint, and the height of the letters for ACAB—which likely took two people to accomplish—as well as the use of the word fascist, indicate a group effort to deface it as a symbol of oppression. Furthermore, the paint covering up the vandalized parts of the wall in Figure 6 from 2021 spreads far beyond the original scope captured in Figure 5, so there must have been additional instances of defacement and vandalism. One can conclude that these actions taken during the protests were not coincidental in nature.

Even without the historical context underlying this sculpture, its subject and aesthetic are enough to leave at least some of Richmond’s community at odds with it. The added context of both Futurism and other overlapping aspects of this piece with fascist monuments...
forces *Thin Blue Line* into similar territory as Richmond’s Confederate monuments. Both *Thin Blue Line* and its Confederate counterparts are “visual arguments that only people like the ones on the pedestals are qualified to rule” (Thompson 13). As a symbol of intimidation and state power, the monument is incongruent with the attitudes of many Richmond residents and therefore does not deserve to be a part of this city’s landscape. If a community is forced to retain a monument it rejects, the preservation of that monument is inequitable and harmful to that community” (Thompson 182). With time, the opportunity to review the purpose and necessity of this piece may arise and allow for the community as a whole to decide whether it should remain.

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