

October 10, 2017

Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl  
Department of Cultural Affairs  
31 Chambers Street  
New York, NY 10007

President Darren Walker  
Ford Foundation  
1440 Broadway  
New York, NY 10018

Dear Co-Chair Finkelpearl, Co-Chair Walker and Commissioners:

RE: Open Letter to the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers

Thank you for giving your time to an issue of great meaning to our city and the people who live, work, and visit here. As you begin this debate, I would like to share a suggestion that I hope will prove useful in the discussion.

In the wake of tragic events in Charlottesville, the conversation about New York's public monuments has focused quite rightly on the checkered past and values of some of the men (largely men) represented in public parks and squares.

To date, the press has eloquently called the question about whether we are endorsing particular viewpoints by allowing these sculptures to remain. This dialogue alone has been of great value to New York. Rather than simply passing public art on the way to our next destination, New Yorkers are talking and thinking about what these monuments represent and how they align—or don't—with our shared beliefs as a city today.

We understand that your central charge is to develop guidelines to assess which existing monuments should be removed or reinterpreted. However, we urge you to seize a broader opportunity to identify the stories that are not currently represented in New York City's public artworks. Whose voices are missing from our narrative entirely?

Here is the chance to explore how best to tell the city's silent history. Adding new narratives to the public realm would be a powerful way to balance what already exists, both by reckoning with the dark chapters in our collective history and in lifting up the more triumphant. It would add new and exciting voices to our civic dialogue, and hopefully ensure that we are never apathetic about what it means for art to occupy a public space.

Clearly, the actual execution of such an idea will cost money. We are not naïve and certainly understand that this is a city of a great many pressing priorities. However, should this idea take hold, we already have a key resource: the Percent for Art Program. If we were to focus even some small fraction of that

funding on creating a voice for the stories that New Yorkers would most like to have told, we would make even more significant progress than this important program has already achieved.

MAS has a long history with public monuments. We were founded in 1893 as part of the City Beautiful movement, dedicated to improving our urban environment through greenspace, sculpture, and art. Over the last thirty years, we have raised millions of dollars in private funding for NYC Parks to assist in the maintenance and restoration of public art across the five boroughs through our Adopt-A-Monument and Adopt-A-Mural programs.

We join many other New Yorkers in wishing you well in this critical discussion. It will be a difficult one, for sure, but your efforts will help shape the experience of our city for generations to come. How we choose to represent our history—the good, bad, and complicated—is a matter of great significance.

Yours truly,



Elizabeth Goldstein  
President