

# The Measure of Turmoil: Dürer's Monument to the Vanquished Peasants

Amir Djalali · July 19, 2012 · PDF

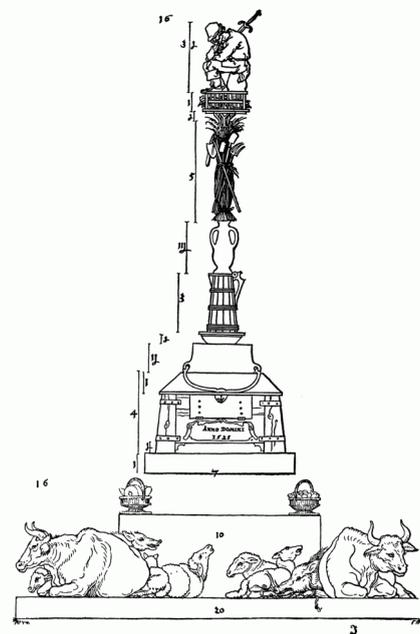
If someone wishes to erect a victory monument after vanquishing rebellious peasants, he might use paraphernalia according to the following instructions: Place a quadrangular stone block measuring ten feet in width and four feet in height on a quadrangular stone slab which measures twenty feet in length and one foot in height. On the four corners of the ledge place tied-up cows, sheep, pigs, etc. But on the four corners of the stone block place four baskets, filled with butter, eggs, onions, and herbs, or whatever you like. In the centre of this stone block place a second one, measuring seven feet in length and one foot in height. On top of this second block place a strong chest four feet high, measuring six and a half feet wide at the bottom and four feet wide at the top. Then place a kettle upside down on top of the chest. The kettle's diameter should be four and a half feet at the rim and three feet at its bottom. Surmount the kettle with a cheese bowl which is half a foot high and two and a half feet in diameter at the bottom. Cover this bowl with a thick plate that protrudes beyond its rim. On the plate, place a keg of butter which is three feet high and two and a half feet in diameter at the bottom. Cover this bowl with a thick plate that protrudes beyond its rim. On the plate, place a keg of butter which is three feet high and has a diameter of a foot and a half at the bottom, and of only a foot at the top. Its spout should protrude beyond this. On the top of the butter keg, place a well-formed milk jug, two and a half feet high, and with a diameter which is one foot at its bulge, half a foot at its top, and is wider at its bottom. Into this jug put four rods branching into forks on top and extending five and a half feet in height, so that the rods will protrude by half a foot, and then hang peasants' tool on it – like hoes, pitchforks, flails, etc. The rods are to be surmounted by a chicken basket, topped by a lard tub upon which sits an afflicted peasant with a sword stuck into his back

Albrecht Dürer, *Unterweisung der Messung* (Treatise on Measurement), 1525[1]

Dürer's design solution for a monument commemorating a victory of the 1525 German peasant's war might look to us like an early anticipation of what Emil Kaufmann defined "*architecture parlante* at its lowest" in reference to some designs by Jean-Jacques Lequeu.[2] Dürer's monument does indeed speak, but understanding what it might be saying is problematic. The forms employed in this design pedantically point to their referent, but what is their meaning? Dürer's monument has always presented itself as an interpretative enigma. Some have seen it as an act of mockery, as an attempt to discredit the misery of peasant life. Others interpret its forms as a passionate endorsement of the peasants' cause.[3]

We are not interested in making another, even more precise interpretation of this design, in order to discover what Dürer might have *really* wanted to say; of course, we could always refine our iconographic references and interpretative tools, but this effort might only accentuate

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1. The English translation cited in this article is Albrecht Dürer, *The Painter's Manual* (New York: Abraris Books, 1977).

2. Emil Kaufmann, "Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, and Lequeu", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 42, no. 3 (1952), 556. Kaufmann refers here to Lequeu's *Monument mémorial dressé en l'honneur de plusieurs cit.ens, sur la place de l'Arsenal* and his *Ordre symbolique*.

3. For an overview on the various interpretations of the monument, see Stephen Greenblatt, "Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion", *Representations* 1 (1983); and Dominique Colas, *Civil Society and*

the contradictions and inconsistencies contained in the monument. These inconsistencies and contradictions, however, are nevertheless productive. The tension that the design displays is capable of making the monument function beyond its representative character, to make something new emerge. What we should ask ourselves is not “What does this monument mean?”, but “What is this monument capable of doing?” Dürer’s design establishes a totally new type of monument: one that no longer *has* meaning, but becomes a machine for producing meaning – a monument that is no longer to be interpreted, but works as an apparatus, a machine capable of producing organization. As we will see, this transformation parallels broader social transformations marked by violence and turmoil that would undermine an order established for centuries, particularly religious schisms, the end of old alliances and the emergence of new social classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – and a new type of relationship connecting them – capital.

## I.

The period we are used to calling Renaissance was marked in Germany by a profound social division and political instability, whereby the insurgence of the oppressed starts to take the shape of a class struggle.[4] Peasants, miners and urban salaried workers were the ones affected most by the institutions of the late feudal system. This had not always been the case. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the lower classes had enjoyed a relative degree of autonomy. In particular, while being enslaved to their lords and to the clergy by a collection of taxes, *corvées* and other obligations, peasants had enjoyed the possibility of accessing communal lands and directly controlling their means of (re)production. This gave peasants the possibility to refuse labour and strengthened their propensity to struggle against their lords. Interestingly, the demographic collapse caused by pestilence and the crisis of the 1300s turned out to be favourable to workers, for it produced both an abundance of resources and a scarcity of labour. But at the end of the 15th century the process known as the “primitive accumulation” of capital – the separation of peasants from the land through the privatization of communal lands – had the effect of inverting the above-mentioned equation: it made resources scarce and labour abundant.[5] From the end of the 14th century, the core of the Empire was in turmoil. The claims of the oppressed find a proper organizational tool with which to express themselves in chiliastic mysticism. In 1471, 34,000 armed peasants responding to Hans the Piper’s call to revolt were bloodily repressed. The Virgin of Niklashausen appeared to Hans announcing:

There should be neither king nor princes, neither pope nor other ecclesiastic or lay authority. Every one should be a brother to each other, and win his bread by the toil of his hands, possessing no more than his neighbour. All taxes, ground rents, serf duties, tolls and other payments and deliveries should be abolished forever. Forests, waters and meadows should be free everywhere.[6]

In a similar spirit, peasants and workers in Alsace organized themselves in the capillary organization of the Bundschuh movement (the “Union Boot”) between 1493 and 1513. In 1514, the “Poor Conrad” rebellion gathered Swabian peasants in revolt against taxes on wine, meat and bread. That same year, Hungarian peasants conscripted for the Crusade against the Turks under general Dozsa, rose up against the lords instead. In this context, the publication of Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses inflamed an already unstable situation. Luther became the figure who was able to temporarily reconcile the conflicting interests of the various German classes. For the nobles, the Reformation offered the possibility of establishing a national “democracy of the nobility” under the emperor to combat the increasing power of the princes. The revolt of the nobility was easily repressed by the latter, however, and in turn, the princes took advantage of the Reformation in their own way, for it threw the ancient order based on the supremacy of the pope and the emperor into crisis, thereby strengthening their own sovereignty. The urban burghers connected to commerce and manufacture hoped the Reformation would put an end to the diseconomies caused by the maintenance of the privileges of the clergy and urban patriciate, which enforced a morality based on abnegation and work. Last but not least, salaried workers and

*Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 166–77.

4. Müntzer and the Peasant War in Germany always resurface in revolutionary moments: Friedrich Engels made reference to it after the defeat of the 1848 revolution, as did Ernst Bloch after the November Revolution of 1918–19; see Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), and Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Munich: Wolff, 1921). Echoes of the peasants’ war resonate in the 1999 historic novel “Q” by the writer collective Wu Ming (at that time known as Luther Blissett), who invoked Müntzer’s predication in a flaming pamphlet before the protests against the G8 meeting in Genoa, 2001. A self-criticism in the instrumental use of history was published as Wu Ming, “Spectres of Müntzer at Sunrise / Greeting the 21st Century”, introduction to *Thomas Müntzer, Sermon to the Princes* (London and New York: Verso, 2010). Recently, Alberto Toscano has argued that Müntzer’s doctrine marks the birth of modern politics; see *Alberto Toscano, Fanaticism: On the Uses of the Idea* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 43–97.

5. Marx dealt with primitive accumulation in the last chapter of volume one of his *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (The Modern Library, 1909), 784ff. Silvia Federici extended Marx’s analysis to addressing the “arcane of reproduction” in her *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

6. Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, consulted online at <http://is.gd/IDmCkW>

peasants saw early Luther's declarations as the initiation of a new struggle which had the potential to be on a much grander scale than those of the past.

Organized around the predication of Thomas Müntzer, peasants, workers and miners took control of a vast area stretching from the Black Forest to Thuringia, occupying castles and monasteries. In March 1525, the movement approved the Twelve Articles. In this document, the rebels demanded the right for every community to elect their own preachers, free access to forests and rivers, the ban of the appropriation of communal meadows and a form of control over the imposition of taxes. But Müntzer confessed the real programme of his "party" under torture: "All things are to be held in common' (*Omnia sunt communia!*) and distribution should be to each according to his need, as occasion arises. Any prince, count, or gentleman who refused to do this should first be given a warning, but then one should cut off his head or hang him." [7] Luther, who in the meantime had become the champion of the princes' interests, harshly condemned Müntzer's predication and called for the physical elimination of peasants. [8] The deceitful diplomatic tricks played by the princes had the effect of dividing the rebels, who consequently participated in the decisive battle of Frankenhausen unprepared and demoralized. The rebels' faith in an impending miracle that would have led them to victory could not help them against the military superiority of the princes' Landsknechte, who easily defeated them in a bloody massacre.

## II.

Echoes of these events can be found in Dürer's *Unterweisung der Messung* (Treatise on Measurement), published a few months after the Battle of Frankenhausen. This book was intended to be a practical manual addressed not only to architects and painters, but also to all craftsmen who would benefit from a conscious control of the principles of geometry, such as carpenters, stonemasons, painters, goldsmiths, etc. The treatise solves the practical problems that might have affected these professionals, who constituted the core of the growing urban minor bourgeoisie. Geometry represents the foundation of all the visual arts, and in his book, Dürer ridicules those artists who, despite having developed a "skilful hand through continual practice", nonetheless produce works that "are made intuitively and solely according to their tastes". [9] Learning the use of ruler and compass allowed the artist to "recognize truth as it meets their eyes, not only in the realm of art, but also in their proper general understanding, notwithstanding the fact that at the present time the art of painting is viewed with disdain in certain quarters, and is said to serve idolatry". [10] Here Dürer is referring to the iconoclasm of some of the reformers, including Müntzer.

In the context of a practical manual regarding the use of "compass and ruler", it might appear strange that Dürer included some designs for commemorative monuments. He seems to have perceived some problems in the art of commemoration that cried out to be solved by means of geometry and measurement. In particular, the commemoration of military victories presented difficulties. A monument to commemorate a victory was a consolidated genre whose nature and purpose Dürer borrowed directly from the ancients. A monument must "inform posterity about what the enemy was like". It was not unusual that a monument contain looted materials: "If the enemy was a mighty one, some of the booty might be used for the construction of the column." [11] Typically, the enemy was to be portrayed with nobility and honour, because a victor not only defeats his enemy on the battlefield, but also acquires his lands and titles. However, war in the time of Dürer was different than it had been in antiquity, or even in the recent mediaeval past. Two main transformations were taking place on the battlefield, both of which generated a common problem of representation for artists that called for a rational solution.

The first problem was a technological one: firearms had changed the way armies clashed on the battlefield. War became far more destructive than it had been previously. Fighting became more and more something that could be done from a certain distance. Practically speaking, killing the enemy was no longer an act of chivalry performed by a noble, courageous gentleman; instead, it had become a technical act performed by professionals. Dürer first responds to these changes by envisioning a generic "Monument to Commemorate a Victory", for which the

7. Peter Matheson (ed.), *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), cit. in Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 75.

8. "They should be knocked to pieces, strangled and stabbed, secretly and openly, by everybody who can do it, just as one must kill a mad dog!" Luther cried. "Therefore, dear gentlemen, hearken here, save there, stab, knock, strangle them at will, and if thou diest, thou art blessed; no better death canst thou ever attain." Cit. in Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*.

9. Dürer, *The Painter's Manual*, 37

10. *Ibid.*, 37.

11. *Ibid.*, 227.

commemorative column is basically made of a cannon turned upwards. Here the technological element becomes the predominant compositional element in the design, thereby producing an unexpected departure from the classical tradition of the genre.

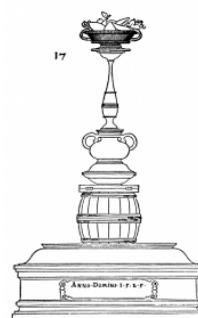
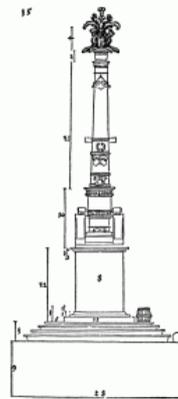
The second problem Dürer had to address was related to the technical and political composition of the enemy. What happens if the opponent's army does not come from a foreign country, but is instead is composed of local peasants? What if you discover that your enemy is not from outside your social world, but actually forms part of your own society? Dürer presents a "solution" to this problem in his design for a monument commemorating the 1525 victory over the rebellious peasants.[12] The monument comprises a collection of ready-made objects taken from the everyday life of peasants: farm animals, various agricultural products and peasants' work instruments. At the apex of the composition, an "afflicted peasant" sits atop a chicken cage, impaled by an enormous sword in his back.

Even more than in the cannon monument, here the ancient genre is hardly compromised in its translation into the modern context. How should we interpret the meaning of this monument? On the one hand, including animals, food and peasant paraphernalia is perhaps a way to discredit peasant life, suggesting that their struggle is illegitimate: the peasants are not recognized as honourable or worthy enemies. But on the other hand, and for the same reason, there is no nobility in killing peasants, notwithstanding Luther's effort to present this act as a pious one.[13] The peasant is stabbed from behind, and as we know, the princes at the Battle of Frankenhausen won because they did not respect the cease-fire that had been agreed upon. The picture becomes even more complicated when one considers that in his book Dürer puts the design for the peasant's monument right after the design of a "monument to a dead drunkard", which combines a beer barrel, a board game and a basket with bread, butter and cheese "for the sake of amusement".[14]

In his biography of the German artist, Erwin Panofsky claims that Dürer was a committed Lutheran, and that his loyalty to Luther's cause never faltered.[15] Nevertheless, in 1525 Dürer was deeply shocked by the violence to which both the peasants and the princes were subjecting the country. We know that three of Dürer's most valuable students were jailed as followers of Müntzer, and Dürer himself was profoundly impressed by the preacher's prophecy of the imminence of the Apocalypse. A small watercolour by his hand depicting an apocalyptic flood – something that Dürer actually dreamt the night of 7 June 1525 – displays enormous columns of water raining from the sky to submerge the world.[16]

Dürer had already depicted the End of Days in a 1498 series titled *Apocalypsis cum figuris*. These images have been interpreted by some as Dürer's commentary on contemporary politics. For instance, in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the people that Dürer despises murdered by Death, Famine, War and Plague are peasants.[17] In some of the other woodcuts in the series, the Apocalypse is announced by the many-headed hydra, a monster that was symbolically associated with the dangerous multitudes, the *mobile vulgus*. Conversely, the 1504 engraving *The Fall of Man* can be interpreted as an allegory for the chasing of peasants off of the communal lands and pastures.[18]

The peasant figure at the top of Dürer's monument can be compared to the frontispiece of Dürer's *Small Passion* woodcut series (1508–10), which depicts Christ as the "Man of Sorrows": a prototypical image of treason, for the peasants were betrayed by Luther when he made his infamous decision to side with the princes. At the same time, the peasants themselves can be seen as traitors, and the monument would thus celebrate their just punishment. The afflicted peasant's posture also recalls that of the angel in Dürer's 1514 allegorical woodcut *Melancholia I*. Panofsky notes that Dürer gives a positive connotation to melancholia, associating it with a state of inaction that is nevertheless linked to an excess of mental activity. *Melancholia I* depicts the allegory of the dark powers of the intellect in competition with God.[19] In a surge of interpretative paranoia, we could link this figure to Joachim of Fiore's heretical prophecy, which Müntzer revived: as the time of the paternalistic rule of the Father has come, the grace of Love, or the Son, will be superseded; we are witnessing the becoming-God of men; the new man will no longer need the truths as revealed in the Scriptures; in the



12. Ibid.,

233.

13. See note 9.

14. Dürer, *The Painter's Manual*, 233.

15. Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 233. Panofsky had no doubt that Dürer was a conservative, and that the intention of the monument was to ridicule the revolting peasants.

16. Greenblatt, "Murdering Peasants", 7–10.

17. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 68.

18. Similar interpretations of other works by Dürer can be found in Colas, *Civil Society and Fanaticism*, 160ff.



is the proletarian side that is independent, that is able to advance the struggle and shape the future:

This peasant-plebeian heresy, in the fullness of feudalism, e.g., among the Albigenses, hardly distinguishable from the middle-class opposition, grew in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to be a strongly defined party opinion appearing independently alongside the heresy of the middle-class. This is the case with John Ball, preacher of the Wat Tyler insurrection in England alongside the Wycliffe movement. This is also the case with the Taborites alongside the Calixtines in Bohemia.[28]

The raw material of Dürer's monument is precisely this duality. Dürer manipulates distant forces in a unitary design and accepts the contradictions of his time without trying to solve them, laying them bare, making them productive. It is already a bourgeois work of art, having the capacity, as Manfredo Tafuri has put it, "to ward off anguish by understanding and absorbing its causes".[29] The role of the monument is thus completely redefined. While the monument retains its commemorative, cautionary *form*, its consumption or reception is not univocal, but a consequence of the social class of the beholder. The monument is therefore capable of producing and organizing diverse subjects into a composition that is simultaneously unitary and unstable. In this sense, Dürer's monument can be seen as an inauguratory work of modern art. In the words of Gilles Deleuze, "The modern work of art is anything it may seem; it is even its very property of being whatever we like, of having the overdetermination of whatever we like, from the moment *it works*: the modern work of art is a machine and functions as such."[30]

28. Ibid.

29. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1979).

30. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 145.

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