A Critical Analysis of the Response to *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* by Maggi Hambling

Eilidh Pirie

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the response to the artwork *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* by Maggi Hambling. The work was commissioned by the Mary on the Green Campaign and installed as a piece of public art in London, in 2020. It is a tribute to Mary Wollstonecraft, who is considered 'the mother of feminism', as her work provided the foundation for Western feminist beliefs. As such, she is highly regarded by modern-day feminists, who feel a protective ownership over her legacy.

There was a polarised response to the work from the public and in the media from, amongst others, journalists, academics, art historians and feminists. As a result, there is value in assessing these views against the wider backdrop of critical and feminist art theories, the tradition of commemorative monuments and the potential of public art.

In this dissertation, an argument is presented to show that the figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* does not conform to the conventions of the typical female nude in historical Western art, nor does it cater to the male gaze, as some critics had suggested.

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft incited a backlash from many critics who had anticipated a traditional portrait statue of Wollstonecraft. They questioned whether the sculpture was an appropriate tribute. It is argued tthat the sculpture fulfilled the artist brief provided by the campaign group and was particularly successful in raising awareness of Wollstonecraft and the impact of her work.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in 1759, was an English writer and philosopher whose work is regarded as the basis of Western feminism. She rebelled against the conventions of her time; she associated with political radicals, supported the French Revolution and often lived and travelled independently. Her socialist ethos and personal desire for financial independence inspired her most renowned work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the first text in the English language advocating for equal rights for women. She argued that men and women were equally human, that differences between them were not due to biology but a product of differing upbringing and societal expectations. According to Wollstonecraft, women, as equally rational and moral creatures, were equally deserving of rights and education.

After Wollstonecraft's death in 1797 (due to complications from the birth of her second child, Mary Godwin, later Mary Shelley, the writer), her husband William Godwin published a memoir in her honour. As well as praising her literary works, Godwin exposed details of her private life, including the fact that she was unmarried when she had her first child by the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay and that she had attempted suicide twice, in response to Imlay's refusal to care for her and the child. Wollstonecraft's radical feminist philosophies, already proving unpopular in a conservative eighteenth-century Britain, were further discredited after her unconventional lifestyle was made public.

Over time, her ideas gained acceptance and popularity, inspiring the likes of feminist writer Virginia Wolfe and suffragist Millicent Fawcett. The ideas set out in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, have influenced women's rights and roles in society today and are still relevant in debates concerning gender, feminism, essentialism and social equality. Consequently, she is often regarded as 'the foremother of feminism' (Scobie, 2017; Mary on the Green, 2019; Birch and Fine, 2021).

Mary on the Green Campaign

The Mary on the Green Campaign was launched in 2010 by the charity organisation Newington Green Action Group. The campaign group aimed to install a monument commemorating Mary Wollstonecraft on Newington Green, in London, where she co-founded a school for girls in 1784. The group worked for almost a decade, raising a total of £143,000 to fund the sculpture.

In 2018, having secured almost half of their funding, the group selected proposals from two artists, Maggi Hambling and Martin Jennings, to be considered for the final design of the sculpture. The proposals were shared with the public, in a meeting attended by over 750 people, before being judged by a selection panel. The panel, which included the Deputy Curator of the Parliamentary Art Collection, Melanie Unwin, the sculptor Danuta Solowiej and members of the

campaign group, voted strongly in favour of Hambling's design (Slawson, 2018; Berry, 2020; Mary on the Green, 2020b, Birch and Fine, 2021).

In a statement released on their social media announcing Hambling as the winning artist, the campaign group said:

> The judges were unanimous in their agreement that this is a radical proposal embodying radical ideas. The figure, an everywoman, emerges out of organic matter, almost like a birth. This evokes Newington Green as the birthplace of feminism, and echoes Wollstonecraft's claim to be "the first of a new genus."

- Mary on the Green, 2018

Maggi Hambling

Maggi Hambling (b.1945), is a British painter and sculptor who lives and works in London and Suffolk. She studied at the East Anglican School of Art, Ipswich School of Art, Camberwell School of Art and the Slade School. In 1980, she became the National Gallery's first artist-in-residence. Her character and artworks have earned her a rebellious reputation, for example, she has always insisted on being photographed and interviewed while holding a cigarette, to signal her belief in freedom of choice (BBC, 2020b; Figes, 2022; Russel, 2022). Furthermore, her public sculptures have proven to be extremely controversial and have divided public opinion. Her 1998 sculpture, *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde*, located in central London, depicts a stylised torso of Oscar Wilde emerging from a coffin-shaped bench, mouth open and cigarette in hand, as if in conversation. It received a particularly vicious review from Tom Lubbock, writing for *The Independent*, who described the sculpture as "a plain disaster", "a tragedy" and "tourist tat" (Lubbock, 1998). Similarly, her 10-foot steel sculpture of a scallop shell, *Scallop*, dedicated to composer Benjamin Britten, was met with criticism after its unveiling in 2003 on Aldeburgh beach (Hambling, 2010). Some local residents objected to the sculpture's location, believing that it spoiled the view of the coastline, (Kennedy, 2003; Ezard, 2004).

Hambling, seemingly unbothered by such comments, has often quoted Oscar Wilde saying: "when the critics are divided, the artist is at one with himself", (Thorpe, 2020). Evidently, the controversy caused by her previous public artworks did not dissuade her from making *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*.

Hambling collaborated with a team from Arch foundry to realise her design for *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*. The final 10-foot sculpture was cast in bronze using the lost wax process and finished with a silver patina (Birch and Fine, 2021). The sculpture depicts, in Hambling's own words, "a tower of intermingling female forms culminating in the figure of the woman at the top who is challenging, and ready to challenge, the world" (Hambling quoted by Mary on the Green, 2020).

Figure 1.1: Full View: *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft, Maggi Hambling, 2020, Sculpture, London

Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/arts/design/mary-wollstonecraft-statue-london.html> (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft: Unveiling

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft (see Fig. 1.1) was installed on 9th November 2020, during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Lockdown restrictions in place at the time meant that the group were not able to host a typical in-person unveiling event. Instead, a few members of the campaign

group were granted permission to attend the site and live-stream the event via Facebook and Twitter (now X) (Birch and Fine, 2021).

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft was equally, if not more, controversial than Hambling's previous public sculptures. There was an immediate and passionate response to the work on social media. An extensive online viral debate ensued, which primarily questioned whether the sculpture, containing a nude female figure was an appropriate tribute to feminist icon Mary Wollstonecraft. The sculpture, and subsequent backlash, received widespread press coverage, predominantly published online.

It is impossible to say exactly how the Covid-19 pandemic and associated social restrictions affected the response to the sculpture. However, it may explain the online response from both the public and press; during the pandemic there was a large shift from print to online news consumption and an increase in the average amount of time people spent on social media (Newman et al., 2021, Pennington, 2021).

Despite the risks and restrictions present during the pandemic, several members of the public attended the sculpture in-person. Amongst them were protesters determined to make their disapproval of the sculpture visible. Some made alterations to the sculpture: on separate occasions, its nude figure was covered using duct tape, face masks and a t-shirt. Others left placards beside the sculpture, including one which read 'is this really our tribute to the mother of feminism?' (Chapman, 2020; West-Knights, 2020).

Dissertation Intentions

This dissertation will analyse the public and press response to *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* with reference to critical and feminist art theory. Prominent aspects of the response will be examined, including the discussion surrounding the inclusion of the nude female figure, the disappointment expressed by many critics that the sculpture was not a traditional portrait statue depicting Wollstonecraft and the perceived successes and failures of the artwork as a public, feminist and commemorative artwork.

Chapter Two: An Idealised Nude?

Criticism of the Nude

The inclusion of the nude female figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* proved extremely controversial amongst the public and critics. Harriet Hall, writing for *The Independent* (2020), expressed her disappointment with the form of the figure, and said: "[Hambling has] embraced a patriarchal way of observing the female form, leaning directly into a centuries-long Western art historical tradition of female objectification".

These sentiments were echoed by Rhiannon Cosslett, writing for *The Guardian* (2020), who additionally criticised the term "everywoman", used by the artist and the campaign group to describe the figure. She said: "the "everywoman" idea is in itself problematic, harking back to the idealised, objectified nudes of the past, those hollow symbols of femininity that for so long represented the containment and subjugation of women".

To assess the validity of these statements and provide a template for comparison, it is essential first to examine the history and legacy of the female nude within Western art through a feminist lens.

The Power of Looking

Referring to prominent historical European artworks, in *Ways of Seeing*, first published in 1972, John Berger wrote:

> Women are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

Furthermore, he described how men assuming the role of the artist, thinker, patron and/or owner are allowed their individualism. By contrast, the women depicted in their paintings are not afforded the same treatment. He said: "the person who is the object of their activities – the woman – [is] treated as a thing or an abstraction" (Berger, 1972).

Berger described how women have typically been objectified in Western art, their bodies reduced to an unrealistic, sexualised ideal that catered to the male gaze.

Feminist analyses of Western art history have considered both these representations of women and the social and political circumstances in which they have been produced. In *Vision and Difference* (1988), Griselda Pollock argued: "If the dominant ideology is formed by men for the benefit of men, then both the art that is produced and the way that art is viewed, will predominantly speak to patriarchal interests" (Jakubowicz, 2017).

This is demonstrated by the way that, historically, men have dictated which representations of women are considered 'ideal', tasteful or valuable by holding influential roles as the artists and commissioners of these works, as curators who decided which works were given prominence in galleries and museums and as writers who perpetuated the prominence of these images within

the study of art history. Held back from education and employment, women were systematically excluded from holding these positions.

Furthermore, the influence of the 'power of looking', specifically the power afforded to those able to look at and study bodies, cannot be understated. Historically, women were not allowed to look at or learn about bodies, internally or externally, either as doctors or artists. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, in art academies in the UK, women artists were not permitted to enter the life room, despite life drawing being considered a central practice to artistic training. It was not deemed socially acceptable for women to observe the naked body or produce images of it. As a result, men had sole access to the production of culturally significant images of the female body, in paintings, sculpture, film, advertising, medical and anatomy textbooks. Men were able create the definitions and norms of ideal health and beauty to which women were expected to aspire to. In Western art, women were represented as they were seen by those with the power of looking: white, heterosexual men (Nochlin, 2015; Nead, 1992; McCormack, 2021).

The influence of these images on how women were expected to appear and behave is still felt today, especially in Western society. This is exemplified by the following passage from Catherine McCormack's book *Women in the Picture* (2021):

> Images of women as sex objects, whether in newspapers or in oil paintings, have the power to shape archetypes that can threaten and undermine gender equality. Women are socialised from an early age to comply with hyper sexual stereotypes found in both fast-moving media and 'high art' and cultural representations, which consequently become the default norm. And seeing women as sexually available images found everywhere from the art gallery to the workplace to the top deck of the bus on the way to school, creates a totalising environment of erotic privilege for straight men.

Venus

In *Women in the Picture* (2021), McCormack highlighted Venus (the Roman mythological goddess of love) as a prominent archetype within Western art and culture, symbolic of ideal femininity. Attaching the label of 'Venus' suggested to the viewer that they were seeing something otherworldly and distinctly non-human, despite images of Venus typically depicting a naked woman. The prominence and reverence of these images in Western art galleries only reinforced Venus' status as the epitome of womanhood. Furthermore, as McCormack argued, Venus has "spawned an avalanche of imitations within and beyond the walls of the gallery that have impacted the way women live and perceive their bodies".

Images of Venus have provided a template for the idealised female nude within historical Western art and thus Venus is a highly appropriate figure to analyse *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* against. One of the sculpture's critics even described it as "an allusion to the creation of Venus from the spray of the sea" (Bartosch, 2020).

Furthermore, the earliest known version of Venus, the Knidian Aphrodite (Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love, later adopted and renamed Venus by the Romans), was itself a public sculpture. Dating back to 350 BCE, the Knidian Aphrodite was a marble sculpture originally located in an ancient Greek temple. Although the sculpture no longer exists, through analysis of the existing imitations and textual references, it has been possible to estimate how the original sculpture would have looked. The sculpture depicted a nude woman holding a bathrobe (McCormack, 2021).

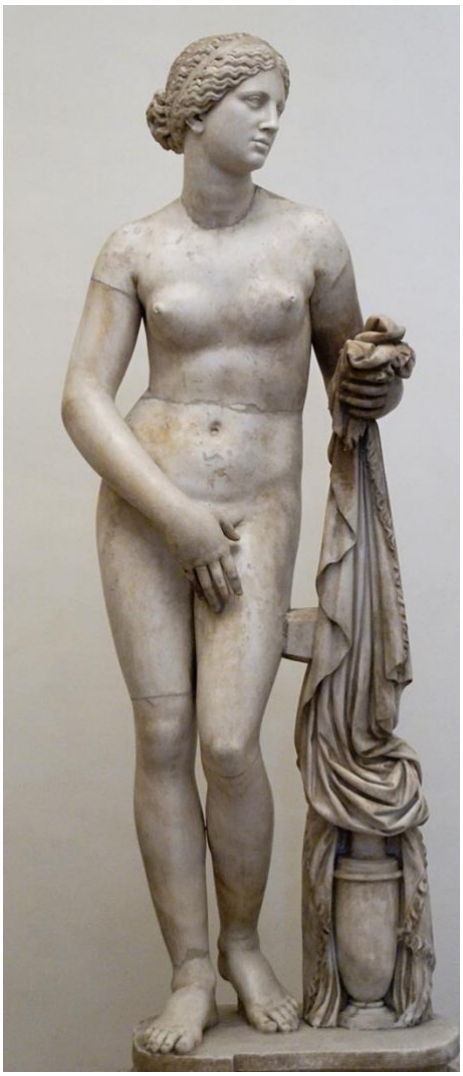

Figure 2.1: *Roman Copy of the Knidian Aphrodite*

Roman Copy of the Knidian Aphrodite, Unknown Artist, Unknown date, Sculpture

Available at:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cnidus_Aphrodite_Altemps_Inv8619.jpg> (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

In a Roman reproduction (see fig. 2.1), the figure appears to be aware of the viewer's presence and is self-conscious of her nudity – her hand covers her groin. This pose, the 'Venus pudica' makes the viewer simultaneously aware of the subject's sexuality and shame. It has been reproduced in countless images of the female nude in Western art and has reinforced a societal expectation that women should be both sexually available and ashamed of their sexual organs.

McCormack argues that the Knidian Aphrodite, along with Sandro Botticelli's painting, *The Birth of Venus* (c.1485), provide the "DNA" for all other reproductions of Venus (see fig. 2.2).

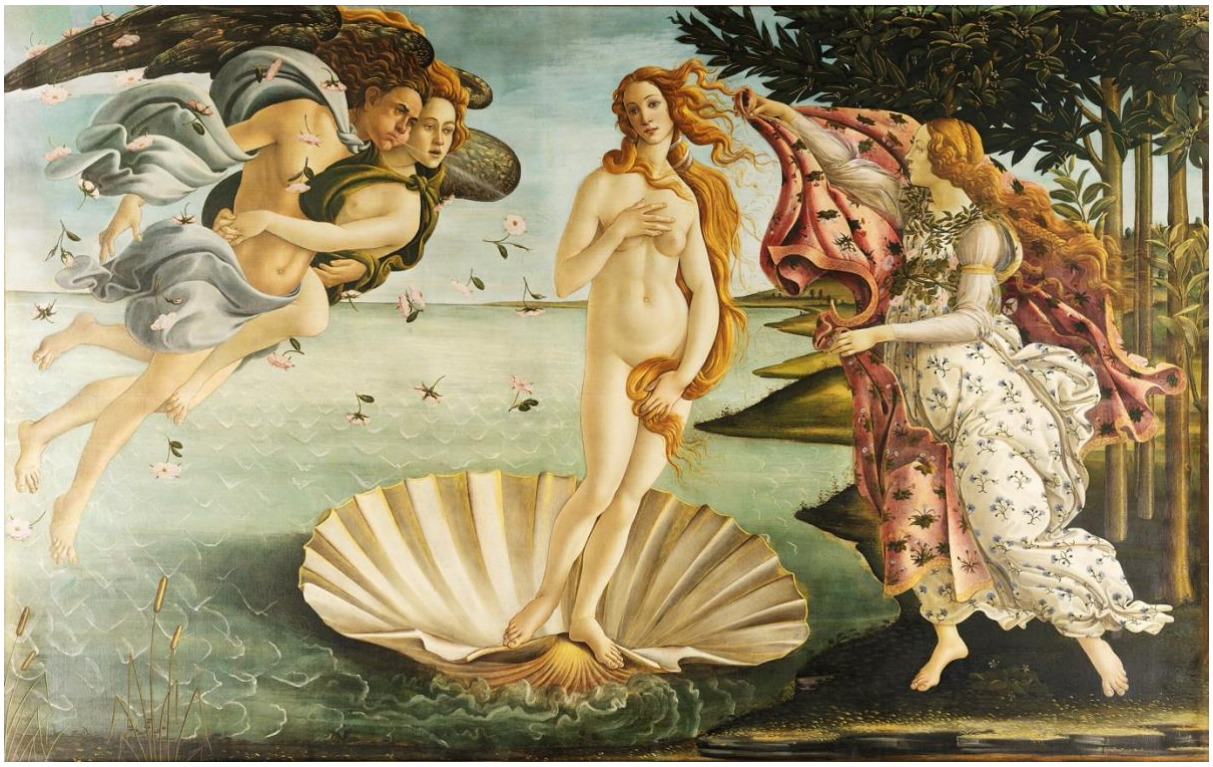

Figure 2.2: *The Birth of Venus*

The Birth of Venus, Botticelli, c.1485, Sculpture, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg> (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

Botticelli's Venus has smooth, white, flawless flesh. She is youthful, with high, round breasts and her body is both toned and softly curved. She, like the Knidian Aphrodite, adopts the Venus pudica pose, drawing attention to her sexuality. Her placid expression comforts the viewer, encouraging their gaze in a knowing performance of sexual availability. The only hair on her body is on her head; pubic hair is notably absent in idealised Venuses. This represents a paradox - Venus must be sexually available without showing signs of sexual maturity. Images of Venus have influenced the beauty standards that our current society values. Women must work to alter themselves, for example, by shaving their body hair, to conform (McCormack, 2021).

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft: Another Venus?

Having outlined the classic hallmarks of images of Venus, who so often represented the ideal female nude within Western art, it is now possible to ascertain whether these features are present within figure of *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*.

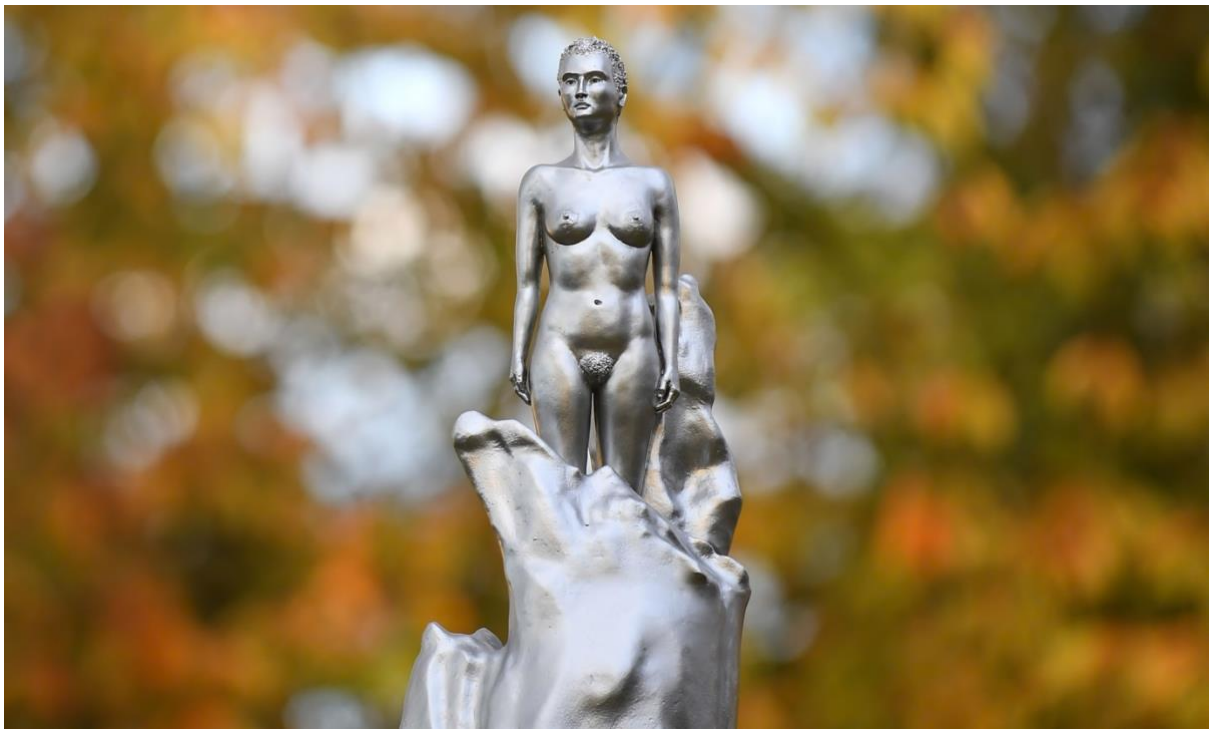

Figure 2.3: Detail: *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft, Maggi Hambling, 2020, Sculpture, London

Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/02/artist-accuses-feminists-criticised-nude-mary-wollstonecraft/> (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

The shape of the figure's body does reflect features of Venus (see fig. 2.3). Critics condemned Hambling for depicting a figure that was "conventionally attractive" (Gowar quoted in Singh, 2020b). They described the figure as youthful, toned, slim, athletic and classically desirable (Hall, 2020; Cosslett, 2020; Ward, 2020). Jo Bartosch, writing for *The Critic* (2020), condemned Hambling's attempt to depict an "everywoman". She said: "Had the Wollstonecraft statue have really depicted an "everywoman" then the figure at the top of the piece would be replete with stretch marks, sagging breasts and cellulite".

Hambling, offended by the attacks on her "everywoman", replied: "As far as I know, she's more or less the shape we'd all like to be" (Hambling quoted by Dex, 2020).

This hasty response is problematic, implying that Hambling's everywoman represents an aspirational ideal, mimicking the ethos of historical Western female nudes. The figure depicted in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* is not an accurate representation of *all* women's bodies, nor should it aim to represent a singular 'aspirational' body type. As Lynda Nead argued in *The Female Nude* (1992), the hyper-visibility of a singular type of female body in Western art can also be regarded as a "tyranny of invisibility", exclusive of the myriad different types of female bodies. It implies that these body types are not worthy of representation, regarded as 'other' or outwith the norm, in both art and society.

The figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*, however, does not fully comply with the stereotypical hallmarks of Venus. Notably, the figure does not adopt the Venus pudica pose. Instead of embodying shame, vulnerability and appearing sexually available, the figure's stance is confident and assured. This was noted by fans of the sculpture; the figure's pose was described as "strong, upright, energetic" (Chisholm, 2020). Olivia Alabaster, writing for *The Independent* (2020) thought that the pose signalled "a woman who is fearless and brave".

Another key difference between Venus and the figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* is the figure's hair on both her head and body. The figure lacks Venus' iconic long hair, a signifier of her beauty and femininity and instead sports a short, masculine cut, although none of the articles examined in the research for this dissertation made this observation. Furthermore, unlike Venus, the figure has prominent pubic hair. Interestingly, instead of celebrating this progressive imagery of an adult woman with natural body hair, some writers were instead critical (See Bartosch, 2020; Cooke, 2020; Hall, 2020). They felt that the pubic hair was too prominent, an uncomfortably gauche reference to feminism. This demonstrates the flawed expectations of the sculpture's critics: the nude was criticised for conforming to an ideal *and* for its visual differences from this ideal.

This is further emphasised by criticism of the figure's facial expression. The figure was described by one critic as a "sour-faced sprite". (West-Knights, 2020). Venus' expression is often calm and placid, comforting the viewer as they visually consume her. By contrast, the expression of the figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* is defiant. Rather than putting the viewer at ease, the effect is confrontational. In a sculpture that represents the ongoing, unfinished battle for gender equality, this is highly appropriate.

Hambling was accused of catering to the male gaze, adopting the classic power dynamic embodied in historical Western female nudes, where the 'ideal' spectator is assumed to be a (white heterosexual) man (see Bartosch, 2020; Cosslett, 2020; Hall, 2020). These comments were refuted by fans of the sculpture. Kate Chisholm, writing for *The Spectator* (2020), said: "This is not a nude in any conventional sense, to be gazed upon or salivated over, but rather an unadorned human being, springing into life without preconceived ideas or stale obligations".

Fans argued that the nude figure was not the dominant aspect of the sculpture, nor was it presented for the (sexual) enjoyment of the viewer, male or otherwise. At the peak of a 10-foot tall sculpture, the figure was much higher than comfortable viewing level, placing the viewer literally and symbolically beneath it (Chisholm, 2020; Ward, 2020).

A simple, but necessary distinction, placing the figure apart from sexualised images of the female nude in Western art was made by Bendor Grosvenor, writing for *Financial Times* (2020), who described the figure as "nude, but not erotic".

This ethos was echoed by Alabaster, writing for *The Independent* (2020), who said:

> Nudity, I don't think, is inherently sexual, though – and nor should it be seen to be. When women are thrown out of cafes for breast-feeding, or told to cover up, we rightly baulk at this. Our bodies are lots of things, and they can be sexual, but they can also be strong and powerful, and can help defend us against the world. They bring us pain and they bring us joy and they are the only thing we all have.

As previously mentioned, the dominance and omnipotence of hyper-sexualised images of women in art and society is problematic, creating a "totalising environment of erotic privilege for straight men" (McCormack, 2021). However, equally dangerous is the total censorship of women's bodies, regarding them as taboo. To label a nude female body as sexual (or as a sexual object), simply because it is unclothed, negates the potential for it to be viewed as anything else.

Chapter Three: Sculpture versus Statue

Sculpture versus Statue

For clarity, the term 'sculpture' used here refers to any sculpted three-dimensional artwork that is abstract or representational. A 'statue' is a sculpture that is a life-like depiction of a person.

A sizeable portion of the public and press response to *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* centred around the fact that it was not a traditional portrait statue of Mary Wollstonecraft. This stimulated a contentious debate: some praised the sculpture for its novel approach to commemoration in public art whereas others felt that depriving Mary Wollstonecraft of a conventional portrait statue was akin to dishonouring her.

Comparison to Commemorated Men

Amongst articles and comments about the *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*, there was a tendency for writers to compare it with monuments dedicated to men. They highlighted that men have typically been commemorated with traditional portrait statues in Britain. (See for example: Bartosch, 2020; BBC, 2020a; Campbell-Johnston, 2020; Cosslett, 2020, Durrant, 2020; Faulkner, 2020; Hall, 2020; Singh, 2020; Sky News, 2020; Topping, 2020).

Rachel Campbell-Johnston, writing for *The Times* (2020) said: "[Mary Wollstonecraft's] male counterparts are always clothed. We don't have a nude Byron prancing down Park Lane or Adam Smith in the nuddy on Edinburgh's Royal Mile". She was one of several writers who asked readers to imagine naked statues of various famous historical men, including Churchill, Dickens and Mandela, as well as Byron and Smith (Campbell-Johnston, 2020; Durrant, 2020; Hall, 2020; Faulkner, 2020; Topping, 2020). They implied that readers would find it absurd if a famous man was commemorated with a nude sculpture.

Hambling responded to these comments in an interview following the sculpture's unveiling and made reference to Cosslett's assertion that a man would not be "honoured with his schlong out" (Cosslett, 2020). She said: "Oh, but there are plenty of schlongs honouring men in art" (Hambling, 2020). She then listed her favourite male nude sculptures to the interviewer, including the Elgin Marbles and Michelangelo's *David* (Hambling, 2020). In doing this, she tried to point out that there are examples of the male nude within Western art that 'honour' maleness, the ideal of the male personified by a character in myth or biblical story.

The male nude carries very different connotations from the female nude within historical Western art. Recall the 'Venus pudica' with its origins in Ancient Greek sculpture. Venus' nudity, in conjunction with her pose signalled her shame, vulnerability and sexual availability in relation to the viewer. By contrast, sculptures of the naked male form in Ancient Greece represented power and heroism. They depicted aspirational intellectual and political ideas (McCormack, 2021). If the female nude has functioned as a reflection of male desire within historical Western art, the male nude has functioned to compliment the male ego, attaching positive and powerful connotations to the male form. While the norms surrounding nudity may have changed, the way

the male body has been presented and regarded in art and public sculpture remains the same. The ideals that the Ancient Greeks tied to the male body are still imbedded in the traditional British statue; although clothed, they are heroic, aspirational depictions of men.

What Hambling alluded to, that men have historically been 'honoured' and flattered by representations of the male nude in sculpture, is therefore accurate. That's not to say that society would consider a naked version of a male statue as appropriate as a clothed version. But it is an inappropriate allegory, suggesting that the figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* is a naked version of Mary Wollstonecraft, which it is not. It is a *sculpture* that includes a nude figure and not a naked *statue*.

Conventions of Traditional Statuary

Several critics' reliance on the traditional statue as a point of comparison for *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* meant that they assumed the viewpoint that a statue was the default, if not ideal, way to commemorate an individual in public art. They suggested that defying this classic format denied Mary Wollstonecraft the respect that a portrait statue supposedly confers. They argued that the campaign group should have adhered to tradition.

Other writers pointed out the limitations and inaccuracies of this traditional convention (Barrett, 2020; Grosvenor, 2020). Helen Barrett, writing for the *Financial Times* (2020) said: "We still struggle to accept anything other than literal representations of humans on plinths, even as we see a statue of a 17th-century slave trader causing 21st-century trauma in this year's Black Lives Matter protests".

Barrett's comment refers to a Bristol Black Lives Matter protest in June 2020 (just a few months before the installation of A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft), where the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down, rolled through the streets and thrown into a harbour (Grovier, 2020). In response, historian David Olusoga said: "Statues are about saying 'this was a great man who did great things.' That is not true, he [Colston] was a slave trader and a murderer" (Olusoga quoted by BBC News, 2020c).

As a result of the Black Lives Matter protests, Britain was forced to face up to its colonial past and to re-examine the appropriateness and modern-day relevance of its statues. One year after the Edward Colston statue was felled, almost 70 memorials to enslavers or colonialists across Britain were either removed or altered to include an explanation of their complex history, in order to comply with the government's 'retain and explain' guidance (Mohdin and Storer, 2021; Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023).

It is evident that people care deeply about who is represented in Britain's statues. More so, when the people depicted by these heroic monuments are no longer considered to be "great", as Olusoga remarked. There are also concerns about the diversity of people represented by public monuments; the majority of the UK's statues are depictions of white men, according to a survey conducted by ArtUK in 2021. Furthermore, of 2,600 public sculptures dedicated to named people in the UK that ArtUK surveyed, 77.5% were dedicated to men, whereas only 17%

were dedicated to women. Less than 2% of the sculptures were dedicated to people of Black, Asian and other ethnicities (Goodwin, 2023).

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft is a public sculpture dedicated to a named woman and thus would meet the criteria for inclusion in the survey. However, several writers believed that Mary Wollstonecraft has been denied representation by being denied a portrait statue (See Sky News, 2020; Topping, 2020).

Celebrating an Idea over an Individual

For both the artist and the campaign group, the move away from the conventional statue was a deliberate choice, representing a shift from celebrating the individual to celebrating their ideas and legacy. In her statement pitching *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* to the campaign group, Hambling wrote:

> As opposed to traditional heroic statuary, the free-standing woman has evolved from, is supported by, and does not forget, all her predecessors who advocated, campaigned and sacrificed themselves for women's education and emancipation.

– Hambling quoted by Birch and Fine, 2021

Bee Rowlatt, Chair of the Mary on the Green campaign group said:

> By choosing Maggi we understood that we were choosing a sculpture that attempted to represent the birth of a movement, rather than a representation of Wollstonecraft herself. We were excited by the idea of getting away from putting people on pedestals, which frankly is not in the spirit of Wollstonecraft's philosophy.

– Rowlatt quoted by Thorpe, 2020

In other words, they were aiming to depict Wollstonecraft's legacy instead of her image. The sculpture references feminism as a movement instigated by Wollstonecraft but also as something that has evolved beyond her to hold new meaning.

However, critics of the sculpture felt that this was unfair and deprived Wollstonecraft individual representation. Hall, writing for *the Independent* (2020) said: "Why must this woman be forced to represent all women when countless men from history have been honoured on their own terms?"

Similarly, Caroline Criado-Perez (an instrumental figure in the campaign to install a statue of suffragist Millicent Fawcett in Parliament square) said: "We've celebrated so few women from the past that the temptation is to attempt [to represent] all of womanhood, which is never an issue when it's a male statue" (Criado-Perez quoted by Topping, 2020).

Nevertheless, Hambling and the campaign group received praise for choosing an alternative type of monument (Alabster, 2020; Grosvenor, 2020). Chisholm, writing for *The Spectator* (2020) said: "The dignity, insight and 'greatness of soul' of Wollstonecraft could never have been contained in a straightforward statue. Nor would she ever have wished to be memorialised as a grandee, in a static monument".

By defying expectations and causing public debate, *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* brought Wollstonecraft to the attention of an audience who preciously would have been unaware if her story, her work and her legacy. It is highly unlikely that a traditional statue of her likeness would have achieved this.

Chapter Four: Measuring the 'Success' of *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*

Was A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft Successful?

This chapter will consider the success of *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* relative to the aims of the campaign group, the expectations of the public and how it commemorated Mary Wollstonecraft.

The debate inspired by *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* prompted the public to voice their opinions on its success as a piece of public art. As discussed in the previous chapter, the finished sculpture was not what many members of the public had envisaged. Some felt that as *public* art, the piece should have catered to the expectations and aesthetic tastes of the general public by being a traditional statue of Wollstonecraft. This, they argued, was a key parameter by which to measure its success.

Other parameters were suggested. Imogen West-Knights, writing for *ArtReview* (2020) commented on the complex requirements of public art: "it is so difficult to get right, needing to somehow represent the interests of the artist, the commissioner, the local powers that be, the subject themselves and 'the general public', whoever they are".

Fulfilling the Artist Brief

Sections of the brief released by the campaign group for the commission were included in Anna Birch's contribution to *Wollstonecraft Live! & The Story of the Statue* (2021). Outlined first were the core requirements of the artist: "Produce a sculpture which will reflect the achievements of Mary Wollstonecraft and enhance the identity and positive future of the area".

Note that they did not stipulate any need for a traditional statue, but a *sculpture* that focussed on Wollstonecraft's achievements. *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* is highly successful in this regard. Wollstonecraft's achievements are her work and ideas. Arguably, these are more relevant in our current society than they were in Wollstonecraft's lifetime and the sculpture acknowledges that modern feminism would not have evolved without the foundations she laid.

Furthermore, the brief stipulated that the sculpture should "be touchable and reflect engagement and debate in its setting". As is evident by the enormous and passionate response, the sculpture certainly encouraged engagement and heated debate. Furthermore, it brought attention and notoriety to both Mary Wollstonecraft and Newington Green.

The sculpture fulfilled the requirements of the brief given to the artist so can be judged a success in this regard.

Pleasing the Public

Despite meeting the brief, the various fiery responses to *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* illustrate that not everyone thought it was successful. Rachel Cooke, writing for *The Observer*

(2020) said: “I’ve been in a rage. Trust me. No photograph does its Bacofoil badness justice”. Similarly, historian Simon Schama was quoted by the BBC saying he had “always wanted a fine monument to Wollstonecraft - this isn't it” (Schama quoted by BBC, 2020a). Both referred to the sculpture as if it had personally offended them; it failed to meet their personal expectations and therefore they deemed it unsuccessful. Several writers alluded to a sense of ownership that the public felt they had of both Wollstonecraft and her commemorative monument. They felt that the public should have had a say in what a monument dedicated to Wollstonecraft should be. (see BBC, 2020a; Cooke, 2020; Cosslett, 2020; Durrant, 2020; West-Knights, 2020). In reality, the conception of the tribute belonged to the campaign group, without whom there would not have been a monument dedicated to Wollstonecraft.

On their Facebook page, the Mary on the Green campaign said: “We understand that not everyone agrees with the end result”, whilst also asserting that Hambling’s design was chosen through a “competitive, consultative process” and had been in the public domain since 2018 (Mary on the Green, 2020a). The campaign group were surprised by the backlash, as they had been transparent about the design when it was chosen. It was only after the installation that the public furore began. Their decade-long initiative to secure enough funding to install the monument had unfortunately lacked such attention and engagement.

Hambling’s proposal was one of two considered for the final design of the statue. The other was put forward by the artist Martin Jennings, who spoke out against Hambling’s sculpture after it was unveiled. He said a “celebrity” artist such was unsuited to responding to public commission and lacked the relevant experience to do so. He said: “It’s very much about listening to your audience, not much about promoting yourself as an artist and celebrity” (Jennings quoted by Singh 2020a).

However, it would be impossible to cater to the needs of the whole public before commissioning and installing a piece of public sculpture. And what about those members of “the audience” who supported the design? (see for example: Alabaster, 2020; Grosvenor, 2020; Nairne, 2020). The difficulty in listening to the public’s thoughts on *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*, is that there was no clear universal opinion. The sculpture was both hated and admired for a variety of different reasons. Individual members of the public have different opinions about what public art should look like and thus the public as a whole is impossible to please.

Commemorating Mary Wollstonecraft

As well as expressing concern about the form of the sculpture, the public questioned its success in commemorating Mary Wollstonecraft. Rowlatt, as Chair of the Mary on the Green campaign, said that she felt that in the end, the group had provided both “traditional commemoration” and “something different” (Rowlatt, 2021).

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft undoubtedly succeeded in educating a wide audience about the work and legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft. The press storm and online discussion meant that Mary Wollstonecraft trended on Twitter and in Google searches. The campaign group certainly felt they had achieved their goal to commemorate Wollstonecraft by raising awareness of her work and legacy (Birch and Fine, 2021).

The group were praised for their success in bringing Wollstonecraft to the forefront of attention (see for example: Campbell-Johnston, 2020; Grosvenor, 2020). Chisholm, writing for *The Spectator* (2020) observed:

> If the intention behind the statue campaign was to ensure that all those who see it would go away and find out more about the woman who inspired it, then it has succeeded brilliantly. Hambling's provocative creation accurately reflects the strange, wilful combination of headlong folly and measured, intelligent response that characterised Wollstonecraft.

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft demonstrated that public art, especially when commemorative, has the power to engage and educate the public. It stimulated interesting debates about feminism, feminist art and public art. Most importantly, it brought a new audience to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Commemoration is about remembering, and this unique monument has ensured that Wollstonecraft will be remembered for generations.

Is A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft a Feminist Artwork?

The success of *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* as a feminist artwork was questioned by various writers, especially since it included a female nude, as discussed in Chapter Two. Bartosch, writing for *The Critic* (2020) said: "One can't help wondering whether the apparently "feminist" reading was added along with the silver-coloured coating, after the body of the piece was finished". In other words, she did not consider the sculpture to to be a feminist artwork.

According to Nead in *The Female Nude* (1992), 'feminist art' has no singular aesthetic and is not limited by style or media. Furthermore, it does not depend on the gender or intentions of the artist, given that interpretation of the artwork in a certain way is not guaranteed. Nead argued that feminist art disrupts dominant historical ideologies. She wrote:

> The work can be defined as 'feminist' at the moment it [...] intervenes in the dominant codes of artistic practice and definitions of gender and sexual difference. [...] This has particular implications for visual images of the female body; in this case, the intervention will be in the structures of male sexuality and pleasure that are conventionally set in place by the female nude.

Chapter Two outlined the history of the idealised nude and its dominance in the Western art world. It confirmed that the female nude within *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* defied convention and was not designed to satisfy the male gaze. In this way, the sculpture is firmly within the boundaries of feminist artwork.

Furthermore, *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* defies the structure of traditional commemoration by providing a sculpture instead of a representational statue. This representational tradition has tended to align with the interests of the patriarchy, favouring the portrayal of white men. It has also helped to encourage the idea that the white male body represents "greatness", simultaneously depriving those who it has not typically depicted from association with grandeur and potential. These notable exceptions include women and people

from BAME minorities. In disrupting this patriarchal convention, *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* further cements itself as a feminist artwork.

While *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* may not meet conventional society's expectations when it comes to how a tribute to 'the mother of feminism' should look, it is successful as a feminist artwork.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft is an unconventional public sculpture, which provoked a strong reaction from its viewers. There was a polarised response to the work from the public and in the media from, amongst others, journalists, academics, art historians and feminists. This dissertation has analysed prominent topics surrounding the response to the sculpture, such as the controversial inclusion of a female nude figure, the appropriateness of the sculpture as a commemorative monument and its success as a public artwork.

Critics were concerned that the nude female figure in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* represented a sexualised ideal, echoing the patriarchal traditions of historical Western art. With reference to critical and feminist art theory as outlined by John Berger, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Lynda Nead and Catherine McCormack, this dissertation has shown that the female nude in *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* defies convention and does not cater to the male gaze. By contrast the figure is strong, assertive and confrontational.

The statue is a traditional, respected form of public commemorative monument. Some critics expressed their disappointment that this was not a traditional portrait statue of Mary Wollstonecraft and their responses made it clear that they equated a statue with status.

This dissertation has shown that some members of the British public also understand the flawed symbolism attached to traditional statues, by referring to issues raised by the Black Lives Matter protests and recent studies indicating a lack of diversity of the individuals celebrated in British public monuments. Despite this, the Mary on the Green campaign group were heavily criticised for straying from tradition and commissioning a different type of commemorative sculpture. Rather than depicting Wollstonecraft's image, the sculpture represents her legacy of ideas that formed the basis of Western feminism.

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft, whilst stimulating opposing and passionate views, fulfilled the brief set out by the campaign group. It was particularly successful in raising awareness of Wollstonecraft's work and legacy by engaging the public in debate. The work inspired thought-provoking questions about the meaning of public art, feminist art and commemoration.

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