My eyes were barely open this morning when I turned to the NYTimes to pursue the headlines and perhaps see if I could find a blog subject for today. I immediately saw a headline in the Arts section about a controversy over a statue of a naked pregnant woman in Trafalgar Square in London, a place where the statue of Lord Nelson (perhaps Britain’s most honored war hero) stands high on a tall column amongst statues of other British war heroes.

If you’ve never been to London, then perhaps you don’t know the history or importance of Trafalgar Square. Named after the Lord Nelson’s last, legendary sea battle (off the coast of Cape Trafalgar in Spain), the square is in the center of London and is considered a major tourist site. Lord Nelson’s tall column, with his statue sitting on the top is in the center of the square. The column is surrounded by fountains and four huge bronze lions that were reportedly made from the recycled canyons of the French Fleet. The four corners of the square, have four plinths, square slabs of granite meant to hold statues. Three of the plinths have permanent statues:

- George IV was a rather dissolute figure whose death elicited the following comment from The Times:

There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow creatures than this deceased king. What eye has wept for him? What heart has heaved one throb of unmercenary sorrow? [...] If he ever had a friend - a devoted friend in any rank of life - we protest that the name of him or her never reached us.

- Major General Sir Henry Havelock, whose major accomplishment was the putting down of Indian Rebels in the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

- Sir Charles James Napier, another general made famous by his conquest of Indian, particularly the Sindh province now in present day Pakistan.

The fourth plinth on the northwest corner was intended to hold a statue of William IV, but remained empty due to insufficient funds. Later, agreement could not be reached over which monarch or military hero to place there. In 1999, the Royal Society of Arts began the Fourth Plinth Project. Contemporary artists filled the fourth plinth with a succession of works.
Beyond all that, the square has always been, since its construction in 1848, a place for demonstrations and political rallies. It is a place of protest among the monuments to the glory of the British Empire.

In the midst of ongoing political and social controversies and protests, the current installation on the fourth plinth installed in September, is that of Alison Lapper Pregnant. Alison Lapper has a congenital disorder, phocomelia, which caused her to be born without arms and with truncated legs. Institutionalized at the age of four months, Alison is an artist who uses photography, digital imaging and painting to, as she says, question physical normality and beauty, using herself as a subject. She paints with her mouth.

The sculptor, Marc Quinn insists that the Square needed a counterbalance of femininity among the machismo of the war heroes and that Alison potentially represents, “a new model of female heroism.”

The statue of Alison on the fourth plinth has caused an incredible amount of controversy in London. Many insist that the subject matter itself is repellent, that a pregnant woman with no arms and legs is not a suitable image to be placed in Trafalgar Square, a place supposedly dedicated to heroes of the British Empire. One person (who has proposed a permanent statue of his stepfather be put on the fourth plinth, a hero of the WWII Battle of Britain) commented in this morning’s NYTimes article:

That a naked woman should be filling the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square is ridiculous. Trafalgar Square should be a place where men who have served their country should be honored. Critics are not merely offended by the subject matter; they have also dismissed the artistic quality of the statue itself. Robert Simon, editor of the British Art Journal remarked, “it a rather repellent artefact - very shiny, slimy surface, machine-made, much too big....” Others accuse the artist as “self-righteous and smug” and that using a statue of a pregnant, disabled woman as a political statement. The NYTimes article quotes one critic: It’s not Miss Lapper whom Quinn has put on a pedestal in the heart of London, but political correctness. He knows full well that anyone who dares to criticize the statue will instantly be accused of prejudice against the disabled. Other critics disagree. Adrian Searle writes in the Guardian, Once seen, it is hard to drag one’s eyes away. It isn’t just the size and mass of Quinn’s sculpture, or the cool, off-white marble, lighter than any of the stone of the square or the buildings around it. It is all in the form, and the strangeness of Alison Lapper’s body itself, its irreducible familiarity and otherness.

The reactions of the public are as varied as the reactions of the critics. There is outrage, disgust, political correctness, and clear experiences of inspiration. There are few neutral opinions about the piece.

This whole discussion got me thinking this morning about the nature of art and its relationship to culture. Like myth, art evolves from the roots of culture and must, if it is true, show the movement of ideas about beauty, nature, death, disorder, and disease. It reveals the hidden truths about the culture we live in, truths we often cannot endure to see. It exposes the implicit constructs of our culture, our biases, our prejudices, our hidden fears.

Art, like myth, like poetry, has no usefulness other than to expose what is unconscious. It transcends temporal political movements, and creates a place in a too-tight world, to open up and breath in something new. It allows a gap in thought, opening ideas that give new meaning to experiences, new depth to old pains. Art, like myth, like poetry is a poesis—a making of something new; a movement away from the repetitive patterns of unhealed wounds and into a healing that is through the wound itself. It allows the exile to exhale and the prisoner to dream. It shows the beauty in what is unbeautiful and the order of what seems disordered.

To me, this statue of Alison Lapper pregnant is what true art is about. It is about discussion, and disagreement, and confronting our deepest fears and desires. Although I have not seen it in its three-dimensionality, which I think is important to do; I get the sense that this statue makes one weep and cheer at the same time, marveling at the insistence of life in death. In that regard it probably feels ambiguous to a lot of people and that ambiguity
disturbs.

But shouldn’t art, shouldn’t poetry, shouldn’t all creative endeavors inspire some sense of disruption, some level of questioning? Shouldn’t they break us out of our complacent little ideas about beauty and truth and push us somewhere new?

Without that kind of disruption, nothing new is born. Alison disrupts with her pregnant body. Refuse the disruption and all this is left are the unnoticeable statues of a dead king, two questionably heroic generals, and one tall, tall column topped with a long-dead symbol of an Empire’s faded domination.