

# SEEING THE PAST IN PRESENT TENSE

## Working Thoughts on Monuments

By Paula Levine



Bodega Bay Highway, Watson Running Fence Historical Site  
Photo: Paula Levine, 2004

### READING

Driving down a road sandwiched between two green rising hills near Bodega Bay, California, I see farmhouses and barns and wonder about the history and use of this land. The short green grass suggests grazing. "Hay Sales" and "Live Crab" tell me more about the economy in the area. "Seniors Crossing" and an icon of a deer tell me about the human and animal inhabitants.

The road signs also invite participation. I want "Joy Road" to reference a state of mind. The intersection of "Bodega Hwy" and "Bohemian Hwy" brings to mind the juncture between local history and geography.

Then, I see a sign that says, "Running Fence/Watson School Historical Park."<sup>1</sup> A call to detour. But, I do not turn off the road. I remain ensconced in my time, place, and purpose: speeding along the road from Sebastopol to Bodega Bay, happily enmeshed in my own present.

I do not take the detour to history.

There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention.

—Robert Musil<sup>2</sup>

### DETOURING

The Situationists and Surrealists aimed for points where the flow of life could be interrupted, disrupted, inverted, reexamined, and questioned, more fully experienced and realized. The Situationists' strategy of *détournement* (a French word meaning diversion, embezzlement, or abduction) and the Dadas' and Surrealists' playful *defamiliarization* were ways to derail the numbed state of mind, where routine flows unexamined; where the details and textures along routes from home to work and back again are hardly seen, and nothing is sufficiently strong enough to pull the traveler off track.<sup>3</sup>

Monuments and memorials can be devices of *détournement* or slaps into consciousness. They have the power to change places on you, redefine the ground under your feet, reposition you in relation to what you already know, lifting you out of the everyday and putting you down, perhaps even in the same place, but different. They can push away everyday life. They can evict from the ordinary, loosen you from the grip of the familiar and mundane, heighten awareness, expand experience of place or time, and shake up compliant points of view. Monuments and memorials can activate you, awaken and open your present, by reintroducing ideologies that have lapsed or require considering again. They can defy physics, allowing your past to occupy the same place as your present.



Monuments and public commemoratives can, when they work well, reeducate us to the events and people before us as a way to pay respect and reactivate daily life.<sup>4</sup> They can be the vectors of memory, waypoints that mark the events, people, sites, and moments of significance that the culture, nation, town, and city value.

However, those same commemoratives can also close down, delimit, and reduce complexities of history, cultural memory, events, ideas, and lives, and appear as objects “for nostalgia or consumption.”<sup>5</sup> They can, as James Young warned, help people forget rather than remember by taking away the responsibility for memory, historical culpability, and responsibility when the past becomes defined and finite outside of ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Democracy not only leads men to a vast number of inconsiderable productions; it also leads them to raise some monuments on the largest scale; but between these two extremes there is a blank.

A few scattered specimens of enormous buildings can therefore teach us nothing of the social condition and the institutions of the people by whom they were raised.

—Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>7</sup>

### CONVEYING

Building a public record of public historical memory is a practice that has existed within the United States since its inception in 1776. In his article “The Past in the Present,” Kirk Savage notes that commemoratives were built honoring living subjects in Europe. This practice was transplanted to the United States and remained so up until the late eighteenth century. According to Savage, by the nineteenth century, American commemoratives became a way to monumentalize individuals after their death.<sup>8</sup>

Savage examines the complexities of the American Civil War in relation to the construction of Civil War commemoratives. He writes that building monuments to the dead was necessary in America to support and further America’s notion of history as progressive—moving infinitely and always forward from a prior past.

Public monuments helped to celebrate and cement this progressive narrative on national history. To do so monuments had to instill a sense of historical closure. Memorials to heroes and events were meant not to revive old struggles and debates, but to put them to rest. Commemoration was a process of condensing the moral lessons of history and fixing them in place for all time... This required that the object of commemoration be understood as a completed stage of history, safely nestled in a sealed-off past.<sup>9</sup>

Savage illustrates this notion in relation to the Emancipation Monument in Washington, DC, designed by sculptor Thomas Ball in 1876.<sup>10</sup> Rather than reflect the complex struggle that followed the abolition of slavery, “the struggle for freedom was condensed into a single human decision—Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation—even though the action freed only the slaves in Confederate territory, leaving slavery intact in the Union.”<sup>11</sup> To become an object of commemoration, emancipation needed to be understood as a finished act, rather than an unresolved process.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, this “logic of commemoration” flattened history and eliminated the detailed threads that composed the historical shift from one set of laws and social practices to another. In effect, the conflation of this event resulted in further displacing the already marginalized participants in this historical struggle, “women, blacks and laborers.”

Savage warns, “by trying to lock up the past in a prefabricated narrative of progress, monuments...work to destroy the sense of a past that still lives within us—a past that helps us define the problems and opportunities we face in the present.”<sup>13</sup>

If we wish to remember much material we must equip ourselves with a large number of places.—Frances A. Yates<sup>14</sup>

### LOCATING

Frances Yates writes about various “artificial memory” devices in her extraordinary book *The Art of Memory*, describing systems used by early Greek orators through seventeenth-century philosophers to aid and facilitate their need to remember ideas and subject matters within their long orations. The way it worked was this: A speaker would locate a topic or idea within an imagined architecture or system. The corner of a room, for example, would house one thought; a statue or vase, another. The speaker then could envision the space and, through association, find and remember the embedded content.

Astrology, the Cabala, famous architectural buildings, the occult—all provided the supporting skeletons on which orators hung the muscle and flesh of their ideas. The mental practice of creating *loci*, or places, within which a topic or a subject matter of a speech could be stored, and through which it would be later recalled, profoundly suggests the powerful and longstanding relationship between environment and associative memory.<sup>15</sup>

Monuments are themselves similar to these early systems of “artificial memory.” They are mnemonic devices located on the surface of daily life, each containing public cultural memories that can be triggered by association. From generation to generation, in spite of the diversity that often characterizes contemporary urban cities, these shared associations are cultivated through rituals, national events, and celebrations, local festivities and ceremonies. Public commemoratives are the public’s cultural mnemonics.

Each monumental space becomes the metaphorical and quasi-metaphysical underpinning of a society...by virtue of a play of substitutions in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange attributes.

—Henri Lefebvre<sup>16</sup>

### REPRESENTING

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American memorials and monuments often used representational and allegorical iconography. Up to as late as the early twentieth century, American commemoratives tended to emulate European aesthetics, with many of the American artists and sculptors studying in Europe and then returning to America to create public artworks.<sup>17</sup> However, the face and voice of American public artworks, monuments, memorials, and commemoratives in the mid-twentieth century, from about 1960 on, broke from this representational and aesthetic past, reflecting more of the social, political, and cultural struggles of the time, as well as the changes taking place within public historical imagination.

Beginning from about the 1960s, public commemoratives began to offer new kinds of places and forms of engagements with the past, different types of public spaces for reflection and a more expanded view of historical narratives, including new analyses of both power and authority. For example, Claes Oldenburg’s *Lipstick* humorously and



irreverently criticized the military involvement in Vietnam. Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial sliced open the earth like a wound and carried the names of all Americans who died in the war up from the ground and back to public conscience and consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

The Names Quilt was a memorial that defied all conventions of monument, from materiality to permanence to voice. The Quilt, originally conceived by Cleve Jones in San Francisco in 1985, grew into a powerful community-instigated, later world-wide, response to AIDS.<sup>19</sup> At the time of the Quilt's beginning, AIDS was an unknown, frightening, and perplexing disease that attacked young, healthy gay men, an already marginalized population. Each three-by-six-foot panel was hand-made and decorated with personal objects, remembrances, and wishes from those who mourned the loss of loved ones and friends to AIDS. The combined panels composed a sea of equivalence, panel to loss to person, powerful and undeniable in sheer numbers and scale.

This monument, in particular, reminds me of Homer's roll call of death in *The Iliad*, where he describes the manner of death caused to both Greek and Trojan, along with the threads that tied these lives to their communities and families from which they came. Elaine Scarry calls this description of each death the "unmaking" of the life and, along with it, all the threads by which that life was deeply and profoundly connected to family, community, and culture.<sup>20</sup> The impact of AIDS on, and within, what could have easily remained a nameless and faceless population, and consequential ripples throughout communities of friends and families, renders loss material in the Quilt through the detailed narratives and textures of lives and relationships severed by death.

Memorial artists in Germany...are both plagued and inspired by a series of impossible questions: How does a state incorporate shame into its national memorial landscape? How does a state recite, much less commemorate, the litany of its misdeeds, making them a part of its reason for being? Under what memorial aegis, whose rules, does a nation remember its barbarity? Where is the tradition for memorial *mea culpa*, when combined remembrance and self-indictment seem so hopelessly at odds?... Germany's "Jewish question" is now a two-pronged memorial question: How do former persecutors mourn their victims? How does a nation reunite itself on the bedrock memory of its crimes?

—James E. Young<sup>21</sup>

## COUNTERING

In Germany, a radical break from the manner and form of public commemoratives emerged around the 1970s and continues through to this day. Artists working within the scope of memory, public spaces, and culture have struggled with ways to visually articulate the burden of conflicts shared among the postwar generations.

How to articulate events that some had not directly experienced but were subject to? How to give a public form to a complex and difficult history without repeating the iconography reminiscent of Germany's Holocaust past? The conventions of more conventional commemoratives—such as solidity, permanence, fixed positions, materials that will last—became points of departure resulting in an innovative and powerful new presence in public life, public memory, and public space.

In 1986, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz designed and built the Monument Against Fascism, War, and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights. I was fortunate to be able to visit this site recently. Their winning proposal for the competition was a monument designed



**Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz**

Monument Against Fascism, War, and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights, 1986; 40 x 3 x 3'

**Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz**

Monument Against Fascism, War, and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights, 1986, now sunk into the ground, Harburg, Germany. Photo: Paula Levine, 2004



to encourage and foster public participation in the fight against fascism and racism in peoples' daily lives, and not to usurp the "community's will to remember."<sup>22</sup> "What we did not want...was an enormous pedestal with something on it presuming to tell people what they ought to think"; Young described it as "a self-abnegating monument, literally, self-effacing."<sup>23</sup>

The monument, located in Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg, was a forty-foot-tall, three-foot-square rectangular structure made of aluminum and sheathed in soft lead. The designers attached styluses to the monument and encouraged visitors to sign their name on the surface of the structure, in effect, signing a contract of responsibility. Between 1986 and 1993, the monument, with all of the signatures it carried, was slowly lowered into the ground on hydraulics. Downstairs, through a glass slit in a metal door, the monument and some of the signatures could be viewed. Finally, only the top of the monument remained visible from the surface.

The designers placed a plaque adjacent to the monument that reads, in seven languages (German, Turkish, English, French, Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic),

We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover the 12-meter-tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.<sup>24</sup>

Too many memorial days, too little remembering.—Yehuda Amichai<sup>25</sup>

## BURYING

Public memory can be triggered by the mnemonic capacities of commemoratives, but the responsibility of caring for and fostering a system that supports and activates such sites is another matter. I visited the site of the Harburg monument recently and found that it has been profoundly and resolutely forgotten.

After wandering the city for several hours, looking for the monument, unsuccessfully asking shoppers, policemen, and passersby, seeking one among them who had heard about or seen the site or knew where it was located, I finally found it in the small shopping center just off one of the main roads in Harburg. The site was overgrown with grass, littered with cigarette butts and other residue. The signage has been tagged with graffiti and pigeon droppings. Not one of the surrounding shopkeepers I spoke to in the shopping complex knew this monument was located just outside their doors. One person remarked that although she could "vaguely remember some kind of monument being constructed," she could never understand "why they would put such a thing in Harburg."

If the residents of the immediate vicinity could forget the presence of a commemorative designed to instigate public participation in, and responsibility for, fighting fascism in everyday life, what does this mean in terms of the ideas of the site and its intentions? This site unfortunately resembles many more like it, both conventional and unconventional in their design and purpose, all having lost their memory currency. These are hollow and abandoned places that could never-

theless be reawakened and reactivated through the simple act of remembering.

The etymological roots for *monument* and *memory* are related. Both come from words meaning "to remind" and "be mindful."

We never come to thoughts. They come to us.

Originally, "memory" means as much as devotion: a constant concentrated abiding with something not just with something that has passed, but in the same way with what is present and with what may come.

—Martin Heidegger<sup>26</sup>

## CALLING TO MIND

Monuments, commemoratives, memorials assert themselves in our consciousness, creating a presence that calls for remembrance. When effective, these places compel us to bring to mind associations and considerations—ideas represented, events that have taken place.

Calling is, perhaps, what monuments do best: they demand, set in motion, reach, invite. When commemoratives work, they instigate participation in ways that make memory more of a verb than a noun. Rather than being the "Cliff Notes of culture,"<sup>27</sup> they awaken and activate the public imagination and encourage participation of those who choose to answer the call, those who take the detours that bridge time and place or reintroduce ideological foundations back into daily life.

But the question is, How does this happen? How can communities cast and recast their commemorative sites to develop ideological and historical stewardship, fusing knowledge with experience? What kinds of innovative and systematic interventions and structures are necessary to ensure that the monument or other commemorative "will not become an obsolete marker of a disconnected past, but an agent of consciousness in a changing world"?<sup>28</sup>

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Information placard at site of Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's Monument Against Fascism, War, and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights, Harburg, Germany  
Photo: Paula Levine, 2004

#### NOTES

- 1 One site where a segment of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence* (1972–76) ran is adjacent to the Watson School (1856–1960). Both sites are under the auspice of the Regional Parks Department of the County of Sonoma, California. For more information about *Running Fence*, an 18-foot-high, 24.5-mile-long fence that ran between Sonoma and Marin Counties, see Jeanne-Claude and Christo's site <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/rf.html>. For some information on the Watson School, see [http://www.sonoma-county.org/parks/pk\\_watson.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/parks/pk_watson.htm) and check with the Parks Department for more historical information.
- 2 Robert Musil, "Monuments," in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Hygiene, Colorado: Eridano Press, 1987), 61.
- 3 Guy Debord, an early Lettrist and later Situationist, used *détournement* as a strategy to derail meaning to instigate and allow for new and different relationships and association to occur. See Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "A User's Guide to Détournement," trans. Ken Knabb, *Les Lèvres nues*, no. 8 (May 1956), <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SL/detourn.htm>; and Knabb, ed. and trans., *The Situationists Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets), 1981. The term *defamiliarization* is often attributed to the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who introduced the idea of estrangement, or *ostraniene*, in his 1917 essay "Art As Device." However, Benjamin Sher, translator for a collection of Shklovsky's essays, describes his *ostraniene* as "a process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness' by 'removing' it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions." See Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher, with an introduction by Gerald L. Bruns ([Moscow, 1929] Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), xix.
- 4 The city can be seen as a kind of topographical cultural diary, with culture's individual journal entries being its commemorative markers. Robert Musil writes in his diary about his desire to "re-educate myself to the story-telling, through paying respect to daily life." His connection between journal writing as a way to pay respect to the details of one's life can also be applied to monuments and other public commemoratives. They too mark and convey the details of those moments, ideas, people, or places of particular cultural resonance through their publicly articulated presence.

- 5 Anthony Vidler, "Trick/Track," in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 105.
- 6 James E. Young, "Memory and Counter-Memory: The End of the Monument in Germany," *Harvard Design*, no. 9 (fall, 1999): 3.
- 7 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, chap. 12 ([http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc\\_indx.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_indx.html)).
- 8 Kirk Savage, "The Past in the Present: The Life of Memorials," *Harvard Design*, no. 9 (fall 1999): 2.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The history of this monument is an interesting and poignant one. Funds came primarily from free members of the African-American community, with Charlotte Scott of Virginia, an ex-slave, donating her first five dollars she earned as a free woman toward construction of the monument. Designed by Thomas Ball (1819–1911)—a white sculptor who created busts and figurative sculpture of well-known Americans including Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, as well as many private commissions—the commemorative depicted Lincoln standing with one hand stretched out over the head of a kneeling slave, who Ball modeled after Archer Alexander, the last slave captured under the Fugitive Slave Act. Lincoln's other hand holds his Emancipation Proclamation, the military order that set slaves free in the Confederacy.
- 11 Savage, "Past in the Present," 2.
- 12 Ibid. Savage describes the tenor of events following the Civil War, noting that an active public discussion on, and questions about, what constituted "freedom" still ensued. He suggests that the complexities, so alive and struggling during this transition from slave to freedom, were lost in the design of the Emancipation Monument—a figure that subsumed the vital and active participation of the slaves themselves in their own emancipation and represented the complex events as the freeing of a slave by one single (white) leader. Savage raises troubling questions about monuments and commemoratives and their limited capacity to convey the nuances and complexities of the history and ideas represented.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 7.
- 15 Ibid., 31. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of*

- Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), in which he describes "tactics of resistance," practices that create spaces where the power and compelling forces of commodity culture can be contested (41).
- 16 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 225.
- 17 Harriet Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7.
- 18 Other examples include Ed Kienholz's *The Portable War Memorial* (1968), monument proposals by Claes Oldenburg including his *Proposed Underground Memorial and Tomb for President John F. Kennedy* (1965), Judith F. Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976), and others as described in Senie, "Memorials and Monuments Reconsidered," chap. 1 of *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 18–60. See also Sergiusz Michalski, "In Quest of a New Heroic Form," chap. 6 of *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage, 1870–1997* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 154–69.
- 19 For the history of The Names Quilt and other relevant links, see: <http://www.aidsquilt.org> and <http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm>.
- 20 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122. See also chap. 2, "The Structure of War: The Juxtaposition of Injured Bodies and Unanchored Issues," 121–24.
- 21 James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 7.
- 22 Ibid., 130.
- 23 See *ibid.* For an extensive and detailed description of the monument, its site and intentions, see 127–139.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Yehuda Amichai, "Too Many," from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), 39.
- 26 Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 365; and *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 140.
- 27 From a private conversation about monuments and memory with Dr. Ellen Salwen.
- 28 Savage, "Past in the Present," 5.