

What a Monument Can Do

This special issue of *Future Anterior* is an attempt to rethink what a monument can do, when all the underpinnings of the traditional monument — community, sovereignty, the nation-state, memorialization, symbolization — are under intense pressure. We are not claiming that these pressures are new, but rather that we are beyond a point of simply acknowledging them. It is the realm of possibility opened up by such pressures that we are interested in exploring. Making such a claim requires that we be equally interested in what a monument can do — its possibilities and capacities, both actual and virtual — and what it cannot do, its impediments and incapacities. We are therefore concerned not only with what monuments might help us intuit and fabulate for a possible politics or community to come, but also with acknowledging and critiquing the inability to unhinge monuments from present-day political formations. The essays in this volume suspend themselves in the gap where possibility and impossibility, actuality and virtuality, almost touch one another, in order to rethink the monument in ethical, aesthetic, ontological, and political terms. All the essays in this special issue are attuned to our present political moment, whatever their manifest content or time period.

Without subsuming the particularities of each essay into an overarching rubric, we would like to call attention to some shared sensibilities and resonances between their conceptions of monuments. They are not preoccupied with memory, commemorating the past, or recovering a fantasy of lost cohesive socialities, but rather have their ear to the future. Monuments appear in these essays as engagements in ongoing acts of becoming, fabulation, and invoking communities to come. In doing so, the emphasis is placed on the future-oriented and experimental aspects of restoration, preservation, and monuments, as opposed to a conservative return to already given aesthetic, political, and social formations. This future orientation hardly means an ignoring of history and historicity; in fact, quite the opposite. It embraces it much more fully if we are willing to take seriously Heidegger's claim that "having-been-ness temporalizes itself only from out of and in the future."¹ Which is to say that our history is not only not past, but neither has it been fully actualized. Our history is *to come*. It should be clear that this orientation *does* put much-needed pressure on the equation of memory with the past, and also calls into question

the view that memory is the very matter and meaning of the monument.

Indeed, one of the primary contributions these essays make to historic preservation theory is to challenge the emphasis on memory in discussions about monuments. In fact, it would not be too far off the mark to say we identify and equate memory with monuments to such a degree that we probably no longer even need to insert the copula between monument and memory to make the connection. One might think about two of our most influential reflections on monuments in the last twenty-five years: Pierre Nora's multivolume *Lieux de Mémoire* and James E. Young's notion of the "counter-monument." The former is predicated on a perceived rupture between the affective and living conduits of "true memory" in premodern society (*milieux de mémoire*) and their exteriorization and materialization in monuments and memorials in the modern era (*lieux de mémoire*). The latter places emphasis on shifting the "burden of memory" back on us and away from its apparent rigid ossification in the monument's hieratic sovereignty.² Both of these accounts enact an antithesis between memory and its materialization, thus ignoring Derrida's basic and powerful claim about the fundamentally prosthetic condition of memory and the body;³ that is to say, memory is never spontaneous, internal, and alive, and thus it can never be cleaved apart from its external materialization, traces, supplements, and repetitions.

Thomas Stubblefield's "Do Disappearing Monuments Simply Disappear? The Counter-Monument in Revision" draws our attention to these material, prosthetic, and iterative qualities, requiring us to be much more aware of the highly complex temporality and modes of inscription that monuments enact. He cautions against current trends in monument design to fetishize ephemerality, movement, or impermanence, as if that eo ipso is an overcoming of the "hieratic" and "sovereign" aspects of historical master narratives: a work in stone can be as vulnerable and fragile as a sheet of paper; the tender sweep of a brushstroke can let a sensation stand on its own just as well or better than a freestanding public sculpture; and a void or a "ground zero" can be as monumental and imposing as any solid building. Moreover, he calls attention to the troubling ways in which contemporary monuments, despite their self-effacing materiality, can solidify established views of the past.

These insights have important ramifications within related realms of preservation discourse. Recent conceptualizations of intangible heritage have carried out significant critiques of the primacy granted to presence and materiality in preservation. But such critiques have not accounted for their own fetishistic objectification of "living traditions" as origins of historical meanings that do not admit external scrutiny from outside the

given “community.” The ephemerality of intangible heritage does not in itself prevent it from hardening into a conception of history that can be as rigid and blind to anything outside itself as traditional master narratives. New conceptions of the monument provide us with promising avenues of research to move beyond what has become the inflexible polarization of heritage into tangible materials and their fleeting counterparts.

Rather than focus on a monument’s materiality, or lack thereof, we might shift our attention to the *way* we gather together signs in order to make sense of our world politically, ethically, and ontologically—what Derrida has called “consignation” in his discussion of the archive.⁴ It is hardly surprising that sites of death are the locus of the most intense acts of consignation, with the monument being the privileged form in which death has been put to work in the service of consolidating “communities of essence,” like the nation-state.⁵ Mark Jarzombek’s essay, “The Dialectics of Death in the Civilian Era: van Houwelingen’s *Sluipweg*,” is a meditation on how the monument’s relationship to the history of modern death is being reconfigured in our era of the slow waning of the nation-state. His analysis of *Sluipweg*, a work of contemporary art that assembles gravestones into a path, shows how difficult, even impossible, it is for contemporary monuments to keep together the social world that was once thought to be inevitably “bound” by monuments. If a whole regime of biopolitics has transferred power from the sovereignty over death to the control over life, including death that is now dispersed throughout life, ways of dying become crucial for our conception of what a political “life” can be. It thus makes sense that all the essays in this issue rethink the relationships of death and temporality to the monument, in order to imagine other forms of political, communal, and aesthetic life.

A full-scale critique of the monument’s tendency to invoke the power of consignation—the temptation to gather together multiplicity and dissociation into a single corpus, or unified identity—is developed in the Monument Group’s notion of the “distributed monument” and Andrew Herscher’s elaboration of that concept. The word “distributed” suggests that the locus of meaning and materiality is not fixed or ontologized in any one spatiotemporal moment, figure, or object, but rather it is interwoven within multiple sites, articulating complex chains of sense extending from bone to paper, from bodies to laboratories, from horror to horror, from graveyard to world heritage site, from a traffic circle to the Holocaust, from the former Yugoslavia to Iraq to the United States. A great deal of the distributed monument’s potential will depend on our willingness to think about and traverse these rich spatiotemporal realms and material trajectories, thus avoiding premature attempts at

stabilizing, isolating, or identifying any one specific moment, or material instantiation with the monument. While objects and narratives are clearly indispensable here, the distributed monument is not reducible to them. It makes secondary the question of distinguishing tangible from intangible heritage, and shifts attention toward what a monument can do.

The search for what monuments can do involves not just spatial practices but also temporal questions. Because interpretations of monuments tend to be overdetermined by questions of memory, they are traditionally associated with the past. Yet, as Jonathan Blower makes clear in his essay, certain monuments can invert that traditional association and orient us toward the future. He interprets “Monuments as Memento Mori in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” showing them to be symbolic harbingers of future events, and in particular, the inevitability of our death. Insofar as death comes to us from a future that has not yet arrived, and which can never be experienced “as such,” perhaps the future anterior is the most appropriate way to describe the complex temporality that Blower analyzes. If Goethe felt uncomfortable in the light of his own role as “participating departed” in the planning of his own monument, that might turn out to be the rule rather than the exception when it comes to speaking about monuments and preservation. Blower’s essay demonstrates that it is often the performativity of the text that materializes the harbingers of death in the novel: the rhythms and repetitions—the assonances, dissonances, and alliterations—of words weave together a complex web of language that fabulates the conditions of death to which it is supposedly referring.

In “Eric Fischl’s *Tumbling Woman*, 9/11, and ‘Timeless Time,’” Karen Lang addresses the need for monuments to pay heed to the horrors done to vulnerable, singular bodies. If, after 9/11, the monument has, once again, been called on to memorialize the deaths of numbers of people in the face of attempts to erase every trace of their existence, then one of the demands of our present time is to open up a space and time in which we can account for the complexity and singularity of human existence, making our world “count” for us in ethical and affective ways. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s notion of a “timeless time”—seen as a gap or suspension opened up between past and future, which she argues also resembles the time and space of aesthetic experience—Lang outlines a realm in which judgment is invited “to exercise its labors on behalf of particularity,” delaying the drive to prematurely subsume those particulars under universal claims. It is from within this spatiotemporal realm that new forms of political and aesthetic responses emerge and are attentive to “a human condition of plurality.” Lang characterizes this realm of possibility in terms

of the future anterior, in which we gain access to the present for the first time by seeing in the present the future in the past.

The grammatical tense of the future anterior is a compelling way of addressing what a monument can do.⁶ The tense of the future anterior asks us what will have been; it opens up a time and space for the monument that does not relegate it to a past that is already accomplished, nor to an anticipated future, nor to a fleeting present. It engages the monument less as an idea, project, or concept and more as an act of mobilizing the possibilities inherent in the rhythms, echoes, resonances, and staging of its complexity. But this also raises a key question about how we might map the new terrains that such possibilities open up. One of the delights of these essays is the myriad ways they engage in such mapmaking, which are never simply tracings of already given terrains, but rather acts of experimentation and construction.

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 206.

² Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Memoire*, vols. 1–4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999–2010); a handy translation of the French introduction was published earlier as Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25. A key sentence from the first page of that introduction reads, “There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory” (7). James E. Young, “Monuments and Memory,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, 2nd ed., 234–47 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³ For example, see Jacques Derrida, “Nietzsche and the Machine,” trans. Richard Beardsworth, in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 248.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al., foreword by Christopher Fynsk (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–42.

⁶ The future anterior is formed in French and English through the conjunction of the future tense of one of the auxiliary verbs “to be” or “to have” with the past participle of the main verb—for example, “He will have seen.”

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