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A nighttime photograph of a modern cityscape. The foreground is dominated by a large, illuminated, cylindrical structure with a grid-like facade. In the background, several skyscrapers are visible, some with glowing windows and others with reflective surfaces. The overall scene is lit with a mix of warm and cool tones, creating a dramatic and futuristic atmosphere.

The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture

Edited by Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White

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The Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture is a critical survey of critical voices from architecture, art history, urbanism, urban geography, anthropology, media and performance studies, computer science, bio-architecture, environmental studies, and other disciplines. It provides the meaning and significance of global architecture of the twenty-first century. It is a critical survey of 30 contemporary thinkers with over 100 black and white images illustrating in six parts concerning both real and virtual space, design, landscape, theory, technology, critique, and practice.


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functional gaps in the master plans of urban megaprojects, and are able to approach unforeseen challenges—which often emerge only after the projects are complete—in a flexible and responsive manner. Rather than regarding villages as an unfortunate vestige of the past and impediment to growth, architects and planners would be well advised to incorporate these existing settlements into the design process of future urban development projects.

Note

1 The authors would like to thank Margaret Crawford and Liu Heng for their helpful comments and suggestions; as well as Jin Jiayi and Peng Yixuan for their research assistance. Unless otherwise noted, the essay is based on fieldwork conducted at Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center between September 2015 and November 2016. The project was funded through the generous support of the Division of Landscape Architecture at the University of Hong Kong and the Hang Seng Bank Golden Jubilee Education Fund for Research.

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After the Counter-monument Commemoration in the Expanded Field

Mechtild Widrich

Is there anything distinctive about contemporary memorials or monuments? Commemoration remains, as it always has been, a retrieval of past events for the present. According to writer Robert Musil, who described the "job" of monuments in the 1920s, memorials or monuments typically use objects and spatial settings to "kick-start" commemoration (Musil 1978: 507). And yet, the form, function, and setting of monuments have changed rapidly over the last decades. This shift has been felt so distinctively, that the prestigious *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, published in 1998, found it necessary to have two entries under the rubric "Monument." The editor's comment on this decision was as follows: "to appreciate the relevance of monuments as subjects of aesthetic inquiry, this entry comprises two essays: Historical Overview, Twentieth Century counter-monuments."¹ The somewhat unwieldy term "counter-monument," used primarily for European Holocaust memorials, must have seemed fitting to describe a then-new, "democratic," ostensibly antiauthoritarian model of commemoration, embodied in monuments whose formal qualities, from jagged and scored surfaces to immersive or open formats (rather than monoliths on plinths), symbolized loss, disappearance, and fragmentation. Gone was the gesture of victory conveyed by an erect, stable permanence. In the United States, Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982), whose commission and execution in fact preceded the popularization of the counter-monument concept, is often put in this category. Indeed it has become the exemplary counter-monument for the subtle yet powerful way it suggests grief and loss on an enormous scale. While melding into the severe landscape of the Washington Mall, it allows for the tracing of the name of casualties inscribed in the black basaltic stone. This interaction has become so much part of the work that most printed photographs of the monument show some sort of "engaged visitor" touching the stone while being reflected in the dark surface (see Johnson 1998: 213ff.); volunteers organized by the U.S. National Parks Service hand out tracing paper and pencils. Kirk Savage has defined Lin's project, which faced aesthetic and political resistance before becoming the most widely acclaimed American memorial (indeed, a mobile half-size replica travels the country) as "the nation's first 'therapeutic' memorial," meaning by this both the monument's cathartic effect on visitors and, more critically, the tendency to use (counter-)monuments to heal rather than thematize conflict (Savage 2009: 267).

Let me be clear. The traditional victory monument is alive and well. In the United States it is evidenced in the 2004 *National World War II Memorial* on the Washington Mall. Elsewhere it

takes a more dramatic form. In Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, for example, much of the city's socialist-modernist fabric (an earthquake in 1963 had destroyed many of the historical buildings) has been torn out by the conservative twenty-first-century government in a megalomaniacal effort to recall the glories of a "Macedonian nation" extending back in time to Alexander the Great. Forty new monuments and 20 historicist buildings will reshape the perception of this region's history for generations to come (Figure 6.1). But there is no doubt that these kinds of unregenerate "monumentality" are a strange leftover from past centuries, ignoring not only the queasy indifference that Musil diagnosed in responses to urban statuary (he thought this an outdated model), but also the postmodern critique of historical master narratives. The latter, coupled with growing demands for after taking political responsibility for acts of injustice ranging from slavery to the Shoah, led to the institution of memorials meant to engage individuals subjectively rather than attempting to instill heavy-handed moral or political lessons. In that sense, it is Lin's memorial and not the bronze trio of soldiers plopped down near it (*The Three Soldiers* by Frederick Hart) at the behest of conservative congressmen, nor Skopje, that embodies the early twenty-first-century consensus on how the past, and in particular the traumatic past, should be remembered.

The term counter-monument itself, introduced by the American literary scholar James E. Young (1992)—who also wrote the corresponding entry in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*—has thus proven useful to identify the shift in artistic practices of commemoration that took place in



Figure 6.1 *Mothers of Macedonia fountain and Warrior Monument, Skopje, Macedonia, 2014*
Source: Copyright Mechtild Widrich.

the late twentieth century. It has also, unfortunately, overshadowed the complex debate about a larger change in the way we understand historical consciousness, which includes the various attempts to involve people in history instead of "feeding" them an official narrative of progress and national success; moreover, as a coinage that seems to describe a particular genre of public art and architecture fairly well, it has obscured the unstable links of recent memorials with practices ranging from landscape design to performance art and the use of social media. Young himself was concerned primarily with projects that commemorate the victims of wrongdoings of states, from the colonial period to the Cold War, and most prominently with the German and Austrian efforts to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. The complicated question of how to find a form for monuments dedicated to groups that had suffered at the hands of the society commemorating them led to discussions that, however compelling, tended to focus on the formal choices—from the comic-book Holocaust memoir of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991) to the architectural memorials of Peter Eisenman in Berlin and Rachel Whiteread in Vienna. Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (finished 2004) with its concrete slabs of different heights on a sloping ground openly embraced experiential buzz words such as "labyrinth," "destabilization of the body," and "disorientation"; much was made of the width between the stones, which was to prevent people from walking next to each other. The monumentality was described as fragmented, dispersed in space, or even broken, in favor of corporeal experience. Old heroic forms had to fall by the wayside in this narrative, but could not erase the inherent tension in these "exculpatory" monuments between those who are remembered and those seeking active commemoration as a public, globally visible sign of catharsis, reform, or closure. Cognate forms are more easily and less controversially employed in the *National 9/11 Memorial and Museum* in New York on the site of the former World Trade Centers, which combines traces of the minimalist aesthetic of Maya Lin with a symbolic use of the void. Under the title *Reflecting Absence* (Figure 6.2), the design by architect Michael Arad and landscape



Figure 6.2 Michael Arad and Peter Walker, *Reflecting Absence*, National September 11 Memorial and Museum, New York

Source: Photograph by Sascha Porsche, 2011/Commons Wikimedia.

designer Peter Walker turns the footprints of the former buildings literally into two pools with waterfalls descending along the edges. The names of the victims are engraved on the sides and the negative forms are surrounded by deciduous trees. The creation of a memorial landscape in the otherwise dense fabric of downtown Manhattan could have been a welcome invitation to slow down and reflect. Yet at the beginning of the new millennium such a design is already uncontroversial, even predictable, and few see a contradiction between the longing for individual contemplation, nationalist self-praise, and compliance with the anticipated national and international memorial tourism.²

From a twenty-first-century point of view and a more global perspective, we see an even more complex memorial imperative, in which old forms re-emerge, and the counter-monuments of the memory boom of the 1980s and 1990s have themselves come under scrutiny. Their putative democracy and inclusiveness, if not universality, has been challenged by the introduction of new epochal concepts like the Anthropocene that draws attention to the fact that humans live their lives within a geological and meteorological theater that impacts and is impacted by their presence. This has resulted in a broader, but also a more sober view of memorials as geographical and ideological landscapes than what the subject-centered architecture of the “memorial boom” allowed for. Just as the way we understand and remember our past is sensitive to the changes of the world and how we treat it, we can say that monuments are indeed indicators of a contemporary state of affairs. With a growing emphasis on a world *beyond* the memorial, and stretching out beyond the visitor’s immediate perception in space as well as in time, a corresponding shift in the stakes of commemoration has, almost imperceptibly, taken place. *Processes* rather than *events* have come to assume more prominence in today’s memorial landscapes. In a very literal sense, contemporary monuments have come to handle contemporary or contemporaneous themes and problems in a way that opens up the monument’s presumed strict orientation to the past.³

To provide a vivid sense of just how commemoration has changed since the beginning of the twenty-first century, I want to discuss Ai Weiwei’s controversial 2016 installation *F. Lotus* (Figure 6.3) at the baroque Belvedere Palace in Vienna. It consists of lifejackets collected from the Greek island of Lesbos, the leftovers of refugees journeying to Europe in overloaded boats in grueling, often lethal conditions. The life-vests are arranged in groups of five, in the form of decorative flowers, floating in the reflecting pool leading to the main façade of the palace of Prince Eugene of Savoy, a great collector of art and a military leader most noted for fighting back the Ottoman Empire from central Europe at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries.⁴ Formally blending into this *Gesamtkunstwerk* of architecture and garden design, *F. Lotus* is an act of subversive decorum that addresses the current state of a world of war, migration, and climate change. The material itself is in a way recycled, as the jackets were discarded on the island after the journey over the sea. Their change from utilitarian object to decoration disrupts the complacent consumption of beauty in the formal garden through the “authentic” roughness of the material, and at the same time conscripts what would be mere garbage into a new cycle of symbolic value—the value of political commemoration.⁵ Is *F. Lotus* a contemporary monument in the double sense I suggested above—not just a monument of the present, but one that reflects on that present? I think so, for the most significant shift of the 1980s might not have consisted in the various formal changes overtaking the genre of the monument, nor in the loss of authority on the part of designers and commissioners (which is something of an alibi for administrators anxious to take the moral high ground), but rather in a shift in the social life of the monument. The old mode of interaction between monument and pedestrian, which as Musil pointed out too often took the form of obstacle avoidance, gave way to a call for *performative* interaction of the visitor(s) with the monument. By this I mean more



Figure 6.3 Ai Weiwei, *F. Lotus*, Belvedere Palace, Vienna, 2016
Source: Copyright Mechtild Widrich.

than the general call for reflection and subjective feeling discussed above: the word “performative” in linguistic theory means doing something by representing it to be so (a phenomenon familiar in signatures and other legally binding ceremonies). Many monuments, in their design and mode of use, called directly for visitors to take a stand or act publicly, whether by signing, reading, or just standing in a particular relation to the monument: thus the celebrated *Monument against Fascism* in Hamburg-Harburg by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz (1986) asked visitors to sign a lead-faced column if they vowed to remain vigilant against fascism. Over the course of several years, the signed column was lowered into the ground and ultimately no longer visible (Figure 6.4). On the rationale of performative monuments, even acts of refusal and vandalism, like carving a swastika into the column, were contextualized as part of the social fabric of the monument and its community, however sinister the act.⁶ It is telling that the two most prominent projects to commemorate the peaceful protests that led to the fall of the communist East German government in 1989 and the German unification in 1990 have either been rejected for execution after initial praise, or are still under debate. Both projects relied on the participation of the audience in a playful way: the memorial in Leipzig (competition won by M + M in 2012) under the title *70.000* involved that parts of the design, 70,000 metal pedestals dispersed on a soccer-field-size basin (symbolizing the peaceful protesters in 1989 that lead to the fall of the communist regime), could be taken “anywhere”—be it to another site in public space or simply home as a souvenir. In Berlin (competition won in 2011 by Milla & Partner and Sasha Waltz, a choreographer), the project was conceived as some kind of oversized seesaw to be used by the audience to symbolize the power of the people to shift history. These projects show that a celebratory counter-monument can easily become a superficial playground-art. Instead of symbolic responsibility, there is play; instead of historical consciousness, there is entertainment.

However, the implicit social link the counter-monument wanted to achieve is by no means a thing of the past, but neither is it, nor has it ever been, anti-authoritative: rather, new forms of authority, from democratic activism to visions of life in the *longue durée* are evoked by new forms of public art. As audiences multiply through becoming engaged via photographs or social media, the objects or sites of commemoration are being adapted accordingly. New questions arise: How does the construction of history travel through time, and space, via photographs and other means, how does it change meaning and what is its force? The destruction of statues and parts of ancient buildings in Palmyra in Syria through ISIS (Islamic State) in 2015 and 2016 is in its vandalism a potent showing that authoritarian regimes still see relevance in the marking of sites (also in the negative through destruction), but also in changing its audiences. The destruction was first broadcast proudly by the destroyers themselves; proof came to the world from satellite images, and started a debate about creating replicas of parts of the destroyed structure through digital imaging to be presented in London and New York—one such restored arch, manufactured without any direct contact with the site from photographs, was shown in Trafalgar Square, London, in 2016 (Figure 6.5) and stood there both as a *pars pro toto* symbol of the respect we should show former and different cultures, and as a memorial of resistance to recent terrorism.⁷ More pertinently, the globally conducted discussion about reconstructing Palmyra goes way beyond issues of preservation. As art historian and preservationist Alois Riegl noted in his celebrated 1903 essay, “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” memorials change their meaning and purpose as history flows past them. They may be “willed” monuments (built to be such), or they might become monuments due to the particular story they are able to tell: Riegl claimed that even a “torn piece of paper” could come to assume a memorial function and thus serve as a monument (Riegl 1982). Palmyra and other sites affected by current world politics (as were the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001) show not only how right Riegl was about the shifting function of monuments, but that their symbolic value is as



Figure 6.4 Site of Jochen Gerz's and Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Monument against Fascism*, 2009

Source: Copyright Mechtild Widrich.

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Figure 6.5 Replica of Palmyra's Triumphal Arch at Trafalgar Square, London, April 2016

Source: Copyright Creative Commons, photograph by Garry Knight.

important as ever. It also shows, and this is new, that their change into signs of resistance, or victory, their participation in a fight for territory, is now even more important as it is broadcast to an audience worldwide through digital media. Still I would think that there is no break with the history of traditional monuments, but rather modifications that go hand in hand with shifts in the way society sees commemoration—Riegl already discussed such shifts in regard to changing audiences in the Habsburg Empire of his time. Commemoration, and this is probably why it is much less stable than the old-fashioned claim to eternity in monuments would lead us to believe, as a reclamation of the past has to change with the way humans change their approach to the process of mourning, cathartic healing, or the celebration of past events.

One of the demands of late twentieth-century monuments was to the authenticity of a commemorative site or its materials. This assumed correlation between what should be remembered and the geographical location of the object or relic triggering commemoration was then new, at least when it comes to newly commissioned memorials. Riegl already noted the thirst for authenticity in debates about then contemporary restorations. But the nineteenth century also experienced an extension and deterritorialization in the understanding of historically important places, from the spread of the photographic postcard to commemorative urban constructions like London's Trafalgar Square (named after the cape in southern Spain where Horatio Nelson decisively beat Napoleon's fleet). Thus, it seems likely that the felt need for a memorial to conform to a resonant place is part of a larger postmodern shift that sees a connection between personal memory and history, and the need to involve individuals in the telling of both personal and collective stories.⁸ French historian Pierre Nora has during the 1980s and 1990s described

the *lieux de mémoire*, which are places (they can be real or imagined, objects or myths) that crystallize memory for a particular community, while urban theorist Françoise Choay has insisted around the same time on the relevance of authentic geography by declaring Auschwitz the only true monument of the twentieth century (Nora 1984; Choay 1992). Ai Weiwei shows that the assertion of the "authenticity" of the material is still important, but ideas of site and audience have changed; thus he transposes the fate of individuals in a particular place and time into more general themes of migration and global responsibility.

Many of the more ambitious contemporary memorials understand that actions humans perceive as history are always also changing the earth as a whole. Issues of economics (monument tourism), of the environment (the role of nature as memorial, and its precarious status in urban and rural civilization), and of representation (not only national or ethnic, but just as often global and cross-generational), must be kept in mind in order to evaluate current debates and designs. This is true even for memorials that seem to be dealing with very specific events and their strictly human consequences. Jonas Dahlberg's winning proposal for the Norwegian *07/22 Memorial* to commemorate the victims of the attack of right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik in 2011 seems, at first sight, to take up many of the formal and ideological tropes of the late twentieth century (Figure 6.6). The memorial has three parts: (1) a massive intervention into the landscape opposite of the island Utøya, where 69 mostly young people were shot in the massacre, (2) a temporary memorial in the government center of Oslo, which was the target of several bombs by the same terrorist, (3) a more permanent memorial in the same location once the fate of the damaged modernist buildings has been decided. The Swedish artist is best known as the maker of films and video installations that question perception and reality and show strange architectural settings and desolated cityscapes. His theme is the construction of reality in our minds—a peculiar choice perhaps for a memorial to a brutal terrorist attack, but, possibly a sign of current memorial culture. The work in progress, whose opening has been postponed, at the time of writing, due to protests from the local population, seeks to disconnect the tongue of land opposite the island from the mainland by a kind of sea canal, thus preventing visitors from looking too closely at the authentic location

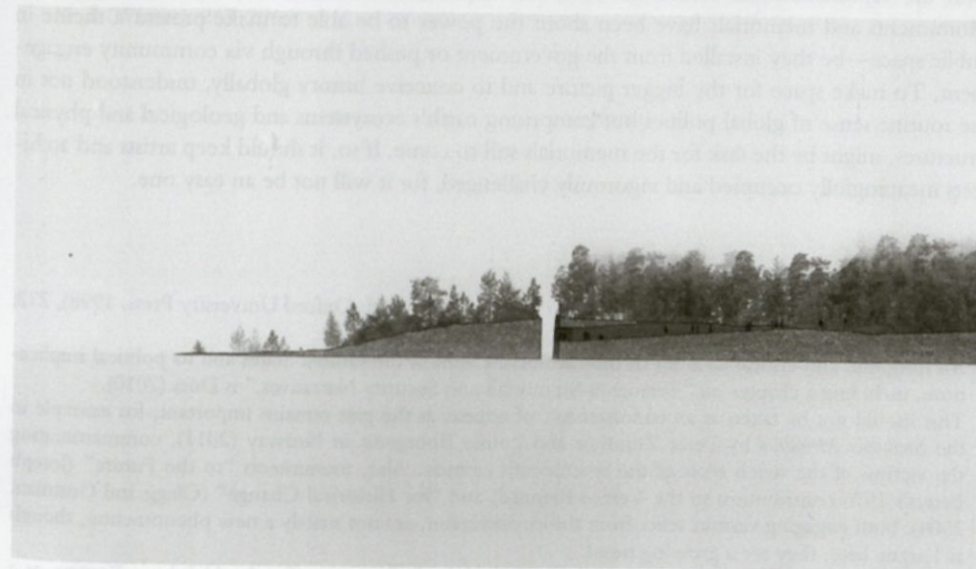


Figure 6.6 Jonas Dahlberg, *July 22 Memorial*, Sørbråten site opposite Utøya, rendering studio Dahlberg

of the massacre. The walls of the earth cut would be engraved with the names of the victims, making them visible, yet out of reach, as would be the disconnected plot of land at the end of the peninsula, which would essentially be inaccessible. Symbolically, the cut also reduces the size of Norway, and makes clear that the wound cut into the territory will remain forever. Dahlberg says he wants to prevent a tourist spectacle, which seems like the expected means to memorialize a catastrophe in the twenty-first century. In a way, he thus works with, but also against, Nora's and Choay's conceptions of *lieux de mémoire* and authenticity. Access to history, which was the demand of the 1980s, has been replaced by monument tourism, and he subtly opposes such a view, even as he takes for granted the primacy of place by intervening in it. Notably, I think, Dahlberg proposes to use the excavated earth and stones for the memorial site in Oslo, reminding us that commemoration today is not just about national feelings or catharsis, meditation, and solitude, but that it is part of what drives history at least equally as much as national sentiment these days: economy and exploitation of resources, and our need for a cautious handling of the world at large, if we want to prevent catastrophic scenarios in the future. Feelings and resources are both excavated from the ground, which moves the debate from interaction between humans and history to one in which the tension between individual demands and its consequences for the globe need to be addressed. That Dahlberg's proposal won, and that it has faced public resistance, also tells us much about Norway: a highly educated nation whose affluence depends in great part on the exploitation of natural resources, notably petroleum and fish.

That a monument intended to mourn the victims of a mass murder could reach beyond this quite difficult task to consider the sites of violence, but also the structure of the place, nation, and the world it inhabits, might seem like a tall order, but it is typical of the way twenty-first-century monuments appropriate the dominant model of the counter-monument, with its performative appeal to spectators and visitors, and use it as the platform for an expanded reflection on ongoing processes beyond the human subject doing the commemorating. National history, the message in the best cases of contemporary monuments, is only part of a global situation. Personal interaction, while still at the center of commemoration, has been reassessed, often merging political activism with the representational values and historical depth (or search thereof) of commemoration. Monuments and memorials have been about the power to be able to make present a theme in public space—be they installed from the government or pushed through via community engagement. To make space for the bigger picture and to conceive history globally, understood not in the routine sense of global politics but comprising earth's ecosystems and geological and physical structures, might be the task for the memorials still to come. If so, it should keep artists and architects meaningfully occupied and vigorously challenged, for it will not be an easy one.

Notes

- 1 *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 3, edited by Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 272; the entry "counter-monument" is authored by James E. Young.
- 2 An insightful and critical account of the memorial boom in the United States and its political implications, including a chapter on "Terrorism Memorials and Security Narratives," is Doss (2010).
- 3 This should not be taken as an endorsement, of course, as the past remains important, for example in the *Steilneset Memorial* by Peter Zumthor and Louise Bourgeois in Norway (2011), commemorating the victims of the witch trials of the seventeenth century. Also, monuments "to the Future" (Joseph Beuys's 1976 contribution to the Venice Biennial) and "for Historical Change" (Clegg and Guttman, 2004), both engaging various relics from the environment, are not strictly a new phenomenon, though as I argue here, they are a growing trend.
- 4 One might also think of Eugene, in his conquest of the Balkan states for the Habsburg Empire, as a precursor of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Europe that conservatives find so threatening in today's refugee crisis.

- 5 Ai Weiwei had mounted similar life jackets in Berlin on the pilasters of a concert hall a few months earlier, and, in 2009, had arranged the backpacks of children who died in the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan (partially due to negligent construction of school buildings) on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich. This work was entitled *Remembering*.
- 6 For more on this social interaction with monuments, see Widrich (2014).
- 7 One important protagonist making possible these reconstructions was software developer and activist Bassel Khartabil, who was executed by the Syrian government in 2015. On the role of social media and the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East, see Karimi and Nasser (2016).
- 8 Here again there is an early twentieth-century predecessor, the French *Annales* historian Maurice Halbwachs.

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