Punctum, 5(2): 5-10, 2019

INTRODUCTION

Lia Yoka and Federico Bellentani

While monuments exist in different plastic and architectural forms, such as statues, buildings, squares, temples, gardens, pyramids, cenotaphs, obelisks and even entire areas of a city, what they seem to have in common is a function that is at once commemorative and political. As a certain type of public material incarnation of information, containing, to borrow Göran Sonesson's term, 'remote intentionality' (Sonesson 2015: 32), monuments aim to promote a certain kind of public remembering of an event, as well as a certain kind of forgetting.

Through their inherent 'remote intentionality', monuments present the ideas of those who erect them. In the modern period, where official acts of commemoration refer to events 'marked distinctively and separately from the religious calendar' (Winter 2010: 312), state-national elites have been aware of the political power of monuments. They have used monuments as tools to legitimize and perpetuate their cultural and political power, i.e. as propaganda invested in objects and rituals, in other words, through forms of commemoration that owe a lot to the psychosocial structure of religious mediation, as expressed for example in shrines and pilgrimages (Groys and Weibel 2010).

However, this legitimization does not always work, and if it does, it cannot last. Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico have aptly summarized the 'paradox' between the physical stability and dynamic meaning of monuments. This paradox is also reflected, as they say, in the gap in scholarship between studying 'the material-symbolic and the political dimensions of monuments', as well as between addressing 'the intentions of the designers and the interpretations of the users' (Bellentani and Panico 2016: 28).

Addressing contemporary monuments made since the 1970s, that is to say, since the total transformation, in formal, aesthetic, as well as functional terms, of memorial culture worldwide through Holocaust memorials, the theorization (and the subsequent multiplicity of definitions) of counter-monuments is an attempt to bridge this gap and to give rise to new conceptions of the relationship between memory, history and political power.

The tension in this relationship, especially after the explosion of post-Cold War memorial culture, is evident in a chain of semantic dismantlings: Serious resemiotization is at work in the demolition of Soviet monuments, in the cathartic destruction of Confederate statues in the

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2019.0019

US, in the building of memorial sites that rearrange national historical narratives (*vide* the epic State programs in Skopje or Budapest), in the unforeseen phantasmagoria of 9/11 commemoration, in spontaneous acts of public commemoration, or, finally, in transformations, *via* an act of vandalism or an expression of indifference, of a hitherto respected object into one of public scorn and ridicule.

In memorial culture today, a culture irreversibly marked first by post-Shoah memorials and then by the post-1989 'memory wars', and exemplified in the trends mentioned above, the meaning of 'public' memory, (and this holds true of all things 'public', a notion usurped by market and State in the name of the people or of some so-called 'collective' use), must be tested anew in every case under scrutiny against the changing constellations of the generic terms memory, history, and political power. If we follow that principle, we could suggest that shifts in the forms and functions of commemoration over the last decades seem to at once confirm and go beyond Pierre Nora's famous distinction between the *milieux de mémoire* (the realms of memory), the real, authentic and vanishing environments for remembering, and the *lieux de mémoire* (the loci of memory), i.e. substitutes of memory that can merely remind us, in an artificial way, of the event that is being referenced. (Nora 1989)

Nora's distinction definitely finds its confirmation in the nostalgia for some forever lost common organic experience in what Erika Doss has called 'memorial mania' (Doss 2012). Civil society as commissioner, designer and user of monuments is employing symbols and mnemotechnics similar to those of religion; and yet, is also aware of the waning of the impact, appeal and interpretative transparency of traditional monuments.

But these new *loci* of memory seem also to reclaim their own *realms,* and in doing so self-reflexively reverse Nora's distinction: Monuments and counter-monuments today claim the recognition and installation of public meanings that are politically combative or controversial, at other times subjective and open to diverse ethical interpretations, and can even become vehicles of soothing moral redemption for civil society's powerlessness and inaction in the face of war crimes and genocides (Yoka 2016).

There are parallels to be drawn between meaning production in memorial culture and meaning production in contemporary art (suffice it to picture post-WWII painterly abstraction and abstract monuments next to each other, or to juxtapose minimalism to strands of the counter-monumental trend): On the one hand, mass communication in the 20th century as exemplified by the technologies of cinema, TV, and the internet, has rendered high art and official memorial culture weaker and irrelevant. On the other hand, both high art and memorial culture continue to refine and radicalize meaning-making, in the sense that they have taken up the task of constantly offering new connections between form and content, object and sign, signification and reference. While steering clear of popular over-expansive definitions of artworks as 'monuments that do not commemorate' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 167), we would add a further categorical connection between art and monuments, namely the blurring

of boundaries (to the point of their extinction) between official public art and public monuments, a feature in numerous city and State commissions of public works today, particularly widespread in the UK.

While hailing from diverse research communities (visual culture, cultural anthropology, art history, cognitive semiotics), and dealing with case studies in different temporal and geographical contexts, the articles presented in this volume address the two basic questions outlined above. The first question concerns the dynamics at the intersection of history, memory and political power in the meaning of monuments and memorial culture today, the second examines the specific techniques of this meaning-making process. The issue also contains two special sections, comprising of original essays and artworks that thematize monuments and commemoration, and explore the poetic aspects of signification and semiotic approaches to making art.

Göran Sonesson sets the theoretical-cognitive stage for the debate on monuments and commemoration combining two demanding sets of epistemic inquiries. Where do we begin to think of the relationship between monuments as typical *exograms*, pieces of extended mind in neuroscientific/evolutionary terms on the one hand, and socioculturally determined public, collective, or potentially shared, historical memory on the other? In semiotic terms, monuments seem to be double objects, but do not necessarily qualify as signs in the strictest sense of the term: Usually, but not always, they are rooted in space as physical objects, they project meanings onto space, refer to a different moment in time, and are offered to public experience. Interpreting Sonesson, one could strip the definition to its bare essentials and conclude that monuments are a special technology of *reminding*.

Mario Panico explores the historical experience of Fascism in today's Italy through the analysis of still standing fascist monuments. He devises four semiotic strategies to elaborate on the historical experience of Fascism in Italy and how these are used in the practical conservation of monuments that remained after the fascist era in Italy: erasure, normalization, narcotization-latency and the construction of polyphonic memories.

Following a contiguous line of inquiry, **Miguel Fernadez Belmonte** calls attention to primarily iconographic and stylistic elements in the Valle de los Caídos in Spain. Reclaiming the analytical power of art historical next to sociopolitical readings of monuments, he charts the currency of the monument in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, its significance within the Francoist legal and political discourses, and finally its competing symbolic values and the conflicts over its meaning for future generations.

Sergei Kruk proposes a comprehensive method for the semiotic analysis of three-dimensional artworks. He focuses on a specific plastic sign of sculpture: the mass. According to Kruk, the mass determines the forces of gravity and inertia and have the potential to elicit connotations. Analyzing monuments erected in Soviet Latvia, the author explains that the experience of three-dimensional sculptures is embedded in the elaboration of the visual input. Therefore, the viewer can interpret sculpture through perceiving the sculptural mass.

In **Viktorija Rimaitė**'s analysis of monuments in Vilnius, Lithuania, monuments are considered tools of construction of national identity. Rimaitė proposes an aesthetic approach to monuments that will bring to the fore the technique of promotion and reinforcement of the sense of national belonging. The author argues that monuments in Vilnius present similar visual and aesthetic features regardless of the political regimes that erect them. To demonstrate this, Rimaitė uses an interdisciplinary approach connecting discourse analysis of news reports and Greimassian figurative and thematic analysis to assess both the variable and the constant features of monuments.

Patrizia Violi's analysis of *Fragmentos* by Doris Salcedo reviews the concept of counter-monument by proposing a more general definition of counter-monumentalization practices that can assume two notable forms: a) the re-semantization of an already existing monument that conveys meanings that are today perceived as unacceptable by a community (this is the case of the controversial monuments inherited by Nazism in Germany, Fascism in Italy and Francoism in Spain and communism in the former Soviet Union) and b) new monuments seeking to oppose the traditional rhetoric of monumentalization, as evident in several Holocaust memorials in Europe and especially in Germany. Drawing on this second category, Violi analyses *Fragmentos* in Bogota, Colombia – a counter-monument as defined by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo herself.

Ariel Barbieri suggests a discussion of the notion of 'non-monumentality' and pursues two manifest aims: a) to construct a semiotic definition of a 'non-monument' in dialogue with the field of commemorative monumentality and deconstructive anti-monumentality and b) to offer possible taxonomies of non-monuments. The essay is inspired by American aesthetics proposed by Rodolfo Kusch and the semiotic categories developed by Juan Magariños de Morentín. It establishes connections between semiotics and contemporary art in an effort to devise a unique framework for the analysis of the non-monument: a planned work of art in progress.

Inevitably, an important part of this issue addresses monuments in relation to the medium of photography. Photography actually predetermines the way we understand public space today, since it is by far the main pictorial medium of mass communication. It also plays a great role in shaping the way memories themselves are perceived and represented, often acting as an emblematic reference to the concept of memory itself. **Eirini Papadaki** examines monuments on postcards and social media images in order to explore two-dimensional mediating practices, their socio-cultural and media settings and the role of such visual resources in producing the meaning of monuments. The author argues that monuments and photography cover a similar ontological status because of their ability to capture selected instances of time and feed into or give actual shape and content to one's memory.

In his review of a photographic portfolio by **Paris Petridis**, shot in Southeastern Mediterranean cities over the last fifteen years as part of an ongoing research project**, Hercules**

Papaioannou navigates through the connections between theory and technique of depicting monuments. He offers a critical overview of the history of photographing architecture, monuments, and landscapes, tracing this specific genre back to the very beginnings of the medium of photography itself. Against this analytical/interpretative background, and in conversation with the contemporary photographic work by Petridis, Papaioannou discusses new aesthetic and conceptual angles, that reinvent and redefine the weight and the trace of the monument in photography.

Finally, the *travelogue* by **Orestis Pangalos** documents, in text and picture, a deeply meditative itinerary, balancing between Lund's museums and its streets, between producing street art and curating it, and between appreciating 'accidental' aesthetic results in public space and analyzing conscious, intentional artworks. He collapses the boundaries between 'street art' and the poetics of urban visual noise, and urges us to imagine a restored connection between making uncommissioned, original public works and exhibiting them, through respectful collecting and curating techniques that will preserve the ethos and credibility of early practitioners.

This issue appears amidst a global pandemic, an unprecedentedly generalized and collective experience of fear and uncertainty, producing hitherto unimaginable connections between communication, politics, biology and nature, allowing for eugenic nightmares to be discussed as potential policies, magnifying and thus exposing, in high resolution, the world's inequality, fragility and anthropocenic despair.

We would like to thank, with all our hearts, the authors that worked with us and responded to our last-minute editorial demands, saving this small moment of semiotic reflection from distraction and confusion. Lia Yoka is grateful to Konstandinos Ioannidis and Konstandinos Korres for their inspiring ideas. Finally, we would both like to thank, for their invaluable help in the review process for this volume, Federico Montanari, Olga Lavrenova, Iwao Takahashi, Carlos González Pérez, Kęstutis Zaleckis, Aleksandra Bogomilova, Aluminé Rosso, Daria Arkhipova, Lukas R.A. Wilde, Tiit Remm, and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou.

REFERENCES

Bellentani Federico and Mario Panico 2016. The meanings of monuments and memorials: toward a semiotic approach. *Punctum. International journal of semiotics* 2 (1): 28-46.

Doss, Erika 2012. *Memorial Mania: Public feeling in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari 1994. *What is Philosophy?* transl. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press.

Groys, Boris and Peter Weibel 'Religion as Medium' 2010. In: Boris Groys and Peter Weibel (eds.) *Medium Religion: Faith, Geopolitics, Art,* Cologne: Walther König, 6-11.

Nora, Pierre 1989. Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire, *Representations*, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 26: 7-24.

Winter, Jay 2010. Sites of Memory. In: Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz (eds) *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates,* New York: Fordham University Press.

Sonesson, Göran 2015. From Remembering to Memory by Way of Culture. A Study in Cognitive Semiotics, *Southern Semiotic Review* 5 (1): 25-52.

Yoka, Lia 2016. Ψυχοθεραπεία και συνενοχή στις σύγχρονες μνημονικές πρακτικές [Psychotherapy and complicity in contemporary memorial practices], Alexandra Chronaki and Petros Phokaides (eds.) *Θέσεις της Μνήμης* [Positions of Memory], Athens: Nissos, 155-176.