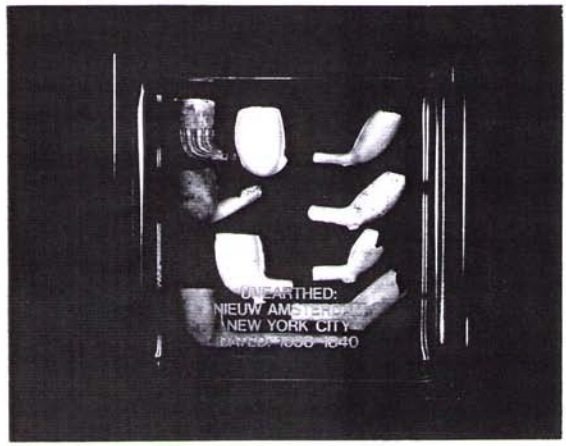
Sculpture
March 1997 Vol. 16 No. 3

Features



Making Memories

Commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves, as John R. Gillis notes, the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some instances, annihilation. (*Commemorations*, ed. John R. Gillis, Princeton Univ. Press, 1994, p. 5)

Commemoration generally refers to a past, yet it is dedicated to future viewers and next generations who will experience the provocation of memory in their own lives. For this and other obvious reasons, schools are strong sites for memory work. In 1992, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel completed *Mnemonics* for the new Stuyvesant High School constructed in lower Manhattan north of Battery Park City. The artists inserted 400 small glass block reliquaries (eight by eight by four inches) throughout the 10-floor building. Forming a daunting archive of local and global information, the glass receptacles are organized by several categories—88 blocks with collages of collectibles represent the history of Stuyvesant High School. (The original school opened in 1904.) Another 88 blocks have been left empty for graduating classes (through the year 2080) to create their own expressions or tributes. The remaining reliquaries contain artifacts and objects collected from sites around the world reflecting the wonder of cultural, natural, and technical histories. These blocks are a physical, site-based manifestation of a vast, diverse sense of knowledge. Like diminutive cabinets of curiosities, the receptacles suggest the slow, enigmatic processes of discovery and memory. *Mnemonics* powerfully expresses multiple concepts of history as well as the predictable and unaccountable dimensions of a future that Stuyvesant graduates will inherit and influence.

The many reliquaries dispersed throughout the building accommodate four years of random encounter and planned observation—the length of a high school education. The mind is not a repository; memories are not simply stored until called into use. They emerge and extinguish, embody and disappear. *Mnemonics* is implicitly concrete and explicitly illusory. Students may know of its 400 components, but its enormous modesty and dispersed scale confirm that no experience is complete or comprehensive—that memory itself is negotiable. With the de-emphasis of memorization and drilling in most U.S. public schools, *Mnemonics* appeals to the dynamic role that memory plays in the perception and knowledge of the world.

Commemorative sculpture is shaped by time, place, and political struggles

by Patricia C. Phillips

articulation of histories. The "official" record is subject to review; it is frequently amended by new additions—alternative visions or counter-monuments that challenge any prescriptive or singular points of view.

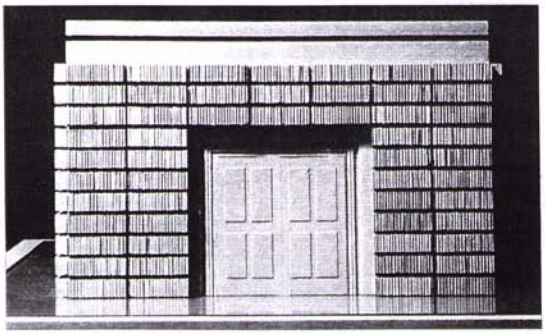
There are powerful examples of revisionist commemorative acts. Jochen Gerz's work has raised incisive, often alarming questions about memory and loss. The *Monument Against Fascism, Harburg* (1986–93) was sited near a Hamburg shopping area. Gerz (with his collaborator Esther Shalev-Gerz) installed a 12-meter-high tower covered in soft, receptive lead. A sign invited individuals opposed to fascism to sign their names in the lead surface. As the four sides of the rectangular tower filled with inscriptions, the tower was periodically lowered into the ground. Ultimately there were enough expressions against fascism to totally obscure the monument.

Of course, revisionist memorials also can stimulate more centrist responses. A series of controversies surrounding Maya Lin's eloquent, introspective, and iconoclastic *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) was quieted by the addition of a flag pôle and a figurative sculpture of three soldiers by Frederick Hart. Some veterans and Washington, D.C. leaders believed that the rich, challenging ambiguities of Lin's project required amendment by a more familiar, "appropriate" representation of this divisive conflict.

In 1996, the National Park Service announced a national competition to design a project that honors the Indians who died protecting their land and way of life in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, fought in 1876. The entire United States Seventh Cavalry, led by General George Custer, died in that battle. Most children grow up hearing stories and learning the lessons of Custer's heroic "last stand." Currently, this site is marked by gravemarkers for the slain soldiers, a U.S. flag, audiotapes describing Custer and the battle, and a large white obelisk listing the names of members of the infantry, which tell a story of manifest destiny and devastating loss. The current competition attempts to confront and expand this privileged and monocular history by recognizing the sacrifices of Native Americans on that day, 120 years ago. At the very least, contrasting visions and versions of this significant historical event will co-exist; perhaps even the "ideas of warfare itself—organized violence and destruction" (Kirk Savage, in *Commemorations*, op. cit., p. 127) will become a strand in the weaving of a more contested, dynamic notion of historical accounts and national commemoration.

Contemporary issues of commemoration have been stimulated by the emergence of Holocaust memorials in the United States and Europe, by Maya Lin's work, and by the nature and construction of memory itself. James E. Young's *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* is an ambitious analysis of memorials internationally. Examining responses in diverse locations, he presents manifestations of memory influenced by site, audience, and history. "Depending on where and by whom these memorials are constructed, these sites remember the past according to a variety of national myths, ideals, and political needs. Some recall war dead, others resistance, and still others mass murder." (Yale Univ. Press, 1993, p. 1) He also raises difficult questions about commemoration and criticism. Do many memorials' accessible, unambiguous messages produce insignificant, univalent art? Is aesthetically and ideologically challenging commemorative art more susceptible—even vulnerable—to political skirmishes? And is there a particular mandate for art criticism that involves memorials?

Recent Turner Prize recipient Rachel Whiteread was selected to design a Holocaust memorial for the Judenplatz in Vienna. She proposed a 24-foot-wide, 33-foot-long, and 12-foot-high structure that resembles a sealed archives or a tomb. The elevations of the cast-concrete structure are casts of stacked shelves of books. But there is a disquieting, self-contained withholding; in a haunting inversion, the edges of the pages are available for public view but the spines appear to turn inward. The form's mute density



Rachel Whiteread, *Model of Judenplatz Wein Monument and Memorial Site*, 1996. Wood, glass, modeling paste, and paint, approx. 10 in. high.

conveys the extinguished lives and unrealized knowledge of annihilation. Construction of Whiteread's stark memorial has been delayed for many reasons, including disputes over the site (excavations in the Judenplatz have uncovered evidence of a Medieval Jewish synagogue) and ideological conflicts regarding the meaning of a Holocaust memorial in Vienna. Some citizens have advocated enlarging the archaeological project, implying that it will suffice for a memorial effort. Whiteread and others believe that the excavation is bound to a particular historical moment that does not adequately represent 20th-century atrocities. Others have questioned if Whiteread's project concerns Jewish mourning or Austrian shame. And can it express both? Still others have found Whiteread's solemn edifice too bunker-like—a defiant obstruction in the small site. At the heart of the various controversies are differing conceptions of the past, how and why it should be represented, and how art evokes and embodies memories.[1]

Undeniably, it is a difficult time to make public art. The ordeal is further complicated when a project is asked to commemorate—to witness the often repressed and volatile nature of personal and public memories. The artist must find her way through thickets of information, competing advocates and agendas, and the obvious omissions and subtle oversights of public records. Her art must encourage the labor of memory in different individuals. The challenge is to activate rather than anesthetize memory, to reveal its negotiable character rather than to anneal meaning.

For nearly two decades, Dennis Adams has been interested in the space and representation of memory. At first concerned with the idea of cultural amnesia—or the unreliability of subjectivity—he installed a series of bus shelters whose reconfigured spaces dissected news photographs of recent U.S. history. The suppressed, displaced images seemed disturbingly familiar—haunting images that document controversial, contested historical events. Without identification, the grim faces of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Roy Cohn, and Joseph McCarthy recalled a less heroic, more problematic political history.

In the past 10 years, Adams has completed temporary projects internationally. He has created far more public projects in Europe than in the United States. Paradoxically—or fittingly—his memory-inspired projects are generally short-lived. Often incorporating the sites, amenities, typologies, and nomenclature of the urban environment, he enables repressed histories—and silenced voices—to emerge. In 1995, he constructed a project in 10 public registration stations in the atrium of the new city hall of The Hague. Designed by Richard Meier, the stunning, formidable building is a clearinghouse for information and civic procedures. In *10 Thru 20: Voices from The Hague*, the artist installed monitors in the stations; 30-minute videotapes of recent immigrants describing their relocation and adjustment to The Hague were reflected in a panel where a public official ordinarily stands. Asked to tell their stories with extreme brevity and long pauses, silence dominated the installation. The mirrored faces insinuated many different stories as well as the insubstantial nature of memory; the long silences capitulated the experiences of immigrants who are limited by language and face begrudging acceptance in communities and cities.

Recently, Adams completed a permanent project for a public school in Queens, New York. Sponsored by New York City's Percent-for-Art program and the Public Art for Public Schools program of the Board of Education, *Tributaries* is a 12-part installation located above drinking fountains in West Queens High School. At these sites of pause, refreshment, and social exchange (not unlike the public fountains of the past in cities, where water was gathered and news shared), Adams installed back-lit photographs from the Civil Rights movement. While none of the images are well-known "classics," they each document a significant moment in the nation's racial history. Each photograph includes a border of 12 names of Civil Rights workers. While pausing for a drink, students (and teachers) encounter a powerful, if somewhat obscure image. The artist envisions these interventions as stations of dissent as well as commemoration. Geographically, "tributaries" inevitably diverge from the main body of water, yet semantically engender an idea of tribute.

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Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future. It is fashioned ideally in a public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and

Above: Dennis Adams, *Tributaries* (detail), 1995. Lightboxes and water fountain. Opposite, right: Esther Shalev-Gerz & Jochen Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*, Harburg, 1986–93. Lead, mixed media. 12 m. high. (From left to right: second lowering, October 23, 1989; fifth lowering, December 4, 1990; seventh lowering, November 27, 1992).

cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures.[2]

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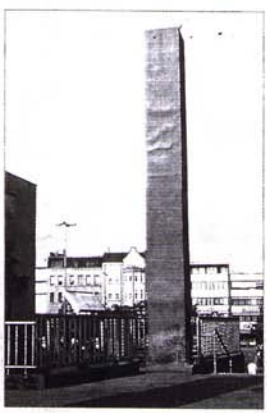
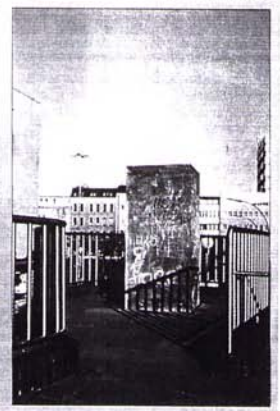
Seeking to celebrate unacknowledged and overlooked individuals whose quiet contributions help to shape cities and stabilize neighborhoods, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville created a *Path of Stars* (1994) in New Haven's Ninth Square. De Bretteville installed 20 medallions in the sidewalks at 15-foot intervals. Beginning at both corners of the neighborhood, the perpendicular paths meet at the center of the district. The compass rose-shaped medallions are spatial and chronological guides to a human history of this urban neighborhood. Depicting 300 years of the lives of ordinary residents, the insets provide names, dates, vocations, and selected stories. While walking through the neighborhood, a visceral sense of the dignity of quiet commitment and dedicated vigilance is experienced. The citing of particular community members was informed by conversations, research, and stories that indicated memorable events. Over time, more medallions can be added to the site to enhance the "texture of memory."

Most of de Bretteville's public art projects acknowledge the quotidian—everyday lives and routine efforts of ordinary citizens. She uses the term "commemoration" reluctantly. And we can all recount too many instances that ennoble injustice and endorse conformity. Unquestionably, de Bretteville is involved in another kind of commemorative work that arouses repressed memories—that celebrates the participation of unknown women, men, and children in communities. Rescuing individuals from anonymity, she personalizes public space, making





experiences visible, accessible, and a part of the public record.

De Bretteville is currently completing an ambitious project sponsored by the Community Redevelopment Agency for the Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles. Using the pavement that runs along First Street, the artist has worked for more than six years collecting stories of the community from 1890 through the 1940s when many Japanese Americans were forced to leave Little Tokyo. Like the lives of working people recalled in New Haven's *Path of Stars*, *Omoide no Shotokyo*'s fragments of texts, timelines, and images running along the base of older buildings engender a fresh history of fugitive memories. She creates a haven for the forgotten.

When memories have been stifled and stories suppressed, commemoration can require an act of piracy. Working with students in Saarbrücken, Germany, Jochen Gerz committed a magnificent incident of "withholding." Having secured lists of jewish cemeteries destroyed during World War II, Gerz and students, working evenings, discreetly removed paving stones (adding replacements) from the city's largest public square. They etched the name of an extinguished cemetery on each stone. The original paving stones were secretly replaced with the inscriptions facing down. *2,146 Stones, Monument Against Racism, Saarbrücken* (1990–93) is acknowledged by an adjacent plaque that lists the forgotten burial sites. The project's defiant invisibility is a potent manifestation of the necessity—as well as the impossibility—of commemoration.

Daniel J. Martinez committed an aggressive, profoundly poetic (although short-lived) commemorative act in Chicago, invited by Mary Jane Jacob to participate in "Culture in Action," a 1993 summer project sponsored by Sculpture Chicago. Martinez developed a two-part project, including an absurdist parade as well as a solemn tribute to ignored, oppressed constituencies of the city. *100 Victories/10,000 Tears*, sited at Maxwell Street, adjacent to the University of Illinois campus, honored the activities, unrest, and political events of the city's labor leaders. Maxwell Street, once a site of revolutionary activities, had more recently become a vibrant open-air market. Considered an unsightly and undesirable site by city and university officials, the University of Illinois had purchased the area for future expansion. Martinez entered the scene at this tenuous moment.

Selecting a block-square, cyclone-fenced site, Martinez appropriated the university signage system and installed placards on the fence recollecting notable leaders and significant events in Chicago's labor history. At the same time, the University of Illinois was dismantling the infrastructure of its campus. A series of elevated walkways and plazas designed in the late 1960s by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Walter Netsch to support democratic discourse had, in fact, quieted free speech and sheltered criminals in its dark recesses. As Martinez writes: "The site was a meeting place and a walkway between main buildings, but it was eventually utilized as a prime area for muggings and rapes, transforming in function from the training of scholars to the terrorizing of students." (*The Things You See When You Don't Have a Grenade*, SmartArt, 1996, p. 78)

Subsequently, the university hired a "mall" architect to "sweeten" the site. Netsch's brutalist agora and walkways were razed; the granite slabs (each weighing 80,000 pounds and measuring 10 by 30 by 1 feet) were removed. Essentially, Martinez highjacked the granite slabs, and with cranes and a flatbed truck installed them in the block-square site. The spontaneous agora became a site for personal expression and community activism. Martinez reports that Netsch used the temporary site for architecture semi-

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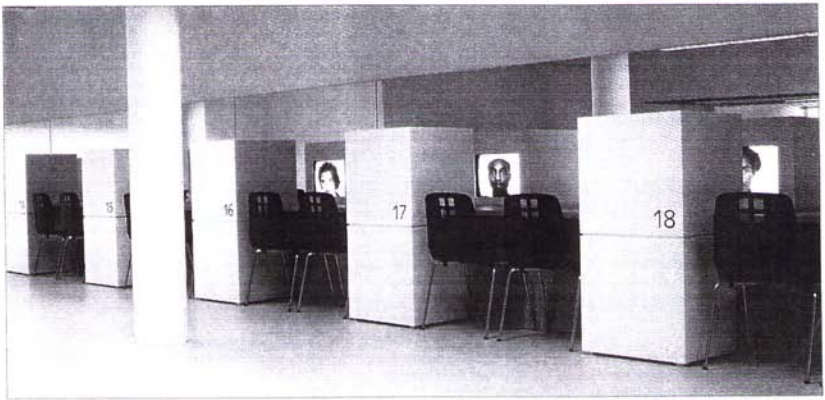
nars. It was an empowering oasis—aggressively democratic. Ultimately, Martinez's guerrilla-like commemorative project was dismantled by the forces of gentrification; the university built a parking lot at the site, destroying the marketplace at Maxwell Street.

A renewed consideration of commemoration has led to other promising projects. A section of the Audubon Ballroom, the site of Malcolm X's assassination, will soon house three tributes to the fallen leader. Projects by Daniel Galvez, Gabriel Koren, and

Left: Daniel J. Martinez, *100 Victories/10,000 Tears* (detail), 1993. Granite slabs, placards, and mixed-media, installation. Opposite: Dennis Adams, *10 thru 20: Voices from The Hague*, 1995. Installation.



Colin Chase have been commissioned by the New York City's Percent-for-Art program and Economic Development Corporation. Unfortunately, only half of the original building—including the stage where Malcolm X was shot—will be saved. Poignantly, this preserved fragment will be surrounded by Columbia University's new biomedical research complex.

Lauren Ewing's new commemorative project is an interrogation of a controversial tradition. Her proposed *The Rose Runway*, scheduled for completion in Atlantic City, summer 1997, examines the history of the Miss America Pageant and cultural concepts of beauty. A rose-colored, illuminated corridor perpendicular to the boardwalk will contain a procession of individual tributes honoring winners since the pageant's inception in 1921. The specific sites will honor the voice and language of women; each plaque contains transcriptions of the successful contestant's stated aspirations. Ewing expects that *The Rose Runway* will honor those who have participated in the pageant while delineating 70 years of change in the lives and expectations of women in the United States. If not solemn, the Ewing's project is a serious, critical act of commemoration.

In spite of new questions, changing contents, and overlooked histories, this is not a time for euphoria. Commemoration is an "incomplete" endeavor. A diverse range of scholars, including Lewis Mumford, Pierre Nora, and Rosalind Krauss, question the way in which monuments and memorials allow citizens to relieve themselves of the obligation to remember.

Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. (Young, op. cit., p. 5) This "forgetfulness" can lead to universalizing constructs, psychological constraints, and a misguided sense of consensus. Memory is deposited and withdrawn when it should be an active, circulating form of currency. This more optimistic concept of exchange informs the ideas of collective memory that M. Christine Boyer has explored. For Boyer, the "collective" does not represent uniformity or single-mindedness. It reflects the multiple. Like collective bargaining, there is an essential recognition of difference. Unlike collective behavior, there is not the expectation or desire for unified, mass response.

The public realm of the City of Collective Memory should entail a continuous urban topography, a spatial structure that covers both rich and poor places, honorific and humble monuments, permanent and ephemeral forms, and should include places for public assemblage and public debate, as well as private memory walks and personal retreats. (*The City of Collective Memory*, M.I.T. Press, 1994, p. 10)

Boyer appeals for contemporary cities where collective memory is the currency of vital, civic exchange. The most compelling examples of commemorative art provide opportunities for public transaction and personal reflection so that our public art and public spaces are never appropriated for an amnesiac, official record. ◘

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Notes

1. Background on this project was provided by Michael Kimmelman, "How Public Art Turns Political." The New York Times, October 28,1996, and Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York, NY.
2. See John Bodnar, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." In Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. 1992. p. 15.

FERNANDO VAN REIJEN