

Introduction

by Mario Di Paolantonio and Chloë Brushwood Rose

This issue of *Public* explores varying attempts to publicly mark and give memorial significance to past collective and/or state sanctioned wrongs that remain still unsettled and unsettling. Human rights trials or pseudo-legal forums such as Truth Commissions are often charged with publicly recognizing past wrongs and with fostering sensibilities for addressing those wrongs. However, artistic memorial practices and other commemorative public interventions, such as the marking of streets and calendars, the re-burial of remains from mass graves, and the recovery and preservation of various sites and objects of social trauma, are equally significant and help in forging public memorial markers capable of instructing a political community about the significance of its violent past and its potential turn to a more just society. Admitting that such endeavours are never simply consensual, this issue of *Public* grapples with how differing memorial displays, objects, and practices are inevitably (re)invoked in a field of competing interpretations, incommensurable memories, and representational strategies.

Of particular interest here are the debates, contestations, and varying proposals that surround artistic attempts to recover, preserve, and publicly mark—in order to memorialize/recall—those sites, buildings, and objects associated with individual and collective experiences of trauma. In distinction to the erection of monuments or to the demarcation of commemorative spaces, the art projects and essays that inhabit this collection explore the uses of art, artistic practices, and aesthetic experiences in representing, working through, and learning from traumatic events. The contributions to this issue grapple with the very possibility of representation and remembrance, particularly in relation to traumatic histories, which by their very definition, remain unintelligible. At the same time, our impetus for developing this issue around the theme of *Traces* emerged from a commitment to the notion that encounters with art can solicit something that exceeds the desire for representation and may offer a connection to the past that reorients us to new possibilities for being in the present.

What, we wonder, is particular to the register of artistic works and their reception in helping us to come to terms with a difficult past? How might the aesthetic register, supplement or allow for a complex and dynamic negotiation with the ends and limits of commemorative practices and spaces? How might artworks and their exhibition help to foster practices of remembrance and learning in the aftermath of mass violence?

While of course we cannot predict in advance how art works will be received, engaged or even resisted in the construction of historical memory, this issue attempts to trace “the terms and conditions on which [aesthetic] images enable practices of looking, which intervene in capabilities to perceive, judge, feel and speak about the past.”¹ At issue then is a consideration of how artistic works and their curatorial arrangements might elicit or provoke an affective engagement and attentiveness to a difficult past that moves beyond the instrumentality often found in commemorative practices. Acutely aware that conventional commemorative projects tend to yield remembrance-learning practices which privilege literalness and a sense of authenticity of representation,² the works and projects collected in this issue appreciate how art can do more than merely facilitate the act of recognition or of representing the veracity of a past event.

Traces brings together a variety of projects that engage with and trouble the limits of memorial practices through the irruptive affect and complex self-reflexivity that artworks potentially afford. Amid unsettled and unsettling images of social wrongs that tend to circulate as spectacle and with a limited lifespan, there is an implicit sense at work in this issue of *Public* that this “is a moment,” as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it, “given to us for rethinking just what our lives, and our arts, are for.”³ Before discussing (in rather speculative terms) the significance of the work of art for practices of remembrance, we want to forefront some of the limits often at work amid conventional commemorative practices and sites.

The demarcation of spaces for remembering and honouring past atrocities often works to contain the scattered fragments of a traumatic past and its irruptive repetition through a consciously constructed

fact-laden learning environment. Usually employing a realist form of representation, such learning environments endeavour to foster the transmission of an evidentiary narrative that can transparently communicate the horrors of the past often in a redemptive manner. Indeed, there is a certain moral and historical assurance accompanying this memorial tendency. As Kyo Maclear notes, “confirming the truth or accuracy of an image or testimony allows us to proclaim a secure relationship to the history under investigation. If the window is transparent, the viewer has a socially and morally credible perspective... [to] bestow coherence upon events, however fragmented and horrible.”⁴ Moreover, amid the current proclivity driving such commemorative work lies the commonly held belief that we need to know as much as possible in order to avert the repetition of the worst atrocities. From the *U.S. Holocaust Museum* to Cambodia’s *Tuol-Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes*, the imperatives “Never Forget!” and “Never Again!” tend to frame the way in which we are to value and deploy learning and remembrance about a terrible past.

Recalling Ernst van Alphen’s critique of conventional Holocaust education, it is significant to note that commemorative projects that have an over reliance on coherent-realist redemptive forms of representation risk a dominating, and ultimately deadening, encounter with the unsettled past.⁵ The attempt to mark the remnants of a traumatic past in order to facilitate the recollection of facts and, thus, inoculate us from ever repeating past wrongs again betrays a certain instrumentalization of memory. More specifically, the operative logic driving this type of commemorative pedagogy “assumes a collapse of two forms of mastery: to know and to dominate. If the past is known, the future can be dominated, kept under control.”⁶ Under such pedagogical practices the force of the past is thwarted as history’s messy and unpredictable surplus (its very *alterity*) is foreclosed within the exigency of instructional ends. In other words, such a cognitive mastery and calculating approach to the work of remembrance-learning strips the past of its irruptive summons, namely, of the incalculability and incongruity that allows the past to face us (and obligate us) as something other than the present.

As a corrective to this potentially deadening commemorative practice Roger Simon invokes the need for a “living memory”—an interpretative memorial endeavour that can open the present to the trace and summons (the touch) of the past. This implies establishing a connection to the past “not in relation to mastery... but in terms of working-through the materials of remembrance in a way that produces something new.”⁷ By approaching the work of remembrance-learning as something other than a facile dispensation of facts wielded to contain the traumatic past, Simon underscores the importance of fostering an affective engagement and interpretative concern with the past. It is the possibility of being touched, implicated, affected by the trace of the past, as something beyond mastery or anticipation, that affords us the potential of being opened up and put into question by what is “yet unsaid or socially and psychically repressed.”⁸ In other words, our remembrance practices need to appreciate the very *alterity* (the disruptive trace of otherness) that the many scatterings and fragments of the past can bring forth, for therein lies the hope of opening ourselves to what is new and outside our present delimitations.

Responding to this need for a “living memory,” we have collected a group of works in this issue of *Public* that harbour the hope of engaging and sustaining a relation with a past which simultaneously puts us into question and reorients us to a new appreciation of who “we” might be. Each of the works featured here points to an “insurgent commemorative practice” that preserves the non-synchronous relation between past and present (where the differential traces between past and present are ethically sustained rather than predicted) all the while fostering “*points of connection* between people in regard to a past that they...might acknowledge the touch of.”⁹

Furthermore, the projects in this issue signal the ways in which the aesthetic register is uniquely positioned to foster such an insurgent commemorative engagement. Simon discusses how the

“associative potency” inherent to the work of art can come to provide a rich resource for crafting an insurgent remembering-learning practice that can turn us around—away from any redemptive perspective—to face our own implication in how we presently bear the traces of a difficult past.¹⁰ The nuances, complexities and contradictions, which often displace and subvert any one literal and figural meaning within an artwork, help to prepare us to engage (rather than cover over) the elisions and gaps evoked by the traumatic past. The potency of associations put in motion through the artwork’s refusal to mean only one thing—the artwork’s refusal to fill or foreclose ambiguity—allows us to bring to the fore, to externalize, the ambivalences and affective resonances of memories that do not settle easily into any straight-forward accounting of experience.

Furthermore, the interminable interpretative complexity that art unleashes can teach us, as Maclear writes, “to confront events that tear the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness, that thrust us into a less literal and more uncertain state of awareness.”¹¹ This is of particular importance in fostering a “sense memory” that can mediate loss or trauma beyond the strictures of an evidentiary narrative that recounts the numbing story of yet another historical catastrophe. The “associative potency” thus works to interrupt the epistemological drive of probing the past to uncover events that comfortably settle within the familiar modes of historical reception. Amid the elisions, gaps and connotative richness left by the work of art we find a point of entry, a moment when we must pause and think otherwise, for bearing with and working through the unruly sensuous perturbations, contradictions and uncertain traces that arise when we face a difficult past.

In this sense, artworks inflected with an insurgent memorial force not only expose that *aporetic* instance when the transparency and coherence of historical narrativization falters, but potentially gesture us to question our own memorial desires for evidence, chronology, closure, identification and redemption. The significance of the work of art for remembering-learning practices thus resides in the *interrogative trace* it unleashes rather than in the *form* it proposes. In other words, it is not the case that the intrinsic formal qualities of the work are prioritized over its historical contextualization; rather the concern here is with the interpretative force (the very trace) evoked and let loose by the work of art. This is a force that can break any fixed relation or final certitude between figure and concept, or between representation and identity, interposing a gap, a pause, an interval in meaning from where we might interrogate ways of seeing and ways of remembering that habitually orient our commitments and social relations.

Equally significant to the “associative potency” unleashed by the work of art is the “extended visual concern” it helps sustain. Simon writes that, “images with an insurgent commemorative force produce an effusion of unresolved visual concern elicited by discontinuities structured into an image’s composition.”¹² The very elisions, gaps and discontinuities that prevent the work of art from finally settling into any one meaning supply a “jolt of incongruity” that arouses an extended visual concern for what is potentially there but not fully shown: the traces. The artwork, in other words, demands a particular time and attentiveness since it withholds telling us directly what it is about and what it wants. Consequently, because art does not reveal or give itself finally and fully to us, it has the potential to fragment and withdraw from our usual instrumental manner of apprehending the world, suspending the practical and purposeful way in which we ration our time with the things we see. Maclear concisely conveys the particular temporality opened up by the work of looking at art when she writes, “art... has the potential to introduce a new pace for eyes used to scanning newspapers and television monitors. Amid the onrush of media and commerce, art asks that we slow down, that we disengage from hasty chaperones of history.”¹³

To “look” at that which does not readily offer us certainty or any straightforward meaning, to sustain a visual concern with the traces of a work, is to begin to learn how to take “our time.”

Looking at art prompts us to give time to what during this time cannot be totally comprehended, to what cannot be fully revealed, to what is fleeting and in danger of disappearing amid the strictures of our own time. Our ability to extend time to the work of art, to slow down and look independently from all practical ends, fosters a different non-instrumental sense of temporality that can—perhaps—open our eyes. Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “entering and exiting, that is what makes the image: appearing and disappearing. Not first representing, but first being or making a time... the time of making or taking an image, the time of time itself, which opens the eyes.”¹⁴ Our eyes are thus opened by the time we take to look and to make something fleeting of concern. In other words, our eyes are opened to the world by the care we give to what is precarious, to what is already withdrawing from us and not fully re-presentable or not conforming to our present terms.

The extended visual concern evoked by the work of art is particularly significant for helping to foster commemorative practices that are attentive to and extend care to what has presently run out of time, or, more precisely, to a past or marginal event that is threatening to disappear amid the exigencies of the moment. Given the manner in which commemoration often compresses and strips the past of its particular *alterity* through our present desires for self or collective affirmation, the extended visual concern for what is not fully comprehensible/representable fosters a particular attentiveness that “opens onto a past that exceeds its idea in the present (in me).”¹⁵ Such a mode of attentiveness extends time and consideration to a past that might not conform to or triumphantly replicate who we think we are, to a past that interrupts the redemptive and celebratory narratives often at work in commemorative sites.

In this issue of *Public*, commemoration is rethought through the terms of an ethical modality, as a particular structure of attending, which “interrupts the givenness of the present, opening the possibility of learning not just *about*, but *from* the past.”¹⁶ The works here extend care and attention to what exceeds our present strictures of historical reception, and, in doing so, enact the possibility of an insurgent form of remembrance that breaks into the present with something new, with something that haunts and concerns us. Such a remembrance practice harbours the possibility of engaging the disjunctive traces of the past as a critical resource that can allow us to pose new questions and hopeful openings regarding our time and sense of implication. Perhaps here we may once more engage the interminable (im)possible question of what our arts are for.

NOTES

- 1 Roger Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 33.
- 2 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 335.
- 4 Kyo Maclear, *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 80-81.
- 5 Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 6 van Alphen, 186.
- 7 Simon, 33
- 8 Ibid., 35
- 9 Ibid., 89
- 10 Ibid., 33-34
- 11 Maclear, 187
- 12 Simon, 35
- 13 Maclear, 75
- 14 Jean Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*. Trans. J. Fort. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 98.
- 15 Simon, 112
- 16 Ibid.