

Artwork, Aesthetics, and Public Memorialization

by Roger I. Simon

The images and texts that appear in this issue of *Public* explore varying, often conflicting, approaches as to exploring what it means to publicly mark, and hence construct, memorial significance in regard to past collective and/or state sanctioned wrongs that remain still unsettled and unsettling. While public memorializations generally practice multiple methods and serve a variety of purposes, our concern here are specific contemporary artworks in which the events referred to aesthetically do not become merely historical.¹ Rather, their appearance in galleries, parks, plazas, and art books is understood to have the potential to mobilize various aesthetics directed against “museum like” narratives and they are intended to bring histories into the present and to broker them authoritatively to an interested public. Traditional museums construct narratives whose function is to secure (or at least limit) the meanings of visual traces of historical events. They offer summary judgements that situate people in a state of remembrance that places them securely in a present, very much on the far side the past. In assigning memorializing artwork a position that resists placing viewers over and against history in order to comment upon it, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Mario Di Paolantonio implicitly ask how “marking” a past event within an aesthetic practice might be understood to conjure an on-going and critical relation between the past and the present. Taken on these terms, this issue of *Public* can be read as refusing the “anti-aesthetic” position that views the political force of aesthetics as largely illusory,² and hence contributes to the revitalization of the question of the relation between aesthetics, ethics, and politics.

Judith Butler has recently called for a reconsideration of Walter Benjamin’s early writing on aesthetics, particularly his efforts to distinguish between the sign and mark.³ Attending to this distinction helps us clarify what is at stake when we say that memorial artworks “publicly mark” historical events. In his brief notes toward a general theory of the mark, Benjamin noted that whereas “the sign is printed on something, the mark emerges from it.”⁴ What he had in mind here was a notion of a mark as like the manifestation of an uncontrollable blush. He argued that in the appearance of such a state there is a form of temporality in which guilt and atonement are “magically fused,” thus eliminating the resistance of the present to a possible relation between the past and the future. Working with this idea and extending it to the concerns of this issue of *Public*, it is productive to consider Benjamin’s notion of a mark as an element of a memorializing artwork. The mark inherent in the composition of such work may be understood as a manifestation of the felt event of loss (including its complex psycho-dynamic reverberations). On such terms, it is possible to characterize memorializing artworks as constituting a composition that together (1) constructs signs that conjure

an indexical relation to a prior event and thus brings forward its public remembrance through semblance; and (2) manifests and hence displays an emergent mark which is linked temporally to the experience of violence and loss. In such a composition, the sign and the mark reside in tension with each other. In a work of art, the signs cannot dissipate the felt encounter with the manifestation of the mark, nor can the mark obliterate the indexicality of the sign, obscuring its legibility as a trace. If either happens, an artwork would fail as a memorialization. This is why the vitality of any given memorializing artwork, its potential “force” wherein representation seems to do more than simply represent, is a consequence of how a work enacts the public rendering of signs while remaining the medium of a mark.

What constitutes the force of an image is one of the key questions in considering the relation between aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Notably, Jacques Derrida argues in this regard that “the force of the image has to do less with the fact that one sees something in it than with the fact that one is seen... The image sees more than it is seen.”⁵ On these terms, the force of a memorializing artwork would be felt as a singling one out, sensed as implicating one in the obligations inherent in the transitive movement of its affectively rendered testimony. This is a kinematic testimony that is always seeking the subject of its address in an attempt to provoke desires and make claims on the felt responsibilities of those who are the object of its regard. It is important to underscore that the testimonial address rendered by a memorializing artwork cannot be reduced to the experiences or expressed intentions of an artist. Artist statements and interviews are of little help in clarifying what is at stake in the testimony of an image as this is something that is manifest in the force of the artwork itself. This force is felt as an encounter with a “dynamis” whose direction is a movement from image to viewer with indeterminate, yet potentially significant, effects. This means that the force of a memorializing artwork needs to be considered in relation to what images do to us. The force of the image’s gaze works affectively and not simply in terms of the legibility of its way of in-scripting aspects of a past event.

The idea that images embody a vitality, and hence they do things to us, has been a key area of concern within visual studies since Roland Barthes suggested that a photograph has the potential to register more than it is meant to denote. He argued for the notion of the punctum, an indeterminate aspect of a photograph tied to the movement of time and certainty of death, which has the potential to disrupt an image’s settling into a clear comprehension of its representation.⁶ While the force of the images under discussion here has clear affinities with Barthes’ punctum, it is not solely tied to imperative of death but rather it is linked to a felt encounter with loss and the various disruptive, often conflicting desires that memorializing artworks initiate.⁷ The affective consequence of the force of an image is no guarantee of its ethical and political consequences (as indeterminate, it might elicit evasion or differently operate as a “shock to thought”), yet without such a force, a memorializing artwork risks its own death when it is rendered into an historical artefact of primary interest to cultural historians. How any given artwork emanates a force has much to do with the question of its aesthetics. Furthermore, the political quality of such aesthetics has much to do with the way they contest the resistance of the present to various possible relations between the past and the future.⁸ In other words, this politics of a memorializing aesthetics seeks to instantiate a temporal disruption which is an intervention into the here and now. At stake in such a disruption is a pedagogical realignment of memory and the present with the possibility of touching “the future on its hither side”⁹ and initiating a hope rooted in the realization that the present remains open and is thus unfinished.

As is evident from the works presented and discussed within this issue, the politics mobilized within the aesthetic dimension of artworks of remembrance are both diverse and contested. This divergence and contention is well illustrated in the contrast between the installations of the work of

Vid Ingelevics and Blake Fitzpatrick on the one hand, and Graciela Sacco on the other. What is at stake aesthetically in the presentation of Ingelevics and Fitzpatrick's large and dramatically backlit auratic images of souvenir fragments of the Berlin wall that have been purchased by North Americans? Under the title *Freedom Rocks*, these striking photographs were recently exhibited together with 220 photo-journalistic images of the wall taken between 1961 and 1989 that were drawn from the Black Star Photo Archive. The exhibition was installed at the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Toronto, the McLuhan Salon of the Embassy of Canada in Berlin, and at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. In their artist statement, Ingelevics and Fitzpatrick indicate that they've embarked on an exploration of the inherent irrationality of the archival impulse and the multiple ways in which big events are sutured on to individual biographies. The photographic scene of their back lit images are resonant with this intent. Labelling each fragment with the name of its owner and displaying them side by side against a black background, as if in an archival display case, suggests their significance for, and perhaps fetishization by, each owner named. These significations, however, are supplemented by a strategic use of space, light and colour to compose images that are quite beautiful. This aspect of Ingelevics and Fitzpatrick's artwork can be best understood in terms of the current revisions of the place of beauty in the world of art. Following Alexander Nehamas who declared these images beautiful, my intent is not to issue a judgement or verdict on the features of these images.¹⁰ Rather, I'm evoking the beautiful as sparking a desire to sojourn awhile with an image, to make it part of one's life, sensing that it is offering something difficult to refuse and, in this regard, compelling one to experience its testimony. Without this aesthetic dimension, such photographs would be without force and simply read as an interesting commentary on practices of cultural memory. It is the evocation of a sense of the beautiful that is the enlivening force in their artwork, a force perhaps felt as a "promise of happiness." In this respect, *Freedom Rocks*, particularly as it is sited in relation to images from the Black Star collection, not only gestures to the fragmented afterlife of the wall, but as well to the felt encounter of the movement beyond the violence of the regime that built it in the first place.

A brief glance at the images presented in the 2007 installation of *M2*, in Rome's Fondazione Volume suggests that, here, Graciela Sacco's aesthetics operate quite differently. Placed in what appears to be a dark cellar with crumbling walls, her black and white photographs of footsteps, taken through a translucent material situated above the camera, enact an intervention into hegemonic representations that position viewers as spectators outside of violence, suffering and loss. The images of this exhibition capture an installation wherein the sense of claustrophobic incarceration is palpable as is the desire to escape or overcome the confines of this captivating space that places one outside the movement of time. Contingently sited in this location, Sacco's aesthetics are framed as a matter of rhetoric, concerned with how a work disposes its viewers to see her photographs, and as a consequence, to re-vision the world. In this sense, Sacco's is an art of engagement in which aesthetics do not evoke the beautiful (as do Ingelevics and Fitzpatrick's aesthetics), but nevertheless they compose a relation between the sign and the mark so as to create spaces in which viewers are positioned to encounter the force of her images.

Boris Groys has quite provocatively argued that "curating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself."¹¹ This is a provocation well worth exploring. On these terms, images are diagnosed as lacking vitality, they are without force. Groys suggests that in its original state, a work of art is "sick and helpless." In order to see it, and certainly for any form of felt encounter, "viewers must be brought to [the images] as visitors are brought to a bedridden patient by hospital staff." What then "cures" the ailing image? What animates it and gives it a presence that might provoke thought and judgment? This is the practice of exhibition, the creation of a *mise-en-scene*

in which an image might appear. Groys' comments are relevant here in the sense that a memorializing artwork, if it is to effect a "touch of the past," must have its conditional moment. On such terms, the aesthetics of a memorializing artwork and its relation to ethics and politics is incomplete without a consideration of situating of such work within a shifting, historically constituted culture. The aesthetics in Sacco's artwork, as well as Ingelvics and Fitzpatrick's work, underscore the point that for such works to be more than illustrative of social and political issues, we must consider artwork not as a site unto itself but always already situated in way that raises new questions as to the role of images in moderating and generating subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and human ethos.¹²

NOTES

1 Vikki Bell, "Contemporary Art and Transitional Justice in Northern Ireland: The Consolation of Form," *Visual Studies*, forthcoming.

2 Hal Foster (Ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

3 Judith Butler "Beyond Seduction and Morality: Benjamin's Early Aesthetics" *The Life and Death of Images*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 63-81.

4 Walter Benjamin, "Painting, or Signs and Marks" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 84.

5 Jacques Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 188.

6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (London: Vintage Press, 1980).

7 A full explication of the notion of force that I am gesturing to would require detailed consideration of its relation to Barthes notion of the punctum as well as other attempts to theorize the vitality of images. This is clearly beyond the scope of this brief text.

8 I am indebted to John Rossini his engagement with these ideas and owe much to our conversations over the last year.

9 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

10 Alexander Nehamas, "A Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, April 9-10, 2001.

11 Boris Groys, "The Politics of Installation" *e-flux Journal* #2, (January 2009).

12 Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, "Introduction," *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, 35.