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Counter-Monument and Digital Iconoclasm as Quasi-sublime Devices

Contents

1. Monumentality

At the beginning of last century, it was mainly Alois Riegl who closely addressed, in his book *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903), the themes of the historical value and the commemorative value of the monument. The term 'monument' derives from 'monumentum,' which in turn comes from the Latin verb 'monere,' meaning 'to remember' and 'to make known.' But already Riegl pays close attention to the contrast or the effect of novelty of a monument in relation to what we recognize as 'contemporary values'. More specifically, Riegl presents the dynamic of monument reception as involving two groups of values. The first are the '*Erinnerungswerte*,' or commemorative values, which include the value of the ancient, the historical value, and the value of intentional memory. The second are the '*Gegenwartswerte*,' the values of contemporaneity or current values, among which he includes use-value, newness-value, and the relative art-value (i.e., modern and not absolute). In this second case, these are values that must establish the monument's capacity to inscribe itself in the present.[1]

Alois Riegl also distinguished between "intentional" and "non-intentional" monuments.[2] This distinction aims to diversify the commemorative effect, which could be induced and guided by an official monument, or experienced, individually or collectively, under specific circumstances that are not necessarily extendable to other individuals or communities, while still maintaining the characteristic of the monument to evoke or sustain remembrance and a sense of history in relation to specific events, whether celebratory or mournful. As has been rightly noted, these are

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[1] For a useful summary of the content of Riegl's text, see G. Dolff-Bonekämper, *Prologue. Valeurs de contemporanéité. Pour une rénovation de la théorie des monuments d'Aloïs Riegl*, in Beyer, Janzing, Pinotti et Trautmann-Waller (ed.), *Le monument en débat*, cit., pp. 17–36, p. 19.

[2] A. Riegl, *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung,* Wien, Braumüller, 1903*;* [transl. by K. W. Forster and D. Ghirardo *The Modern Cult of Monuments: its Character and Origin]*

relative and not absolute categories: all monuments are intentional from the point of view of their creators, but at the same time "everything can become a monument" over time and in changed circumstances,[3] which also allows for a more private form of commemoration linked to facts and experiences unexpectedly recalled by a place, a structure, or an object.

Although Riegl primarily emphasized the commemorative value as characteristic of monuments, he did not fail to reflect on the non-functional directions of the monument, highlighting the temporal qualities of objects in their capacity to take on, under certain circumstances, a monumental value and thus become objects of their own kind. Furthermore, Riegl explicitly referred to the possibility that works of art as such could be considered 'monuments,' as well as other human-made works, regardless of their meaning or purpose.[4]

In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt's position stands out with regard to the 'monumental' character of works of art (but also, significantly, the writing of history) for their special ability to endure and thereby provide some stability to the common world, both as a world of objects and as a public sphere. She writes: "The reality and reliability of the human world rests on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced" (*The Human Condition*, 1958). This is what things generally are, the products of artifice, the "apparent permanence of objects". There is however also a special type of permanence coinciding with a kind of 'monumentality' Arendt refers to when speaking of works of art insofar as they witness human thoughts and activities free both from the necessities of life and practical interests, that is, for Arendt, insofar as they are targeted by the continuous action of (culture in) re-affirming, through recollection, a collective value, either with a "living recollection," as in oral transmission of poetry by rhapsodes or bards, or mostly through "reification" and materialization of the activity of human artifice: remembrance, in fact, needs tangible things to perform their durability.[5] This is how the outcomes of the activity of a writer, a historian, an artist are destined to be for the world as an enduring home for human beings: "only insomuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of things produced for use" the human artifice can be "fit for action and speech" that is, for the political realm.[6] Since they are reified, the products of such a 'superior' artificial activity suffer from a special 'deadness', but their 'living spirit' can be rescued when the dead letter comes back into contact with a life willing to resurrect it.[7]

Arendt seems here to place her statements on the 'monumental' character of the work of art very close to Riegl's taxonomy, and notably at the intersection of *Erinnerungswerte* and *Gegenwartswerte*. The permanence or, according to Arendt's terminology, the "worldliness" of the work of art is entrusted to the practice that inscribes itself in the public sphere, which alone can (eventually) guarantee the *Erinnerungswerte* of an artifact. It is therefore *from this perspective* that Arendt's reference to the 'monumental' character of the artwork in *The Human Condition*, should be understood. For Arendt, the monumental value does not concern a modern cult of monuments based on the historical value of artworks as culturally 'preserved' objects, but rather on their value in terms of public exhibition and their presence in cultural discourse. Implicitly, their value is also a conflicting one; 'monumentality' thus becomes, in reality, an arena, a battleground.

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[3]   See M. Widrich, *Monuments intentionneles et non intentionneles. La* Judenplatz *de Vienne et* Le culte moderne des monuments *de Riegl*, in Beyer, Janzing, Pinotti et Trautmann-Waller (ed.), *Le monument en débat. Théories et pratiques de la monumentalisation en Allemagne et en Autriche après 1945*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2022, pp. 149–176, p. 171.
[4]   See A. Riegl, *The Modern Cult of Monuments: its Character and Origin* (1903).
[5]   H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 169–170.
[6]   Ibid. 173.
[7]   Ibid. 169.

This second aspect of Arendt's analysis seems the most topical: every monument, place, or object (e.g., artwork) that claims some monumental value today is not only at the center of debate but also part of a debate that has become heated with reference to history and, especially, culture and identity. When transferred to the realm of the Internet, this gives the object an almost sublime quality due to the effect of limitlessness that the network (at times) exerts on our imagination.

2. *Is memory a sublime phenomenon?*

From the 1990s onward, Reinhart Koselleck broadened the scope of his work on conceptual history to include iconographic and memorial symbolism, focusing on the political uses and narratives of images, especially of monuments. According to Koselleck, some works, including monuments, are capable of generating a "semiotics of aphasia" that allows the "unspeakable to be defined as such, so that one can form an idea of it."[8] This notation seems to be true in both the cases of commemorative monuments that have a monumental or an anti-monumental structure. Yet, he also suggests that the signifying capacity of monuments does not necessarily remain anchored to their primary purpose. The general hypothesis is that, "like all works of art, monuments have an excess potential that eludes their original purpose."[9] However, it is no coincidence that Koselleck focuses in particular on war monuments ("On political Iconology of Violent Death")[10] and the role they play in the "establishment of a political identity" for the survivors.[11] In other words, monuments provide meaning not only to the commemoration by the survivors but also to their survival: this is the more properly political dimension of the monument, its ability to produce a "political iconology," in which the element of identity always tends to position itself in opposition to other political entities.[12] Koselleck is fully aware of the need not to consider the monument merely as a "historical text" and the event as a story to be narrated. He rather emphasizes the importance of considering its role in the context of a political iconology. When the generation of survivors disappears, and thus the political community, the monument, according to Koselleck, presents itself rather as an "aesthetic object" – which for him means, in a reductive sense, it no longer conveys any pathos, it is a simple artistic construct, something that can be judged as beautiful, interesting, but no longer sublime in the sense that it has an unspeakable meaning (of communal mourning). In this case the 'excess potential' disperses the quasi-sublime potential of the monument, that is, for Koselleck, its pointing in the direction of "negative memory," of trauma experienced by survivors, without directly meaning it, especially if what was experienced was the "excess and abyss character" (*Ausmass und Abgründigkeit*) of mass massacres or genocides: the monument cannot do this but being detached from the primary context that generated trauma, it must lead to the 'common space' of memorial symbolism experience, far from personally experienced trauma, a "petrified lava"[13]. If memory has its first-hand

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8   R. Koselleck, *Bundesrepublikanischer Kompromisse. Die Deutschen und ihr Denkmalkults. Reiner Metzger sprach mit R. Koselleck*, in «Kunstforum» 134., 1996, pp. 467–469, p. 467.

9   R. Koselleck, Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftung der Überlebenden, in K. Stierle, O. Marquard (Hrsg.), *Identität,* Munich: Fink 1979, pp. 255–276, p. 274; transl. War Memorials: Identity Formation of the Survivors, in Koselleck, The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing, Concepts (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002, 285–326).

10 R. Koselleck, *Zur politischen Ikonologie des gewaltsames Todes. Ein deutsch-französisch Vergleich*, Schwabe, Basel 2002.

11 See R. Koselleck, Kriegerdenkmale.

12 Indeed, the dynamics described here reveal a clear affinity with the theories of Carl Schmitt, particularly his concept of the distinction between friend and enemy; see C. Schmitt, Gesammelte Schriften 1933–1936, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2021.

13 R. Koselleck, Glühende Lava. Zur Erinnerung geronnen, in B. Sausay, H.L. Arnold, R von Thadden (eds.) *Vom Vergessen vom Gedanken. Erinnerungen und Erwartungen in Europa zum 8. Mai 1945*, Göttingen, Göttinger Sudelblätter, 1995, 19–25. (In May 1945 Koselleck was captured by the Soviets and spent one year in the Kara-

roots in an individual (unspeakable if traumatic) experience of the past, a shared memory can either rely on historical assessments or get easily caught in a "war of images," very different from a proper knowledge of past events. Of course one might question whether a 'proper' knowledge of the events could be available at all, even in those cases in which historiographical work has achieved widely accepted results.[14] Mostly what happens is that the 'excess potential' of memorial symbolism is pushed in the direction of radical historicisms, that is, of a radical transformation of the meaning of a monument over time, which drives to different, even opposite, political uses and narratives of a given symbolism. Due to its contrastive nature, a political community could subsequently even aim to destroy monuments that have become alien to the new sensibility – and go so far as to commit iconoclastic acts against them.

It seems necessary, as suggested by Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper, to add a "conflicting value" to Riegl's taxonomy of values related to the monument, since "the values of remembrance" cannot but be "values of contemporaneity": memory is always re-enacted, even in negative terms, in the present and for the present[15]. Because of the cultural constitution of historical perception, memory cannot be without historical judgment and, as Riegl clearly shows, the evaluation of the meaning of a monument changes because of the temporal dynamics inherent in the act of judging itself and because of changed interests and values. An undoubtedly far-sighted perspective, which takes us, with a leap forward, to Superstudio and architect Robert Venturi, who in the Fifties redefined ramps and fast-food stands as the 'real' contemporary monument,[16] able to make a 'great impression' and renew a 'shock value' as in the case of the parabolic arch designed by Eugène Freyssinet for hangars housing big dirigibles at Orly, whose iconographic evolution would have been the McDonald Arch.[17]

3. Counter-monuments

The conflicting value seems to merge with the value of contemporaneity in the concept of monumentality upheld by James E. Young, the theorist of the counter-monument. Young used the term 'counter-monument' in reference to Germany in the early 1990s and to *Denkmal-Arbeit*, the work undertaken at that time on monuments, memory, and national history.[18] Again, a crucial part of defining a monument, of every kind, is the public debate it generates.

However what is at stake now is not only the fact that monuments change their meaning over history since a new meaning is imposed upon them, but the need to reverse the traditional 'monumental' and vertical format of the monument and to propose a new symbolism.

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ganda prison camp in Kazakistan). On the issue see S. Jollivet, *Thinking the image with Koselleck in the age of mass media: The transformation of experiences between memory and trauma*, https://hal.science/hal-04386364v1, visited August 18th, 2025.

[14] In general, while events are happening, a proper knowledge seems to be hampered by circulating images, some of them impossible to verify – as has been recently shown by the war of images following the attacks of October 7 2023 in Israel. Carl von Clausewits already spoke of the "fog of war" (*Nebel des Krieges*) to designate the absence of information and uncertainty used as a strategy to paralyze the enemy.

[15] See Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper, *Gegenwartswerte. Für eine Erneuerung von Alois Riegls Denkmalwerttheorie*, dans Hans-Rudolf Meier und Ingrid Scheurmann (Hrsg.), *DENKmal-WERTE. Beiträge zur Theorie und Aktualität der Denkmalpflege. Georg Mörsch zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin/ Munich, 2010, p. 27–40.

[16] See M. Widrich, *Performative Monuments. The Rimaterialization of Public Art*, Manchester: Manchester UP 2014, p. 7.

[17] R. Venturi and D. Scott Brown, *A View from the Campidoglio*: P. Arnell, T. Bickford, and C. Bergart (eds.), Harper and Row, 1984, pp. 65–67.

[18] See J.E. Young, The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today, in "Critical Inquiry", Vol. 18, n. 2, Winter 1992, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. See also Id., T*he Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between,* University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst (Ma) 2016.

Even if they are still and clearly 'intentional' monuments, counter-monuments refrain from a celebratory approach; they do not evoke any greatness achieved through the sacrifice of life, though they are still dedicated to fallen soldiers or victims of war, or recall an event of enormous tragic significance, such as a major disaster that resulted in many deaths.[19] A kind of counter-monuments had already emerged in the 1980s, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, a project created in the National Mall in Washington in 1982 by the young architect Maya Lin (1959). It consists of a double path forming a large V2 that descends along the slopes of an artificial hill. The names of the 58,000 soldiers who died or went missing in Vietnam are inscribed on black granite slabs running along its walls.

The emphasis is on the anti-rhetorical value of the monument, which, in distancing itself from the celebratory monuments of the past – extending into the nineteenth century – relates to the anti-formalist, conceptual, or minimalist structures of much twentieth-century art, inspired by avant-garde movements and a new sense of landscape, including urban landscape, inaugurated by land art.

It is in this direction that we might speak of an effect of quasi-sublimity specifically produced by the counter-monuments of the last fifty years. Firstly, because of the agonistic character enacted by the counter-monument against the monument in a physical and material-sensible sense, contrasting with an inhibited or hindered vision the visible elevation of the monument in terms of verticality. A similar agonistic framework was already present in Edmund Burke's *Inquiry*, where the sublime is described as a conflict-governed experience of obscurity and uneasiness.[20] Later Kant reproposed this experience in terms of a conflict of faculties, and ultimately entrusted "terrifying power" of imagination in the Romantic sublime (Wordsworth). Burke's legacy however seems to provide the only long-term definition able to relate also to contemporary and technique sublime: 'astonishment' is the keyword, "that state of the soul in which all motions are suspended, with some degree of horror (…). Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect."[21]

The counter-monument seems to follow Burke's path renewing the question of how we can describe the state of mind of the viewer trying to orient herself when sensibility is excluded or hindered and to achieve a kind of invisible and 'atmospheric' remembrance. The only way out is, almost automatically, an appeal to imagination, which however cannot easily make 'absence' and 'silence' disappear and fill the gap, and neither can it prevent a feeling of 'respect' mixed with a feeling of uneasiness. The counter-monument works on subtraction, where the visible and perceivable form tends to be reversed, generating a quasi-sublime effect. While the traditional memorial imposingly offers itself to the viewers' sight, the anti-monument withdraws; it must somehow be reconstructed by the spectators or "searched for" in a hidden recess, with the establishment of a true "counter-monumental strategy of absence."[22] A prime example is the 9/11 memorial (2002), for which a proposal was submitted to dig two subterranean craters that would reproduce, underground, the entire volume of the two Twin Towers.[23]

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[19] Such as "The Broken Line" memorial in Tallin (Estonia), commemorating the many lives lost in the sinking of the Baltic ferry in 1992.

[20] E. Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry int the Origin of the Sublime and the Beautiful, Columbia UP, 1958, pp. 57–59.

[21] Ibid.

[22] See A. Pinotti, L'ultima spiaggia del monumento. Per una tipologia della contro-monumentalità contemporanea, in G. Bordi et al. (ed. by), L'officina dello sguardo. Scritti in onore di Maria Andaloro, 2 voll., Gangemi, Rome 2014, vol. 2, pp. 55–60.

[23] I am referring to the project by Gerhard Kruunenberg and Paul van der Erve; see A. Pinotti, L'ultima spiaggia del monumento, cit., p. 57; however, the winner of the contest for memorial 9/11 was Michael Arad and Peter Walker's project "Reflecting Absence", consisting of two sunken pools in the exact footprint where the twin Towers used to stand.

Time Capsule by artist Akraam Zaatari, shown first in Kassel 2012, pursues an outcome similar to that of the counter-monument. The capsule, not visible because placed by the artist in a subterranean well covered with earth, collects, like a buried treasure, the memory traces (letters, papers) of a recent collective past, of a country (Lebanon) torn apart by war and still involved in a new one. The Project was particularly intended to denounce current blindness to the witnessing power of images and expresses concern about the mis-recognition and mis-use of images. *Time Capsule* buries what it intends to hide from view in order to protect it, it is a museum no one is allowed to visit, it assembles a collection that exists in the mental image and social commentary it generates.

But what truly distinguishes a counter-monument from a monument, if their memorial function is virtually identical? Let us try to see what kind of result we may achieve by applying James Gibson's concept of "affordance" to both the monument and the counter-monument. It is a widely held view that architecture, by its very nature, presents a specific affordance, understood in Gibson's ecological psychology as "both a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior," referring to the *actions* and *movements* that a particular environment allows or supports based on certain characteristics. What applies to architecture should also apply to a public art installation or a monument. While it is clear that understanding architecture involves grasping its general form and function, one should not overlook the fact that important aspects of architecture or of an installation, if a monument is at stake, can be identified through the responses of those who observe, pass through, or visit it.[24] But what does a monument – or a counter-monument – affords for human beings perceiving them? A monument is not just a sculpture or an architecture: it is supposed to afford support to memory. What about a counter-monument? If not properly 'announced' or signaled, it could for instance, as a flat, horizontal, short terrestrial surface, just afford physical support to walk on – a certain senso-motorial behavior that ignores the culturally motivated ban (not to climb a sculpture) in a public environment. If however the link between memory and monument also applies to counter-monuments, it encourages not a simple perception of an architectural object or a landscape as affording actions and movement but a cultural perception, allowing only certain kinds of movement and actions, only certain kinds of human interaction.

Along this line, I believe a potentially original and non standardized interpretation of the counter-monument has been rooted in the last decades in its formal characteristics, as it participates both in deconstruction of monumental architecture, questioning the monumental model and values and in the de-sublimation of the sublime, a concept also advanced in particular by minimalist versions of modernity and late modernity in the arts. During his collaborative venture with architects Peter Eisenmann and Bernard Tschumi, Derrida describes the gesture of deconstruction in the following terms: "when you have deconstructed some architectural assumptions – for instance, the hegemony of the aesthetic, of beauty, the hegemony of usefulness, of functionality, of living of dwelling. But then you have to reinscribe these motives within the work. You can't (or you shouldn't) simply dismiss those values (…). You have (…) to shape a new way of building in which those motives or values are reinscribed, having meanwhile lost their external hegemony."[25]

In counter-monuments, the denial of the traditional monumental format or the proposal of an inverted, subterranean verticality continues to showcase the weakening of the self that character-

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[24] For a reading that emphasizes architectural space as lived space, drawing on the critique of architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa against the "ocularcentrism" of how architecture is received, and in favor of a synesthetic experience, see at least J. Robinson, How to experience architecture, in D. Goldblatt et al (eds.), Aesthetics. A Reader in the Philosophy of the Arts, Routledge, New York and London 2018, pp. 170–173, p. 173.

[25] See J. Derrida, *A Discussion of Architecture (with Christopher Norris)* "Architectural Design", 59, no. 1–2 (1989), pp. 7–11.

izes, in various ways, the structure of the sublime. At the same time, they de-sublimate the experience of the monument by preventing the affirmation of anything infinite or grand in a positive sense. The counter-monument breaks with its own affirmative 'monumental' representation and chooses to become imperceptible, convoluted, conceptual – acting rather as a trigger for a mental, immaterial experience. It adopts the register of secrecy or that of ambiguity, without fearing the paradox created by the fact it offers itself in the open space of the public and relational dimension, with an explicit purpose. However, it seems clear that, precisely due to this minimalism, almost no counter-monument can do away with the memorial function; rather, counter-monuments often amplify it, even though this memorial value is increasingly accessed through the filter of the monument's conflicted value, in whatever form it may present itself.

4. Pseudo-monuments (or monumentalization through installation)

Let us now ask what kind of proposals have emerged, in recent decades, from the art world. I believe at least three approaches can be identified in installations that enter into dialogue with the monument: the one that monumentalizes with a tendency toward the colossal – this is mainly represented by giant sculptures placed in front of museums or public buildings, such as Jeff Koons' series of *Bunny*, Louise Bourgeois' *Maman*, or Maurizio Cattelan's L.O.V.E. Although, in some cases, they may provoke a certain unsettling discomfort due to the imposing size of the structure, they remain within the realm of playful immersiveness, evoking curiosity more than uneasiness.

On the contrary, uneasiness (and therefore a quasi-sublime state of mind) is technically generated in another approach that has been described as "monumentalization through installation,"[26] including site-specific interventions such as *Unschnitt/Tallow* (1977) by Joseph Beuys, *House* (1993) and *Embankment* (2005) by Rachel Whiteread, or more recently *These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light* (2022) by Anselm Kiefer.

The apparent labyrinth created in works like *Embankment* by Whiteread (Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London 2005), with blocks of white monochromatic elements reaching imposing heights, is difficult for the viewer to grasp as a whole, that is, it is difficult to relate to a unifying image when experienced environmentally.

On its part, the monumental, site-specific installation of paintings titled *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce* (These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light) presented by the prominent German artist Anselm Kiefer in 2022 at the Doge's Palace (Palazzo Ducale, Sala dello Scrutinio) in Venice (59th Biennale) was intended as a dialogue with Venice history and with the philosophical writings of Andrea Emo.[27]

It is an overloaded, thick, darkened and amazing monumental historical landscape superposed on monumental paintings by Tintoretto, Vicentino, Palma il Giovane, representing eight centuries of battles, destruction and dominance of the see by the Venetian 'Serenissima' Republic. Material layers of acrylic paint and everyday objects embodied on the surfaces glimpse and swallow any residual light coming from the objects, burning their life to illuminate them – quasi-sublime glimpses.

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[26] See J.-P. Antoine, *Joseph Beuys: sur quelques monuments "allemands"*, in Beyer, Janzing, Pinotti et Trautmann-Waller (ed.), *Le monument en débat. Théories et pratiques de la monumentalisation en Allemagne et en Autriche après 1945*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2022, pp. 264–277, p. 273.

[27] Anselm Kiefer, "Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po di luce" [These writings, when burned, will finally cast a little light] catalogue exhibition, Venice, March 26th – October 29th 2022, edited by G. Belli and J. Sirén, Marsilio, Venezia 2022.

Kiefer knew that the iconoclasm suggested by Emo – and chosen as a 'motto' for the installation – is one with the original 'creation of images'[28] and the artist goes back to the topic, stating that an image without iconoclasm is a violated mystery and that we can save ourselves not in the outcome of an artwork but in the very process of working, in the process of constructing a form that gives way to an image.[29]

The issue of fire as a technically driven disaggregating force gives to me the opportunity to finally focus on Unschnitt/Tallow (1977) by Joseph Beuys.

The structure of the installation – irregular parallelepipeds scattered throughout the courtyard of the Museum of Art and Cultural History in Münster – seems to propose a minimalist or post-minimalist approach to the arrangement of the installation's elements. But because of the material used, Beuys seems to question the monument in an even more radical way. In fact, the artists used twenty tons of liquefied fat, which was then cooled and cut into five separate geometric blocks placed in the museum courtyard, in dimly lit and transitional spaces. Over time the blocks started melting and have become deformed and deteriorated in various points. As in other works, Joseph Beuys prompts reflection by giving the sculpture an almost fluid material quality, like "evolutionary detonators," which, like heat, can suggest a form that, in contrast to the crystallized form and the geometry of the right angle, gives an organic appearance to the form and a synesthetic quality, rather than a purely 'retinal' form, to perception.[30] In Beuys' case, the pseudo-monument, which relies on the silent transformation of the material it is made of, on the evolution of the monument toward its disappearance by means of liquefaction, also engages in an operation of *dépense*, a play contrary to the principle of preservation and conservation, an expenditure that reveals a different aspect of loss, the result of the dissipation of accumulated (memorial) tension.

Something different but related to Beuys' social activism happens with Hirschhorn's *Monument-Series* (1999–2013), where the memorial value of each proposed 'dedication' (*Spinoza Monument*, Amsterdam 1999; *Deleuze Monument*, Avignon 2000; *Bataille Monument*, Kassel 2002, *Gramsci Monument*, New York 2013) is entrusted to a work of art in a public space, provocatively entangled with the function of the monument as a 'gathering point' and with "the resistance of art and its power not to be neutralized by culture and consumption."[31] Thomas Hirschhorn's approach explicitly questions the monument but in the meantime asks about the 'monumental' character of art. *Gramsci Monument* was a seventy-seven day institution at Forest Houses, Bronx, in the summer of 2013, a 'utopian village' with a radio station, a newspaper, a Gramsci library and exhibition, a theater, lectures and field trips. In *Monument Series* Hirschhorn addresses an audience far from inclined to engage with either his work or that of the philosophers represented. Hirschhorn's redefinition of public experience, suggests Buchloh, becomes all the more legible when we situate his work within the dual lineage of European and American constructions of "participatory sculptural space,"[32] though his monuments as "mnemonic acts"

[28] M. Donà, Incomprensibile come la pietra. In vertiginosa prossimità. Andrea Emo e Anselm Kiefer, Anselm Kiefer, These writings…, catalogue, pp. 87–105, here 92, 97.

[29] Thomas Hirschhorn, Interview with V. Trione, Kiefer ritrae il filosofo venuto dal nulla, «Corriere della sera» February 18th 2018. On the topic see also L. Viglialoro, Anselm Kiefer. Kunst als Prozess, Passagen Verlag, Wien 2024.

[30] See J. Beuys, What is art? in C. Mesch, V. Michely (eds.), Joseph Beuys, The Reader, The MIT Press, 2007.

[31] Thomas Hirshhorn, *Gramsci-Monument*, Catalogue, Dia Art Foundation (Forest Houses, Bronnx, New York, July 1–September 15 2013), New York, Koenig Books, London 2015, p. 7.

[32] *Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, precarious Publics and the public precariat: Thomas Hirschhorn's* Gramsci Monument, in Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, Catalogie, pp. 428–439, here 430. Buchloh mentions Joseph Beuys and Hans Haake for European transition from sculpture to participation and Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham for American transformation of sculptural volume and mass (Donald Judd, Richard Serra) into "purely phenomenological spaces". (ibid.)

still raise some criticism about the artist's "idiosyncratic choices" of audiences for his Monuments – African-American and Hispanic populations of the Bronx (Gramsci Monument) or the Turkish working-class population in Kassel (Bataille Monument) etc. –, not exactly a self-generated and self-determined group of participants.[33] If it was Joseph Beuys who first redefined sculpture by means of dialectics of historical commemoration and social activism, Hirschhorn renews in his *Monument-Series* the idea that 'the presence' of the artist is political in itself, though dealing differently with 'audience and place' in a more ethnically and geopolitically determined direction.[34]

I would like to take advantage of Beuys' expression "evolutionary detonators," which he applies, as mentioned above, to the organic materials used in his installation, that however could also be applied to a different phenomenon, that is to the transformation of the memorial material, as it were, of the monument, when having an impact with present social and historical dissent, which is increasingly becoming the main evolutionary detonator of memory. Of course, stories have always been told in a plural form, one that is physiologically linked, we might say, to the vital interests of peoples, cities, and communities. But what has been taking place in recent years is undoubtedly connected to something that resembles a 'technical' sublime: the seemingly unlimited proliferation of online micro-communities that promote an identity-driven discourse particularly inclined to provoke micro-explosions within the network itself. The preferred topic seems to be precisely history – mostly past history, as it is more easily tied to a political iconography that has solidified over time, that micro-explosions of cancel culture would like to reduce to a fluid or a gaseous state.

5. *Iconoclasms*

It seems to me that any attempt to answer the question: what does a monument still tell us (assuming it speaks to us)? must face a two-sided attitude: the evaluation of a monument as a dead thing or as a living thing. The latter circumstance witnesses that 'the pathos linked to the event' has returned, especially in recent years, to disturb and create aversion towards past events that, in many cases, we do not believe have been buried by time, which means that the influence of monuments that celebrated them still seems to be felt as a threat to changed interests and values. Increasingly, monuments and especially monuments that celebrate a particular individual are at the center of controversies. This does not only occur in cases of regime changes, as would be natural, (we may think of the toppled statue of Saddam Hussein), but more and more often during protests and demonstrations that easily take on an iconoclastic turn. Probably conflict is fundamental to the making of the monuments because "commemoration is an inherently oppositional project."[35]

In his book dedicated to the "image act," Horst Bredekamp links cases of iconoclasm to what he calls the "substitutive image act," which, unlike the "intrinsic image act" (whose power emanates from the form itself) and the "schematic image act" (bodies that bring images to life), involve a kind of exchange between images and the event/object they refer to, a "type of substitution – of the image for the body and of the body for the image". The image displaying itself as "an activating force in its own right".[36] In the case of monuments erected in honor of historical figures who later became controversial, the "dilemma" of iconoclasm becomes evident: it reinforces what it rejects: it argues that images are inanimate, but in the very act of destroying them,

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[33] Ibid., pp. 436–437.

[34] Ibid., p. 432.

[35] See Marisa A. Bass, *The monument's End. Public Art and Modern Republic*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton UP, 2024, p. 15.

[36] Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* [*Theorie des Bildakts,* Berlin 2010], transl. by E. Clegg, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 2021, XIII.

treating them as criminals (…), high traitors, or heretics, it grants them life.[37] Does the vandal who destroys a monument realize this dilemma, or perhaps paradox? Certainly. But for the vandal, this will be a lesser evil compared to the advantage gained by spotlighting – and possibly getting rid of – a negative symbol.

A striking case in the war on images in the turn of the millennium was the destruction of the monumental Buddhist statues of Bamiyan in March 2001, following the Taliban's iconoclastic edict issued the previous month, which garnered wide media attention. This act has been interpreted as a possible symbolic precursor to the destruction of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th, 2001.[38] In this case we are confronting a political-religious calculation and decision made at the level of the government that supported and financed this kind of 'iconic' terrorism, for both internal and external purposes.

However, the situation changes when one is *against* the monument because of its memorial value, that is, when it is the *specific* remembrance that a monument conveys that is subjected to censorship and thus *denied* by means of a new critical perspective linked to contemporary sensibilities. I will briefly mention, in this regard, some recent phenomena linked to cancel culture, largely driven by a desire to align the past with the present and with our current beliefs. A real 'war against statues' has been waged by activist groups calling for the removal of monuments that offend anti-racist, feminist, post-colonial sensibilities, etc. In some cases, they simply tear them down, as in the case of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in Boston or that of Christopher Columbus in Richmond, both in June 2020. This is a highly debated issue, which I can only briefly touch upon here,[39] but one that undoubtedly directly concerns the legitimacy and function of monuments, particularly those that celebrate controversial historical figures, to the point that what has traditionally been considered the right of these monuments to a special permanence as historical documents and testimonies has been questioned. Here what comes to the fore is the assumption of a totally anti-sublime attitude towards memory and the past: the present being the exclusive measure for significant historical judgment.

Whether the fight for rights can benefit, in the medium and long term, from the destruction of symbols, especially celebratory monuments that have become alien to us and whether the new critical perspective we apparently embody as iconoclast is ethically and politically up to the challenges posed by the present, or whether moralism and fundamentalism are destined to prevail is an open question, that must be tackled by looking at each specific case. No doubt destruction has a cathartic aspect, also beyond real political activism, as it carries the pathos to liquidate a certain political value still rooted in the public space, as monuments are, which is half-hidden by the value of the cultural heritage.

The kind of *pathos* that resurfaces and that makes us take opposing sides in the name of ideologies or affiliations is however a clearly anti-sublime pathos, being only the byproduct of ideologically opposing positions that lead us to view monuments as an embodiment of an adverse political iconology. Political iconology conveyed by monuments often becomes the ground on which cultural and political dissent finds both a physical, material basis for a certain action and the 'publicity' necessary for a protest to gain sufficient resonance.

This, of course, somehow encourages forms of cancel culture, reactions that are not only of "denial" but also physically destructive or vandalistic towards certain icons we have inherited from the past or have recently come to the forefront because of a monument. We can ask ourselves whether it is right or wrong, or even productive to adopt an iconoclastic attitude. When

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[37] Ibid., pp. 167 ff.

[38] See B. Latour, P. Weibel (eds*.) Iconoclash beyond the image wars in science religion and art*, Catalogue, The Mit Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002, p. 219; see also Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*.

[39] On this topic see at least (in the field of Memory Studies) U. Capdepòn, S. Dornhof (eds.), *Contested Urban Spaces. Monuments, Traces, and Decentered Memories*, e-book, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

taking issue with an image to combat the real disorders of the present – slavery in disguise, the equality of rights never truly achieved or defended, racism and sexism – the answer, perhaps, will depend on how much we rely on the war of images. Or on how deeply political activism is rooted. Or, more simply, on how much we give in to the need to destroy what is "physically built or culturally built or theoretically built just in order to reveal a naked ground on which something new could be built."[40]

Not always however, the value of the monument has become indistinguishable from the conflict the monument itself conveys as a guarantee of posthumous life. There are cases in which a monument – especially a commemorative one – that draws on an iconography consolidated by tradition, reveals its ultimately abstract character, and is hardly capable of evoking the specificity of an event or of a commemoration. This not only makes war memorials, for example, all very similar, but also renders them interchangeable. As in the strange case recounted by Slavoj Žižek of the gigantic statue of a woman waving a flag, the monument to the liberation of the city by the Red Army in 1945. A statue that, in fact, as proof of what Žižek calls the "plasticity" of the meaning of commemorative monuments, had been erected two years earlier by the fascist dictator Admiral Horthy in memory of his son who had fallen on the Russian front fighting against the Red Army, and which was later adopted as a symbol of liberation from Stalinist occupation.[41] Or as in the case – if possible, even more striking – of the artistic project COMMEMOR by the photographer Robert Filliou (*Commission mixte d'échange de monuments aux morts*, 1970), who creates collages with images of war memorials 'exchanged' between cities in Holland, Germany, Belgium, panels arranged on the pedestal of the previous monument as an iconic substitute for it, in different places and city-backgrounds, while the original memorial provides a different icon to be placed, in panel format, on another pedestal in substitution of another memorial (a project carried out in agreement with the municipalities involved).[42]

A different kind of iconoclasm leads us back to Thomas Hirschhorn, and precisely to *The Purple Line* pixel-collage, exhibited at the MAXXI Museum in Rome (October 2021 – March 2022). The Pixel-Collage cycle of collages was realized between 2015 and 2017. The series confirm Hirschhorn's engagement with remembrance, this time however focusing on the relation of censorship and images, that is to say on the link between perceptible reality and political outcomes. The monumental panels running along the walls pair and recombine advertising photos with images taken from several groups of found war images mainly from Afghanistan and Syria. Reversing the current politically-correct choices regarding what can or must be shown and what should or must be concealed, Hirschhorn de-pixelates images of bodies devastated by war explosions and pixelates models advertising glamour and luxury goods.

The collages dramatically create a clash between de-pixelated images the viewer immediately recognizes and the images subjected to pixelation's power to tear apart the digitized image or even make the figures disappear into the fog of an abstract pattern. Actually, the two images not only face one another, but also intertwine and 'speak' with one voice.[43]

My point is that Hirschhorn's pixel-collaging generates a kind of 'technical' sublime in the form of a disturbance in both visual perception and codes (measures) associated with censorship of shock images. Pixelation displays itself as a tool to activate both a technically driven visual censorship for the gaze and the 'unconscious', as it were, of the figure (a model, a businessman)

[40] J. Derrida, *A Discussion of Architecture…,* in "Architectural Design", 59, no. 1–2, 1989, pp. 7–11.

[41] S. Zizek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge-London 2006.

[42] On Robert Filliou, COMMEMOR, 1970, photographie et collage (Galerie Nelson-Freeman) see Éric Baudelaire, *Puissances du faux (Journal)*, in D. Zabunyan (ed.) *Que peut une image?* Editions Textuel, Paris 2014, pp. 188–205, here 202.

[43] See M. Diers, Disiecta membra. Die Collage als symbolische Form bei Thomas Hirschhorn, M. Diers, Vor aller Augen. Studien zur Kunst, Bild und Politik, Paderborn: Fink 2016, pp. 267–281, 274.

hidden beneath an absorptive pixel texture made of pixels cut and taped to the advertising section. While creating an effect of uncertainty in perception, the collages convey a feeling of disorientation and of incommensurability between de-pixeled and pixeled images, and between these images and the imagery and 'gaps' in our mind. The impossibility of drawing a line between visible and invisible technically induces a quasi-sublime experience. The sublime effect is enhanced by perceptive unforeseen little 'shocks' the viewer experiences when a slight change of her position in front of the collage surface suddenly reveals either a de-pixelated corpse or the same image in a pixelated status.

In Hirschhorn's assessment, "exhibiting the *Pixel-Collage* series offers a form to the problematic of today's visible and non-visible":

> I believe that "pixelation" or blurring, masking and furthermore censorship or self-censorship, is a growing and insidious problematic, also in regard to new social media. Obviously, I don't accept what has been pixelated in my place "to protect me" and consequently I don't pixelate what is usually concealed and meant to be removed, frustrated, censored or made non-visible. [44]

That's why pixel-collage is "a decision" while it is, of course, a technique. The gesture of putting or removing each pixel is a political decision.[45] And a weapon. What for? To witness how censorship related to an 'ecology of images' directed to a supposedly general need to avoid the shock caused by crime or war images is governed by a 'false conscience' – as Adorno would have put it. When they appear in the official press, images of "mediatized death" are subject to a "re-mediatization" that often involves pixelation of sensitive materials.[46] Hence Hirschhorn's idea to mainly invert the direction of censorship and of designation of the areas of the image to be pixelated and those to remain unaltered: fashion photographs are pixeled and horror war photographs are un-pixeled. The part of the composition which remains unaltered is the found image of those killed by explosive weapons, printed in high resolution, while the ads are scanned in low resolution, "scaling the size of the pixels until they became solid blocks of colour. Thus abstraction clashes with reality."[47]

According to the artist the pixel has become a free-floating signifier of authenticity and "delivers an aesthetic to the demand for authority, for protection and for de-responsabilization."[48] For this main reason, he says "I want to integrate the growing phenomena of facelessness in pictures today. What interests me specifically about this aesthetics of facelessness, is its formal embodiment through pixelation. Pixelating has taken over the role of authenticity." Challenging images pixelated by media: "What interests me in these pictures taken from the medias is that pixelation suggests authenticity while it is masking facts. Partly pixelated pictures look even more authentic." The partially or totally pixeled figures are asked to keep the dead bodies at an enormous distance from the viewer; the distance is embodied by the advertising section of the collage, silent figures of consummation (often luxury) goods as products of fabrication, paradoxically connected in the opening of a hiatus to the figures of violently murdered individuals as by-products of war. Often the pixeled figures are placed at both sides of the photos presenting a dead body, figures-de-cadre silently pointing to the scene which they actually do not look at. Some thoughts presented by Hirschhorn at *The Purple Line* exhibition, put on some "showcase for thought" besides the walls wrapped with the plastic collages, have been also integrated and collected by the artist as a sort of decalogue, a set of eight statements provided as the keywords

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[44] Thomas Hirschhorn, The Purple Line, Catalogue exhibition, Ed. Nero, MAXXI, Rom 2021, p. 225 (text by T.H.).

[45] Thomas Hirschhorn, The Purple Line, Catalogue exhibition, p. 173 (text by T.H.).

[46] Lilie Chouliaraki, Mobile Witnessing: Ethics and the Camera Phone in the 'War of Terror', "Globalizations 6, n. 1, march 2009: 61; see also Lisa Lee, Thomas Hirschhorn and the Incommensurable Gesture, Thomas Hirschhorn, The Purple Line, Catalogue, pp. 31–37, 35.

[47] Y. Raymond, Paying Respect: Thomas Hirschhorn's Pixel-Collage, Thomas Hirschhorn, The Purple Line, catalogue, pp. 56–60, 57.

[48] Thomas Hirschhorn, *The Purple Line*, Catalogue exhibition, p. 177 (text by T.H.).

directing and orientating his work on the *Pixel-College* series, [49] and can provide more evidence of the artist's aims and technical strategy.

At point 7 we read: "I'm interested in pixelation because what is pixelated is considered as the worst. The worst is not shown, the worst is censored. Pixelation is used as a moralistic arbitration between what to see and what is too improper to look at. Nothing is un-showable. What cannot be shown is what has no form." Labeled as 'Provenance', 'Redundancy', 'Invisibility', 'The tendency towards "iconism"', 'The reduction to facts', 'The victim syndrome', 'The irrelevance of quality', 'The distancing due to hypersensitivity', the eight headlines highlight the constellation of Hirschhorn's attempt to explain in a few points why today it is important to show and to look at images of human bodies being devastated by war explosions. First of all the often unclear or unverifiable 'provenance' of such images, since they are taken by witnesses, passersby, or rescuers, mirrors the blurred condition and uncertainty of our time. That is also why such photographs are often devoid of 'aesthetic quality', which is precisely what makes them compelling, being shot in situations of urgency. Moreover, we must bear in mind that their 'redundancy' is not effectual insofar as each image points to a different human body, making clear that the issue is not repetition of images but the immeasurable accumulation of human suffering. If many such images remain invisible, hidden from mainstream media because they are considered too disturbing, they reveal both an unjustified overlapping of sensitivity and hypersensitivity and a strong 'tendency toward iconism' – the selection of a single, striking image that 'speaks more' than the others. This practice, however, risks ignoring differences and privileging the consensual, acceptable image, thus leading to manipulation. Finally, Hirschhorn argues that these images resist being reduced to simple facts; they testify to an irreducible devastation that exceeds factual truth. Looking at them evokes the so-called victim syndrome: the scandal is not the act of looking itself, but the realization that countless human bodies have truly been destroyed. Being 'sensitive', says Hirschhorn at the end, does not mean to distance oneself under pretext of hypersensitivity: "I want to be awake, to be present."[50]

It has been noticed that in this project Hirschhorn re-actualizes a method compatible to that of Bertolt Brecht for his 1955 *Kriegsfibel-collages*.[51] For both, I would add, an epistemic activism goes parallel to the political claim, technically questioning the mechanisms of abstraction and exploring new forms and processes – also quasi-sublime ones – enabling the audience to try to strive for (historical) truth.

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[49] T. Hirschhorn, *Pourquoi est-it important, aujourd'hui, de montrer et regarder des images de corps humains détruits?* In Dork Zabunyan (ed.), *Que peut une image*? Le Bal, Paris 2014, 106–115.

[50] Ibid., p. 115.

[51] Dirk Snauwaert, *Thomas Hirschhorn – Pixel-Collaging*, Thomas Hirschhorn, *The Purple Line*, Catalogue exhibition, Ed. Nero, MAXXI, Rom 2021, pp. 46–50, 47.