Performative Materials and Activist Commemoration

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Abstract
Monument debates in the second decade of the twenty-first century, turning almost entirely on questions of *who* is represented and *by whom*, might benefit from considering questions of *how* and with what *material resources* first raised in the context of post-WWII commemoration of the Holocaust and other traumatic events. The involvement of audiences in the memorial's physical substance, entering its spaces and otherwise performing *acts* of commemoration rather than just looking upon public art meant to broadcast an ideal official history, has been central to the most durable memorials of the last half century, and is given a particularly radical turn by artist interested in justice and restitution. In Colombia, Doris Salcedo has taken the very fabrication of a memorial space—made from surrendered FARC firearms by women who had suffered in the war in cathartic acts of hammering sheet metal—as a performative process making commemoration physical. The same phenomena can be observed spontaneously in acts of public imagination directed at more conventional memorial objects, such as the Korean *Statue for Peace*, whose bronze girl commemorates the victims of sexual exploitation during WWII is clothed by anonymous contemporary Koreans. The task for theorists of monumentality today, as much as for monument-makers, is to understand how an ethics of care can meet and interact forcefully with a politics of taking responsibility.

Keywords
Monuments, Public Space, Activism, Materiality, Performativity, Participation, Care, Conflict

Commemoration – which I would define as public remembrance – is always a reclamation of the past in the present. This applies to monuments as well as memorials, to rituals, activism and even to vandalism or the destruction of monuments. In the last hundred years, negative reactions against traditional monuments and their claim to stand in for (state-)approved history have intensified: monuments have been criticized for their authoritarian or colonizing force, for their literal invasion of space, and, conversely, for falling silent due to their endurance, their immobility, and their banal appearance (think of a man on a horse). This criticism was and is important. Monuments have not stood still before this criticism, but have themselves gone through rapid change, especially in the second half of the 20th century. The authoritarian regimes of National Socialism and Stalinism in Europe – and I would add colonial regimes in Asia, Africa, and the Americas – worked with what the modernist architectural critic Sigfried Giedion called, in the mid 1940s, "pseudo-monumentality" – using a style borrowed from antiquity, without any reason beyond the hint of power and endurance. (Giedion 1944) Such monumental forms were especially suspect after World War II: so much so that the German philosopher Theodor Adorno could write in his *Aesthetic Theory*, first published in 1970, that "the more people were tortured in the cellar, the more…the roof rest on [classical] columns." (Adorno, 1997, 49) People saw the problems with monumentality, but did not want – or could not – let go of the energy monuments could create. How to make monuments democratic? How to allow people to think through history, and to incorporate memory and personal approaches? How to *question* historical dogma instead of simply affirming it? How to bring more voices and histories into the History with capital H?

I will talk about commemoration, performative power – a concept I will explain – and, maybe surprisingly, care. I will make the case that history is of utmost importance for a functioning society and a functioning public sphere. And I will think about physical objects and sites in relationship to the virtual spheres of today's media world.

Today, in an age of rapidly expanding use of electronic media, history and its images are complicated topics. Online platforms increasingly serve (or pretend to serve) as the voices of conscience, whistleblowing, and protest, but they are also bastions of conformity and self-congratulation, not to say of political manipulation. Social media also, however, needs to be taken seriously as part of the public sphere, in fact as part of public space: with smart phones, we are both offline and online, in physical and virtual space at the same time. It might not be easy in such an era to make a case for commemoration, for memorials and monuments that stand still somewhere pointing at history, much quieter than the "viral" chatter (a term that seems inappropriate to use in the middle of a pandemic). I am certainly not the only one who has "liked" or shared a political article before properly reading it, much less questioning its sources or argument. The presentism of social media is in conflict with the patience needed to listen to and work through history. But it might also be able to help it. Whether we think that Facebook, Instagram and Snap Chat are culturally important or a waste of time, we have to admit they play a role in today's construction of history, and in how we use and define public space.

I am starting with our contemporary social-media-condition in order to ask my first question. Do we still need actual objects in public space in order to commemorate? Do we even need a physical public space to come together? What does the materiality of monuments mean, the fact that physical monuments are *made*, constructed, that they need labor to be made and to preserve? What does it mean that material-based monuments require long and often unresolved debates about their location, not to mention large sums of money that could be spent otherwise? Would it not be easier to avoid all this and go into virtual spheres, not annoying those who do not want to engage in the act of commemoration, and bringing those together who want to? I wrote this paragraph before March 2020, claiming that this was a dangerous approach. It seems we all feel this now, as most of the world has been, or still is, under lockdown, and we all have experience with stay-at-home-orders or curfews, while in the last weeks, protests are again making people meet up outside. But why do I think we need to have debates, conflict, tensions, and *objects*, or *sites*, actual physical sites, no matter how small, if we want a democratic access to history and commemoration, which are necessary for a democratic society.

Here I have changed my point of view a bit in the last few years, or maybe I am just defining it more clearly, not, I want to add, to favor traditional, big statues or the massive use of materials. I am still unsympathetic to traditional monumental forms, and have also started to think more deeply about the use of materials in art making and to minimize a wasteful approach to natural resources - I teach at an art school, where students dumped a lot of their materials once a course was finished, but now I can see that they think through the impact of the economy of resource extraction from our ecosystem in their own practice.

Let me briefly discuss the role of the object, and what I see as its connection with bonds of responsibility, a responsibility to history and to each other. My first example is the debate about Confederate monuments in the US. These monuments commemorate the short-lived Confederacy of the Southern States that wanted to hold on to slavery, seceded from and attacked the United States (which had not yet abolished slavery) in 1861. The Confederate States were defeated in 1865 at the end of one of the nineteenth century's bloodiest wars. As you might expect the former Confederate States were hardly allowed (or wanted to) celebrate their defeat in the immediate postwar years, but with the passage of time and the intensification of race terror against African-Americans, commissions arose to celebrate Confederate war heroes. The war became a grand and honorable Lost Cause, and ultimately, an insistence on White Supremacy of the Settler Colonists, as my colleague Kirk Savage has shown in his research. (Savage, 1999)

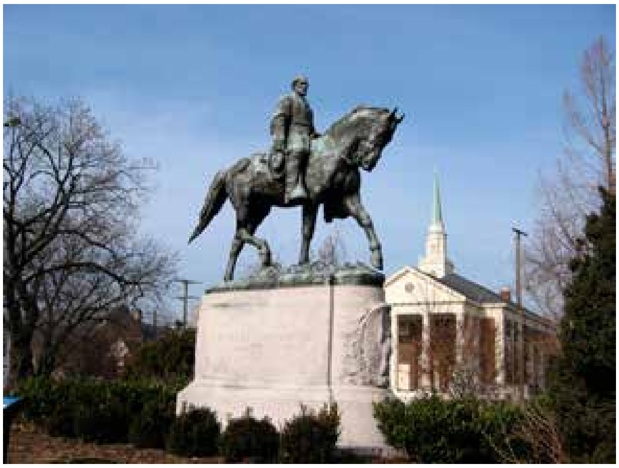

Figure 1 Robert Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, (author cville dog; image in the public domain).

The Robert Lee Memorial in Charlottesville, Virginia, was built *after* the First World War, for example, a time of race riots and segregation. It was also a time of nostalgia for the slave-owning South powered by the Hollywood media machine, notably in films like *Gone with the Wind*—which is still the best-selling film in history, adjusted for inflation! In any case, the Charlottesville monument, ignored for decades, led to protests and calls for removal some years ago, partly because of the political tensions under President Trump. Unlike Trump's remarks about preserving such monuments for their "beauty" (a moot point, since most would be removed to museums rather than destroyed), both the right-wing partisans of the monument and its left critics cited the preservation and rectification of history as their motive. But they had very different senses of history.

I would like to focus on notions of history, but only insofar as they connect to the physical nature of a monument. The reason stone and metal are central to traditional monuments is obvious: they are durable materials, they change little outdoors, especially bronze with its protective coating. They seemed as stable as the history they represented, a history constructed from above, and told to the people. But bronze can be used very differently, for more interactive projects. One of my students, Sandra Shim, wrote her MA thesis on the Korean monuments erected for the victims of sexual exploitation under the Japanese occupation – they are inappropriately called *Comfort Women*. (Shim 2018)

Entitled *Statue of Peace*, the first statue by Seo-kyong Kim and Woon-sung Kim was made on the occasion of the 1000the occurrence of the so-called Wednesday Demonstration, a weekly protest demanding an apology by the Japanese government, and public acknowledgment of the "comfort system" of World War II. (Shim, Chapter 1) She showed me the images you see here in which people had given the statue of the girl standing in for all women who were forced into sexual slavery, a coat, a scarf, and other warm clothing during winter. On one hand this was part of the success of the monument, that it allowed for care, for empathy, that one could start understanding the history

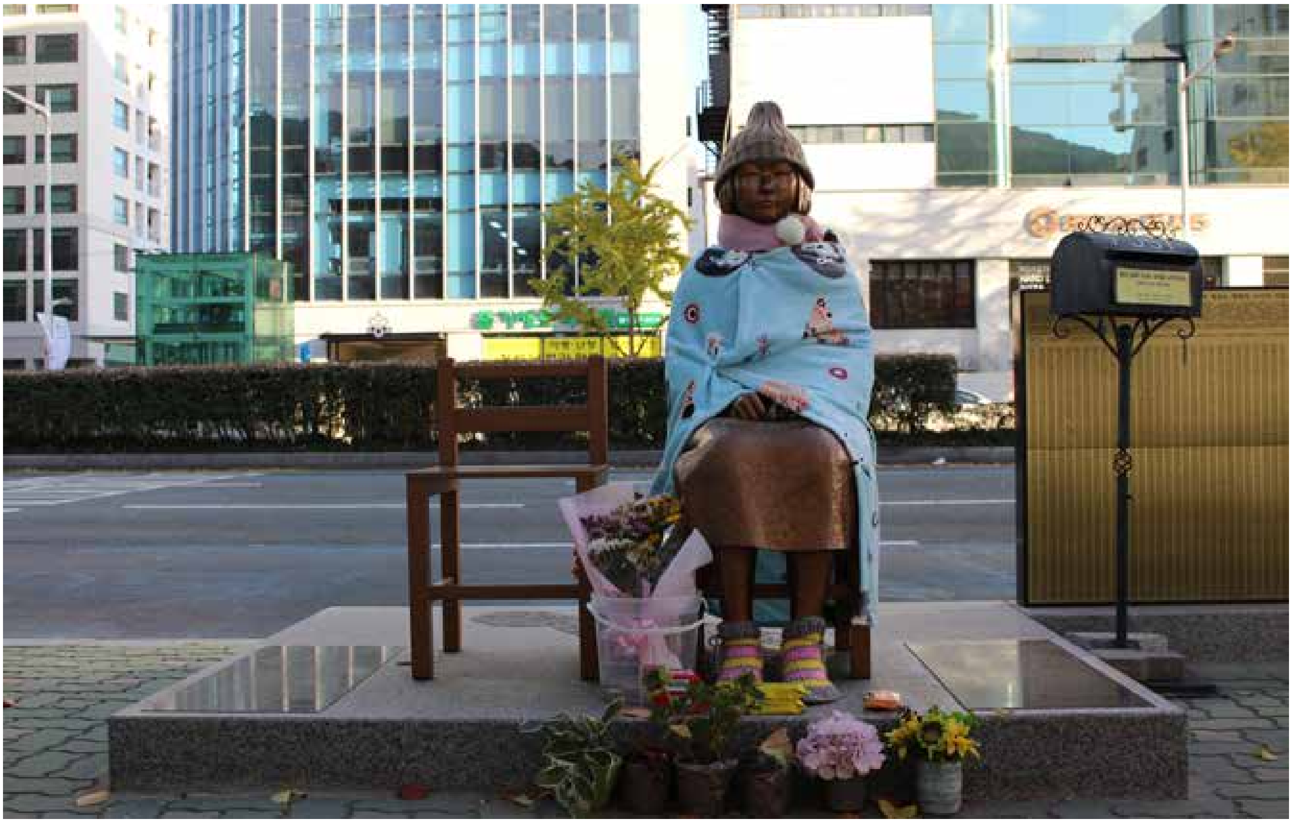

Figure 2 *Statue of Peace*, Busan, South Korea (public commons license).

through those small gestures. You see a chair next to the girl inviting the audience to sit with the statue – and become part of the work. The bronze sculpture itself is idealized: the girl is wearing a ceremonial *hanbok* dress and has a bird on her shoulder, as if a sentimental symbol of her pure soul rather than any direct confrontation with pain. The monument was replicated many times, popping up in Korea via crowdfunding and several initiatives and later even in the US in Korean communities. I am glad the monument became so popular, but there is something off-putting to the traditional material and form, which the audience might have sensed. The clothes make her more approachable, individual, changes the statue, makes it malleable – or at least hint at that. The history of the project is complicated, with the political activism by several survivors coming first. Going public was difficult for them, and they needed to fight off prejudice that they had voluntarily gotten involved with the enemy. The acts of care then are important, performative gestures that allow for a change in attitude. The chair in which the audience can sit and commit to listening, to acknowledging these women's history, is an obvious invitation to engage, but it is also conventional, and I am more interested in the act of clothing, the sensed tension between the foregrounding of a history of violence and the choice of material. Showing these acts on social media also played a role, of course. But what I'd like to emphasize is how the material, perhaps even its apparent limits (hardness, coldness, brutality) worked in the object's transformation by living people: it is not *just* the image of a girl, that elicited these reactions, just as the real survivors struggled so long without sympathy. I think the cold metal, bronze is in fact copper with an addition of zinc, tin, or other materials, and not just the form it took, is one reason there seemed to be need for something soft and warm. Is the statue then a failure or a success? In any case, it is productive, for the care that it made possible, and second, for showing us that activism and monuments have become closely linked, and not always just as activism against monuments.

In both cases, the Confederate Monuments, and the *Statue for Peace*, activism was helped by social media to bring at-

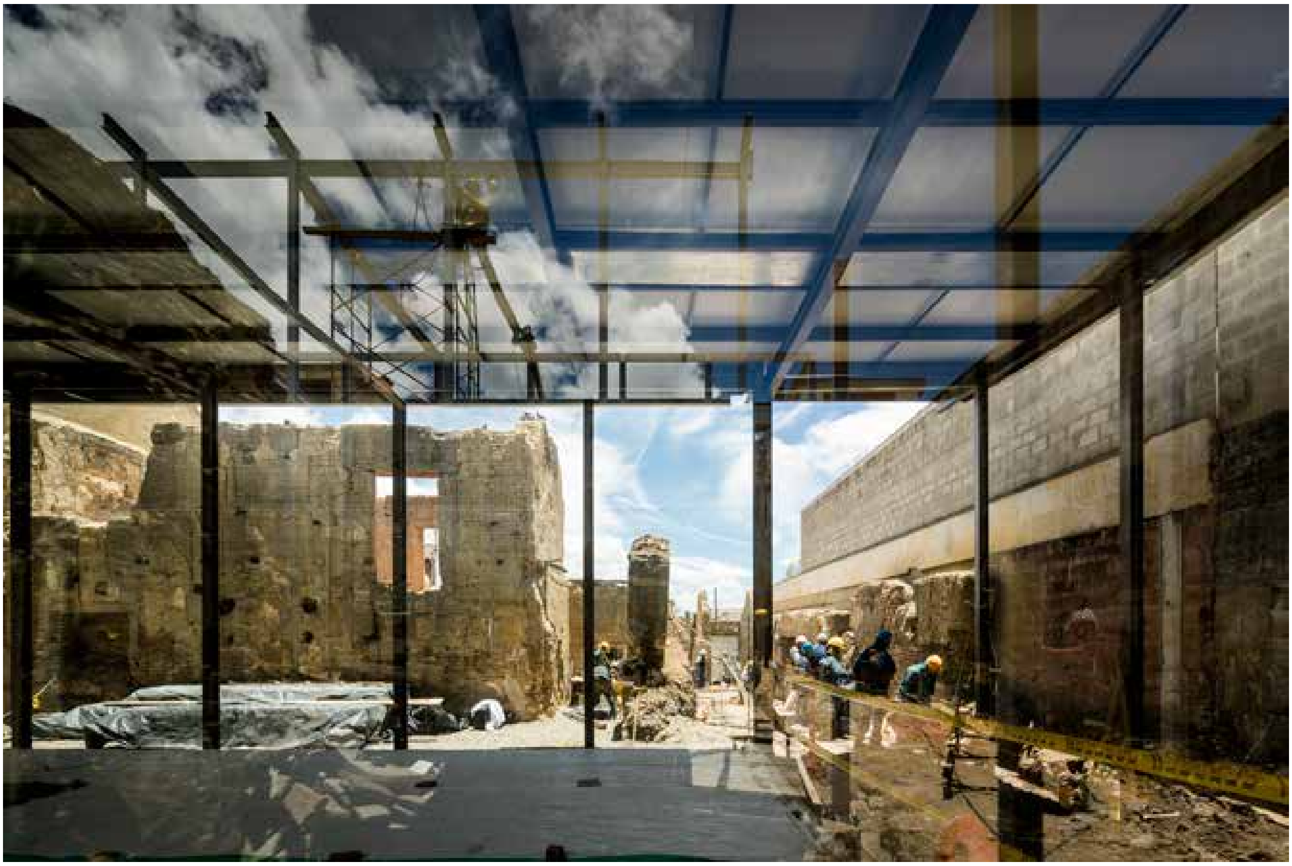

Figure 3 Construction of *Fragmentos. Espacio de Arte y Memoria*, Bogotá, Colombia. Photograph of Juan Fernando Castro. Courtesy of Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria of the Ministry of Culture of Colombia.

tention to the underlying topics in society. In both cases, the monuments in public space are at the center of the debate, the Confederate statues as examples of long outdated ideologies the remains of which keep reminding us that history always needs work, if sometimes the labor of removal of such signs of racist ideologies, and the girl in bronze that the empathy that emerged in the society can become a visible sign on the object. Here I can already answer some of the questions I asked at the beginning, namely about the need of actual objects in public space – they are needed. While they might connect to public spaces online, these alone are just not open enough – they are too controlled by companies, administrations and the law of the strongest (often in terms of money). On the other hand, materials and objects need to be different in our contemporary society. There is a need for new forms, forms that allow democratic access (the chair might literally allow this symbolically), but they also need to be foreword looking in terms of material: how these relate to our state of the world does need consideration.

Here in Bogotá, for example, Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria is an exhibition space, but it is also a memorial. The memorial is the very basis, the architecture, a project by Doris Salcedo dedicated to the Columbian Peace Process between FARC and the government.
Fragmentos connects to my two examples via the material, metal, but this is where we need to pause: the metal here in Bogotá is not a resource taken from the ground – it is a "recycled" material if you wish – weapons taken out of the circuit of violence and melted, reshaped with the help of victims of sexual violence, and made into the floor of the space.

This change of the material disconnects from, but also connects to traditional monuments. Both stable and not, steady and lasting, and also showing us the exact opposite: no matter how tough and uncompromising history seems, and how impossible it seems to react against injustice, and to bring voices to the foreground that have been silenced, it can be done. The performative act of the engagement of female survivors of sexual violence becomes one step to change history, but is also the labor of commemoration for them, a labor that allows for negative feelings and aggressive force. The material and its changes symbolizes history and how we as individuals have the right and the power to shape it. Here, the "monumentalization" is not stable, but one step in a construction of history full of tensions, ambivalences, and interpretations. The circulation instead of the use of new material is also an acknowledgment that history *cannot* be erased – the weapons, and the violence, are and will remain part of it, but the material shift shows that they can be re-activated differently – and this is the brilliant and surprising, maybe even shocking part – to move through the violence. Both audience and object change, and the interacting between them is both historical and visceral.

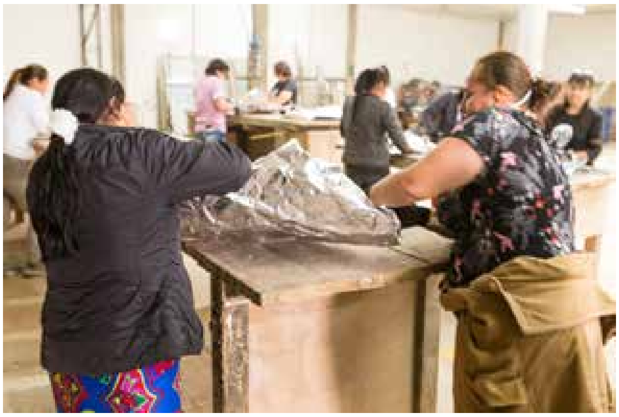

Figure 4 Women participating in Doris Salcedo's project, *Fragmentos*, Bogotá, Colombia. Photograph of Juan Fernando Castro. Courtesy of Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria of the Ministry of Culture of Colombia.

Let me come back to traditional monuments and their changes in site or material. Monuments can fall out of use, "fall silent" and they can be contextualized, or moved into a different context to stand in for a new version of history, or even to stand in for a new historical event – this applies to stolen war trophies, but also to artistic practice – may it be a proposal to let plants overgrow an unwanted monument, or just a conceptual detail that changes the way we see the monument. How is this connected to the change or removal of material? When the activists in the US called for the removal of Confederate statues – they did not always discuss what this would mean. I agree that some of the monuments need to leave public space, but I want to be clear here: the notion that the disappearance of the material would solve history is simplistic. And this is apart from legal difficulties, as some of the monuments were paid for by private organizations or are on ground not owned by city or state. Monuments are part of the construction of history; however, you cannot destroy history by destroying a monument. However, a shift of the material presence can change the future. Here we are again asking what the *object* does, and what the *interaction* with an object means? A performative gesture can initiate a different social reality. The reason for this is that monuments function only in relation to the audience. They are nothing without us interacting with them. But this is also their force. The value of art lies exactly in how such shifts occur – not because objects are magical or operating on their own, but because they can be made operative in a performative operation between participants and their relation to history. (Gamboni, 1997) To explain this process, I need to recall my earlier work on commemoration.

In my book *Performative Monuments.* (2014), I explained commemoration in the last decades of the twentieth century as a social practice emerging from performance art around 1970. In calling these monuments "performative", I don't just mean they "perform" something, but employ a term coined by British philosopher J.L. Austin (*How to do Things with Words*) to describe how certain speech acts, like a promise or a marriage ceremony, enact the very reality they describe. "I promise" can be a legal contract sometimes, but in any case, it is a social one. I claim that a functioning memorial enables an interaction with its audience resting on just such a social contract, requiring the right context, performer and witness, and documents to mark the very act of commemoration. (Widrich 2014) In the political context of central Europe, Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia in particular, I considered works as they functioned for a much belated, and often also geographically dislocated audience. After the Second World War, as I noted at the beginning of this lecture, monuments were accused of always being authoritatively installed 'from above', oblivious to their site, and socially dysfunctional or ineffective. Similar insights were already voiced by critics in the wake of World War I (and again, II), and led to demands that statues be replaced by gardens to walk in, community centers, or cubist dispersals of form under the slogan of "Living Memorials". (Shanken 2002) This phrase contains a clue: the very emergence of performance art in the 1960s, a mode of art making that has been seen as the opposite of the monument in its temporality and embodiment. Against this, I think that performance art in fact held the key to the monument's revival as a supposedly 'democratic' community-builder. Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT's early street actions, especially *Touch Cinema* and *Genital Panic*, and their (after)life in carefully staged photographs, are relevant in their mission to interact in public space, and to use her body to challenge the notion of an oppressive public sphere full of authoritative power. In the 1960s and '70s, she inserted herself into buildings and spaces as a feminist statue, both the director and the subject of the action, in order to shift the social fabric of the future. The performances were supposed to make visible power structures, and possibly change them. There was a strong connection to architecture, and in some of the works, the historicist columns and statues of 19th century Vienna are the frame and counter of the body, which moves in reaction to the shape of the architecture, while challenging its supposed oppressive, imperial tendencies. EXPORT's relatively unknown project for the Holocaust memorial in Vienna (the competition was won by Rachel Whiteread) is a good case study of how the thinking in terms of performance fit perfectly the engagement with historical content that, in the wake of the 1960s and '70s, came to be demanded of monuments.

EXPORT's design for the Vienna memorial does not feature her performing, but delegates a performance of history to the audience. We are meant to walk through a tunnel, one side of which consists of dark stone, one side of glass. In doing so, the individual acts of remembering, or at least its outer appearance, are visible and become very public, with the audience as part of the works. EXPORT envisioned a computer-selected audio program featuring Jewish authors to be randomly played during the walk, resulting in individualized aural experiences. The site was chosen by the city, and it is important: it is the authentic location on top of a medieval synagogue that was destroyed at the time of medieval pogrom against Viennese Jews. But this is not just a matter of placing a piece of sculpture: it is our movement over this place that, as in performance, establishes a geographic and with it a historical link. EXPORT wanted the medieval dig exposed and visible through a glass floor, with running water between it and us, mediating the view. The project was wildly impractical (imagine what archaeologists would say about installing a stream over the old excavations!), but in her aesthetic ideas, EXPORT is not alone. Some of the key artists of the 1980s and '90s practice surrounding commemoration involved in both practices and developed both genres in relation and sometimes tension with each other. Visible mourning was used as a means to take on responsibility – for whom, was not completely clear in the country of

Holocaust perpetrators, and this might have been another problem with this particular project.

The concept of performative access to history by the audience also allows for individuals to approach and work through the past more easily than if they are just fed a historical dogma. The corporeal being-in-space can open up history to a broader range of personal approaches. The outcome of what history is, remains open, and is being made in the encounter with the often fragmented object presented– that EXPORT works with fragments is not a coincidence – because the engagement of the audience is part of the process of history making.

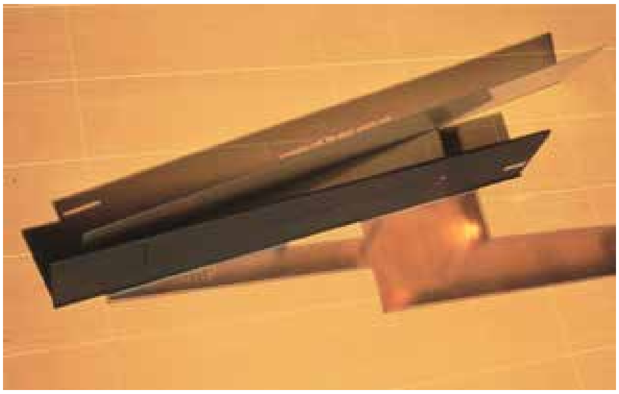

Figure 5 VALIE EXPORT, *Proposal for the Memorial for the Austrian Jewish Victims of the Shoah*, courtesy of the artist.

This means that the body can be activated in the process of commemoration and making history. There is the danger, of course, of replacing historical consciousness with mere bodily "feeling", and I discussed this elsewhere, but I overall believe that performative commemoration, or performative monuments, are a good way to connect individuals with their own experiences to History with a capital H. Ideally historical consciousness and history become part of the creation of a functioning public sphere. I believe that the public sphere is always contested and that it is important to claim histories and historical consciousness, and to be aware that governments or majority groups are not always willing to allow everyone access. The impulse (often by politicians) to "leave the past behind" cannot work if the experiences of individuals in the past are simply dismissed. This also prevents the creation of a functioning society, in which the past informs the present. This all sounds easier than it is, of course, and gets even more complex in the case of traumatic events. I mentioned the problem of replacing history with feeling, which, in some cases leads to a simplistic equation: if I can make an audience, who did not personally experience the trauma feel a bit of it (unstable seeming architecture, claustrophobic installations, etc.) it might lead to an understanding. It needs more than that, though, if we want empathy, maybe even care; it needs the ability for those who want to commemorate to explore and relate, interact and question, slowly build history in relation to memory and commemoration, in relation to other people and their own histories.

This brings me back to the question if objects – the "performative monuments" do anything by themselves. They cannot. But, if set up openly enough, they can invite a performative process, in the interaction between object and audiences, which can expand to interaction between people, of course. This can also include later audiences. This is where mediation can become useful and important, be it mediation via discourse or communication, or via photographic images and film, online or off-line. (Widrich 2018)

History in the present is politics, and the discourse in which history is constructed takes part in the creation of the public sphere. I would like to think of it as commemorative action that involves the making of history for the future. Performative means a social interaction that changes the fabric of history. Here I am again going back to its original meaning in Speech Act Theory. Would that need an object, or a performance on the ground? I feel that some kind of material or physical event, while not entirely necessary, enables a grounding of history in the fabric of its geographical or imaginative site. We can engage in stories, sites, and material in different yet equal ways, but for me at least, the material presence, or a physical site, in particular in its changing form, seem an adequate form to both stabilize and destabilize historical narratives. I do not mean to make a claim for authenticity, I am merely trying to understand how interaction with our surrounding world works best. Social media plays a role here, as even a performance that only takes place once, is usually mediated online, circulated via the channels of reproduction and recontextualization, and is, like all art, already a mediation in its symbolic value. It can be further stabilized, anchored in the frames of algorithms and hashtags. This is sometimes enough, and a successful activation of the public sphere. But sometimes it is not.

A factor I did not discuss in my book is one that seems to matter more and more in recent years: care.

First prominent in feminist discussions, "care ethics" has emerged as a powerful category from psychology to architectural discourse – thanks for Elke Krasny in Vienna. Care relates back to the question about the relevance of the labor needed to make and preserve objects. Without care, objects and sites can disappear, and without care for commemoration and for public discourse, the past will not help us for a better future. But more broadly, we are at a point in history in which we understand that care for our environment is necessary for our survival as species. The care as attitude also relates to the performative engagement with the past, and the care extends to objects or sites that might allow an easier access to this past. Activism for or against monuments can be seen as care for the society. And to see care for the survivors starting with a coat for the Korean girl in bronze might seem strange, but it seemed a shift in the approach, away from the simple aggression against Japan (even though there was quite a bit of this too), towards and engagement with those who had to live the horrible history. What I would still criticize in these particular memorials is that there was no careful reflection about the material, that it was chosen for traditional historical connection with monuments and elevation in the traditional sense. But, if monuments work in the present, if they want to connect the past to a (hopefully changes) future, it seems important to work with the condition of the present tense, to react to where we are now as a public. How to find materials of care that are not taken from the ground as if we had endless supply?

The reuse of the weapons as materials in Salcedo's work also speaks to this current moment. Care can be forceful and allow for the tensions and negative feelings to emerge as part of the process of moving forward, like here. But care is also a gesture in itself, performative in how it allows for change, and performative, because the gesture of caring can be used to invite a broader audience into the performative change of a historical narrative. I am therefore delighted to be able to discuss these concepts here in a space – virtual unfortunately -- that, in my opinion, has brought together these ideas in such a powerful and moving way.

Acknowledgements:

This paper is the result of an invitation to give a talk at Fragmentos, Espacio de Arte y Memoria, Bogotá, Colombia, which was planned for spring 2020. Due to covid-19, the lecture was postponed and ultimately streamed online with a live Q&A on various platforms on September 10, 2020. Heartful thanks go to Maria Fernanda Ariza, Beatriz Dávila, Ines Arango, the Columbian Ministry of Culture, the Goethe Institute Bogotá and everyone else who was in dialogue with me.

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Endnotes

1 - I am here referring to the Austinian use of the "performative". J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. More in the following passage.

2 - The most prominent attempt to theorize an ethics of care in relation to gender is Gilligan, 1982. The Saas-Fee summer school devotes the 2020 iteration to Care, Caring and Repair in Cognitive Capitalism (https://sfsia.art/2020-berlin/), and a section of the performance studies international conference (no postponed to 2021) is entitled Crisis of Care (http://psi2020rijeka.com/). My colleague Elke Krasny has worked on the topic for years, I thank her for conversations.