

# ***COLLECTIVE MONUMENT***

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This catalog accompanies the exhibition *Collective Monument*, curated by Raino Isto, on view at the Stamp Gallery from January 25—March 11, 2017.

*Collective Monument* examines monumentality as a complex and ambiguous cultural form that emerges from networks of power, memory, and participation. The exhibition presents three artists from diverse geographies who engage with the significance of monuments and monumental industry in current geopolitical conditions. Onejoon Che, Nara Park, and the DZT Collective all use monuments to propose forms of collective experience and to critically examine the grounds of that collectivity. The works on view trace the methods by which monuments are produced, the kinds of meanings they propagate, and the ways that individuals and groups can speak to, through, and with them.

South Korean artist Onejoon Che's three-channel video *Mansudae Master Class* documents the labor of North Korean sculptors constructing colossal sculptures in Africa, revealing that monumental commissions can transcend isolationist politics. Washington, DC-based sculptor Nara Park's *Never Forget* ponders the simultaneous profundity and superficiality of monumental forms and language, considering monuments' capacity to appear both natural and artificial. The DZT Collective—a collective of Albanian and Italian artists, curators, and architects—presents *Study for a Monument*. This interactive installation invites visitors to use their bodies and objects at hand to model a monument within the gallery, opening a space to experiment with strategies for embodying resistance and commemoration. Taken together, the artworks in *Collective Monument* push us to reconsider how monuments can allow us to share our experiences, with whom we can share them, and what futures we might construct out of them.



# THE PERSISTENCE OF MONUMENTALITY

*Raino Isto*

*The problem is whether history can give itself only as the illusion to establish the sole and necessary ground of Being, or also as the lucid recognition of the eventuality of Being. The reduction of monuments to masks, or even to sheer signs and documents referring to life-forms that raise no claim to the status of metaphysically grounded models, should not be regarded as a symptom of the "moral crisis," namely, of the decadence of our society. On the contrary, it is an essentially positive stage toward the new possible monumentality [...].—Gianni Vattimo<sup>1</sup>*

## I. Introduction

When we speak about monuments, what are we speaking about? Of the many conflicted cultural phenomena to which aesthetic and political criticism returns, monuments are without a doubt among the most paradoxical. The very notion of monumentality seems at once frustratingly ambiguous and persistently ubiquitous; the monument almost by definition appears as a universal form present across vast stretches of time and in numerous cultures.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the monument derives its meaning from its rootedness in a specific place and within a specific historical horizon. Mention of the monument will call to mind both figurative representations and abstract, architectonic monoliths; the term encompasses sophisticated forms of political propaganda as well as simple piles of stones that mark ephemeral events and lives. The monument may be primarily textual, something that can be 'read', or it may be a remnant that—by its very belonging to a distant past—is no longer legible to us, an object that can only be understood by being 'lived.' The indefinite quality of monumentality may ad-

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<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "Postmodernity and New Monumentality," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 28 (Autumn, 1995): p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> On the apparent universality of monumentality as a cultural category, see James F. Osborne, "Monuments and Monumentality," in James F. Osborne, ed., *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 1-19.

here in objects that are colossal in size, or small enough to cradle in our hands. When we ask what a monument is, and what a monument can be, we are asking what we believe can serve as a materialization of our memories, what can gather us as a community, and what is credible to us as a reflection of history.

## II. A New Monumentality?

While the monumental seems to resonate as a universal form, its existence and meanings have become distinctly tendentious over the long course of modernity's development. The rise of capitalism and industry, together with the proliferation of urban spaces and notions of nationhood, have placed new and heightened pressures on monuments. The history of monumentality in the modern era is a conflicted one, and this history certainly cannot be traced as a steady continuity, development, or decline across any span of time or geography. In many instances, though, the scale of monumentality seemed appropriate to the radical changes of modernization. But the very notion of monumentality also suggests a timelessness or eternity that is at odds with the continuous change, and it is this apparent quality of timelessness that led sociologist Lewis Mumford famously to declare, "The notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms. If it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument."<sup>3</sup>

The monument's perceived eternal qualities, and their supposed incompatibility with modernity, has not necessarily led to the monument's increased visibility (say, by contrast to the dynamism of modern life). The noted novelist and philosopher Robert Musil asserted "there is nothing in this world as invisible as monuments": they tend paradoxically to escape our notice rather than attract it.<sup>4</sup> Musil's concern about the apparent inconsequence of public monuments was in fact a fairly late addition to a centuries-long dispute about where the memory supposedly materialized in monuments actually resides or finds itself properly materialized. As Kirk Savage points out, such concerns can be traced back to Pericles' funeral oration and the idea that the monument "planted in the heart" is nobler than the one engraved in stone.<sup>5</sup> This notion has frequently found its

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3      Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1938), p. 438.

4      Robert Musil, "Monuments," in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike (New York: Continuum, 1986), p. 320.

5      Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), II, p. 43, qtd. in Kirk Savage, "The Past in the Present," *Harvard*

way into postwar monumental practices; as artist Horst Hoheisel said of his inverted monument to the Aschrott Brunnen fountain in Kassel, "The sunken fountain is not the memorial at all. It is only history turned into a pedestal, an invitation to passersby who stand upon it to search for the memorial in their own heads. For only there is the memorial to be found."<sup>6</sup> That is, according to some, the monument's proper function is to participate in directing attention away from or beyond itself, so that the work of memory can be carried out elsewhere.

The notion that memory is displaced from the materiality of the monument also grounds certain vehement critiques of the traditional monument. According to these critiques, the monument has come to function exclusively as a representative of official 'history.' The proliferation of this form of history also reveals the dearth of memory embodied in contemporary life, and such history even actively participates in the displacement and denial of memory. The most famous version of this argument is put forward by Pierre Nora in his discussion of 'sites of memory' (*lieux de mémoire*). Nora writes that "[m]useums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders" are "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it."<sup>7</sup> These manifestations of history appear precisely because "there is no spontaneous memory" in modern society, and their appearance testifies to the fact that, for Nora, "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition."<sup>8</sup>

Nora's declaration that we no longer live in a time of memory but in the era of obsessively produced history is dubious, at least in regards to monumentality and its paradoxical eternity and invisibility. If the public monument is truly somehow invisible—or at least if it escapes our notice—then can it really be part of history's replacement of memory? Does its invisibility, its role in the background of experience, make it necessarily an object of memory, rather than of history? Finally,

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*Design Magazine* 9 (Fall, 1999), <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/the-past-in-the-present> (accessed December 18, 2016).

6 Horst Hoheisel, "Rathaus-Platz-Wunde," in *Aschrottbrunnen: offene Wunde der Stadtgeschichte* (Kassel, 1989), unpaginated; trans. and qtd. in James E. Young, "Memory and Counter-Memory," *Harvard Design Magazine* 9 (Fall, 1999), <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory> (accessed December 18, 2016). The emphasis is mine.

7 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," trans. Marc Rousebush, *Representations* 26 (1989), p. 12.

8 Ibid., pp. 12, 8.

are we so certain that the proliferation of history at the expense of memory still occurs today, in the period some call 'postmodern' and some 'contemporary,' and that others consider to be simply a continuation of modernity?

Writing in the 1980s, Nora remarked upon a proliferation of manifestations of what he called 'history,' including monuments. Let us consider this assessment alongside that made by Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo in the mid-1990s, when he recognized in contemporary society "a newly found legitimacy for monuments," and a proliferation of objects (often architectural) that are considered monumental.<sup>9</sup> For Vattimo, the context of this new legitimacy of the monumental form was in fact not modernity, but its passage into something else. The monuments' context was thus not a strengthening of 'history,' but its enervation. Society returned, in other words, to monuments in "an era in which [...] everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historicization of experience."<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, Vattimo's assessment of the turn to a particular kind of monumentality coincides with a particular characterization of postmodernity, one that implies a different kind of 'modernity' than the one Nora describes. Theorist Mikhail Epstein writes of postmodernism as the inversion of the utopian dreams of the avant-garde in the earlier part of the 20th century, arguing that "[p]ostmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in doing so it gave it the attributes of the future: indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of possibilities."<sup>11</sup> For Vattimo, the relatively recent rediscovery of the monument is premised explicitly on its characteristic multiplicity—that is to say, its polysemy—and also on a kind of perpetual indeterminateness that might manifest in obscurity or invisibility, or in our own uncertainty about its meaning.

We must say that Vattimo's understanding of 'modernity' is quite different from that which caused Lewis Mumford to claim that the monument was incompatible with the modern. For Vattimo, the quintessential *modernity* of monumentality is its apparent relationship to eternity—"to the essence of monument belongs the illusion of uniqueness and eternity, and ultimately the ambition to be a monument of foundation."<sup>12</sup> The operative word here is *illusion*: to equate the mon-

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9 Vattimo, "Postmodernity and New Monumentality," pp. 39-40.

10 Vattimo, "Introduction," in *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 10.

11 Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 330.

12 Vattimo, "Postmodernity and New Monumentality," p. 44.

ument with eternity is to misunderstand that this association is a contingent one, an association that masks the complexity and dynamic multiplicity of meanings that the monument can either embody or engender. This definition of the monument's essence still of course does not quite resolve the relationship of the monument to Nora's discussion of memory and history, his assertion that "[m]emory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past."<sup>13</sup> In fact, Nora's memory looks something like the de-historicized simultaneity of postmodernity that Vattimo laments as ubiquitous. At the same time, Vattimo understands the recent turn to monumentality not as an attempt to consolidate memory's evasive ambiguity into history, but instead as a dissolution of modernity's search for metaphysical foundations, an acknowledgement that the monument in fact represents something far more amorphous and 'ungrounded' than it might appear.

### III. The (Un)Trustworthiness of Monuments

The paradoxically illusory character of the monument's relationship to the truth of history and collective experience places monuments in a peculiar double bind. On the one hand, the monument is treated as deceptive insofar as it masks the ephemeral and shifting character of (post)modern life. In art historical accounts of the development of modern sculpture (such as the one put forward by Rosalind Krauss<sup>14</sup>) as well as in sociological accounts of the urban context (such as Lewis Mumford's<sup>15</sup>), the 'logic of the monument' is ultimately associated with a stage of cultural production that has outlived its applicability to both art and the lived environment. On the other hand, the fallibility of monuments, their untrustworthiness, continues to be a subject of criticism, as monuments appear to stand for the manipulative aspects of official power structures that orchestrate their commission, placement, and reception. Monuments are treated as political tools deployed to mask underlying sociopolitical truths by means of vacuous ideologies. As the Russian art collective Chto Delat write in their discussion of the possibilities of contemporary monumentality, "today's citizens live surrounded by monumental symbols that have been drained of meaning," symbols "erect[ed by governments] in the centers of their decaying power."<sup>16</sup>

13 Nora, "Between Memory and History," p. 8.

14 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 279.

15 Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp. 433-440.

16 Chto Delat, "Face to Face with the Monument," *Chto Delat Newspaper* 37 (May, 2014): p. 1, [https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/37\\_face-to-face-with-the-monument/](https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/37_face-to-face-with-the-monument/) (accessed

The discovery of the monument's complexity and ambiguity makes it at once liberating and threatening: the monument is caught between the belief that we must recognize the multifaceted and relative actuality of truth(s) in contemporary society, and the equally persistent belief that ideologies are fundamentally deceptive systems of propaganda concealing a deeper truth that remains to be uncovered through persistent critique. One of the most salient examples of critical reaction against monuments as propagandistic forms is the widely publicized destruction and relocation of monuments throughout the former Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>17</sup> The symbolic end of socialism as a viable global sociocultural force was supposedly reinforced by circulating images of monuments pulled down, destroyed, and transported to peripheral areas of cities or to parks specially made to contain such monuments as reminders of the totalitarian past. In the wake of the Cold War, the monument emerged as one of the most prominent symbols of the past (the demise of the dream of Communism) and of a system that allegedly epitomized authoritarianism and bureaucracy.

The rejection of monuments as propaganda has not always taken the form of iconoclasm, however; in some cases it has simply resulted in a general shift in the emphasis of commemoration. The traumas of the twentieth century, the Holocaust foremost among them, produced a greater need to commemorate victims of conflicts rather than the heroes of such struggles. The monument's role as a focus of shared mourning became even more central to its sociopolitical identity. At the same time, the practice of constructing monuments to victims also produced a new view of history. As Branimir Stojanovic has suggested, the monument commemorating the victim became "a post-historic monument" in the sense that it "impl[ies] that we are outside of history, that we are [at] its end, that we have knowledge of the outcome and that the victim is fixed ... and that we know who it is."<sup>18</sup> That is, the practice of dedicating monuments to the victims of aggression—as a means of resisting totalitarian hero-worship and cults of personality—has, in its own way, obscured a certain aspect of the monument's connection to lived history and its uncertainties. The association of the monument with victims suggests that the victims and aggressors of history are established, and thus that the work of commemoration has already been done.

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December 19, 2016).

17 For a detailed account of the destruction of socialist monuments, see Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion, 1997).

18 Branimir Stojanovic, Milica Tomic, and Nebojša Milikic, *Politics of Memory* (2007), p. 9.



Distrust of the monument's propagandistic history has also given rise to numerous monumental practices emphasizing "invisibility" as well as "inaccessibility and inversion,"<sup>19</sup> resulting in works that James E. Young terms "counter-monuments." Counter-monuments, for Young, are those "brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being."<sup>20</sup> Young's account of the counter-monument as a form focuses on postwar Germany, and attempts there to remember the traumas of fascism without reifying fascist monumentality. These works explore the notion of the "monument against itself": they attempt to activate their audiences by receding, by becoming invisible, by staging temporary disruptions of public space with the aim of activating memory.<sup>21</sup> The notion of the counter-monument has also been used by Gal Kirn to describe the "dynamic and unfixed" character of memory materialized in Yugoslav monuments to the Partisan struggle of World War Two, monuments that deny the consolidation of nationalist identities through formal ambiguity.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it would seem, the only way for monumental works to fulfill their "responsibility" (as Marianne Doezema puts it<sup>23</sup>) to their publics is to emphasize the processes by which the material object has ceased to mean anything in itself, so that meaning remains sited outside the monument or else emerges only relationally in the encounter between viewer and object.

## IV. Monument and Mass Ornament

If the monument has become somehow fundamentally separated from the lives, memories, and aspirations of its public, however, there is also a persistent critical resistance to the idea of monumental displacement, transference, or transformation *into* the public. Despite the fact that the idea of the monument 'planted in the heart' suggests that the monument's meaning is authentic "inso-

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19     Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (London: Reaktion, 1998), pp. 172-189.

20     James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18:2 (Winter, 1992), p. 271.

21     Young, "The Counter-Monument," pp. 274, 285.

22     Gal Kirn, "Anti-fascist Memorial Sites: Pure Art or the Mythologization of Socialist Yugoslavia?" in *Art Always Has Its Consequences*, ed. Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, Emese Süvecz, et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), p. 129.

23     Marianne Doezema, "The Public Monument in Tradition and Transition," in Marianne Doezema and June Hargrove, *The Public Monument and its Audience* (Cleveland: Cleveland Institute of Art, 1977), p. 9.

far as it is ... shared by a community that recognizes itself in [the monument],”<sup>24</sup> the equation of the public itself with the monument is also often met with suspicion.

This suspicion derives, as Michael North has argued, from the ways the monumental paradigm was applied to the masses under ‘totalitarian’ regimes, both fascist and socialist.<sup>25</sup> North points out that the integration of the populace with the architectural and monumental environment was one of the central aesthetic concerns of Nazism. What critic Siegfried Kracauer termed “mass ornament”<sup>26</sup>—the aesthetic that subsumes bodies to coordinated mass movement in the context of dance—emerged as a key element of capitalist, fascist, and socialist spectacle. Subsequent attempts by artists working in the tradition of the avant-garde to treat the masses or the public as a sculptural or architectural form have thus had to overcome the associations of such practices with authoritarian and totalitarian forms of social policy. Thus, for example, performance artist Joseph Beuys’ experiments with the notion of “social sculpture” seem, in hindsight, deeply problematic insofar as they fail to reckon with the full range of historical precedents for such ‘sculpture,’ including fascist ones.<sup>27</sup>

This tension has not prevented numerous artists and activists from creating “living memorials,” works that attempt to combine counter-monumental ephemerality with the paradigm of memory as ‘a perpetually actual phenomenon’ that requires participation and enactment to be fully realized.<sup>28</sup> These living memorials are almost by definition localized, and thus they avoid the implicitly totalizing claims associated with authoritarian uses of monumental public spectacle. The notion of the living memorial confers on that community or group not only the aesthetic function of the monument but also, quite significantly, the responsibility

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24 Vattimo, “Postmodernity and New Monumentality,” p. 45.

25 Michael North, “The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament,” in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp. 16-17.

26 Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring, 1975), pp. 67-76. See also the discussion in North, “The Public as Sculpture,” p. 16.

27 North, “The Public as Sculpture,” pp. 14, 17.

28 Examples include Sanja Ivekovic’s *Rohrbach Living Memorial* (2005), a memorial enacted by the citizens of a small town in Austria, dedicated to a group of Roma and Sinti Holocaust victims to whom no monument exists; and the ongoing efforts of protestors who have created a participatory space (begun in 2014) in Budapest’s Szabadság Square as a reaction against the Hungarian government’s erection of a memorial that implicitly denies any Hungarian role in the persecution of Jews or responsibility for the events of the Holocaust.



for remembering. In this sense, such projects preserve the public not only as a kind of 'ornament' but also as a network of political subjects responsible to and for the activity of remembrance.<sup>29</sup>

## V. The Monumental (as an) Aesthetic

The somewhat incongruous association of the monumental with the (mass) ornamental raises another question fundamental to a discussion of monuments throughout history: that of the aesthetic category or categories appropriate to the monument. Monuments have most frequently been considered in terms of the sublime, both because of their scale and because of the notion that the historical events they aim to represent are in some way beyond immediate imagination or cognition. As Suzana Milevska writes, "To build a monument is by definition to attempt to represent the sublime, that which is incomprehensible, bigger than us. Any monument offers a remembrance of a certain unperceivable and unrepresentable sublime. It commemorates incommensurability and incomprehensibility [...]."<sup>30</sup>

This sublime quality places monuments close to the monstrous. When monuments proclaim official ideologies, they often aim to create an environment conducive to fear, Terry Kirk argues.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, if the public comes to question the ideals the monument is intended to express, then the colossality of the monument's form becomes repugnant: "the emptiness of its structure, the inflated pride of its gargantuan elements, the vaporousness of its blanched surfaces, and the heresy of its superabundant decorations"<sup>32</sup> all become aspects that inspire aversion and hatred.

An alternative vision of the monument, however, links monumentality to the ornamental in a different way. For Gianni Vattimo—following Martin Heidegger—the monument is also an ornament insofar as its background quality (the invisibility Robert Musil ascribed to monuments) reflects its refusal to stand for a deep

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29 Stojanovic, Tomic, and Milikic, pp. 2-4.

30 Suzana Milevska, "Ágalma: The 'Objet Petit a,' Alexander the Great, and Other Excesses of Skopje 2014," *e-flux journal* 57 (September, 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/agalma-the-objet-petit-a-alexander-the-great-and-other-excesses-of-skopje-2014/> (accessed December 22, 2016).

31 Terry Kirk, "Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentality," *Perspecta* 40 (2008), p.13.

32 Kirk, p. 14.

truth, an absolute authenticity. Vattimo characterizes the monument as an ornament insofar as the monument draws out the conflict between “decoration as surplus and what is ‘proper’ to the thing.”<sup>33</sup> He quotes philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer’s assertion that “the nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation; namely, to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his [sic] taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it occupies.”<sup>34</sup> This mediation is at once the spatial mediation between the situatedness of the monument and its wider historical field, and the mediation between the specific tangibility of the monument as a discrete object and the unrepresentability of the sublime at which it gestures. This unrepresentable sublime may be a memory—say, the collective memory of suffering and the loss of homeland—or it may be a contemporary condition—say, the global coincidence of proletarian consciousness in Revolutionary struggle. In any case, the monument conceived as ornament, as Vattimo characterizes it, renounces the claim to a strong metaphysical truth that is often associated with monuments: the monument serves only to emphasize the unstable and shifting relations of time and place that can give rise to memory and community, but can just as easily erode them.

Unlike the ‘mass ornament,’ Vattimo’s theory of monumentality as a form of ornamentality proposes no fundamental unity among the masses as a reflection or materialization of the monument. Instead, it proposes that the very “eventuality”<sup>35</sup> of the monument draws attention also to the contingent situatedness of all communities and collectives that contribute to its creation and sustain its life in the present. Thus, the monument is always also a locus of (ant)agonism, and its representation of history is always characterized by a multiplicity of viewpoints, a criss-crossing, overlapping, and overturning of identities.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Gianni Vattimo, “Ornament/Monument,” in *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 87.

34 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cummings (New York: Crossroads, 1984), p. 140, qtd. in Vattimo, “Ornament/Monument,” p. 83.

35 Vattimo, “Postmodernity and New Monumentality,” p. 44.

36 For this reason, monuments are often associated with the notion of “memory wars,” and the frequency of conflicts over, between, and around monuments have given rise in turn to the trope of “monument wars.” See, for example, Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), as well as Rebecca Solnit, “The Monument Wars,” *Harper’s Magazine* (January, 2017), pp. 10-13.

## VI. Conclusion

The monument is a nexus that starkly illuminates a number of the constitutive paradoxes of contemporary culture and politics. The monument's history in the course of the uneven and incomplete transition from modernity to postmodernity points to the unresolved anxieties that continue to cohere around bodies, public art, and—ultimately—the possibility of the truth of history. In the monument, truth and ideology clash: no monument is to be trusted, and yet the very untrustworthiness of monuments draws attention to the inherent conflict between our desire to deconstruct received, 'fundamental' truths, and our concurrent need for such truths. The difficulty of imagining a monument that satisfactorily represents the present (to say nothing of the past) as an era of alleged 'post-truth' points to the ramifications of this conflict. We know that monuments are never really telling us the truth, indeed that they cannot tell us the truth, but we nonetheless persist in deconstructing the illusions they propagate.

Perhaps this persistence owes itself to the relationship not only between monuments and historical narrative, but also to the relationship between monuments as material objects and our own bodies. Here, again, the monument reflects our own anxieties: we want to assert that no mere object, no matter how sublime, can match the vitality of living memory that is found in the speech, the traditions, the bodies of a community. And yet we also resist the apparently totalitarian attempt to make our own bodies the monument, to really live the history we insist the monument cannot fully embody. The body and the monument-as-object must be kept steadfastly separate in order to respect the freedom we apparently require as individual political subjects. As long as these conflicts and anxieties adhere in our discussions of monumentality and our attitudes towards it, monuments will continue to serve not only as dynamic representations of the past and visions of the future, but also as reflections of the ways we try to live together in the present.

# NEVER FORGET, AGAIN

*Ingrid Pimsner*

The 2016 American presidential election introduced America to the phrase ‘post-truth,’ but the election was really just an especially shrill note in absolutism’s long-ago-begun *Libera Me*. It threw into relief the extent to which people can render supposedly clear ideals like democracy, transparency, and equality so multi-faceted that they become meaningless. Suddenly, we inhabited a mirror world: a world in which the internet propagated fake news stories, the media conflated reality TV antics with political campaigning, and the veneer of our democracy gave way to supposed Russian hackers. But humans have actually grappled with some version of these problems since the dawn of purposefully crafted imitations. In broadest terms, these are all philosophical problems of truth. What is real, and what happens when we lose track of what is real? It is this inability to hold on to absolutes in the wake of the shifting of our foundations that Nara Park’s *Never Forget* investigates and mourns.

In the most basic sense, *Never Forget* is an imitation of a monument: it looks like stone and moss but is actually comprised of many hollow, plastic packaging boxes. It seems to be a solid structure, but is actually just taped together in formations across the gallery floor. The sculpture is a mimesis of a ‘real’ thing in the world: a memorial covered in photographic images of stone and moss with vinyl lettering spelling out words such as “DEVOTION,” “HONOR,” and “DIGNITY” that Park lifted from Washington, DC monuments. One could call it a lie, in so far as one could call any artistic reproduction a lie. However, with its hyper-real photo scans and glossy surfaces, Park’s installation makes no real attempt at deception. Instead, *Never Forget* is a very real—though imitative—monument of ambiguity. Its sleek surface makes no apologies about being a simulation of nature. Paradoxically, Park’s boxes are honest imitations; imitations that are not trying to deceive us, just as our politicians’ manipulative words are not trying to convince us. This makes *Never Forget* feel especially prescient.

The 2016 Presidential election turned America’s body politic inside out. It peeled away our modernist faith in progress, truth, and other hitherto seemingly sacred Judeo-Christian values and exposed the blood and guts of our ugly Post-Truth

reality. In this reality, up is down, lies are just exaggerations, and Twitter accounts could be run by ISIS or a seven-year-old Aleppo refugee. But the Post-Truth condition has been with us all along; it is the stuff that politics is made of. Post-Truth is the grease that oils the slippery boundaries between propaganda, entertainment, and art.

What made 2016 especially disturbing was simply its brazenness and *Never Forget*'s glossy plastic surfaces read as an allusion to this. The lies came so hard and fast that news outlets did not bother citing facts or figures to counter them. When journalists accused politicians of lying, the politicians just pointed fingers at each other and said the other side lied more.

The installation's unstable construction and potential for change also alludes to our geopolitical state. *Never Forget* mimics heavy, moss covered stones—the solid remains of sedentary buildings—but the geometric stones are packages of air and the moss patches are hexagons as light as rice cakes. If someone sat on the piece it would crumple just like so many campaign promises. Park has exhibited *Never Forget* in the past and may do so again in the future, and she alters the arrangement of its pieces every time. Park's sculpture seems to capture our electorate's obsession with change, regardless of its price. Julian Assange exemplified this attitude recently, when he stated that the Trump presidency offered opportunities for “change for the worse and change for the better,” as if change were the only factor that mattered.<sup>1</sup>

In so far as Park's monuments are a physical manifestation of the confusion between authenticity and imitation, they can act as locations to mourn the confusion and its consequences in our world today. More and more, we will need such places to wrestle with what we believe, and what we can no longer accept as true. As many journalists have pointed out, losing our ability to confidently label something True or False leads us towards a murky instability that threatens much more than just Truth; it threatens our values.<sup>2</sup> In the face of this new reality, *Never Forget* can memorialize our greatest losses: the loss of the ability to differentiate between truth and a lie, and the loss of a collective moral compass.

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1 Julian Assange, “Donald? It's a change anyway,” *La Repubblica.it*, December 23, 2016.

2 Jonathan Freedland, “Don't call it post-truth. There's a simpler word: lies,” *The Guardian*, December 16th 2016.

Indeed, Park's title, *Never Forget*, already has more sinister connotations than when Park first exhibited the piece. *Never Forget* echoes the international community's promise to Holocaust survivors that 'never again' will such an atrocity occur. We broke that promise many times over with Rwanda, Bosnia, and other tragedies, and now, once again, with the siege of Aleppo. Words like 'devotion' and 'dignity' used to be a testament to our desire for immortality and permanence. Their moral certitude and convictions came from steadfastness as weighty as the rocks upon which they were inscribed. Traditionally, they were etched in stone to stand the test of time, but Park's words are made of vinyl lettering affixed to faux bricks that possess the structural integrity of tissue boxes. One cannot shake the suspicion that these words are merely hollow campaign soundbites.

In all of these ways, *Never Forget* is a deflation of sculptures like those Richard Serra is known for, of the traditional monumental memorial. In its use of rearrangement and its pretty veneer wrapping nothing more than empty air, *Never Forget* accepts impermanence, though it does not embrace it. Park, after all, did not make the work from biodegradable material, from any substance that would be truly ephemeral. Instead, the piece exists in some indeterminate middle ground, representing the incertitude of our current world. Like dancers who lost their spotting, we lost sight of what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. We will need a memorial to help us grieve for the growing losses this moral ambiguity is sure to herald.

# STUDY FOR A MONUMENT

## *DZT Collective*

When art goes out from museums and galleries, it is always for a reason. Among the various forms of expression, the monument has always been an example of how art has been enlisted over the centuries as a tool to pass on values to the people. Of course, these values were linked to religious or political sentiments, depending on who commissioned the creation of the monument. Contemporary art, freeing itself from this clientelism, has moved away from the direct duty of acting as “the bearer of values for the people.” Instead, it focuses at certain times on itself, at other times on what is happening in the real world around it, but contemporary art always does this from a position of autonomy. So the “classical” production of the monument was abandoned, and art went back in the public space in ephemeral forms, as temporal and socio-political acts, related to the territory or else completely transformed into popular culture.

*Study for a Monument* is born from a series of questions: How has the idea of monument changed today? Is it still possible to conceive of the monument in terms of a base and a figure above it that communicates something important to the rest of the people? It seems to us that today the idea of the monument is closer to an empty pedestal, first of all because of the difficulty of identifying a figure capable of supporting the weight of being a monument, and secondly because the values to be transmitted to the people change at the same velocity with which our society absorbs the present. This means, in our view, that the monument should represent values with the same speed, and then let the pedestal stand empty again, waiting to host a new person who wishes to transmit their values to the world for a few moments. The photographs of the performances each represent a precise idea, and then as a whole they represent a kind of study of the concept of the monument: of the form, the colors, and all the aesthetic values that are part of the monument.

The base that we have chosen is a common object, a stepladder, to allow people to get up just high enough to be visible to everyone, and then to focus, to transmit their thoughts to the world, and finally to get down again and be among the people continuing on with their lives. The stepladder is an object

easily transportable from one place to another, and potentially anyone with a message to share with others can stand upon it to become a monument. For us, the monument is a temporal and social object.



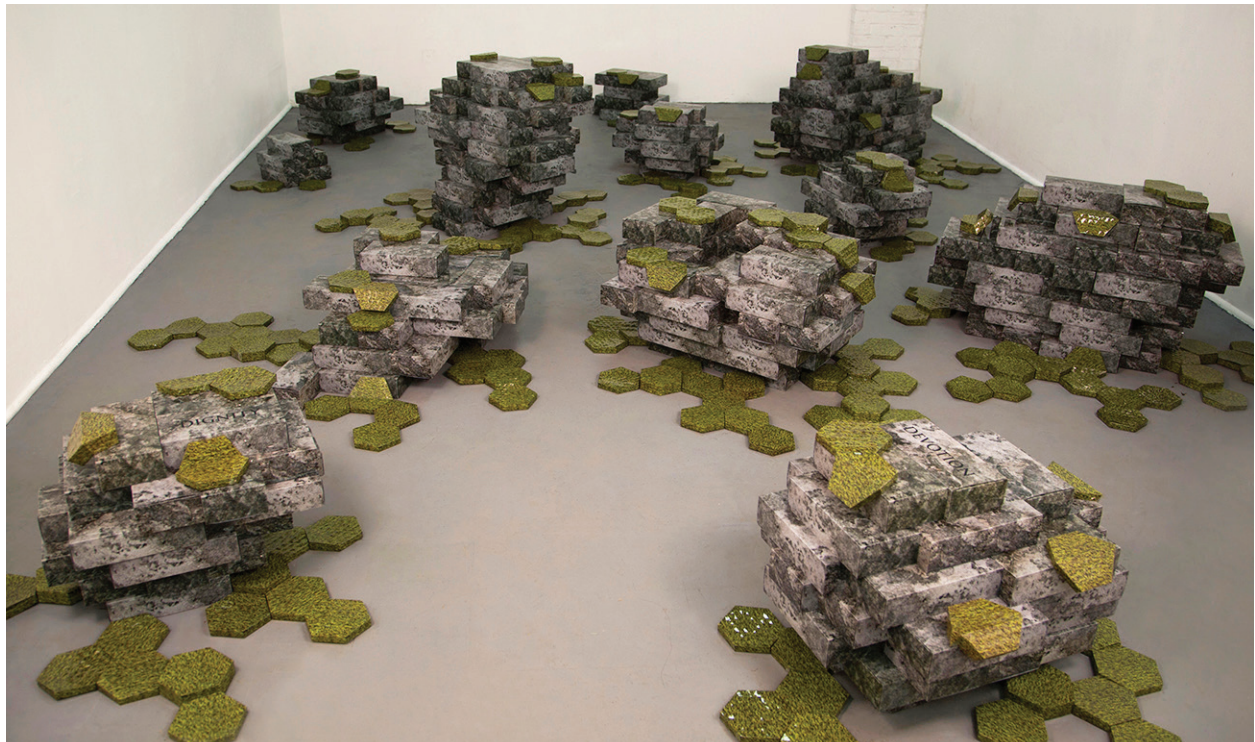
# WORKS

## Nara Park, *Never Forget*, 2014

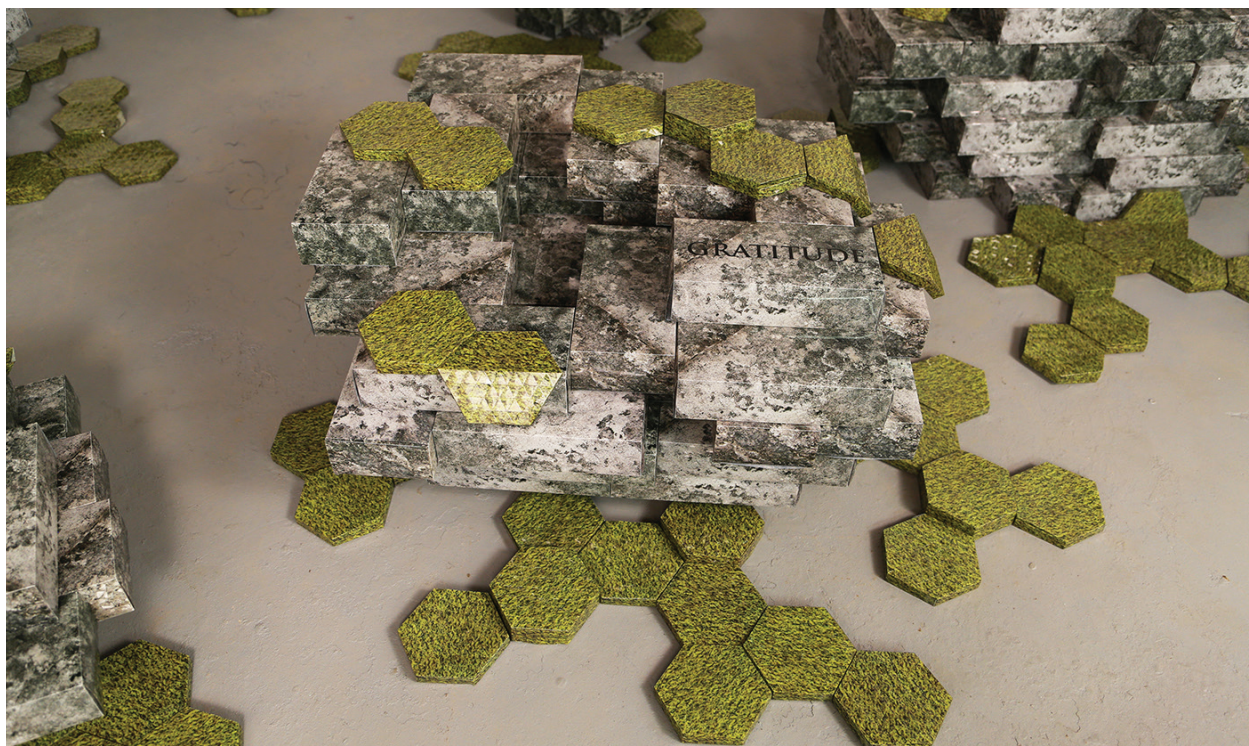
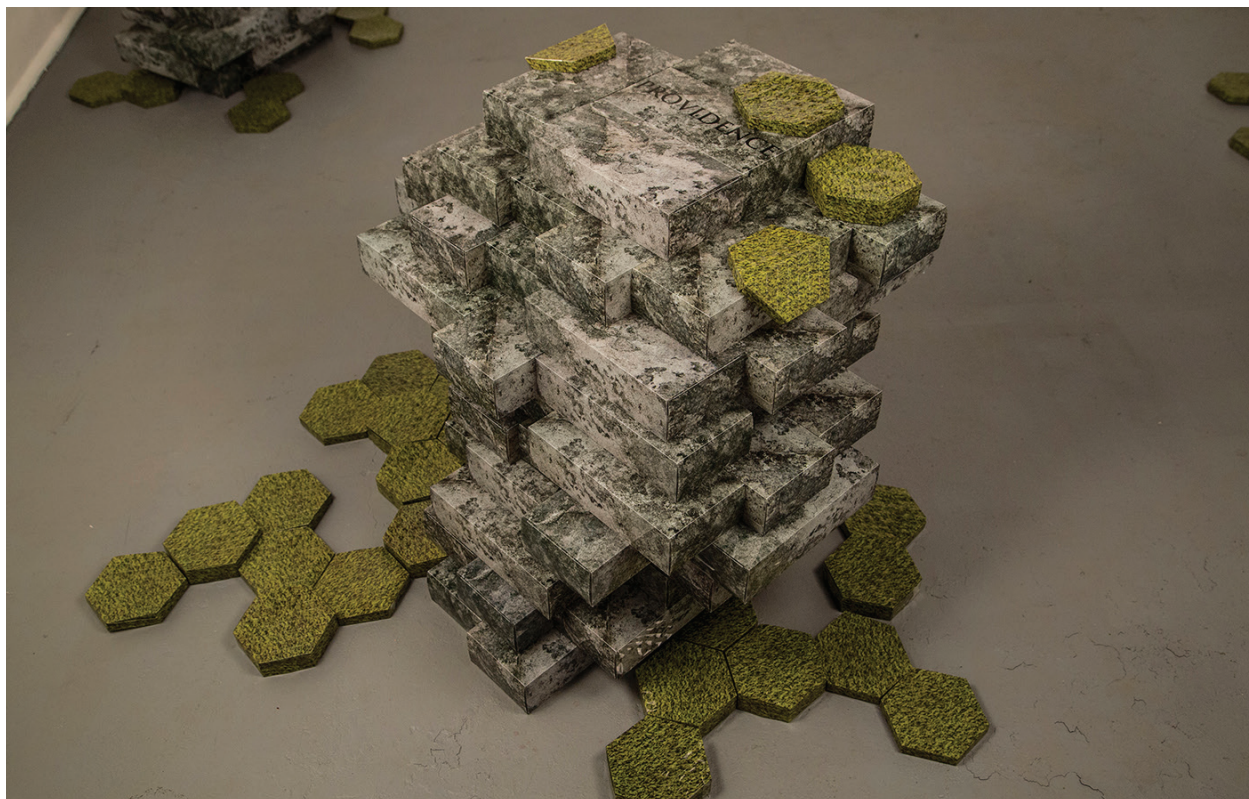
### Plastic packaging boxes and vinyl

*Never Forget* is constructed with custom-designed packaging boxes printed with patterns of stone and moss, drawing inspiration from forms and materials found in nature but transforming them in markedly artificial ways. Each 'rock' has a hopeful word selected from among the thousands of texts engraved on the memorials around Washington, DC. Words such as 'devotion,' 'dignity,' 'gratitude,' and 'protection' seem at once weighted with significance and empty of meaning in the context of explicitly synthetic reproduction. The process of designing and producing the sculptural boxes draws attention to the way that monuments are created via processes that can be collaborative, but also produce alienation between the body and the materials used.

Images courtesy of the artist and Hamiltonian Gallery and Artists









## DZT Collective, *Study for a Monument*, 2014—ongoing

### Stepladder

*Study for a Monument* offers visitors the possibility to perform their personal idea of a monument. The work functions as a performance that DZT cyclically stages in different situations. The stepladder serves as a pedestal for viewers to perform their ideas, in an era when the acceleration of time and the fragmentary quality of lived experience have made it difficult to think the solemn idea of a monument. The work invites viewers to embody resistance, commemoration, or celebration, to stand for their own ideas and values in dialogue with their sociopolitical surroundings.

Images courtesy of the artists









## Onejoon Che, *Mansudae Master Class*, 2015

**Three-channel HD video, 40 min.**

*Mansudae Master Class* documents South Korean artist Onejoon Che's attempts to learn more about the North Korean Mansudae Art Studio, the state studio that produces posters, statues, and other public art celebrating the country's regime. As a South Korean citizen, Che is unable to visit North Korea, and to understand the work of North Korean artists, he travelled to Africa, where the Overseas Project of the Mansudae Studio is engaged in producing monumental commissions for several national governments. The work of North Korean sculptors in Africa represents the fruit of Cold War relations between North Korea and the African continent, and Che's documentation of these cultural and economic networks reveals the paradoxes of nearness and distance that characterize today's global geopolitical realities.

Images courtesy of the artist





