

If mediatization has surprisingly revealed the secret life of inert matter and the 'face of things', the flipside of this has been the petrification of living organisms, an invasion of stone bodies in a state of suspended animation. Within a contemporary imaginary pervaded by new forms of animism, the paradigm of death looms large in many areas of artistic experimentation, pushing the modern body towards mineral modes of being which revive ancient myths of flesh-made-stone and the issue of the monument. Scholars in media, visual culture and the arts propose studies of bodies of stone, from actors simulating statues to the transmutation of the filmic body into a fossil; from the real treatment of the cadaver as a mineral living object to the rediscovery of materials such as wax; from the quest for a 'thermal' equivalence between stone and flesh to the transformation of the biomedical body into a living monument.

Alessandra Violi is Full Professor of English Literature and Culture at the University of Bergamo.

Barbara Grespi is Associate Professor at the University of Bergamo where she teaches Cinema and Visual culture.

Andrea Pinotti is Professor of Aesthetics in the Department of Philosophy 'Piero Martinetti', State University of Milan.

Pietro Conte is a Tenure-Track Assistant Professor of Aesthetics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

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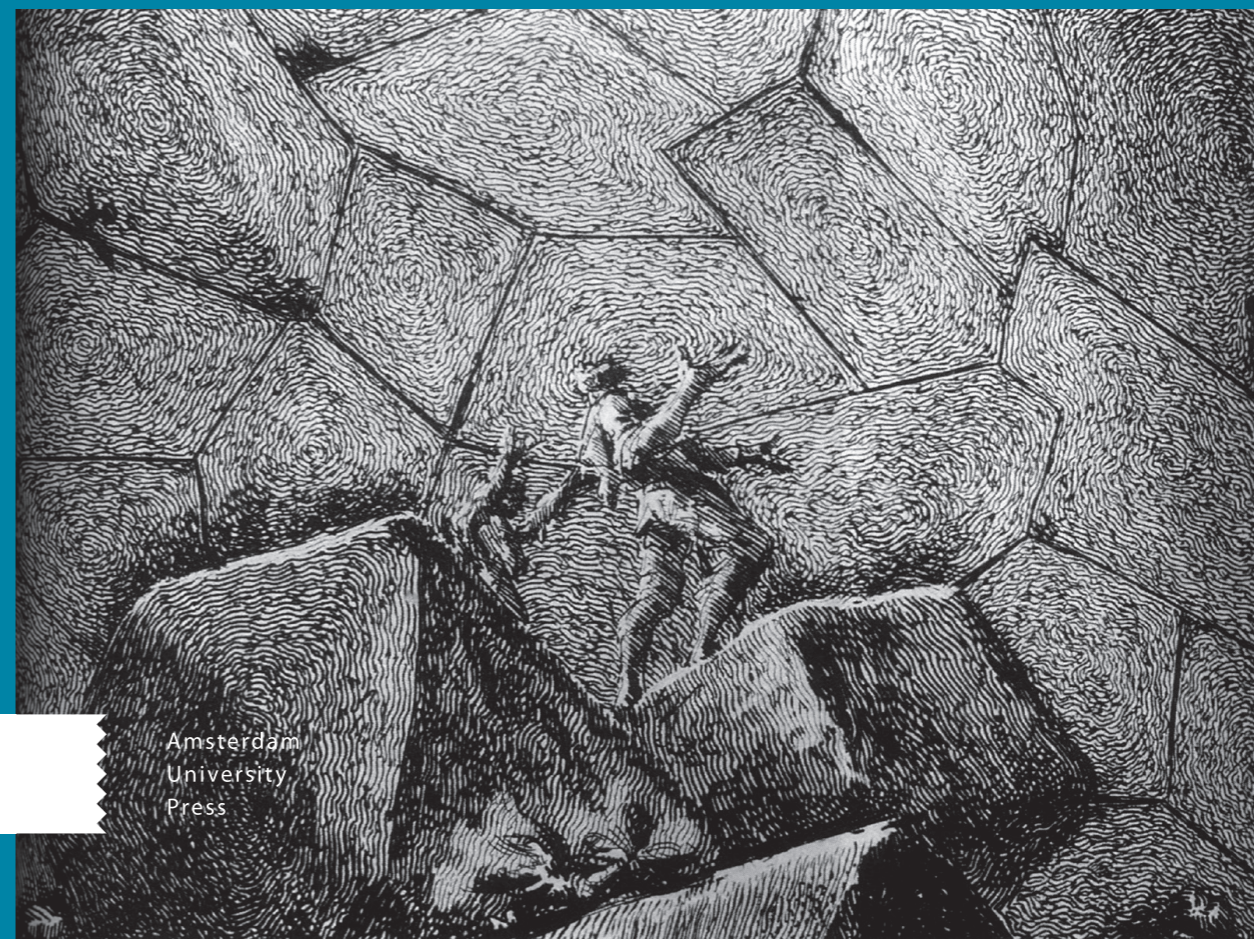
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Bodies of Stone in the Media,
Visual Culture and the Arts

Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts

Edited by Alessandra Violi, Barbara Grespi,
Andrea Pinotti and Pietro Conte



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Table of Contents

Introduction	9
Learning from Stone	
<i>Alessandra Violi, Barbara Grespi, Andrea Pinotti and Pietro Conte</i>	
I. Statue: The Imaginary of Uncertain Petrification	
1. Theatre and Memory: The Body-as-Statue in Early Modern Culture	25
<i>Greta Perletti</i>	
2. Translated Bodies: A 'Cartographic' Approach	45
<i>Silvia Romani</i>	
3. Pantomime in Stone: Performance of the Pose and Animal Camouflage	63
<i>Barbara Grespi</i>	
4. Animated Statues and Petrified Bodies: A Journey Inside Fantasy Cinema	89
<i>Michele Bertolini</i>	
5. The Ephemeral Cathedral: Bodies of Stone and Configurations of Film	105
<i>Vinzenz Hediger</i>	
II. Matter: Size, Hardness, Duration	
1. Bodies That Matter: Miniaturisation and the Origin(s) of 'Art'	133
<i>Michele Cometa</i>	
2. Brancusi's 'Sculpture for the Blind'	159
<i>Elio Grazioli</i>	
3. Cinema, Phenomenology and Hyperrealism	169
<i>Pietro Conte</i>	

4. Ephemeral Bodies: The 'Candles'
of Urs Fischer 179
Cristina Baldacci
5. The Celluloid and the Death Mask: Bazin's and Eisenstein's
Image Anthropology 189
Antonio Somaini

III. Corpse: Fossils, Auto-Icons, Revenants

1. Funeral Eulogy: Post-Mortem Figures and Redeemed Bodies,
in Images 211
Luisella Farinotti
2. On Jack Torrance As a Fossil Form 231
Barbara Le Maître
3. Technical Images and the Transformation of Matter in
Eighteenth-Century Tuscany 243
Anna Luppi
4. Glass, Mixed Media, Stone: The Bodily Stuffs of Suspended
Animation 261
Alessandra Violi
5. Bodies' Strange Stories: *Les Revenants* and *The Leftovers* 277
Luca Malavasi

IV. Monument: Embodying And Grafting

1. The Impassibly Fleshly, the Statue of the Impossible 295
Filippo Fimiani
2. Frozen into Allegory: Cleopatra's Cultural Survival 305
Elisabeth Bronfen
3. The Orphan Image 317
Federica Villa

4. The Well-Tempered Memorial: Abstraction, Anthropomorphism, Embodiment <i>Andrea Pinotti</i>	325
5. Monuments of the Heart: Living Tombs and Organic Memories in Contemporary Culture <i>Sara Damiani</i>	343
Index	361

Chapter Title: The Well-Tempered Memorial: Abstraction, Anthropomorphism, Embodiment

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4. The Well-Tempered Memorial: Abstraction, Anthropomorphism, Embodiment

Andrea Pinotti

Abstract

This paper addresses some crucial categories in contemporary practices of memorialisation and public sculpture, including the polarities of “abstraction / figuration” and “transitivity / intransitivity” and the questions of anthropomorphism and embodiment. Referring to paradigmatic cases belonging to different media—sculpture, architecture, video installations—and comparing different memorialistic subjects (the Holocaust memorials, the Italian fascist sacraria, the monuments dedicated to the Vietnam war), the chapter investigates the dialectics of presence and absence in the relationship between the present material body of the monument and the absent bodies evoked by the process of memorialisation.

Keywords: Abstraction; anthropomorphism; embodiment; memorialisation; monumentality

Abstraction

In the complex landscape of contemporary monumental practices and strategies of memorialisation, the class of memorials specifically devoted to the Shoah offers an incomparable richness of cases that articulate in apparently inexhaustible ways the relationship between image and memory.

At first sight, a major difference splits this class into two principal subclasses: figurative and abstract. However, such a distinction is highly problematic from the point of view of the aesthetics of visual arts: although

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the first so-called abstract watercolour by Kandinsky was realised more than one hundred years ago, a unanimously agreed definition of 'abstraction' is still a *desideratum*, and the very term 'abstract' has been frequently disputed and challenged by cognate denominations such as 'non-figurative', 'non-objective', 'non-representational' (in the German-speaking literature, the term is often dismissed in favour of the adjective *gegenstandslos*, literally 'with no object'). In an essay published in 1938, Kandinsky himself took up the formulation 'concrete art', coined eight years earlier by Theo van Doesburg to characterise precisely what in ordinary discourse is usually designated as 'abstract' art.¹

A series of controversial issues related to the core of visual representation affects this discussion of visual representation performed both by bi-dimensional and by three-dimensional images: resemblance, likeness, recognition and reference. These issues have engaged various disciplinary approaches: from formalism to semiotics, from phenomenology to analytic theories of depiction. I am well aware of the open and unsolved status of this scenario. However, in the absence of a shared notion of non-figurativeness, for the argument I want to propose here I will nevertheless assume the naïve distinction of 'figurative' and 'abstract' as a distinction between, respectively, images that allow the beholder to recognise in them objects belonging to the real world and existing in this world independently of their visual representation, and images that do not allow such recognition.

If we apply this provisional distinction to the Holocaust memorials ('Holocaust' itself being a no less controversial term than 'abstraction'),² one might simply think of two different typologies: referential memorials and monuments (representing, for instance, prisoners behind the electrically charged barbed-wire fences of the concentration camps) and non-representational, non-figurative objects (frequently presented in elementary geometrical volumes, broadly belonging to a 'minimalist' style), in which no apparent referent directly pertaining to the Nazi genocidal context is to be recognised. Among the many figurative and referential examples, we could mention George Segal's *The Holocaust* at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco (1984) or Kenneth Treister's *Holocaust Memorial* in Miami (1990),³ both showing suffering and anguished prisoners. As regards the abstract

1 Kandinsky, 'Concrete Art'.

2 See the critical remarks expressed by Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*; and Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, pp. 7-9.

3 On Segal, see Baigell, 'Segal's "Holocaust Memorial"'. On Treister: http://holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org/about/treister_testimonial/

memorials, perhaps the most famous and debated is Peter Eisenman's 2005 *Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, made up of 2,711 grey concrete stelae.⁴

In the initial phase of the Berlin project (around 1997), sculptor Richard Serra was involved as well, but he eventually pulled out because of differences with the commissioning body.⁵ A reference to his work can help us approach a second fundamental polarity intersecting the first couple 'abstraction/figuration': namely 'transitivity/intransitivity'.

Serra repeatedly rejected the designation of 'monumental' related to his work:

When people see my large-scale works in public places, they call them monumental, without ever thinking about what the term monumental means. Within the history of public sculpture, they are small-to-medium in size. [...] When we look at these pieces, are we asked to give any credence to the notion of a monument? They do not relate to the history of monuments. They do not memorialize anything. They do not cry out to be called monuments. A steel curve is not a monument.⁶

Using a traditional—although inadequate—aesthetic terminology, one could say that Serra's sculptures exhibit the *form* of monumentality (vertical development, ideally permanent materials, maximal visibility) but no monumental *content*: by virtue of their shape, dimensions, verticality, durable materiality, they seem *as if* they were erected in order to commemorate a person or an event. But there is no such person or event: 'They do not memorialize anything.' The apparent commemorative gesture does not apply to any particular object. Their monumental agency is therefore *intransitive*.

A hybrid case is interestingly represented by *Berlin Junction*, a public sculpture inaugurated in 1987 in Berlin. It consists of two curved corten steel plates that were initially installed in front of the Martin-Gropius-Bau and then repositioned in 1988—following a personal suggestion of Serra—near Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonic and very close to Tiergartenstrasse 4, the address of the headquarters of the *Aktion T4* euthanasia programme, a building destroyed by the Second World War bombings. Although it was not

4 See: *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, edited by the Foundation for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

5 See Young, *At Memory's Edge*.

6 'Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture. An Interview by Douglas Crimp', p. 135.

originally conceived as a memorial, it became such only *post festum*, once relocated to a site highly saturated with social mnemonic significance. This unusual circumstance helps us to understand why the Jewish community and the general public tended to respond to the rigorously geometric and abstract character of this sculpture with a sense of insufficiency and a demand for supplement: the sculptor Volker Bartsch was entrusted with the task of adding a commemorative plate in order to explicate through an inscription its memorialising function of the victims of the *Aktion T4* euthanasia programme.

Nevertheless, in some significant occasions Serra did accept from the very beginning the endeavour to design and realise *transitive* monuments and memorials. Such was the case, for instance, with the above-mentioned initial engagement in the Berlin memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe but also the sculpture *The Drowned and the Saved* (the title of Primo Levi's essay on the Nazi camps)—initially installed in 1992 in the Stommeln Synagogue in Germany and now at the Kirche St. Kolumba in Cologne—and *Gravity*, a slab erected in 1993 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. *The Drowned and the Saved*—two right angles leaning against each other so as to form an inverted 'U'—seems to evoke the experience of the Holocaust only in its title. *Gravity*—a 12-foot-square steel slab vertically intersecting the stairs of the Holocaust Memorial Museum⁷—has neither in its title nor in its form any representative reference to the Shoah.

Anthropomorphism

The recourse to abstract geometric forms is not exclusive to Serra. Among other examples we could mention *Black Form: Memorial to the Missing Jews*, a rectangular wall of concrete blocks painted in black—abstract as to the title, referential as to the subtitle—realised by Sol LeWitt for the 1987 *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, then subsequently demolished, reconstructed and repositioned at Altona Town Hall in Hamburg.⁸

But rather than striving for a complete list of the abstract memorials of the Holocaust, a different question should rather be raised, and a theoretical one: is it appropriate to characterise such memorials as both *abstract*

7 On the commissions for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (including besides Serra also Ellsworth Kelly, Sol LeWitt and Joel Shapiro), see Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, pp. 199–237.

8 Young, *The Texture of Memory*, p. 35.

and *transitive* (identifying respectively their abstract nature in their non-representational status and their transitive quality in their explicit dedication as expressed either in the title or in the commission)? Or are we here perhaps adopting too narrow a concept of 'representation' based on a misleading idea of resemblance or likeness and on a simplistic notion of mimesis?

In his book *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman repeatedly and severely warns against a naïve assumption of realistic representation based on the ambiguous concept of similarity.⁹ In his essay 'Seven Strictures on Similarity', he expands on this issue, remarking that resemblance is not the necessary and sufficient condition for representation:

Similarity cannot be equated with, or measured in terms of, possession of common characteristics. [...] When, in general, are two things similar? The first response is likely to be: 'When they have at least one property in common'. But since every two things have some property in common, this will make similarity a universal and hence useless relation. That a given two things are similar will hardly be notable news if there are no two things that are not similar. Are two things similar, then, only if they have all their properties in common? This will not work either; for of course no two things have all their properties in common. Similarity so interpreted will be an empty and hence useless relation.¹⁰

If anything is in some way like anything else, anything (coming to our specific question) is in some way like the Holocaust. LeWitt's generic *Black Form* can thus function as a *Memorial to the Missing Jews* by virtue of some kind of resemblance to the Jewish genocide: as black, perhaps, as the fatal and tragic destiny of the victims? Serra's inverted 'U' of *The Drowned and the Saved* resembles the leaning against one another as the only elementary human support in the inhuman conditions of camp life. And his slab *Gravity* interrupts the normal action of ascending and descending the stairs, similar (we might say) to the abrupt interruption that the Holocaust represented for the ascending and descending lives of millions of people.

Is the relation of similarity really as indifferent as Goodman puts it? Or is there something that makes the difference? In his confrontation with the poetics of minimalism, Georges Didi-Huberman has suggested that something makes the difference, and that this something is the *anthropos*: the human being and its irrepressible drive to anthropomorphism, that

9 Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 3-10.

10 Goodman, 'Seven Strictures on Similarity', p. 443.

is, to understand the non-human world according to the rules, principles and dynamics governing the human body. In this perspective, no object can escape the anthropomorphic associations. Certainly not the black cubes so intensely practiced by the minimalists. Let us take *Die* by Tony Smith: 'Le cube de Tony Smith est anthropomorphe dans la mesure où il se donne, par sa présentation même, la capacité de nous imposer un enchaînement d'images qui nous feront passer de la boîte à la maison, de la maison à la porte, de la porte au lit et du lit au cercueil.'¹¹ Certainly not a cube by Giacometti, which *somehow* resembles a face, by virtue of its 'anthropomorphisme abstrait'.¹² Certainly not one of those *ex-voto*, votive offers made of wax, which base their representative faculty not on the most faithful imitative portraiture of the face or of some parts of the suffering body but rather on the correspondence between the wax mass and other factors, like the weight or the length of the body itself:

Affirmer spontanément que seule est 'ressemblante' la *face* de cire, modelée ou moulée sur le visage du donateur, c'est manifester une bien courte vue quant au champ opératoire de la ressemblance: c'est, justement, ignorer que la ressemblance forme un *champ* et admet une pluralité d'objets, de critères, de supports et d'opérations. La *masse* de cire brute, non travaillée, non figurative – type d'*ex-voto* attesté en Occident depuis le IX^e siècle au moins – peut mettre en œuvre des critères de ressemblance extrêmement précis, tout aussi pertinents que les traits du visage: à côté des dons votifs conventionnels que sont les *cerei moduli* de petites dimensions, les donateurs déposaient des *massae cerae* à leur propre poids.¹³

The correspondence between the weight of the suffering body and its wax counterweight guarantees a kind of physical resemblance that has nothing to do with the exterior imitation of physiognomic traits but that is nonetheless founded *in re*, in the thing itself. An analogous argumentation works for the votive candles *ad mensuram corporis* or *secundum longitudinem*, i.e. of the same length as the donor's body.¹⁴

To support his view, Didi-Huberman leans here on Aristotle's *Poetics* (1447a), stating that, far from being univocally defined by their copy-like

11 Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, p. 94. On this, see the whole chapter entitled 'Anthropomorphisme et dissemblance', pp. 85-102

12 Didi-Huberman, *Le Cube et le visage*, p. 53.

13 Didi-Huberman, *Ex-voto*, pp. 70-73.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

reproductive skill, imitations ‘differ from one another in three ways, either in their means, or in their objects, or in the manner of their imitation’.¹⁵ In this respect, we could also evoke Vico’s lesson on the bodily and anthropomorphic root of metaphors:

It is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions. Thus, head for top or beginning; eyes for the looped heads of screws and for windows letting light into houses; mouth for any opening; lip for the rim of a vase or of anything else; the tooth of a plow, a rake, a saw, a comb; beard for rootlets; the mouth of a river; a neck of land; handful for a small number; heart for centre (the Latins used *umbilicus*, ‘navel’, in this sense); foot for end; the flesh of fruits; a vein of water, rock or mineral; the blood of grapes for wine; the bowels of the earth. Heaven or the sea smiles; the wind whistles; the waves murmur; a body groans under a great weight.¹⁶

Anthropomorphism appears therefore as a kind of material and physical a priori of our meaningful relationship to the world: a transcendental condition of possibility that operates as it were ‘before’ the distinction abstract/figurative, obliging us to radically rethink the very notions of representation and reference. Such a condition of possibility is nevertheless not always recognised in its universal operativeness: as Goethe would put it, ‘a man never understands how anthropomorphic he is’.¹⁷ Consequently, the stricture imposed by Goodman (everything is in some way like anything else) could be emended as follows: everything is in some way like the human body.

Embodiment

One of the most evident contexts in which the operativeness of the anthropomorphic drive can be clearly recognised is that of what might be named *embodied* memorials. No less than ‘abstraction’ and ‘Holocaust’, the notion of ‘embodiment’—central to the debates in philosophy, art theory and the cognitive neurosciences in recent years¹⁸—is highly problematic and can

15 Aristotle, *Poetics*, vol. 2, p. 2316.

16 Vico, *The New Science*, p. 116.

17 Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, nr. 165, p. 94.

18 See Ziemke, ‘What’s That Thing Called Embodiment?’.



Fig. 29: Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz, *Denkmal an ein Denkmal*, 1995; photo © Claus Bach, Gedenkstätte Buchenwald; courtesy of the Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau Dora.

easily lead to misconceptions (the major one being the mentalistic idea that in the process of ‘embodiment’, something that previously existed in a non-bodily form assumes some sort of body). Quite on the contrary, if taken in its proper meaning, ‘embodiment’ should convey the idea of the coming into existence of a particular sense that could not be expressed or achieved in any other way than through that particular bodily experience.

Among the embodied memorials, particularly eloquent is *A Memorial to a Memorial*, designed by Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz and inaugurated in Buchenwald in 1995 on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp (Figure 29). The apparent reflexive nature of the title of the work—*Denkmal an ein Denkmal*, a sort of memorial squared—refers to the fact that in the very same place a wooden obelisk had been erected in April 1945 by the liberated inmates with the wood taken from the barracks where they had been imprisoned: an action of re-appropriation and of re-signification of second-hand elements (of *bricolage* in Lévi-Strauss’ terms),¹⁹ which nevertheless could not endure through time because of the perishability of the material. By installing a substitute memorial, Hoheisel and Knitz produced an object that at the same time memorialises both the original memorial and its actual referent, the victims of the camp: this

19 See Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, chap. 1: ‘The Science of the Concrete’.

Denkmal—literally: a mark (*Mal*) for thought (*Denk*)—induces a double movement of reflection oriented both to the initial monument now disappeared and to the genocide perpetrated in Buchenwald.

Hoheisel is an artist who shows himself to be particularly sensitive to the intimate fragility of monuments, to their difficulties in withstanding time and oblivion, their need to be themselves supported and remembered—i.e. memorialised. Seven years before the inauguration of the Buchenwald memorial, he had been commissioned to remake the Aschrott Fountain in Kassel, which was a gift of a Jewish citizen to his hometown which had been destroyed by the Nazis in 1939. He conceived the replica following the original model, but instead of installing the fountain in the traditional erected way, he interred it in the spot where it once stood upright, thereby producing a mirror image of the primal monument—a *counter-* or *anti-*monument in the spatial sense of the prefix.²⁰

Coming to the formal and material nature of Hoheisel's Buchenwald memorial, it consists of a stainless-steel plate laid horizontally on the ground of what was the roll call square of the concentration camp. The plate bears the inscription K.L.B. (Konzentrationslager Buchenwald) and is engraved with the names of the different nationalities of the prisoners (included the *Staatenlose*, the stateless people). Thus far, by virtue of its simple square form (2x2 m, corresponding to the base of the original obelisk), this memorial seems to belong to the category of abstract Shoah monuments.

What makes it an embodied and anthropomorphic memorial is the fact that the slab is constantly heated to a temperature of 97.7° F (36.5°C), namely the regular temperature of the human body. Even during the icy winters, the warmth melts the snow so that the plate is always perfectly readable—and above all touchable. In fact, visitors tend spontaneously not only to read the inscriptions but also to kneel down respectfully to touch the heated surface, receiving in turn its touch. Such mutual tactile experience (touching and being touched) determines the *haptic* and *motor* nature of this memorial: 'There is just a technical warmth—Hoheisel warns—in this mnemonic sign; the task to transform it into a human feeling and acting remains an offer to the visitor to this empty place.'²¹

20 See Hoheisel, 'Aschrott Brunnen – Denk-Stein-Sammlung – Brandeburger Tor – Buchenwald', pp. 253-257; Spitz, 'Loss as Vanished Form'.

21 'Es ist nur eine technische Wärme in diesem Erinnerungszeichen; sie umzusetzen in ein menschliches Fühlen und Handeln, bleibt ein Angebot an den Besucher dieses leeren Ortes' (Hoheisel, 'Aschrott Brunnen – Denk-Stein-Sammlung – Brandeburger Tor – Buchenwald', p. 265).

A peculiar tension is instituted between the semantic side of the memorial (the inscriptions) and its somatic side (the bodily temperature): while the names of the nationalities engraved on the slab refer to *different* groups of victims, the heating is *indifferent* to any national classification, belonging to the human being as such. The bodily temperature is thus *anonymous* in its evocative power. In this respect, a comparison with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, erected in Washington by Maya Lin in 1982, is worth considering.²² The two slabs of black granite (more properly, gabbro rock) bear the inscription of the first names and surnames of the around 58,000 American soldiers classified either with a diamond as KIA ('killed in action') or with a cross as MIA ('missing in action') during the conflict. No reference to rank or unit is provided. In this monument, contrasted with the national groups and the universal bodily temperature of Hoheisel's memorial, the grade of individualisation appears at its utmost. As in the Buchenwald memorial, here too a kind of reflectivity is assured: not by the tactile means of the temperature but by the visual means of the polished treatment of the stone, which optically reflects the bodies of the visitors, who look at themselves as if in a mirror while reading the names of the victims etched on the surface. This visual device appears to collide with the individualised character expressed by the names: whatever name I read, I narcissistically see myself in the reflecting background of the inscription (it could have been me, had I lived in those historical circumstances). Victims and visitors, past and present collapse in the mirror image. The coldness of the granite is 'heated' by this empathetic identification on the basis of a potential common destiny.

Notwithstanding the different spatial orientation of the two memorials (horizontal in Buchenwald, vertical in Washington), an analogous manual performance is elicited in the two cases: hands and fingers are invited to touch the surface, to palpate it. Maya Lin's memorial is incessantly caressed and stroked by the visitors in visual-motor search of the names: a gesture that has become part of the iconographic dissemination of this monument. Common rituals of the visitors are the donation of heterogeneous items (military decorations, little sculptures, flowers, flags, even a Harley Davidson, the so-called 'Hero Bike')²³ and the practice of 'stone rubbing' (consisting of placing a sheet of paper on the inscribed name and rubbing a graphite pencil on it in order to reproduce the lettering).

22 See Griswold and Griswold, 'The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall'; Wagner-Pacific and Schwartz, 'The Vietnam Veterans Memorial'.

23 <https://vvmf.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/wisconsin-hero-bike-the-motorcycle-left-at-the-wall/> (accessed 9 December 2019).

In his video installation *Transmission* (colour, 43 min. sound/loop), realised in 2007 as part of the research project *Kunstöffentlichkeit Zürich*, Harun Farocki includes the Washington and the Buchenwald memorials among a series of monuments—both religious and secular—that induce in the visitors not only a contemplative and meditative visual attitude but also a tactile or more generally somatic and motor interaction. The shots of his video insist on the hands and fingers of the visitors following the names of the Vietnam Vets or responding to the heating of the Buchenwald slab.

In spite of the non-religious nature of these two memorials, their inclusion by Farocki in a class of monuments that embraces religious instances marks a pragmatic continuity of the performative act. *Transmission* shows the bodily behaviour of the visitors relating to cult items such as: 'the footprint of the Devil' in the Frauenkirche in Munich; 'the handprint of Jesus' on the 'Via dolorosa' in Jerusalem; the bust of Father Rupert Mayer (one of the leading figures of the German Catholic anti-Nazi resistance) in the Bürgersaalkirche in Munich; the gap in a rock, the so-called 'Bucklwehluckn' near St. Thomas am Blasenstein in Austria (a very narrow passage in a pre-Christian and subsequently Christianised cult stone that marks the threshold between illness and health, culpability and forgiveness); the so-called 'Bocca della verità' (the Mouth of Truth), a man-like face carved in marble representing a river god, located in Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome; the 'foot of St. Peter' in the Basilica of St. Peter in Vatican; the Crucifixion Altar on which Jesus was nailed to the cross, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; the *Marienuß* or *Marientrirt* ('the footprint of Mary') in Würzburg; the cracked column at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, into whose fissures people place little papers with vows and intercessions; but also the tomb of the French Argentine tango singer and composer Carlos Gardel, buried in La Chacarita Cemetery in Buenos Aires. Farocki focuses on the tactile relationship performed with these monuments in present days: but the roots of such behaviours are very old, going back to the ancient habit (no less magical than religious) of touching and kissing icons and relics²⁴ in order to ensure by contact the 'transmission' of a supernatural and miraculous power.

Obeying what Frazer called the 'law of contact',²⁵ this practice is either performed directly with parts of one's own body or indirectly through

24 James, "Seeing's believing, but feeling's the truth". On the importance of Bernard of Clairvaux's theories for the kissing practices, see Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact*, chap. 3.

25 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, chap. 3: 'Sympathetic Magic'.

the intermediation of personal belongings and religious symbols (such as crosses or rosaries) which are physically put in contact with the magic source from which they gain force, in the tradition of the so-called 'relics of touch, or *brandea*, which acquired miraculous powers through contact with holy remains'.²⁶

Such an iconophile practice eventually leads to an iconoclastic conclusion, namely the consumption and destruction of the worshipped object: we may imagine that in a distant future, a similar fate will befall the Buchenwald and Washington memorials, too. What is *permanent* in this kind of monument is less the material they are made of than the motor response they induce. In this sense, they fully belong to the class of *performative monuments* that radically invest the temporal nature of monumentality itself: 'What is crucial to the performative monument, then, cannot be impermanence as such, but the temporal interaction with an audience that itself is no eternal public, but a succession of interacting subjects.'²⁷

The name of a present absence

Pursuing the comparison between the Buchenwald and the Washington memorial, it is worth making a further remark about the dialectics of abstraction/figuration (from which the present paper started): in this respect, the two monuments appear like a sort of mirror image of each other. In the case of Buchenwald, among the numerous memorials erected on the camp site²⁸ to honour the victims, a particular tension is instituted between Hoheisel's abstract/embodyed plaque and the figurative *Denkmal* designed in socialist realist style by the sculptor Fritz Cremer (representing eleven heroic inmates of different ages engaged in the self-liberation of the camp), which had been erected during the DDR regime in 1958 (Figure 30).²⁹ In the case of the Washington veterans memorial, the harsh controversy provoked by

26 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 59.

27 Widrich, *Performative Monuments*, p. 6.

28 On the transformation of the Buchenwald memorial site, see Lüttgenau, 'Eine schwebende Gedenkstätte?'

29 See Cremer, *Buchenwald*. Hoheisel himself has recognised the dialectic dialogue of his memorial with Cremer's group: 'It is a counter-piece to the monumental installation by Fritz Cremer on the southern side of the Ettersberg: a simple mnestic sign [*Es ist ein Gegenstück zur monumentalen Anlage von Fritz Cremer auf der Südseite des Ettersberges; ein einfaches Erinnerungszeichen*]; Hoheisel, 'Aschrott Brunnen – Denk-Stein-Sammlung – Brandeburger Tor – Buchenwald', p. 264).



Fig. 30: Fritz Cremer, Group of figures, 1958; photo © Naomi Tereza Salmon, Gedenkstätte Buchenwald; courtesy of the Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau Dora.

the selection of Maya Lin's project led to a compromise: in 1984 a figurative bronze group—named *The Three Soldiers* or *The Three Servicemen* (European American, African American and Hispanic American physiognomies are recognisable) and realised by the sculptor Frederick Hart (who had come third in the memorial competition)—was placed near the abstract Wall as a referential counterweight. The non-figurative character of the Wall is also counterbalanced by *The Vietnam Women's Memorial*, a bronze group representing three nurses assisting a wounded soldier which was commissioned from sculptress Glenna Goodacre in order to commemorate the women (especially those serving as nurses) who died during the conflict; it was dedicated in 1993.

Abstraction integrates figuration in Buchenwald; figuration integrates abstraction in Washington. This reminds us of the importance of considering the single monumental option not just in itself but *ecologically*, namely in the broader context of the memorialising environment, in which different and even opposite tendencies operate in a field of heterogeneous forces.

A further comparative element between Buchenwald and Washington is offered by the question of the names of the victims. The list of the names etched on the Washington wall and the names of the prisoners implicitly

evoked by the very location of the Buchenwald memorial (the *Appellplatz*, the roll-call square) articulate the dialectics between absence and presence, death and life, which lies at the deepest core of the experience of memorialisation³⁰ and of the funerary origin of the image itself, whose iconic body re-presents by substitution the dead body disappeared in putrefaction or some other dissolving organic process.³¹ The implication of the roll call integrates and enhances the function of a presentification of the absent that is accomplished by the bodily temperature for the Buchenwald memorial and by the mirroring stone surface for the Washington Wall. As Farocki remarks in a couple of captions related to the Vietnam memorial: 'Behind the mirror lies an intermediate realm'—'Behind the mirror, the realm of the dead, who are not yet gone'.

The idea to closely connect the ritual of the roll call of the present people to a memorial devoted to the absent and dead can be invested by various and even opposite political and ideological implications. A very eloquent precedent is offered by the rhetoric of the collective answer 'Presente!' which characterised the Italian fascist rituals of commemoration of the dead comrades on the occasion of a kind of funerary roll call.³² The utterance 'Presente!' eventually became the standard inscription of many military or paramilitary sanctuaries erected in the 1930s by the Italian fascist regime. This practice was inaugurated on the occasion of the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution), programmed in order to pompously commemorate the tenth anniversary of the takeover and opened by Benito Mussolini on 28 October 1932 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. In the *sacrarium* of the martyrs (the fallen 'Black Shirts' whose sacrifice had made the revolution possible), designed by the architects Adalberto Libera and Antonio Valente under the supervision of Mussolini himself, six circular rings hosted the etching 'Presente' repeated hundreds of times over.

This specific decoration was extended in the following years to the sanctuaries devoted to the thousands of Italian soldiers fallen during the Great War on the northeastern front as part of the strategy of appropriating their memory and including their sacrifice into the fascist ideological and historical genealogy. This process reached its peak in 1938 with the erection

30 On this, see Conte (ed.), *Une absence présente*.

31 For the intimate connection between the origins of the image, the dead body and the funerary cult, see Blanchot, 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary'; Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (esp. chap. 1: 'La naissance par la mort'); Belting, *An Anthropology of Images* (esp. chap. 4: 'Image and Death: Embodiment in Early Cultures').

32 Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*.

of the military sanctuary of Redipuglia in Friuli Venezia Giulia: a huge war memorial containing the corpses of 39,857 identified and 69,330 unidentified Italian soldiers. Located in the monumental stairs (designed in order to elicit in the visitors/pilgrims a motor ascensional action), bronze plates bear the inscription of the known names of the victims, alternated with the capital lettering 'Presente' repeated 880 times. Once again, a significant dialectisation is set up here between the individualisation of the names and the anonymising function of the collective answer, which unifies all differences in a single voice.³³

The strategy of listing the victims' names is a paradigmatic instance of one of the most problematic aspects of monumentality, namely the ideological ambivalence of the memorialising practices, which can serve politically opposite purposes: while it is certainly true that, as has been remarked in the case of the Washington Wall and of many memorials of the Holocaust (such as the one in Paris), 'it is a discreet, anti-rhetorical and anti-monumental option',³⁴ the example of the fascist sanctuaries patently shows how this use can be effectively appropriated by the bombastic programmes of totalitarian propaganda.

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33 See Taiss, *Presente!*

34 Zevi, *Monumenti per difetto*, p. 92 (my trans.).

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About the author

Andrea Pinotti is Professor in Aesthetics in the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti", State University of Milan. His research focuses on image theories and visual culture studies, memorialisation and monumentality, phenomenological aesthetics, empathy theories and the morphological tradition from Goethe to the present day. His publications include *Il corpo dello stile. Storia dell'arte come storia dell'estetica a partire da Semper, Riegl, Wölfflin* (1998), *Memorie del neutro. Morfologia dell'immagine in Aby Warburg* (2001), *Empathie. Histoire d'une idée de Platon au post-humain* (2016), *Cultura visuale. Immagini sguardi media dispositivi* (in collaboration with Antonio Somaini, 2016). In 2018 he was awarded the Wissenschaftspreis der Aby-Warburg-Stiftung in Hamburg. He is currently directing an ERC Advanced project entitled *An-iconology. History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images*.