

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.

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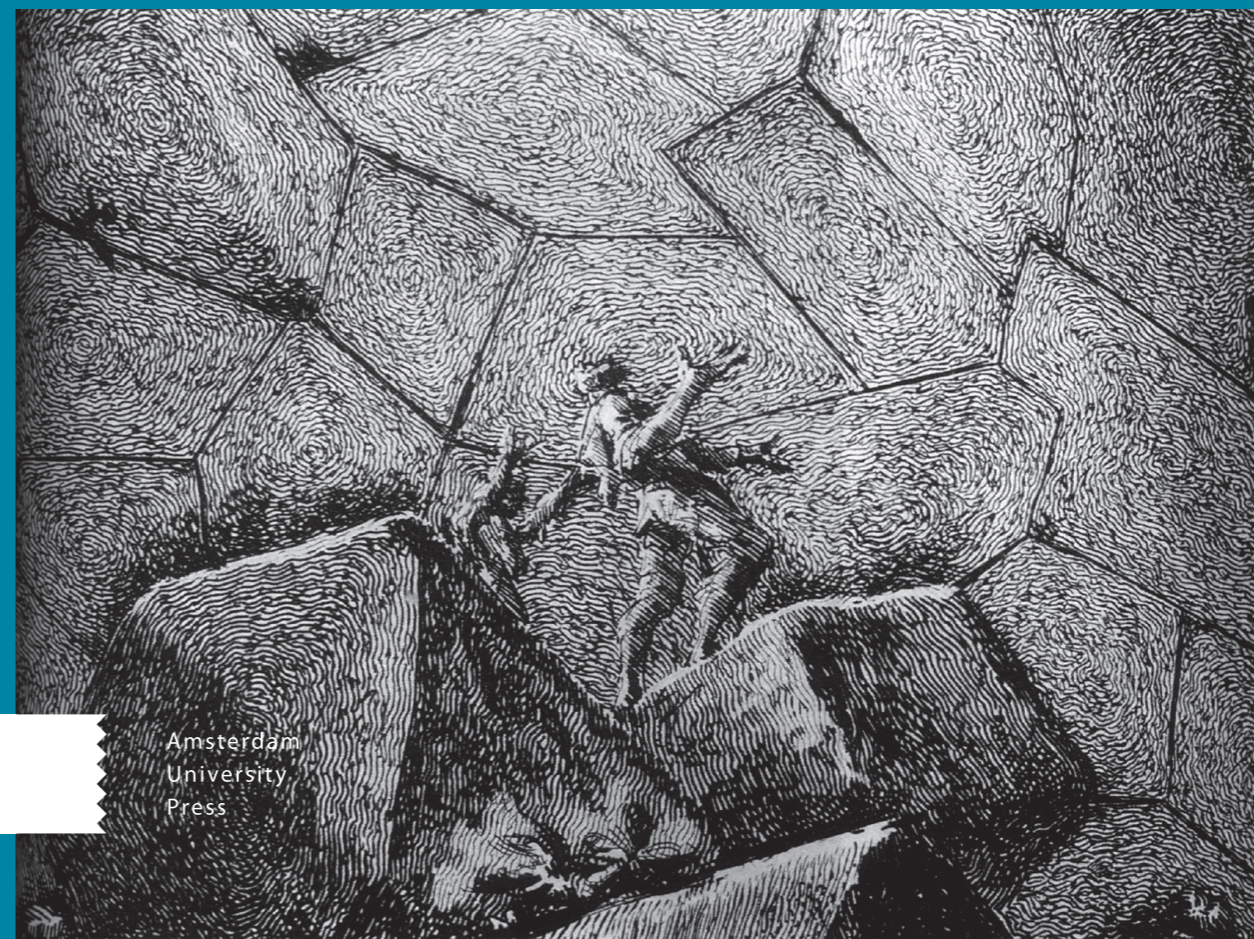
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Bodies of Stone in the Media,
Visual Culture and the Arts

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



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IV.

Monument: Embodying And Grafting

This final section considers the process of monumentalisation that stone produces ‘treating’ the body. The concept of the monument allows a reflection on mnemonic practices that structure our relationship to the heritage of images that is at the base of our collective imagery. The monument is an exemplary and paradigmatic case of mnemonic externalisation: it is a visible image in which a community records its memory of an event, a person, a moment crucial to its history in order to avoid loss and forgetfulness.

If we look at the ways in which the monumental sensibility of an epoch expresses itself, we will at the same time have a vision of the balance that each epoch negotiates between the dimensions of memory and oblivion. As Plato clearly stated in his dialogue *Phaedrus* (274e-275a), and as Jacques Derrida more recently repeated in his *Plato’s Pharmacy* (1968), any device assuring an externalisation of our recollections produces an intrinsically paradoxical effect: trusting the medium to remember on my behalf, I can allow myself to forget. Similar to the paradoxical effect known in pharmacology (for instance, pain caused by a pain relief medication), the aids for remembering end up causing amnesia: they represent a veritable *pharmakon*, at the same time medicine and poison for memory.

In the *longue durée* that runs from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary psychological and neurological memory modelisations, what is particularly intriguing is the fact that the externalisation paradigm, far from applying only to actually *external* devices (from writing tablets to digital clouds), informs the way in which *internal* procedures of memorisation are understood. The possibility of memory is conceived of as structurally linked to the possibility of the graphic inscription. From Plato’s metaphor of the soul as a wax block, described in his dialogue *Theaetetus* (191c), through Aristotle’s *On the Soul* (430a) and *On Memory and Reminiscence* (450a) to Freud’s *A Note upon the “Mystic Writing Pad”* (1925) and down to the contemporary cognitive neuroscience of memory, the influential model of recollection as a kind of script reading has rested on the notion of imprinting as the condition of possibility for the production of the mnemonic trace. The conceptualisation of the internal memory is consequently inspired by the procedures of the externalised memory; internal remembering operates like the reminding and retrieving of an imprinted external trace.

In this conceptual frame, a play on words offered by Plato in his *Cratylus* (400c) is remarkably telling: the body (*soma*) is called the “tomb” (*sema*) of the soul but also its “sign” (*sema*), because through the body the soul signifies (*semainei*). The cultural background for the connection body-sepulcher (which Plato shared with the Pythagoreans) is to be sought in the ancient Egyptian mystery cults, for which “tomb” is, foremost, the dead

corpse and not the architectural building hosting it. Plato's pun adds to this thanatological association its semiotic counterpart: the body operates as a system of visible signs for the semantic outputs of the invisible soul.

This crucial combination of thanatological and semiotic implications constitutes an early conceptualisation of the idea that the origins of image production, long before being concerned with mimetic representations, are rather intimately intertwined with the death rituals and the dialectics between absence and presence so thoroughly investigated by the school of historical psychology initiated by Jean-Pierre Vernant. The very notion of the cadaver as the first self-portrait finds its roots in this terrain.

As the texts collected in this fourth section clearly show, this ancient categorial constellation of monumentality, memory, death and image is far from having exhausted its powerful efficacy in ancient times: quite on the contrary, it has demonstrated its capacity to pervade down the centuries heterogeneous genres of iconic expression and to intersect various medial manifestations, proving to be very much alive also in our contemporary epoch.

Filippo Fimiani's essay analyses in these terms the phenomenon of subjectivisation, as it is set out in 1940s French existentialist thought and taken up by Emmanuel Lévinas. From Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Blanchot, the imagination of the Self is subject to a process of petrification, a metaphor that expresses the production of an image of existence from a retrospective point of view, in sum, the point of view of death. On this view, life transformed into an image corresponds to a solid block, deprived of a future, unchanging and definitive, and traditionally associated with stone. Michel Leiris thinks of his own face as stone, using make-up to 'chalk himself', but he also imagines fusing his torso with a column, thus producing a literal monumentalisation of the Self. Maurice Blanchot asserts that the cadaver is an image, a 'solemnly impersonal' double of the subject, and this observation helps us to fully understand the concept of 'face' that Lévinas contrasts with that of 'image': where the former is a living representation, the latter is a death mask.

The monumentalisation of the Self in the cadaver is also taken up by Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of the figure of Cleopatra. Cleopatra's corpse plays a fundamental historic role in the Queen's own choreography that selects the allegorical configuration through which she gives herself over to death and, so, to future memory, thus completing 'the political divadom she had put on display throughout the play'. Here too, the production of the cadaver is an entry point into aesthetic life, into the symbolic realm, but also into the monumental genre, which in the cinema (and especially in the blockbusters on Cleopatra) features the cadaver's reawakening from which point of view the protagonist's story can be told.

Federica Villa's contribution offers another telling example of a monumental narration that arises out of images of death. This is the case of Amos Humiston, a sergeant at the front in the American Civil War who, as he lay dying, chose to look at the photograph of his three children. Once more, it is the manner in which the cadaver is presented that produces the monumentalisation of the subject; in this case, transforming him into an exemplary individual whose story deserves to be recounted. He is an individual to whom a name needs to be given and, so, an existence that can represent them all; and it will be through a monumental bronze plaque that repropose also the photograph of the children that he will be monumentalised, thus mineralising not so much the corpse of the soldier as his story. The plaque is one of the most common forms of monument, but, along with the very idea of the monument, it has been profoundly reconsidered in contemporary art.

In 'The Well-Tempered Memorial', Andrea Pinotti considers the plaque *Denkmal an ein Denkmal*, by Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz, which was unveiled in 1995 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald. The peculiarity of this large metal plate, on which are etched the nationalities of the camp's inmates, is that it is kept at a temperature of 36.5°, that of the human body. Reflecting on the non-anthropomorphic equivalence between body and mineral as a broad horizon for the monumental, Pinotti invokes the concept of embodiment as key to overcoming the classical categories for analysing commemorative objects, such as abstract vs. concrete and transitive vs. intransitive.

This primary link between body and monument is also at the centre of Sara Damiani's discussion of 'Monuments of the Heart', which takes the limiting case in which the body is not the reference of the work but is the work itself, the living sarcophagus and the monument to another body that is welcomed within itself. This occurs in the contemporary operation of organ transplants, which redefine the boundaries of the Self and expand them to include the Other and other forms of existence, thus introducing the possibility of a biological form of commemoration. The ancient origins of the notion of transplant can be traced to the story of Artemisia, who drinks the ashes of her husband so as to become his sepulchre and to conserve his memory within her flesh. The collection closes with this image of the absolutely up-to-date re-emergence of monuments that move and breathe, that are mausoleums made of flesh or bodies—no longer cadavers—that turn themselves into images, stones, memories.

Andrea Pinotti