

## Commemorative Public Art

The Austrian historian Robert Musil noted, ‘there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument’.<sup>1</sup> Despite their commemorative rhetoric, memorials and monuments have a relatively short life-span after which their overt meaning and relevance diminishes and they become anonymous landmarks or ornamentation.

By its very nature a commemorative public art work implores the viewer to remember; yet, often the effect it has on the viewer is to be forgettable or, worse still, invisible. There is evidence that the failure of much commemorative public art to engage the viewer over time may be the result of multiple, competing agendas, collective decision-making and compromised artistic vision, but it is also possible that forgetting is in fact part of the purpose of commemorative public art – a form of built-in obsolescence.

Commemorative public art is intended to ensure that the public remember a key event or person through the representation of an aspect of that person or event in the form of a public art work. Yet, this imperative to remember in perpetuity goes against the normal functions of the human psyche. According to Freud, forgetting is an important part of the mourning process, where it is essential to work through the painful process of remembering and to reach a point where memories can be consciously stored away and retrieved at will and, ultimately, it becomes possible to forget. ‘Forgetting is not a malfunction or failure of memory; it is a characteristic that enables people to continue living.’<sup>2</sup> The memorial, as a concrete manifestation of the memory of the loved object, can facilitate this gradual process by offering a means to revisit the experience of the loss in a manageable and ‘contained’ manner where the memorial comes to serve as a container of the memory.

The purpose of commemorative public art can be to facilitate either mourning or celebration. For example, John Henry Foley’s *O’Connell Monument* (1882), on O’Connell Street, is commemorative in that it was commissioned to honour Daniel O’Connell and ensure that he remains in the public consciousness through a permanent public art work, but the work is celebratory in style and purpose, acknowledging the man’s accomplishments. Similarly, Danny Osborne’s *Oscar Wilde Memorial* (1997), in Merrion Square, is a celebratory commemoration of the author’s life and accomplishments. Alternatively, Rowan Gillespie’s *Famine* (1997), in the docklands is an example of commemoration for the purpose of collective mourning.

Traditionally, commemorative public art tended to be figurative, triumphal and celebratory, involving combinations of architectural and sculptural features. Many of the models with which we are familiar today – heroic figures on columns, clusters of figures depicting an allegorical message, larger-than-life standing or seated figures on plinths – evolved as part of the nation-building process of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, where such works were used to mark geographic and conceptual territory and to

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil, "Monuments." Posthumous Papers of a Living Author. Trans. Peter Wortsman. Hygiene: Eridanos, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Tanya Barson, **'Unland'. The Place of Testimony, Tate Papers, 2004.**

reinforce the political and cultural values of the dominant regime. For example, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris serves as a memorial to the young French men who lost their lives at the battle of Austerlitz; however, in style and presentation – an enormous arch emblazoned with decorative elements depicting the battle and positioned in a central location - it is a triumphalist gesture celebrating the German defeat by the French. In this manner, traditional commemorative works were usually made on a large scale in long-lasting materials, such as metal or stone with the objective of permanence.

More recently, the nature and purpose of commemorative public art has become more complex and problematic. The events of the twentieth century, in particular two world wars, raised questions about the relevance of traditional commemorative public art and its politically-driven agendas. After World War I, traditional modes of commemorative and monumental practice, with their emphasis on triumphalism and heroism, seemed inadequate as a means of expressing the sense of abject loss and futility incurred by the war. New modes of commemorative public art, such as the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* and the *Cenotaph* emerged during this period and have had a significant influence on subsequent commemorative work. Simultaneously, developments in art, architecture and critical theory presented considerable challenges to traditional commemorative public art in terms of its relevance. Late twentieth-century commemorative public art practice has internalised and addressed many of these critical issues resulting in the emergence of new models of practice, such as the counter monument and the anti-monument. Examples include Joachim Gerz and Ester Shalev-Gerz's *Harburg Monument Against Fascism* (1986), Rachel Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial* (2000) in Vienna and Sol Le Witt's *Black Form Dedicated to the Missing Jews* (1987) in Münster.

As with all public art, commemorative public art is informed by a range of interests and concerns – political, social, economic and aesthetic - however, the commemorative context provides an additional range of concerns. When the subject for commemoration is a tragic event it can be difficult to arrive at a solution that meets the needs of those directly affected while also engaging a wider audience over a long period of time. Often people directly affected, wish to have a role in the development of the commemoration. While ensuring authenticity, the emotive and subjective nature of such contributions can inhibit more innovative or challenging outcomes. The challenge for commemorative practice is to address these tensions. Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington D.C. (1982), is an example of a contemporary commemorative public art work which manages to do this, by meaningfully engaging those directly affected by the Vietnam War – veterans, family members, etc. – while also engaging a wider, transcendent audience. In this regard, the work functions successfully as both a site for commemoration and as a public art work.

In Ireland, the bronze or stone-rendered figure – usually seated, standing or occasionally on a horse – commemorating important political, military, social and culture figures is the dominant form of commemorative public art and represents the default position in both the conception and reception of such work. While most traditional commemorative public art has either been destroyed or removed since the establishment of the Free State, there are examples which predate this era, such as John Henry Foley's *Edmund Burke*

(1868) and *Oliver Goldsmith* (1864) both in front of Trinity College. More recent examples of this traditional mode include Edward Delaney's *Wolfe Tone Memorial* (1967), in St. Stephen's Green, Oisín Kelly's *Jim Larkin* (1979), on O'Connell Street, Jeanne Rynhart's *Molly Malone* (1988), at the bottom of Grafton Street and Eamon O'Doherty's *James Connolly Memorial Statue* (1996), in Beresford Place and Danny Osborne's *Oscar Wilde* (1997) in Merrion Square.

This traditional approach is prevalent for a number of reasons: it is familiar and accessible to a broad audience and it offers a safe means of addressing the political and emotional sensitivities particular to commemorative public art. Such work seeks to appeal and soothe rather than challenge. However the tendency towards such a literal interpretation can result in work that lacks any emotional or poetic impact. Dominance of this conventional approach can inhibit the development of more experimental, innovative approaches.

German literary critic, Andreas Huyssen argues that the monument, through strategies of aestheticisation and direct political comment, is bound to serve as a cipher of forgetting, favouring instead work that 'resists easy consumption' and which does not yield its meaning through a first reading but which requires the viewer's engagement. The need to remember and commemorate is rooted deep in the human psyche and, where memorialisation seeks to go beyond the merely commemorative, mnemonic gesture and to engage in a meaningful, poetic response, rooted in contemporary experience, the potential of such practice is to be found within contemporary arts practice.

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