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**Intolerable Images,
Tolerable (Counter) Monuments:
A Critique of the Unrepresentable
in Some Recent Memorials**

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RESUMO

Intolerable Images, Tolerable (Counter) Monuments: A Critique of the Unrepresentable in Some Recent Memorials

Nas últimas décadas, memoriais públicos têm adotado a abstração, e não a figuração, para representar os eventos que eles comemoram. Isso é feito especialmente no caso de eventos históricos traumáticos, como o 11 de Setembro. Enquanto a prática se situa em forte contraposição à tradição dos memoriais de guerra, também conecta estes memoriais à mudança na maneira como esses eventos são conceitualizados. Conforme a vitória sobre o inimigo, como nos memoriais de guerra, cedeu lugar à perda a toda a humanidade, como no exemplo paradigmático do Holocausto, os monumentos se abriram a interpretações críticas. Assim, esses monumentos e memoriais não apenas comemoram, mas também comentam ou condenam os eventos aos quais se referem. O problema se torna mais complexo, porém, quando se trata dos limites entre nações e comunidades de luto, como no já mencionado 11 de Setembro. Nestas situações, a retórica de favorecer a abstração sobre a figuração – que eu chamo aqui, a partir de Jacques Rancière, *irrepresentação* – coloca estes eventos numa zona neutra, desconectando-os de suas consequências políticas mas também da política mais geral de produção e circulação de imagens. Partindo de Rancière mas também de Reinhart Koselleck e Talal Asad, esta contribuição aborda os problemas levantados acima por meio da crítica do irrepresentável nos memoriais contemporâneos, argumentando que a celebração coletiva do luto privado não pode ofuscar o caráter político destes eventos.

Palavras-chave

memória; arte pública; contramonumento; 11 de setembro

ABSTRACT

Intolerable Images, Tolerable (Counter) Monuments: A Critique of the Unrepresentable in Some Recent Memorials

Public memorials have in the last decades adopted abstraction instead of figurative representation to refer to the historical events they commemorate. This is specially the case of traumatic historical events, such as 9/11. While this stands in stark contrast to the tradition of war memorials, it connects them to a significant change in the way these events are conceptualized. As the victory over an enemy, as in war memorials, became a loss for all humanity, as in recent traumatic events, such as the paradigmatic case of the Holocaust, monuments opened themselves to critical interpretation. Thus, these monuments and memorials not only commemorate, but also comment or condemn the events they refer to. This is further complicated, however, when it comes to the boundaries between nations and communities of grief, such as in the aforementioned case of 9/11. In these cases, the rhetoric of favoring abstraction over figuration – which I call, drawing on Jacques Rancière, *irrepresentation* – places these events in a neutral zone, disconnecting them from their political consequences but also from a overall politics of the production and circulation of images. Drawing from Rancière but also from Reinhart Koselleck and Talal Asad, this paper addresses these issues through a critique of *irrepresentation* in contemporary public memorials, arguing that the collective celebration of private mourning cannot overshadow the political character of these events.

Keywords

memory; public art; countemonument; September 11

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1

Although references to art are relatively common in Don DeLillo's late novels¹, I want to begin with an excerpt from *Falling Man* regarding the resemblance between one of Giorgio Morandi's still lifes and the image of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center:

Martin stood before the paintings.

"I'm looking at these objects, kitchen objects but removed from the kitchen, free of the kitchen, the house, everything practical and functioning. And I must be back in another time zone. I must be even more disoriented than usual after a long flight", he said, pausing. "Because I keep seeing the towers in this still life".

Lianne joined him at the wall. The painting in question showed seven or eight objects, the taller ones set against a brushy slate background. The other items were huddled boxes and biscuit tins, grouped before a darker background. The full array, in unfixed perspective and mostly muted colors, carried an odd spare power.

They looked together.

Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

"What do you see?" he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers.²

The relationship between Morandi's painting and the image of the towers is interesting for a number of reasons. First, because of DeLillo's longstanding interest in the power of images and the nature of contemporary historical events, issues the writer has explored in other works, most notably in *Mao II*. Second, the ambiguous nature of Morandi's paintings, which straddles the line between abstract and figurative painting. Stripping objects

of their everyday significance, the Italian painter does not necessarily stress the materiality of the objects he paints, but renders them decidedly abstract. Neither concrete nor completely imagined, they are something in between. Thus, when compared to the disappeared towers of the World Trade Center, the convergence between these objects and the towers discloses what seems to be an afterimage, something that is only seen when the eyes are closed. That is, an image that one cannot avoid seeing though one cannot look directly at it.

Taken together, this convergence has somewhat of a clear meaning: the events of 9/11 are better represented indirectly, obliquely. DeLillo's mention of Morandi situates him in a broader contemporary discourse about the difficult relationship between traumatic historical events and their artistic representation. This discourse usually emphasizes the sublime or the unrepresentable and, with that in mind, it is possible to situate DeLillo's reference to Morandi among other aesthetic responses to 9/11.

The language of non-representation runs through 9/11's most celebrated visual representations. One famous example is the cover of the September 24th, 2001 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine, designed by Art Spiegelman after a hint from the magazine's artistic director, Françoise Mouly. Portraying only the silhouette of the towers over a black background, Spiegelman's cover – which is reminiscent of Malevich's color experiments in early twentieth century – is a striking figure of absence (fig. 1). Nonetheless, it was not the first cover he designed. His first idea was a drawing in which the Twin Towers are enveloped in a black cloak, levitating over the burnt-orange skyline (fig. 2). This drawing, which would eventually become the cover for a book of recollections by artists and writers on the events of that day, was defined by Spiegelman as a "Christo in mourning", referencing the work of the Belgian artist couple, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, that cloak famous buildings, monuments and landscapes in orange fabric, playing with ideas of turning something visible and invisible at the same time. Despite this artistic reference, or probably because of it,

Spiegelman deemed it inadequate because surrealism did not seem fit at the moment and the “vividness of the color seemed to obscenely mock the blackness at the heart of the picture”.³ Confronting both drawings, one can say that Spiegelman achieves a powerful representation of the attacks not adding but subtracting elements from the scene.

Fig. 1: Art Spiegelman's Black on Black for *The New Yorker Magazine*, September 24th edition. © The New Yorker Magazine

Fig. 2: Cover from Ulrich Baer's *110 Stories: New York writes after September 11* showcasing Art Spiegelman's first drawing. © Art Spiegelman and Columbia University Press.

This dedication to subtraction can also be found in William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*, bridging the gap between visual and musical minimalism. As soon as they were released in 2002, the compositions were interpreted as a reflection upon, a musical rendering of, and an homage to the absent towers. This reflected also the process of its making. As the composer, a longtime Brooklyn-resident, transferred his old tapes from

analog to digital, he noticed that they were turning into dust, and decided to play them continuously at loop until they disintegrated. It is as if the dust accumulated on the composer's studio became a synecdoche for the dust that covered the streets of the southern tip of Manhattan. That he also decided to film the clouds of smoke coming from the buildings after they were hit by the planes from his apartment's rooftop and that stills from these videos became the covers for the four CDs in which the compositions were released only adds to this interpretation (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Covers from the four *The Disintegration Loops* CDs. © William Basinski and Temporary Residence

The same could be said of the first official memorial held at Ground Zero – the place where the World Trade Center formerly stood –, called *Tribute in Light* (fig. 4). Composed by two beams of light generated by 88 high intensity lamps projected over Manhattan's skies, the installation was inaugurated March 11th 2002, six months after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For half a year, the two beams shone on Manhattan's skyline and then,

after this period, the installation was repeated yearly at the same place on September 11th, despite the announcement that it would be discontinued after 2011 because of the inauguration of the new One World Trade Center and its memorial for the victims of the terrorist attacks. In a certain way, one can say that *Tribute in Light* is the inverted version of the *New Yorker* cover designed by Art Spiegelman.

Fig. 4: *Tribute in Light*. Credits: Denise Goldman/Copyright U. S. Air Force

Finally, one last example regarding September 11th is the installation called *Reflecting Absence*, unveiled to the public in 2011 to mark the tenth anniversary of the attacks. Part of the National September 11th Memorial & Museum, this installation includes two large black pools, circled by ramps through which the visitors can descend, into which water is drained, disappearing through two apertures, thus giving the impression of one endless fall (fig. 5). The memorial where this installation is presented also includes what was left of the old buildings' foundations, a space where the unidentified remains of victims are on display and, in the ramps mentioned above, the names of all known victims. According to Michael Arad and Peter Walker, the Memorial's creators, it is a "personal space of remembrance", highlighting the private and individual responses to these events.⁴ This hints to the preference accorded by contemporary memorials and monuments to highlight the personal dimensions of historical experience, even

though – as in this case – these memorials and monuments are part of larger memorial complexes of public and, sometimes, official character. Besides, as the two architects involved in the Memorial's creation decided to reflect or represent *absence*, they also chose not to make an overt statement about the terrorist attacks beyond the shared dimension of private loss, thus refusing to overtly signify and narrativize the events. This is in stark contrast to the immediate response held by the U.S. government regarding the attacks, which were from the beginning portrayed as initial acts of a new war, the War on Terror, as I will explore later.⁵

Fig. 5: *Reflecting Absence*, in the September 11 Memorial & Museum. Credits Susan Velasquez

To conclude this first section of this paper, I want to cite an example not related to September 11th, but which shares with it some relevant aspects. I refer to the proposed memorial designed by Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg for the terrorist attack perpetrated by right-wing extremist Anders Breivik in the Norwegian camping island at the small island of Utoya in 2011.⁶ As planned by Dahlberg, the memorial would include a small canal, of 3,5m in length, cut across Sorbraten, a peninsula at Utoya, called *Memory Wound*, and the placement of the names of all 69 victims of the attacks at the walls of this new canal

(fig. 6). This new, open space on the landscape of the island is meant to represent, in a direct way, the sense of loss and rupture with day-to-day living which results from the attacks.

Fig. 6: Model for the proposed installation *Memory Wound*. Credits Jonas Dahlberg Studio

That the emphasis is, once again, in presenting loss as the key to understanding the event, shows that the configuration presented by the September 11th memorial initiatives mentioned above is not casual. Loss is an important dimension of every traumatic historical experience, but it does not come without consequences when given public or official stamp. The fact that the construction of the memorial proposed by Dahlberg was halted signals that even when they intend to address this private, personal dimension, those memorials are not straightforward answers deemed adequate or secure by the public.⁷ To understand the common idiom of *shadows*, *absence* and *loss* manifested in these – why not call them this way? – public monuments, it is necessary to look at the confluence of the public opinion, historical trauma, and the practice of contemporary art.

2

The war memorial has a long history, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown in “War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors”.⁸ Tackling the centuries-long history of this kind of

monument, the German historian signals a significant shift that took place before and after the French Revolution.⁹ First, death, which until then was thought of as a passageway, loses its transcendental significance. Therefore, the religious meaning of death as universal experience is transformed into a political meaning, constructed nationally.¹⁰ In addition, as death becomes relevant for a circumscribed national political community, the dead lose his or her generic character and becomes individuated.¹¹ This means not only that the dead soldier is remembered as such but also that social classes hitherto not represented in these memorials are now able to be represented. Koselleck calls this aspect a “democratization” of death and its representation.

These two characteristics, added to the limited stock of figures and motifs regarding the memorials, suggest that the genre was notably constant during the century and a half between the French Revolution and World War II. This constancy extended also to space, as, in spite of a few different markers, the memorials were similar also from country to country.¹² It didn't matter, in the end, if the memorial was consecrated to a victory or defeat, as the represented figures and the styles used were usually the same.¹³

World War II signals a change in the style of war memorials. As Koselleck explains, “the style of heroic realism, the style in which most of the monuments by the Russians or those for the Resistance in France or Belgium were erected, often barely differs in its formal features from the official art of National Socialism”.¹⁴ Besides this, there were political and technical changes regarding death and being that led to these changes. Before World War II, war memorials framed death and killing in a larger narrative that justified the sufferings inflicted upon or taken by individuals or peoples; in modern war, however, the scale of destruction and the targets chosen – mainly, civilians – render difficult to place these deaths in a meaningful narrative that justifies them. “Victims condemned to senselessness”, reflects Koselleck, “required, if at all, a kind of negative monument”.¹⁵

In this sense, *countermonuments*. The twentieth century brought questions about the commemoration of historical events deemed as traumatic, while it also challenged the monumental rhetoric associated with certain political regimes. These two possibilities represent two different phenomena manifested through the notion of countermonument. According to Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazarkerley, it might refer to the *anti-monumental*, that is, a monument “that is contrary to conventional subjects and techniques of monumentality”, or it might refer to a *dialogic monument*, one “that critiques the purpose and the design of a specific, existing monument, in an explicit, contrary and proximate pairing”.¹⁶ While the latter is a case of what Bruno Latour terms “iconoclash”¹⁷, my interest is in the former. As the aforementioned authors argue, “given that anti-monumentality typically addresses troubling memories and feelings, it is not surprising that anti-monumental form is often the inversion of traditional monumental forms”.¹⁸ In this way, “fundamental inversions also include voids instead of solids, absence instead of presence [...], dark rather than light tones, and an emphasis on the horizontal rather than the vertical forms”, while also abstraction, rather than figuration, is a common characteristic.¹⁹

Nonetheless, even if counter- or anti-monuments usually emphasize the ephemeral, either to refer to the failings of memory or to indicate troubles affecting the identity of certain groups or people on public discourse, they can eventually assume monumental aspects. Peter Eisenmann’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews, in Berlin, for instance, uses 2711 concrete stelae to render the absence – and, indeed, the murder – of European Jews; another example is Arad and Walker’s *Reflecting Absence*, where two large pitch-black pools with dipping water point to the possibility of the existence of a “monumental countermonumentality”. That said, it is necessary to assume the place of these countermonuments in a complex public sphere, which, in the transition from the twentieth to the twentieth-first century, means that they are inscribed in an art circuit, where the signature behind them is an important factor,

or are becoming tourist destinations, as it seems to happen with the National September 11th Memorial & Museum and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin.

What unifies the anti-monuments is the way they counter traditional monumentality. While traditional monuments intend to display univocal, straightforward and didactic messages, this very didacticism is reversed and, instead of direct statements, anti-monuments place upon visitors and spectators questions and interrogations and the uneasiness that comes with them.²⁰

3

This means that anti-monuments work through the perception of an incongruence between linguistic discourse and the visual rendition of historical events that is either their object or manifested through them. But why does discourse seem unable to grasp what is essential in these events and why is it that the artistic response must be to shy away from them, as if only a failure to represent could be successfully represented? To answer this, it is necessary to discuss, first, the perceived nature of the historical processes these events relate to, and, second, the visual regime into which the memorials are inscribed.

In recent decades, discussions about the adequate representation of the Shoah, or, indeed, if it could be represented at all, stressed the relationship between trauma, memory, and history. Trauma has become a standard of the representation of historical events, something that representation must strive to achieve but ultimately fail to attend to. It was characteristic of twentieth-century political violence to disassociate subjectivity and the body, which also meant a disassociation between individual agency and the historical process. In other words, the “disposability” of history, as Reinhart Koselleck defined in another essay²¹, has become not so disposable for individuals to master (or try to), and has since degraded into an understanding of history and memory as dimensions of pain, suffering, and loss.²²

One way of construing something positive out of this is Shoshana Felman's exploration of Walter Benjamin's theses on history. As she writes, "the relation between history and trauma is speechless", thus "traditional theories of history tend to neglect this speechlessness of trauma: by definition, speechlessness is what remains out of the record".²³ However, it seems that it is not so much what is out of the record and, supposedly, lost forever, but what actually wasn't given attention to and now becomes a possible, stripped out, historical record. Thus a new materiality can express itself, as in the room where the remains of the unidentified victims of 9/11 are placed or, for instance, in some of Christian Boltanski's works, which both expand and question the idea of the archive (fig. 7). The attention to trauma shifts history's concern with telling and understanding into presenting. It therefore seems that the adequate response to the memorials is not dialogue – that is, a counternarrative to them – but silent reverence.

Fig. 7: Christian Boltanski's *Personnes*, at the Grand Palais, in Paris, 2010. Credits: Didier Plowy

All those aspects are even more relevant to the understanding of one specific form of recent violence: terrorism. Here, I want to draw upon Talal Asad's *On Suicide Bombing*. According to Asad, the divide that renders terrorism illegal and incomprehensible is the divide between legitimate and non-legitimate violence.²⁴ As he says in another moment, "What seems to matter is not the killing and dehumanization as such

but how one kills and with what motive”.²⁵ If there are legitimate deaths, then one can say that, after the shock caused by World War II, an effort was made to define meaningful, that is, legally sanctioned killings. It is possible to say that the technical progress in warfare determined a certain aesthetic related to the representation of death. This means that not all deaths became senseless, as Koselleck sustained, even if the meaninglessness of death became a matter of perspective, as it happens with terrorism.

The question, actually, is against whom this violence is being addressed. As Asad expounds, if terrorism is only and purely evil, then “the definition of war and terrorism as opposite makes it possible to speak of a war *on* terror to assume that the state can conduct itself freely toward the terrorist precisely because he does not respect the law”.²⁶ That is, an evil terrorism makes for just wars. Extrapolating the meanings of history, Islamic violence is constructed as always irrational, that is, “not embedded in a historical narrative – history in the ‘proper’ sense”.²⁷ This means that “the absolute right to defend oneself by force becomes, in the context of industrial capitalism, the freedom to use violence globally: when social difference is seen as backwardness and backwardness as a source of danger to civilized society, self-defense calls for a project of reordering the world in which the rules of civilized warfare cannot be allowed to stand in the way”.²⁸ Needless to say, this is also a historical frame through which terrorism is understood.

While not outside history, terrorism presents some challenges to historical understanding, mostly regarding the contingency with which terrorist acts of violence are inflicted.²⁹ This contingency expresses itself both on the side of the perpetrators – how did they come to do it? – but, more importantly, on the side of the victims – why did *these* bystanders die? Terrorism takes even further the bypassing that divides soldiers justly – or legally – killed in war and collateral victims. But while the violence that characterizes terrorism is not necessarily new and is itself a possible feature or latent possibility present in any act of violence perpetrated even in a

legal framework – “In this reasoning”, Asad writes, “can the killing of innocents by taking one’s own life be the final gesture of a morally strong leader?”³⁰ – there is something indeed deeply unsettling about terrorism. That is, the loss of a common background for a given situation against which identity can form itself.³¹ In this way, victims of terrorism sit alongside other victims of political violence in the twentieth century, like Latin American *desaparecidos*. In both cases, the disproportionate relationship between one’s life and one’s death and/or the irretrievability of a mutilated or unidentified corpse does not only challenge how this particular life can be understood as a particular story, but also discloses “the ease with which the boundary between what is alive and what is not – between the sanctity of a human corpse and the profanity of an animal carcass – can be crossed”.³²

This difficulty implies that terrorism short-circuits the mechanisms through which a story is created out of a life. It also points that terror succeeds in its sheer materiality. This is something that it shares with the memorial initiatives that try to commemorate its victims. And if, for Asad, the experience of horror runs *against interpretation*, to recall the title of a famous essay by Susan Sontag³³, there is also something voluntarily non-discursive being imposed by its (anti-)monumental responses.

4

At this point, Talal Asad’s terror becomes the aesthetic sublime. Claims of unrepresentability go along with questions regarding the relationship between an ethics of image production and circulation and the limits of art to portray what’s outside ordinary experience. To understand these claims, I will refer to Jacques Rancière’s essay “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, published in *The Future of the Image*.³⁴

Rancière posits the historical existence of two different regimes governing art, in particular, and image production, in general: the representative regime and the aesthetic regime. The first

concerns itself with the adjustment between discourse and visibility, that is, between what is seen and what is said.³⁵ This implies a notion of *decorous* representation and the conscious separation of the fiction space where representation takes form and the undifferentiated space that might be labeled “reality” or ordinary experience.³⁶ The late eighteenth century, however, brought a change of sorts regarding this set of rules. According to this new regime, the aesthetic one, “there are no longer appropriate subjects for art”.³⁷ This undoes the coupling of visual and discursive either presenting the inner subjectivity of individuals represented or imposing presence through the deployment of description over action.³⁸ Another such example might be modernism’s claims for autonomy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In either way, what distinguishes this aesthetic regime from a representative one is that everything can be equally represented³⁹, which also suggests that “the representative separation between the rationale of facts and the rationale of fictions” is undone.⁴⁰ Art can be about anything, anywhere, at any time.

Rancière’s remarks are important because they dislodge abstraction from its understanding as the proper answer to unrepresentability.⁴¹ One might think, regarding twentieth century historical tragedies, that there is no necessary correlation between trauma and abstract representation. Nathan Rapoport’s monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto, erected in 1948 (fig. 8), and *Liberation*, by the same sculptor, located in New York City, almost four decades later, in 1985 (fig. 9), show that realist figurative representations of the Shoah were possible, not leaving doubts about its allegiance to the experience of the victims and the condemnation of the perpetrators.⁴² In effect, there is also nothing intrinsically politically incorrect in them, in spite of using heroic realism’s representative idiom.

Fig. 8: Nathan Rapoport's *Monument to the Ghetto Heroes* (1948). Stock photography

Fig. 9: Nathan Rapoport's *Liberation* (1985). Credits: Ken Lund/Flickr

What follows is that there is also nothing intrinsically unrepresentable in 9/11 nor the terrorist attacks at Utoya. There is not a lack of language capable of rendering meaningful these events. "Actually", says Rancière, "the problem is the reverse. The language that conveys this experience is in no way specific to it".⁴³ If one is reminded of the plethora of images related to 9/11, then it is possible to say that the responses mentioned in the first section are attempts to safeguard representation against its banality, as the events were taped and reproduced

over and over again. Trying to look away becomes a way – and, for those monuments, the only way – to construct a meaningful gaze.

5

However, this does not exhaust the question. It is possible to say that while trying to look away, these images reverse the desire, original to political art, to make people look at the unseen. There is a shift from the political to the sublime.

As Jacques Rancière argues, following Kant, the sublime cannot be *inside* art, but only outside it.⁴⁴ By challenging reason's ability to understand phenomena, the Kantian sublime is "an idea that draws us outside the domain of art, transferring us from the sphere of aesthetic play to that of the ideas of reason and practical freedom".⁴⁵ "Sublime art" becomes a paradox because "one cannot have the sublimity both in the form of the commandment prohibiting the image and in the form of an image witnessing to the prohibition".⁴⁶ The way to solve this is to present another idea of sublime, that is, the Burkean sublime. This second idea of sublime works with the accumulation of images rendering them underdetermined, as the words fail to grasp them. But, as Rancière remarks, this "indetermination is, in reality, an over-determination: what arrives in the place of representation is in fact the inscription of its initial condition, the trace of the Other that haunts its display".⁴⁷ In other words, it is an art that refuses to speak while speaking, maybe saying so much that it cannot remain in silence.

This concept of sublime, for Rancière, inadvertently confirms three postulates regarding representation. First, the correspondence between form and content. Second, the total intelligibility of human experience. Third, the correspondence between the intelligibility of the events and the "formative reason of art".⁴⁸ In this, it both continues and supplants political art.

The relationship between ethics and aesthetics is at the core of political art. This is the same set of questions that concerned Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which images of war, mostly of pain and suffering, are nonetheless images, available for aesthetic enjoyment.⁴⁹ This is, as Rancière points, a problem within the *dispositif* itself, that is, in images. Does the representation of vice lead to virtue? Could the representation of violence lead to less violence? "The element that is left over once all these reactions are subtracted is the supposed 'beauty' or 'power' of the photograph itself. The logic of mimesis consists in conferring on the artwork the power of the effects that it is supposed to elicit on the behavior of the spectator".⁵⁰ The idea behind such representations is the supposed continuum between aesthetic perception and ethical action. One response is elaborating an art that assumes its place in "the real world", rendering everyday life into art or play. This points to the core of the problem of political efficacy, but, as Rancière argues, "it does so by jettisoning both art and politics in the same stroke, fusing them together by framing the community as artwork".⁵¹ In contemporary art, this becomes a disguise for "anti-representation".

In a certain way, what is at stake in contemporary anti-monuments is not the questions of unrepresentability, that is taken for granted, but the quest for an art that situates itself beyond representation. This takes the form of a suspicion over the medium, doubtless because the overabundance of images renders them not only banal but also forbids the critical act of supplanting a false image with reality itself.⁵² Contemporary anti-monuments and memorial initiatives try to pause this rush with which images are replaced by other images. Despite their darker, sober tones, those anti-monuments are, nonetheless, made to be seen. They are tolerable images, images that beg one specific kind of gaze: long, sustained contemplation.

6

There is a distinction, however, when this same set of injunctions hangs upon the gallery walls or occupies real estate

and is infused with public and civic spirit. Here, I want to turn briefly to the work of some artists that seem to tackle these same issues. As I will show, the contrast between them and the memorials regarding 9/11 or Utoya unveils something important related to these initiatives.

Glenna Gordon's series of photographs showcasing the clothes and other personal belongings of the Nigerian schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram (fig. 10), or Fred Ramos' similar photographs regarding gang violence in El Salvador (fig. 11) point to the oblique nature of presence and absence. What is shown are vestiges left by the disappearance of the subject to whom these objects belonged. But these traces are problematic, as they point to unsolved political problems.

Fig. 10: Glenna Gordon's *Abducted Nigerian School Girls*.

Fig. 11: Photographs from Fred Ramos' series showcasing gang violence in El Salvador. Credits: Fred Ramos/World Press Photos

The same could be said of the work of two Japanese photographers, Tomoki Imai and Shimpei Takeda. Imai's series titled *Semicircle Law* is composed of photographs taken at the 20-mile mark established by Japanese authorities around Fukushima's power plant after it was destroyed by the combined action of an earthquake and tsunami (fig. 12). Takeda requested from laboratories samples of contaminated soil from inside this 20-mile circle around Fukushima and placed them upon film (fig. 13). Without context, the photographs could be taken as images of the night sky, but the white dots are actually impurities of the contaminated soil that react with the photosensitivity of the film, thus making the invisible radiation visible.

Fig. 12: Photograph from Tomoki Imai's series *Semicircle Law*, depicting the 20-mile exclusion zone around Fukushima Power Plant.

Fig. 13: Shimpei Takeda's *Trace #10*, Iwase General Hospital.

These four bodies of work are ingenious and subtle ways of reflecting upon absence. They also show the conjunction of trauma and the sublime as a way to deal with the human dimension of political violence or natural disasters. If anything, all these photographs pose questions marks on official discourses that try to render those events and their

consequences manageable or finished. And, even though they refer to something deeply human shared by all who possibly could suffer similar experiences, they are decidedly particular and only became meaningful because of this reference to the specific historical events that made them possible.

But what does it mean when the state employs the same language to mourn a national tragedy? Why is this countermonumental rhetoric employed simultaneously for the presence, in public discourse, of the legitimization of war in order to inflict violence and suffering on other countries and peoples? Those questions, which result from the confrontation with the works mentioned above, show that *Tribute in Light* or *Reflecting Absence*, for instance, are not only anti-monuments, but also political constructs of grief.

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When they are represented as monuments of loss and when they adopt an anti-monumental rhetoric, these monuments are also stripped down of any historical reference besides the event they make reference to. In this way, they render the events as if they were enclosed into themselves. This is similar to what Susan Sontag already pointed in Virginia Woolf's reactions to photographs from the Spanish Civil War. "For Woolf, as for many antiwar polemicists", she writes, "war is generic, and the images she describes are of anonymous generic victims".⁵³ But this generic condemnation of war implies the refusal to consider, as was the case, "Spain as a country with history".⁵⁴ I have already demonstrated that there is nothing intrinsically ahistorical in terrorist acts of violence. Indeed, as Talal Asad states, "Suicide attacks are therefore, above all, histories".⁵⁵ The fact that these narratives are not easily constructed and that the search for causes of and motivations for these acts not settled, is not necessarily an argument for not trying to understand these actions as historically conditioned and, thus, historically circumscribed.

These monuments, such as *Tribute in Light*, *Reflecting Absence*, the proposed memorial for Utoya island or, in fact, the deployment of an aesthetic dependent of subtraction or “minimalism” in public, commercial, but not necessarily official responses to these events, show that these events are grieved, but not necessarily mourned, as mourning implies the possibility of elaborating on this loss’ meaning for the living ones. They only function if the events are to remain open wounds in the community’s memory.

But what community of grief is this? This is not an easy question to answer. As Reinhart Koselleck’s work on war memorials already demonstrated, twentieth century traumatic events don’t necessarily present a clear division between victors and losers. The Shoah is a loss for all humankind, regardless of the countries to which the victims individually belonged (something that is further complicated by the absence of a unified Jewish state before Israel). *Reflecting Absence*, for instance, doesn’t show any national flags or symbols. Indeed, the diverse provenance of the victims make 9/11 as close as possible to a world tragedy. There is, however, a deep rift in the 9/11 memorial complex between the memorial itself and the museum’s overdetermination of discourse, with its singling out of heroes and the presentation of 9/11 in a nationalist framework. This uneasiness is significative, because it puts forward the question regarding who is meant to mourn the dead.

In another essay, Reinhart Koselleck explores what he calls “asymmetric counterconcepts”. By this he means the pairing of concepts that cut the limits between “us” and “they”. These positions cannot be both occupied by the same group at once and thus signals a way through “which the group can recognize and define itself”.⁵⁶ In this sense, they do not “merely denote such an agency, [but] it marks and creates the unity. The concept is not merely a sign for, but also a factor in, political or social groupings”.⁵⁷ The opposed concepts of Hellene/Barbarian, Christian/Heathen or human and its various

nonhuman iterations, such as superhuman and subhuman, are examples of these pairings of concepts.⁵⁸

My argument, then, is that the proposed community of loss to which these memorials refer is humankind itself. But, as the concepts mentioned above show, this is only possible if the nonhuman is created in the process. This same dialectics are presented in the 9/11 memorials.

As Talal Asad writes, terrorism renders difficult the usual ideas behind Western traditions of justice, either because crime and punishment are conjoined, while they would be separated in a legal context, or because, as the perpetrator dies, there is no time for vengeance.⁵⁹ Another aspect is that acts of terrorism result in one death that can't be mourned, that of the terrorist itself. But, if the subject of mourning is humanity itself, the perpetrator stands rightly outside of it, as something *less than human*. This becomes clear when he or she is put outside history or outside reason, be as an example of backwardness, or as a figure of innate evil.

This is a clear example of what Judith Butler calls "differential allocation of grievability".⁶⁰ As she writes, "part of the very problem of contemporary political life is that not everyone counts as subject"⁶¹, and this can be seen in the unequal distribution of grief between different lives taken at war or in acts of terror. Butler highlights that a grievable life is "a life that can be regarded as a life, and be sustained by that regard. Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life".⁶² A life that can't be grieved, that is, that can't be considered as life at all, also means that the person who holds it can't be counted as a subject, an individual or particular life exposed to condition and/or subject to responsibility.⁶³ This is shown, once again, in the different ways the events of 9/11 are explained, where complex causes such as the subjectivity of the perpetrators and/or the complex geopolitics that shaped the ascension of terrorist groups is left behind in the name of binary oppositions, like good and evil, rational and irrational, modern and backward.

The same could be said of the different circulation of images regarding individuals situated along both extremes. As Butler recalls, the individuals killed by US troops in contemporary wars are not grieved like the American soldiers that die in it⁶⁴; the same could be said of the contrast between the self-censorship imposed by US media and television networks regarding scenes – “intolerable images” – of September 11th victims taking their own lives, or even showing their corpses, and the exposition of terrorists’ names and faces.⁶⁵ In this case, victims are concealed, while terrorists are exposed. The same interplay between concealment and exposition can be seen here, showing that it can also be a political tool to create and sustain the asymmetrical identity of a group.

There is one further example I would like to mention: Black Lives Matter. More specifically, the video, released in April 2015, that register the shooting of Walter Scott, an unarmed African-american man, by a white police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina. In this case, the video not only went viral – as was the case with other recorded shootings of black men and women in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement – but also went mainstream, being shown and displayed on TV and large news websites (fig. 14). It became so largely widespread that it raised questions of whether seeing a man being killed is an ethical thing to do, even in the context of inequality and struggle for life of a minority group.⁶⁶ Either way, it is possible to highlight a very different treatment of the image here and of those in the monuments studied in this paper. In this case, the circulation of the video was made with disregard of the subject being shown, which demonstrates how the dignity of the victim – a black man – was not viewed as a question by the networks that aired it. One can wonder what would happen if it was a white man or woman being shot. Nonetheless, the same specificity of the death being portrayed and the fact that it went public made it a shared locus of commotion and placed it in the center of pleas for change in police actions towards black citizens. In this way, as Butler states, “open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in

the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential".⁶⁷

Screenshot from Feidin Santana's video showing police officer Michael Slager shooting at Walter Scott from behind, in North Charleston, South Carolina. Source: Wikipedia

This stands in stark contrast to the way 9/11 became remembered in the United States. It is possible to say that such memorials enact three significant shifts that retracted them from a political world of images. First, they transform particular tragedies into universal ones. Second, because of its initial widespread media coverage, they transform the spectator into survivor, thus blurring the distinction between bystander and victim, just as terrorism attempts to do. Third, it creates a boundary between tragedies that can be mourned and, then, not represented, and tragedies of communities that cannot control the images circulating about them. Although assuming an anti-monumental form, these memorials are aimed at toward consensus. How can one critique them if doing so becomes the same as placing oneself outside humanity or taking the stand of the nonhuman or irrational? Though they indeed pose questions, one needs to be a little suspicious of such an effort – material, political – to render these questions private. Why the adequate answer to them is silent, reverent contemplation and not outrage, specially considering what followed 9/11 globally? But where is the anti-monument to that tragedy? Perhaps we need to take things further and reinscribe those memorials into their subdued political framings, and perhaps we need monuments that question not only the September 11th

Memorial & Museum, but also other memorial's safe anti-monumentality.

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¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 291.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p. 302.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 301.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 321.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 322.

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- ¹⁹ Ibidem.
- ²⁰ Ibidem, p. 954.
- ²¹ KOSELLECK, R. "On the Disposability of History". In: _____. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 192-204.
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- ²⁶ Ibidem, p. 22.
- ²⁷ Ibidem, p. 8.
- ²⁸ Ibidem, p. 62.
- ²⁹ Ibidem, p. 63.
- ³⁰ Ibidem.
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- ³⁹ Ibidem, p. 118.
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⁶⁴ BUTLER, J. *Frames of War*. Op. cit., p. 39.

⁶⁵ BUTLER, J. *Precarious Life*. Op. cit., p. 5.

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