Thou Shalt Memorialize

Memory and Amnesia in the Post-Secular

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In 2009, the New York Times Room for Debate weblog discussed the phenomenon of roadside memorials. The question of whether these makeshift memorials should be banned prompted many to post critical messages in which they denounced this informal practice of memorialization. This way of commemoration is dangerous, they said, as it distracts or even upsets drivers (like in Jeffery Deaver’s thriller Roadside Crosses); it also infringes on the separation of church and state; and, moreover, such memorials appear as superfluous expressions of idiosyncratic individualism in a collective domain. One might presume that civilized society would be an ideal and accepting environment for people dealing with a personal traumatic loss. However, the criticism of roadside memorials must be seen in the context of increasingly invasive memorializing practices and the creation of a vast number of (semi-) permanent memorials and monuments. This process has become so omnipresent in everyday life that it leaves hardly anyone unaffected. Preeminent examples of this process are the various 9/11 commemorations and the abundant initiatives to place personalized memorial plaques or stones along streets or sidewalks for victims of traffic accidents or violence. Time and time again these vernacular death memorials confront people going about their daily tasks with remembrance and grief. In comparison, the ‘stumbling block’ project by German artist Gunter Deming is related, but distinct. Throughout Europe he sets stones permanently into the sidewalk outside the places where Jewish people lived before the Holocaust, making individual grief, memory and the magnitude of the collective trauma visible in public space.

But is there actually an unlimited receptivity towards the growth in memorialization practices? Various reactions suggest that public commemoration has its limits and that there is now a certain fatigue towards a seemingly all-encompassing need to memorialize and heritagize through the creation of monuments and memorialesque expressions. The NYT blog was an expression of this sentiment; other criticisms come from organizations which perceive the abundance of commemorative memorials as a form of ‘grief inflation’ that infringes on the meaning of existing monuments; and there have been local protests by residents who do not want to be confronted with a memorial and its related grief in their daily environment. For some, this is accompanied by a sense of memorial abundance, which cynically has been termed Memorial Mania (Doss 2010), and regarded as being a contemporary ‘obsession’ to commemorate and memorialize ad infinitum.

Will the tenth anniversary of 9/11 perhaps close off the initial period of coping with the ongoing national trauma of the terrorist attacks upon the United States, or will the memorialization be appropriated politically as a presidential re-election topic in relation to the taking out of Bin Laden? Such questions touch upon the phenomenon of forgetting as intentional amnesia, which applies variously to Holocaust deniers, atheists and people unacquainted with a particular personal trauma and grief. How will the present commemorations be perceived and instrumentalized? Whatever these practices mean or seem to be, anthropologists need to supply the insight that public memorialization is a major cultural expression for society at large, as well as, more and more, for individuals dealing with trauma and the past. As David Lowenthal has said about the crusade for heritage, memorialization has taken its place as a sort of religious expression: it helps people cope with the existential dramas of our human condition in post-seculiar society.

Against this backdrop, the value of our discipline lies in its capacity to provide an understanding of the societal significance of memorializing practices for remembering, coping, healing and overcoming, within communities, whether these are imagined or not, and especially for individuals. This becomes manifest in the shift from institutional public commemorating to individual, grassroots practices, unconnected to the official circuits. These informal practices are easily criticized by those who are not affected or involved, and who do not grasp the full implications of the grieving process within its sociocultural and political dimensions, or possibly because they also constitute a form of social action. The creation of makeshift memorials in public space is thus not just about grieving; with regard to the situations they address, memorial bricolages also try to achieve positive change in a political manner.

The value of memorializing from the grassroots level is well exemplified by the fact that the ‘last remaining Twin Towers column’ has been preserved and placed as a sacer sanctum totum within the National September 11 Memorial & Museum: “What makes the Last Column so powerful and authentic is that it was the most makeshift of all the memorials, as people spontaneously left firehouse patches, police logos, union stickers and writings to honor the victims” (NY Daily News, August 24, 2009). It shows the importance of personal participation in the memorialization process. This brings us to another crucial aspect of contemporary grassroots memorialization: it usually is accompanied by a large amount of seemingly superficial and ephemeral material culture. Time and again people want to participate themselves, and contribute candles, letters, and other objects to a makeshift memorial when it appears. Within that setting, the question arises: how to deal with these mementos and offerings when the significance of the memorial diminishes, or after the memorial is ultimately removed. The indexical sacrality of the memorial actually touches upon every individual object and, when the memorial had a broader societal meaning, raises the question of whether to conserve or ‘heritagize’ it or not.

Nowadays heritage institutions in Western society tend to preserve the materiality placed at such memorials. These personalized objects, like the offerings at the DC Wall for Vietnam veterans, are not only expressions of individualized society. These institutions tend to assume that these collections represent an alternative testimony about what happened in the shocked community or society involved, notwithstanding the complete change of context when the material is archived as a repository of memory and seen as the solidified emotion of trauma. But then, one must be aware, a removed grassroots memorial is no longer functional, as its political, social and communicational qualities are nullified. When academics and museum experts step into this process, they become part of the memorialization process itself, and constitute a factor in the heritagization of grassroots memorialization.

So, the inevitable question: should public institutions then collect, process, house and display the vast materiality of such objects is decided upon? Should museums be ‘managing’ these memorials, which means removing them from their visibly public environment and subsequently storing them in sanitized and often less accessible archives? When would they do this? After how long? How do we select? Even more problematic is the ethical question of whether archivists are actually entitled to conserve, make available, and analyze personal documents that are not addressed to their institution and that are meant for an ephemeral, deeply personal purpose? These objects might be advisable and even necessary, as often people who leave materials at a site do not want to have them conserved, let alone documented or published. Another external factor is the common practice of cleaning, polishing and preserving these materials to meet the aesthetic and conservational standards of museums, thus creating amnesia on how the objects were used. This changes contexts and meanings, so that the materiality becomes a form of memorial art or a polished product to display. And if public exhibitions of such objects is decided upon, is it useful or even possible to preserve “the sacred qualities of the shrine” (Grider 2007), as was the goal at the Texas A&M University exhibition after the Bonfire tragedy? James Gardner observes that the presentation on 9/11 in the American History Museum in 2002 was not designed for interpretation, but to evoke emotion and memories (Gardner 2011). Actually, that is what grassroots memorializing is all about: a highly significant, idiosyncratic emotion at certain moments in each person’s life. Let us keep that in mind.

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