

A Selected History of Imaginary Monuments
In Europe and the United States Including
but Not Limited to the Work of Aimée Burg,
Mark Dixon, Thale Fastvold and Emily Hass

By Fritz Horstman

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Imaginary Monuments

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In 1863, Union General Darius Couch suspected that the Confederate army would attack the area where he was stationed, so he had his troops construct the earthworks that still stand at the corner of 8th and Ohio in Lemoyne, Pennsylvania. That attack never came. Several years ago I was in Lemoyne with my wife visiting her family. We took a walk through the neighborhood and came upon a monument to Fort Couch. The monument consists of an interpretive stone plaque and the remaining earthworks, which make it easy to imagine the shape of the would-be battle. While there is an actual monument, it is to an imagined battle. Standing on that hill overlooking the Susquehanna River valley, I could almost see the Union soldiers waiting at their hastily made fort, and then realizing that the enemy wasn't coming. Likely relieved, they wandered down the hill to their dinners, or camped right there. In either case their mood was probably lighter for the battle they'd not fought.

A monument is generally understood to be a place or statue reserved for or made in honor of a significant person or event. Traditionally, if it is a person, he or she must no longer be living. There is inherent overlap with memorials. Many memorials are or contain monuments and vice versa. Memorials are more likely to involve a ritual or action, such as a parade. Both words have their linguistic

roots in the word "memory." As a curator and artist I am attracted to the form because it holds both time and emotion for a very large group of people. Almost everyone has an understanding of monuments, whether or not they've really given it thought.

In 1889 a statue of Etienne Dolet was placed adjacent to Notre-Dame in Paris. Dolet was an early Protestant martyr who was burned at the stake by Catholics in 1546. In the early twentieth century conservative Catholics proposed placing a statue directly across the plaza from Dolet of the Spanish anti-Trinitarian Michel Servet, burned at the stake by Protestants in 1557. That either man was killed in the first place testifies to the early discord between Protestants and Catholics. That people were still interested in raising monuments to these men three hundred some years later tells us that the differences hadn't been settled. The city council denied the second request for statue placement, avoiding a confrontation of religious monuments. (Michalski 35) The space between these two monuments, one real and one only proposed, is far more interesting than either alone. Since the second statue was never erected, we are left to imagine two religiously opposed figures, facing off across a Parisian plaza for years on end. The imagined space between the two statues is a contentious and charged monument of its own to the division of Catholics and Protestants.

Beginning in ancient times monuments were placed on tall columns, theatrical and aloof of everyday life. Starting around 1890 in Paris, monuments—which were mostly statues—were placed on lower and lower plinths. (Michalski 39) Their subjects went from looking outward or down onto the crowds, to being absorbed in their own worlds. This was in part an artistic maneuver away from the old fashioned monuments, and partly a reflection of a changing societal understanding of how we relate with one another and with public life. By 1926 these monuments that now often existed almost on street level prompted Robert Musil in his essay ‘Die Denkmale’ to say, “There is nothing in the world which approximates the paradoxical invisibility of public monuments. They are erected, no doubt, with the aim of attracting public attention, but on the other hand they seem to be strangely impregnated against attention from the outside. ... One considers them—like a tree—to be a part of the street, one would be immediately struck by their disappearance, but one does not look at them and one does not have the slightest idea whom they represent...” (Musil 64)

This perceived invisibility of monuments is dispelled when the monument becomes a part of a ceremony or ritual. Veterans placing a wreath at the foot of a war monument would not say it is invisible. The makers of

monuments haven’t traditionally thought of their work in terms of invisibility. Monuments pass into invisibility because as they age they accrue anonymity. Or that anonymity is built in, as in monuments to unknown soldiers.

Monuments had always on some level been allegorical. In the 1920s they shifted to being metonymical. This was a move from an interpretive abstraction to a more specific one. To allow one thing to stand in for another and be a part of a larger whole is a form of abstraction that was more and more widespread in the early twentieth century. This was seen, among other places, in the proliferation of Tombs to Unknown Soldiers. War has always produced unidentifiable victims. Monuments before had somehow encapsulated those losses within allegory. With the huge losses and many unaccounted-for dead of World War I, many monuments were needed. Conceptually the public was prepared for the metonymy of these Tombs in a way they hadn’t been for prior wars. These are real monuments, but they work on the imagination in a unique way. They are singular monuments standing in for the unnumbered and anonymous imagined monuments carried in the minds of lost soldiers’ survivors. These monuments are open tables to which anyone is welcome. Standing before them one is awash in the vast timelessness of anonymity.

II.

Monuments consisting of figures often take on the characteristics of tableaux. They depict a specific historic scene and embody grace. Georges Didi-Huberman compares the properties of a tableau to those of a table. Where a tableau may have centripetal beauty, emanating a specific uniqueness outward from an identifiable central point, a table's beauty may have centrifugal beauty, pulling disparate images or objects together. (Didi-Huberman 19) Huberman was referring to the working method of the early-twentieth century art historian Aby Warburg arranging and rearranging images on a table in a library, creating his *Atlas Mnemosyne*. Warburg's images could come from anywhere to inform the arrangement on the table. His *Atlas* was composed as a meandering and organic survey of the themes he found most pervasive in art history. He might trace the various forms Dionysian nymphs have taken over the last three thousand years, or images of sheep livers and other divinatory objects. The arrangements have an improvisational feel, and to even his

most devoted students, can't be followed exactly. They were alive in his mind, and so complicatedly so that he didn't think words could do them justice. Instead they become something new to each viewer. He created a new form of art history that was based on iconography, on making visual connections between images—something that seems completely natural now, but at the time went against the dominant art historical trend of connoisseurship. (Gopnik 34)

AIMÉE BURG's table of objects has a centrifugal beauty akin to Warburg's *Atlas*. One senses that many configurations were considered, and that many objects came and left in the process. As with Warburg, the final arrangement is for Burg alone to understand. To each of the rest of us she leaves the pleasurable task of making our own visual connections. Her exploration and learning through making is evident. Though each object alone contains its individual seriousness of purpose, there is an implicit invitation to the fun she has had in bringing this work together.

III.

In the 1960s artists started to take the concept of a monument as material in itself. In 1967 Robert Smithson wrote *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*. (Smithson 68) He shows us a bridge, a pumping derrick, and a sandbox, among other “monuments.” The word *monument* comes from the Latin *monere*: to remember. Is Smithson asking us to remember the pumping derrick, or something for which the derrick stands in? Or is he calling attention to the formal aspects of these objects he calls monuments? Yes, some are large, but there are many other large objects in Passaic that don’t make his list. While Smithson never tells us his intent, he has contributed to the process of giving a new generation of artists freedom to make monuments in subversive and altogether unexpected ways.

Anticipating the Vietnam War’s future monuments, in 1967 Claes Oldenburg commissioned a group of municipal gravediggers to dig a hole in Central Park behind

the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As soon as they were done they filled the hole back in. (Michalski 175) This was Oldenburg’s monument-as-protest. It was a monument to the perceived futility of the war and a preemptive protest to future monuments.

Others have taken up the idea of subterranean monuments. In 1908 in Kassel, Germany a Jewish merchant named Sigmund Aschrott paid for a fountain to be built in his neighborhood. When Nazis took power in the 1930s they destroyed the fountain. In 1988 the artist Horst Hoheisel made a replica of the fountain. It was displayed for a year and then buried upside down on the same site. The perimeter, which is shared by both the original and inverted fountains remains visible in the plaza. (Michalski 177) Known as the Aschrott Fountain Monument, its subterranean presence can only be imagined. Beholding it, history rushes past us with the elegant form of the fountain’s base firmly held as a monument to dignity.



Thale Fastvold, *GREEN—the New Human*, 2015, meteorite, spelt, potting soil, pot, certificate of authenticity, dimensions vary.

THALE FASTVOLD's *GREEN—A New Human Being* consists of a planting pot filled with dirt and a meteorite, with spelt or nasturtium growing from the soil. The plants are drawing nutrition from the soil, and also possibly from the meteorites. Photographs and certificates of authenticity are provided, giving us a few certainties, but it is the uncertainty that makes this work interesting. Are we to believe that the plant is part alien? Is some alien life infusing the plant? Knowing the meteorite is there in the soil, but out of sight, our imaginations are engaged. The plants then give shape to the possibilities. Fastvold has other agenda beyond this imagining. These edible plants are to remind us that the only place in the universe that can support human life is Earth, and that we should we want to survive as a species, we need to take care of it.

Fastvold's photographs from her series *Genius Loci* borrow from the aesthetics and traditions of ghost photography. In early photography, all photographs were considered to be true representations of reality. Odd lighting effects or inconsistencies in the photographic negative were sometimes thought to be ghosts. *Genius Loci* translates from Latin as "spirit of the place." All cultures have certain places that are considered to contain spirits. Often times these places are the sites of monuments. In her



Thale Fastvold
Genius Loci
2012
Giclee print
24x17"

photographs taken in Greece and Norway Fastvold has captured mysterious spirit-like forms. The artist is unforthcoming about what exactly is happening in the photographs, which are digital prints. Something has happened either in the photographed space or on the camera's sensor to produce the misty form. She assures us that there has been no post-production. Given the title, we are to understand that she has captured an image of a "spirit of the place." The photographs are monuments to that spirit, be it a trick of light or smudge on the sensor. Or they are monuments to the people who can believe that the spirit is there, even if the photograph is fudged.

MARK DIXON has been making paintings and drawings of the monuments around his neighborhood at the edge of Philadelphia for several years. With his sensitive and wispy application of paint he creates images that have an air of *genius loci*. They are a part of their landscapes; naturally *there* rather than any other place. We see them in low or preternatural light, often in silhouette. We know the subject is a monument and not a person just out for a walk because we see the signifier of a pedestal or socle. Details are blurry but there, seeming dreamt or remembered. It is as if Dixon is working in his studio only imagining the monuments he is painting.

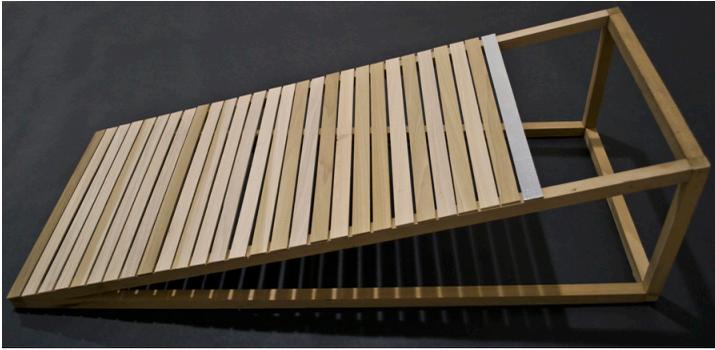


Mark Dixon, *American Bishop*, 2014, oil on canvas, 48×48”.

The summation is an imagined timeless meander around the neighborhood’s parks and open spaces. He and Musil would have a shared understanding of the invisible nature of monuments.

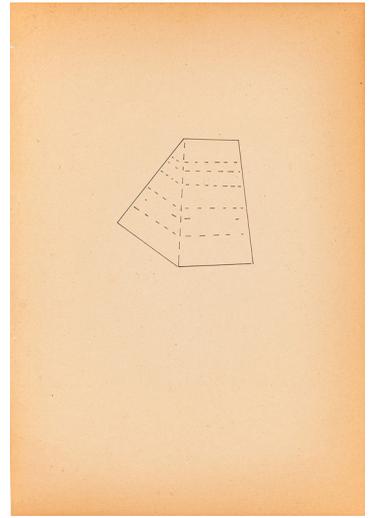
The Fourth Plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square is a popular venue for temporary public sculpture. In 2009 Antony Gormley began his one-hundred-day project *One and Other*, in which 2,400 public participants stood on the otherwise empty plinth for one hour each. Participants could and did do all variety of things, including protest, costumed performance and posing nude. (*The Guardian*) Had these actions been staged in almost any other setting they might still have been interesting, but their placement upon a plinth tells us that they can be considered monuments. There are many plinths in Trafalgar Square, and every other one bears a monument, so the sign is hard to miss. Gormley’s decision to pass the decision of content on to the public gives this series of monuments a democratic imagining. In this case it is really only the plinth that is required to denote the idea’s monumentality.

The low plinth beneath the Marx-Engels Forum monument in East Berlin by Ludwig Engelhardt, installed in 1986, was graffitied with the words WIR SIND UNSCHULDIG (“We Are Innocent”). (Ladd



Left: Aimée Burg, *Ramp*, 2012, wood, paint, 7×12×30".

Right: Emily Hass, *Kaiserdamm, 20 Triangle*, 2013, ink on vintage paper, 16×11".



203) The words have been left there for years with the collective consent of the population, while the statues themselves remain unmarred. The anonymous graffiti-ists took what was a fairly straightforward monument and gave it additional meaning, through an avenue unimagined by the sculptor. They reimagined the low plinth form to address German history with an act of dissociative protest.

EMILY HASS' exquisite drawings and installations address German history of the mid-twentieth century through an intricate monumentalizing of the architecture associated with some of the most significant cultural figures of the time. Hass' father left Germany as a child during Nazi rule, prompting his daughter, the artist, to learn much later about the place from which her family had come. Her search

began as a study of the architectural details of her father's childhood home. The search expanded to the dwellings of significant German artists and intellectuals associated with that time period. Her drawing *Kaiserdamm, 20 Triangle* is a detail of the former Berlin address of World War I veteran and artist Otto Dix. Drawn in ink onto an old blank page of a scrapbook, the mysterious form tells us only a very little about the man and space for which it stands in, though metonymically it functions perfectly. Similarly *Kurfurstendamm 177 Stairs (Michael Blumenthal)* is a stark and beautiful distillation of the staircase leading up to the historian's former residence in Berlin. This drawing is especially interesting for the isolated rectangle the artist has chosen to include above the stair detail. Given the monumentalizing nature of the work, this focus takes on the

elevated feeling of something to which you ascend.

Ascension is also present in Burg's *Ramps*, which lead upwards, but to an undefined height and destination. She's adamant in this uncertainty, leaving off the last few slats of the ramp. Given the work around it, this ramp can be read as an approach to an elevated stage—possibly a plinth.

The ramp forms show up in Burg's drawings, as well. Here they become wedges and triangles, encircling and otherwise bringing focus to nonspecific areas. She and Hass both employ this geometric elevating device. Hass' *String Composition* leads us ever upward through the unfilled pages of old notebooks, whose arrangement is based on her architectural subject's design. The string wends its way through the papers, creating wedges and triangles, ramps that lead from one level to the next.

In 1938 Constantin Brâncuși completed his monumental sculptural ensemble at Târgu Jiu, Romania, comprising the *Table of Silence*, the *Gate of the Kiss* and the *Endless Column*. Together they are a monument to the soldiers of that town who died in

World War I. While the seventeen-and-a-half stacked rhomboids of the *Column* is his most recognizable work, the *Table of Silence*, with its simple open form, leaves the most to the imagination. It consists of a flat circular limestone table surrounded by twelve hourglass-shaped limestone seats. It gathers as many ideas and memories as the viewer can bring to it.

A similar openness runs through the work in *Imaginary Monuments*. The artists create photographs, drawings, paintings and sculptures that build on our collective understanding of monuments. Some of the pleasure of looking at this work comes through the real and implied passage of time. Gathered together, the work looks back from a future that is monumentalizing our present. There is a mysteriousness to this time-bending pleasure. These are artists who seek to cement or celebrate the intangible and precarious world in which we live. Each work refers to something past, or looks back from a future when its subject will be past. None of the work is particularly nostalgic, but in every case the work is solemnly telling us to take note of these passing moments and ideas.

NOTES

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Aimée Burg lives and works in New Haven, CT. Her installations combine a natural history museum with sci-fi sets, placing herself in the past looking at the future looking at our past. (BFA Pratt; MFA Yale)

Mark Dixon is based in Glenside, PA. His paintings and drawings are of his neighborhood at the edge of Philadelphia. They depict neglected monuments and spaces. (BFA University of Delaware; MFA Maryland Institute College of Art)

Thale Fastvold is an artist, curator and writer living in Oslo, Norway. Working with photography and installations, her art practice researches concepts such as liminality in time and space and the Earth's place within the Universe. (BA Istituto Europeo di Design, Rome; MA Art History and Literature, University of Oslo)

Emily Hass lives and works in Manhattan. She paints in gouache and ink on paper, investigating the architecture of Berlin in the 1930s, specifically where persecuted Jews, artists, and intellectuals lived. (BA Hampshire College; M.Ed in Psychology, Harvard University; M.Des Design, Harvard University)

Fritz Horstman is an artist and curator based in Bethany, CT. He focuses on unusual and quiet instances of nature and culture overlapping, often producing scientific-like tools and images. He has been a member of Ortega y Gasset Projects since 2014. (BA Kenyon College; MFA Maryland Institute College of Art)

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