Commemoration of War

Paul Gough

Introduction: ‘plinth and/or place’

In the four weeks leading to 11th November 1928 the now defunct illustrated newspaper Answers published a ‘magnificent series of plates celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Armistice’. Under the strapline ‘Ten years after, 1918 - 1928’ the plates were published as four pairs of pencil drawings by the former soldier-artist Adrian Hill. They depicted the principle buildings on the old Western Front in Belgium and France as they appeared in ruins in late 1918, and under restoration ten years later. Arras Cathedral, the Cloth Hall at Ypres, Albert Basilica, and the Menin Road had become icons across the British Empire as the immutable symbols of the trauma of the Great War. Indeed, in the months after the Armistice, Winston Churchill had strongly advocated ‘freezing’ the remains of Ypres and preserving it forever as an ossified commemoration of the war. Its pulverised medieval buildings, he argued, would be more articulate than any carved memorial or reverential monument. Churchill’s predilection for bombed ruins surfaced again during the Second World War when he argued that a portion of the blitzed House of Commons ought also to be preserved as a reminder of the bombing of the capital. (Hansard 25 January 1945)

As with many grand commemorative schemes, Churchill’s vision was not to be realised. Indeed, after both wars many of the grander commemorative schemes floundered: a national war memorial garden in the precincts of St Paul’s Cathedral was abandoned as a project in the late 1940’s; ambitious plans to
house the national war art collection in an imposing ‘Hall of Remembrance’ came to nothing twenty years earlier, as did a similar architectural scheme in Canada. Although, many ideas were realised, though few were achieved without some degree of argument.

In this chapter I will examine how the desire to produce a common understanding of the past has resulted in material forms such as the plinth and the pedestal which have become the key visual components of ideological and rhetorical urban topography, I want to contrast them with the concept of ‘reified place’, in particular preserved or reconstructed battlefields which have become the focus of commemorative rites; the places where ‘one takes personal narratives’. Most of the examples used to illustrate this tension will be drawn from the northern European theatres of war, although reference will be made to certain far-flung conflicts – such as the Battle of Gettysburg – which became the template for historic conservation and the embellishment of military memory. In concentrating on idealised objects on the one hand, and recuperated landscapes on the other I will have to set aside consideration of other acts of commemoration: by these we might include ritual, song and poetry, but also the material culture of war such as artwork, paintings and sculpture which were commissioned by national governments as both propaganda and as evidence of cultural superiority. When considering how warfare might variously be commemorated it is clear that every act is highly contested. Even the granting of war trophies could stir dissent and disagreement. In 1919, when the small east Lancashire town of Haslingden was offered a tank as a gift from the government in recognition of its contribution to war savings, the local branch of the Discharged Soldiers and Sailors Association (DSSA) rejected it as an inappropriate emblem of commemoration. ‘This tank’, wrote their President, ‘will remind us of things we do not want to be reminded of, and one which would be an expense to the town.’ (Haslingden Gazette 1919) He asked instead that the government send an army-hut as a club-room for the veterans, and ensure them a fitting place in the coming Peace Day celebrations – the protocols for the latter
proving to be as equally contested as the gift of a redundant military vehicle. (Turner 1999, 58)

Of course, many of the tensions between ‘plinth’ and ‘place’ had been played out long before the Great War. The construction of monuments and memorials on sites of battle has a history reaching back to the classical periods of Greece and Rome (Borg, 1991; Carman and Carman, 2006). However, the demarcation of battlefield sites so as to accentuate the material remains of the past is a fairly recent phenomenon. In their analysis of twenty-three north European battle sites, covering nine centuries (from the Battle of Maldon in 991, to the Spanish battle of Sorauren in 1813) Carmen and Carmen note (2006, 184-86) that only five are marked by contemporary memorials, while all but three are furnished with modern memorials, of which all take monumental form. Six of these sites also host a museum or have heritage status, usually dating from the twentieth century, thus reflecting the idea that such places have only latterly been considered worthy of note and subject to demarcation, textual display and commodification. Such spaces are invariably politicized, dynamic and contested. As Bender notes, they are constantly open to negotiation. (Bender, 1983) They are also complex sites of social construction. As we shall see in our examination of twentieth century wars in northern Europe, it is best not to view such sites as the location of single events but as ‘a palimpsest of overlapping, multi-vocal landscapes’. (Saunders 2001, 37)

**Commemoration, reverential and utilitarian: a definition of terms**

Any reading of the historiography related to the commemoration of war, (Hynes 1990; Mosse 1990; Borg 1991; Winter 1995; King 1998) will reveal that the words ‘monument’ and ‘memorial’ are used interchangeably, their definitions often paradoxical and weakly articulated. Arthur Danto, reflecting on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the United States, attempts to distinguish one from the other by arguing that whereas many memorials speak of healing, remembrance and reconciliation, monuments are usually celebratory or triumphalist. (Danto 1986, 152) Although somewhat simplistic, such definition offers a starting point.
According to the Oxford English Dictionary a monument is ‘a structure, edifice or erection intended to commemorate a person, action or event.’ In contrast, definitions of ‘memorial’ focus on the preservation of specific memory and on their iconographic role in evoking remembrance. In common understanding a monument should bear the attributes of scale, permanence, longevity and visibility. Memorials, by contrast, are often more intimate, local and personal, though they are still required to be durable and open to public gaze. While the monument has often been built to promote specific ideals and aspirations – from the Statue of Liberty to the Eiffel Tower – the memorial is essentially a retrospective form, idealising a past event, historic figure or deified place. The German cultural historian Alois Riegl distinguished between monuments that are ‘wanted’ – in the sense of satisfying a commemorative need - and those that are merely remnants, usually in the form of ‘historical’ or preserved remains that connect us to a revered past (Reigl 1903). Drawing on Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia, others have argued that monuments become memorials as a result of the successful completion of a mourning process (Rowlands 1999) when;

the object must die twice, first at the moment of its own death and secondly through the subject’s unhitching from its own identification. It is only then that the object can pass into history and that the stones can be set – for mourning and memorial are a phase apart. (Cousins 1996, 36 – 41)

Clearly, there are several distinct phases in the creation of the public monument. Winter proposes a tripartite cycle in the afterlife of lieux de memoire: an initial, creative period – the construction of ‘commemorative form’ – which is marked by monument building and the creation of ceremonies that are periodically centred on the reverential object. During the second phase the ritual action is grounded in the annual calendar and becomes institutionalized as part of civic routine. There is then a critical, transformative period when the public monument either disappears or is upheld as an active site of memory. This final phase, as Winter reminds us, (Winter 2000, 22-25) is largely contingent on whether a second
generation of mourners inherits the earlier meanings attached to the place or event and adds new meanings. Without frequent re-inscription the date and place of commemoration simply fade away as memory atrophies. Very soon the monument loses its potency to re-invigorate memory: it becomes ‘invisible’.

This complex and delicate process is exemplified in the case of monuments to distant wars. Here, as Inglis suggests, the terminological difference is significant: ‘Where the French speak of monuments aux morts, the English say war memorials.’ Memorial leaves open the form of commemoration which may, or may not, be monumental. (Inglis 1992, 601) Commemoration, essentially anti-entropic, is often predicated upon the ‘monument’ being a physical object that arrests the effects of time. It has a temporal as well as a spatial value, and might be considered a 'single point [that] continues in the present and into the future' (Treib 2001, 82) By comparison, the German word for monument ‘denkmal’ – literally ‘a means to thought’ - offers a conceptual vehicle that is more closely attuned to the idea that human perceptions shift and adjust, and that monuments – like so much rhetorical topoi – can become irrelevant, invisible and, yet also able to arouse intense debate. (Gough and Morgan 2004)

In largely Protestant countries such as Britain, hospitals, libraries and other utilitarian memorials had long been considered to be structures appropriate for the commemoration of war. Victorian and Edwardian Britain is strewn with the evidence of philanthropic and state benefaction. This was perhaps most evident after the First World War, when small communities, already torn by grief, were further divided by the need to decide between erecting reverential memorials or building functional utilities. In the latter, memorial schemes varied in object from avenues of trees to pragmatic solutions to local issues and took the form of community halls, recreation grounds, convalescent homes and, in one case, a waterpipe to a local school. (King, 1998, 68) There were precedents for such decisions. A paper on ‘Monumental Memorials and Town Planning’, given in 1917, noted the tale of a ‘small Urban Council who, with an eye to thrift and economy, decided to commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria by the construction of a new public sewer.’ (Adhead 1917) A preference for the
utilitarian may, in part, have been a reaction to the frenzy of monument building across Europe in the late-nineteenth century. As Whelan points out, the busy furnishing of the urban centres reflected the intense nationalism of the period when plinth-topped statuary became a focus for collective participation in the politics and public life of villages, towns and cities across Europe (Whelan 2005, 63). Figurative ensembles were readily understood as symbolic devices capable of capturing and imposing the ideals, principles and aspirations of the established regime. ‘Frenzy’ is the appropriate term. Owens calculates (1994, 103) that one statue was erected in central London every four months during the reign of Queen Victoria, In Germany, in a single decade, some five hundred memorial towers were raised to Bismarck alone.

However, in 1919 the need to find a tolerable meaning to the vast losses of the Great War demanded a radical break from august statues crowding the over-furnished urban centres of Europe. Nor could the scale of loss be satisfied by short-term utilitarian solutions. In the absence of bodies to grieve over, the cenotaphs, memorial stones, and catafalques erected in thousands across Britain had to perform several interlocking functions. Initially they acted as a focus for personal, public and civic displays of grief. Their iconic form helped to reassure non-combatants and relatives that the dead had died for a greater cause, one linked to abstract values of nationhood, camaraderie or Christian citizenship. The blank–faced slab of the Cenotaph in Whitehall provided a template for hundreds across the Empire honoring the placeless dead. Along with the equally classless Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, the Cenotaph became a heterotopic site at which the ‘multiple memories’ of parents, fiancés and widows could be located and fixed. (Hallam and Hockey 2001, 90) The very solidity of these monumental forms provided a sense of ‘anchoring’ – spatial, temporal, perhaps even social – in a mobile and disjointed society. (Huyssen, 1995, 7) Indeed, stone, brass and metal have become increasingly valued as the material embodiment of memory largely because they seem to act as a counterpoint to fears of a ‘throw-away consumer culture’ with its emphasis on the immaterial, the transient and the fleeting.
Annual rituals such as Armistice services gradually reinforce the permanence of the material through becoming the locus of communal and individual remembrance, and opening up a discourse of healing, regret and reflection. Monumental forms argues Rowlands:

should ideally allow the fusion of the living with the dead as an act of remembrance whilst in time providing a way out of melancholia through an act of transcendence (Rowlands, 199)

As such they function as palliative *topoi* that help resolve the conditions of ‘negativity and impotence’ aroused by violent death, particularly of the young. Of course not all war memorials act in this way: some are bombastic and celebratory, embellishing the past, promoting pride in distant victories and asserting inflated values of nationhood. Although they play a major part in the creation of place identity in the built environment, the role of monuments during social change is rarely predictable and they are subject to random forces:

Existing monuments may be removed and replaced; they may be re-designated and their meanings re-interpreted to express new meanings; or they may simply become ignored and rendered all but invisible, their meanings lost through being irrelevant or unreadable. (Ashworth and Graham 2005, 11)

Unsurprisingly, they are also capable of arousing complex passions. Take for example, the furor over the installation of a statue to Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris in London in 1992 (Johnson, 1995) or the ‘desecration’ of the Whitehall Cenotaph during May Day protests in 2000 (Winter, 2000). Consider also the recent upsurge in the memorialisation of the Second World War, most notably in central London (Gough, 2007) but also at the National Memorial Arboretum in central England. Amidst such contingency we can be certain of two things: monuments are seldom built to commemorate continuing events or to honour those still living. This explains our ‘queasiness when we are commemorated’ (Lowenthal 1985, 232). Secondly, the erection of memorials is intended (but does not always achieve) to be a terminal act, indicating closure and the completion of a segment of historical past. Monuments, according to Hynes (Hynes 1990, 14), are crucial icons in the official act of closure, the ultimate solidification in the ‘discourse of

**Naming and knowing**

In his account of building the Menin Gate at Ypres, Sir Reginald Blomfield identified the single greatest problem in achieving an appropriate design for his war memorial: ‘I had to find space for a vast number of names, estimated at first at some 40,000 but increased as we went on to about 58,600.’ (Blomfield 1932, 179) Yet despite spreading the names over 1,200 panels across walls, arches, columns and even the stairwells, Blomfield could fit only 54,896 names into the elongated tunnel-like arch. Expediently, the names of ‘an excess of nearly 6,000’ were transferred to national burial sites nearby. (Longworth 1967, 96) Further south the design of the gigantic arch at Thiepval was dictated by the need to display the names of 73,367 men with no known resting place who had died during the Battle of the Somme. Designed by Edwin Lutyens, the arch consists of sixteen enormous load-bearing columns each faced by stone panels carved to a height of some six metres, the words never quite beyond legibility. It is, as Geoff Dyer reflects, a monument to the ‘untellable.’ (Dyer 1985, 126) whilst also being a monument that is ‘unphotographable’: no image can capture its daunting scale, its weight, and the panorama of names, ‘So interminably many’, Stephen Zweig notes ‘that as on the columns of the Alhambra, the writing becomes decorative.’ (Zweig, in Lacquer 1994,154) It is also unnervingly precise in both its grammar and specificity: individuals who may have served (and died) under assumed or false names are listed; common names – Smith, Jones, Hughes – are further identified by their roll number, the memorial also features an *Addenda* and, according to Barnes, a *Corrigenda*. (Barnes 1995, 98) It is a gargantuan roll of honour created in brick and stone. As Shepheard has convincingly argued it is this painstaking attention to detail – the assiduous ‘clip and mow and prune’ and the insistence on specificity at every level that makes it possible for the
Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries to commemorate the dead without glorifying war. (Shepheard 1997, 227)

Naming, and the evocation of names, was central to the cult of commemoration after the Great War. As a process it mirrored the complex bureaucracies developed by the industrial armies during years of total war; the administration of death echoed the military machine which had become ‘rationalised, routinised, standardised’. (Horne 1984, 228) However, initial attempts to co-ordinate the burial and recording of the dead were haphazard. In the British army in Flanders it was the zeal of Fabian Ware and his graves registration unit that laid the foundations of a systematic audit of the dead and their place of burial. (Longworth 1985) Once it had been decided that bodies would not be exhumed and repatriated, Ware began to establish a method for graves registration and a scheme for permanent burial sites. He also arranged that all graves should be photographed so that relatives might have an image and directions to the place of burial. By August 1915 an initial 2,000 negatives, each showing four grave markers, had been taken. Cards were sent in answer to individual requests, enclosing details that gave ‘the best available indication as to the situation of the grave and, when it was in a cemetery, directions as to the nearest railway station which might be useful for those wishing to visit the country after the war.’ (Ware 1929, vii) Less than nine months later Ware’s makeshift organisation had registered over 50,000 graves, answered 5,000 enquiries, and supplied 2,500 photographs. Little over a year later the work to gather, re-inter and individually mark the fallen had become a state responsibility. The dead, as Heffernan points out, were no longer allowed ‘to pass unnoticed back into the private world of their families’. They were ‘official property’ to be accorded appropriate civic commemoration in ‘solemn monuments of official remembrance’. (Heffernan 1995, 302)

Lacquer has pointed out the epistimological shift that came out of Ware’s founding work; here, a new era of remembrance began - the era of the common soldiers’ name. This marked a radical break from the customs of the 19th century. On monumental structures in France and Prussia, naming dead soldiers of all
ranks had been occasionally adopted, but not in Britain. When such a proposal was considered as a way of honouring the dead of Waterloo it was turned down by Parliament. (King 1998, 184-185) It was left to military units to initiate and raise the money for memorials that listed all ranks. More usually, only officers were named, rankers simply identified by the number of dead. (Penny, 1987, p. 794)

This was certainly the practice after the Crimea, but by the end of the Boer War it had become commonplace for local military memorials in Britain to contain lists of those who had died, often denoting rank – a practice that was avoided after the Great War largely to connote ‘equality of sacrifice’ irrespective of class, rank or status.

After the Armistice of 1918, the administration of death and grieving became highly regulated and was marked by ‘a historically unprecedented planting of names on the landscapes of battle.’ (Lacquer 1996, 152-153) Indeed, the very words chosen for the Stone of Remembrance in each of the larger cemeteries underlines this fact: ‘Their name liveth evermore.’ A phrasing that caused Lutyens to ask ‘But what are names’. For the bereaved, however, they were often all that was left.

**Place and the ‘anxiety of erasure’**

While names can be recovered, even recuperated from the past, language strains to depict the calamity and depravity of modern war. As T.S. Eliot wrote, words crack ‘and sometimes break under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish.’ (Eliot 1963, 194) John Masefield, writer and future poet laureate, had no available vocabulary to describe his first sight of the Somme battlefield in 1916. ‘To say that the ground is “ploughed up” with shells is to talk like a child’, he complained, ‘to call it mud would be misleading’

It was not like any mud I’ve ever seen. It was a kind of stagnant river, too thick to flow, yet too wet to stand, and it had a kind of glisten and shine on it like reddish cheese, but it was not solid at all and you left no tracks in it, they all closed over, and you went in over your boots at every step and sometimes up to your calves. Down below it there was a solid footing, and
as you went slopping along the army went slopping along by your side, and splashed you from head to foot. (Masefield 1978, 164)

Almost every battlefield visitor called it ‘indescribable’. And yet, every battlefield visitor made an attempt to describe it in words; indeed many thousands of pages were filled trying to define and describe the trauma that had been visited upon this small tract of northern France. The spectacle of abject ruination drew pilgrims, just as it draws visitors today, to dwell on it in dread fascination.

However, when considering these as commemorative sites, the ‘spectacle’ was often little more than a cleared tract of land to which historic significance had to be attached: it often took negative form, it was a spectacle of absence, a potent emptiness of flattened earth, ruined and shattered forms. As sites of memory though, these obscure places loomed huge in the popular imagination.

Identifying, conserving and managing these ‘places we want to keep’ because they are deemed to have layers of significance is strewn with competing demands. As Freestone argues, the structures and relationships between the many sets of stakeholders who have some authority over a given ‘site of memory’ are ‘complex, incomplete, sometimes unfair, confused, and conflicting.’ (Freestone, 1995, p.79) As locales of embodied potentiality (Forster, 2004) battlefields present very particular opportunities for preservation. It is possible to trace a pattern of commemoration that was first created after the battle of Gettysburg in 1863, continues on the barren ash hills around Verdun, through to such Second World War sites as the beaches of Normandy, the ‘martyred village’ of Oradour, and finally on to the razed city of Hiroshima. (Gough, 2000) On each battleground the moral resonance of the site itself is seen as paramount. Ditches, mounds, ruins and apparently barren tracts have been maintained, preserved and sometimes enhanced, because they are seen as ‘historical traces’ which have an unassailable authority. However, the semiotics of commemorative spatiality are complex because they must be constantly negotiated and redefined. This difficulty notwithstanding, a semiotics of place has been clearly articulated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who was compelled by
the qualities of particular sites and examined their role in the formation of collective memory. ‘Space’, he wrote ‘is a reality that endures’, it has the capacity to unite groups of individuals and believers concentrating and ‘moulding its character to theirs.’ (Halbwachs, 1950) So saturated in potentiality are some sites that pilgrims have been continuously drawn to places that ‘contain’ the memory of overwhelming events. In this sense, the terrain around the Brandenburg Gate, the ‘raised knoll’ in downtown Dallas, the ash-hills of Fort Douaumont can be considered secular shrines capable of rekindling memories of awesome events.

Nowhere, perhaps, are such matters more urgent than in the controversies that surround how we remember and represent the Holocaust. In the absence of convincing memorials, the very sites chosen to remember the Holocaust have become pivotal in the national and popular imagination as it attempts to address the events of the Second World War. This has become especially pressing in those places where ‘unmanaged ecological succession threatens to erase history’. (Charlesworth and Addis 2002, 240). Koonz in an analysis of the commemorative hinterland around Nazi concentration camps, suggests that whereas we know that written texts are ‘infinitely malleable’ and readily abridged, that films can be edited and photographs digitally manipulated, the landscape feels immutable. Only geography, she argues, is capable of conveying the narrative of extermination: ‘At these places of remembering, memory feels monolithic, unambiguous, and terrible.’ (Koonz 1994, 258) It is a view earlier suggested by Mayo in his epic survey of the contested terrain of native north America, when he simply states ‘the landscape itself is the memorial.’ (Mayo 1988, 172)

Wandering over the sites of the Battle of Gettysburg and musing on the manner in which we create ‘significant’ landscapes, Harbison suggests that ‘serious tourists’ help monumentalise the landscapes they pass through, ‘classicising’ them. We do this by concentrating on certain nodes of significance which acquire ‘ceremonial eminence’ whatever their outward condition. (Harbison, 1991, 38) The role of the ‘serious’ tourist, he argues, is essentially reconstructive. Similarly, Ashworth and Graham suggest that the imposition of
the designation ‘heritage site’ forever alters the character of an area, which ‘thus becomes monumental and historic with potential consequences for the sense of place held by insiders and outsiders.’ (Ashworth and Graham 2005, 151)

The former battlefields perched on the tip of the Dardanelles Peninsula in western Turkey offer a telling example of a heritage site that has been spasmodically contested by ‘insiders and outsiders’ since the Empire troops evacuated its bloody ridges and exposed beaches in early 1916. The defence of Gallipoli was a victory for the Turkish army - their single triumph in five campaigns – but this might not be the first impression gained by the casual visitor.

The peninsula is peppered with war memorials, battlefield museums, facsimile trench lines and cemeteries. The main period of cemetery planning and memorial building took place in the 1920s when the Imperial War Graves Commission assumed responsibility for situating and planning 31 cemeteries and five Allied memorials (Longworth, 1967). They are carved in the restrained neo-classical style that characterises the work of the IWGC, work that was carried out in the most severe climactic, geological and socio-political conditions. The principal architect, Sir John Burnet, bemoaned the insecure ground, poor drainage and the propensity of the impoverished locals to remove stone and metal intended for the Commission. He had also to work in an emotionally charged context: a clamorous lobby by Australian and New Zealand ex-servicemen to designate the entire ‘Anzac’ area as consecrated ground; a lobby that, while unsuccessful at the time, would later lay the foundation for territory disputes that have become spasmodically inflamed since the Turkish government agreed the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

As for marking their part in the campaign, there was no comparable response from the Turkish authorities until the 1950s, and then again in the late 1960s when a number of imposing modernist structures were built at Cape Helles, the most southern point of the peninsula. During the late 1980s a number of traditional Islamic memorial sites were built, and in the last decade years several large figurative statues – some of them strident, even bombastic, in tenor
have been located at Anzac and Helles. Although the war ended here in 1916, a battle for monumental supremacy has been waged ever since. Turkish and Commonwealth memorial sites are located uncomfortably close to each other on the cliffs over the once disputed beaches, and immense statues of Turkish heroes stand face-to-face with CWGC obelisks, locked in 'parallel monologues' (Ayliffe et al, 1991). On the eve of the 80th anniversary of the Allied landings in 1995 the Turkish authorities supplemented the martial statuary with an ambitious – but not uncontroversial – planting regime designed to dress the battlefield with appropriate symbolic floral designs (Gough, 1996).

Two years later the Turkish government announced a competition for a new 330,000 hectare park dedicated to peace at Gallipoli. Although a winning design was chosen, there has been little progress in advancing the scheme and the only physical changes on the peninsula has been the unplanned encroachment of villas and an irreversible road-widening programme intended to facilitate the tens of thousands of visitors (many form Australasia) who want to visit, but who have become increasingly concerned at the unsightly violation of a place they deem to be essential to their identity as a nation.

As hallowed sites of national memory, the identification and preservation of a battlefield as a physical and inviolable entity can help maintain a consciousness of the past which (as Lowenthal argues) is 'essential to maintenance of purpose in life, since without memory we would lack all sense of continuity, all apprehension of causality, all knowledge of our identity'. (Lowenthal, 1985, 103) However, as is evident on the contested ravines and beaches of the Dardanelles, memory, identity, and purpose are seldom shared values, especially between nations tens of thousands of miles apart. Nevertheless if, as Lowenthal (1979, 110) has suggested, landscape, is 'memory's most serviceable reminder' then preserved battlefield sites can help to concretise the experience of war and evoke profound reflections. Despite the need for occasional artifice, battlefields are especially significant as memorial landscapes because they 'challenge us to recall basic realities of historical
experience, especially those of death, suffering and sacrifice.’ (Rainey 1983, 76; Lambek 2002, 10)

**Beyond space: counter-memorials**

Perhaps some of the most radical developments in the evolution of commemorative form emanated from Germany in the 1980s, as a young generation of artists and writers began to face up the concealed and repressed recent past of their nation. Building on the maxim of John Latham and the Artist Placement Group which asserted that ‘the context is half the [art]work’ artists and cultural interventionists such as Jochen Gerz worked from the premise that memory is fluid and contingent and that, consequently, it is neither possible nor desirable to insist on a single, objective and authoritative reading of any place or historic moment. (Latham 1997, 15) The key concepts behind these actions produced ‘negative’ or ‘invisible’ forms. Anti-matter and the ephemeral was preferred over verticality and solidity; dislocation and disturbance were premised over comfort and reconciliation. Now regarded as the origins of the ‘counter-monument’, the conceptual base was articulated by contextual fine artists, who asserted that fixed statuary induces national amnesia rather than meaningful acts of remembering. Their principle aim was to register protest or disagreement with the ‘untenable prime object’ (invariably, the ‘hero on the horse’ – the plinth-bound exalted statue) and to stage an alternative that might arouse reflection and debate, however uncomfortable or radical. (Michalski 1998, 207)

Through their extraordinary interventions, artists such as Christian Boltanski, Jochen Gerz and Krzysztof Wodiczko were not ‘commemorating’ particular wars as such, they were offering up a complex critique of how nations repressed or subverted uncomfortable memory. One example brilliantly illustrates the radical shifts in the nature of commemoration brought about by such thinking. The *Harburg Monument Against War and Fascism and for Peace* was unveiled in October 1986 by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, but had ‘disappeared’ by November 1993, not through vandalism or theft but to meet the artist’s radical agenda. Having asked the critical question – ‘What do we need another
monument for?’, and answered: ‘We have too many already’ – they created one that would gradually disappear, and in so doing challenge the traditional connotations of permanence, durability, and ‘authoritarian rigidity’ normally attributed to monuments. (Young 2000, 128) In a nondescript suburb of Hamburg, in an obscure pedestrian mall, they unveiled a forty-foot high, three-foot square pillar of hollow aluminum, sheathed in a layer of soft lead. A temporary inscription in several languages invited all citizens of the town to add their names – and so ‘commit ourselves to be vigilant’ – and become aware that over time the column would gradually be lowered into the ground. ‘In the end’, concluded the inscription. ‘it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.’ As sections of the tower were inscribed with graffiti – names, messages, obscenities, political slogans and aerosol-painted tags – it was lowered into its chamber until all that was left was a simple capstone. Provocative and uncomfortable, the vanishing monument returned the burden of memory to visitors. As Young notes: ‘all that stands here are the memory-tourists, forced to rise and remember for themselves.’ (Young 2000, 131) In France, Gerz transformed a stereotypical provincial memorial to Les Morts of the First World War by gathering statements, reminiscences and observations from local inhabitants about their feelings and responses to the existing memorial, inscribing some of them on to plaques which were then affixed to the stonework. The intervention is planned to carry on, possibly for years; each new inscription covering the others and radiating from the locus of ‘official’ memory.

While counter-monuments are often shocking in their confrontational polemic, can it be said that they have subverted the cultures of commemoration? Have they re-invigorated the material form of memory-creation? In northern Europe, recently built war museums – at L’Historial Peronne and In Flanders Fields, Ypres, for example - have engaged more fully with its audience, creating participatory and interactive exhibits that genuinely attempt to engage all levels of involvement and suffering. However, only miles away, the former battle grounds of the old Western Front are being systematically bedecked with monumentalia of uneven aesthetic quality, occasionally based on dubious history. Capital cities
such as London are being liberally furnished with additional monuments – to women’s contribution in the Second World War; to animals who died in wars – arches, memorial gateways, and other commemorative *objets de memoire* designed to stave off that ‘anxiety of erasure’ felt by generations of combatants and their relatives for whom their war contribution is a fast fading.

How will the ‘war on terror’ be remembered? If the ‘war’ is ever resolved, what commemorative forms might result? If closure is one day achieved what will be its inscription and markers? Will it find commemorative shape in three-dimensions. Pervasive warfare may be matched by pervasive technologies of commemoration. The public space that once housed the reverential monuments of the twentieth century has become fragmented, serialized and digitally accessible as a consequence of the rapid expansion of communications technologies and digital cultures. In an age when the local has exploded, it is now understood that ‘the Internet provides a medium in which public art can be created specifically for non-localized, interactive and lasting memorializations.’ (Gerin 2002, 11)

One example will illustrate this transformation: *The Numbers and the Names* is an on-line memorial to 9/11. It was created by Mac Dunlop and Neil Jenkins, with a visual prologue by Annie Lovejoy, as a component of an extensive collaborative art project. Eschewing the naming of names, the four-dimensional memorial consists of words drawn from Dunlop’s poems *11.09.01*; using an orbital engine created by Jenkins they float on a colourless screen in a steady rotation around a central void. The order in which they appear is generated according to an inverse reading of the viewer’s IP address and those of previous visitors to the website. The visitor-participant can use the mouse to slow down or re-orient the orbiting words but they cannot stop or reverse the process. As a virtual monument *The Numbers and the Names*, both records and functions because of the history of mourners who have visited the site: it continues to exist only if visited by those who wish to participate, or as long as people continue to show any interest. Whereas many virtual memorial sites are in
little more than on-line petitions, Dunlop’s interactive site may indeed represent a paradigm shift in the nature of commemoration.


Bender, B. (1983), ‘Stonehenge: contested landscapes (medieval to present day)’ in Barbara Bender et al. (ed.).


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Contact
Paul.gough@uwe.ac.uk