Representations of Absence: Counter-Monuments from the 1980s to Today
Introduction

Memorials and monuments are a recurrent feature in our urban landscape. From memorial parks and museums that commemorate both victims and heroes, traditional heroic war statues and contemporary minimalist memorial walls, to contemporary sculptures and interactive public works, the need to recognise and remember the people and actions of our past has a long history that crosses the discourses of art, politics and identity. Since the 1980s, not only has the output of memorialising public sculptures increased, but the forms they take and the subjects they evoke has dramatically changed from memorials prior to this.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, public art was utilised as an extension of the ruling class or monarchy’s authority, power and moral ideals. Public sculpture was heroic; it celebrated the Great Man, such as the successful military leader or a prominent royal figure. With the decline of authority and influence of the upper class came a decline in the acceptance and presentation of public sculpture as moralising, heroic, and educational in traditional ideals. The First World War provided an opportunity for memorial sculptors to create public sculpture, but these were patriotic, figurative works which propagated ideals about the sacrificial and loyal hero. These traditional memorials are prominent in central city positions world-wide; they are also the form of public memorial sculpture which contemporary artists aim to be the antithesis of.

On the back of the 50th anniversary of World War Two, and the rise in identity politics, human rights movements, Modernism and the public art revival, memorialising public sculpture witnessed development and change. Instead of celebrating heroic men and justifying their deeds during times of war, artists saw a need to commemorate those who had been all but forgotten in the history of memorials; the victims of war and tragedy. The very premise of monuments and
memorials had collapsed, as well as the traditional figurative forms that typified their make-up.¹

The study of contemporary public memorials cannot be realised without acknowledging the seminal work which propelled the counter-monument trend in worldwide public art spheres, Maya Lin’s 1982 work, the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Fig. 1).² Instead of celebrating America’s involvement in the war, or propagating ideals of heroism and patriotism, Lin’s work remembers those who died or are missing in action, by listing their names chronologically, in order of their deaths, across a reflective black wall. The sculpture sits in the landscape and tapers into the ground, creating an immersive and contemplative environment which allows for public and private contemplation. The work aims to consolidate, but also to highlight, the human sacrifice; it invites the viewer to think about the nature of war, and the importance of acknowledging and remembering those involved. The *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* is an influential work because of Lin’s approach to the memorial’s purpose, and the subsequent form the memorial took. The memorial is reflective, minimal and honest; it does not aggressively promote ideals or white-wash the human sacrifice. It is also non-figurative and non-heroic, the antithesis of two common tropes of traditional war memorials. The conceptual and formal elements of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* paved the way for new memorial forms which challenge and question traditional public memorials and the role they play within our contemporary society obsessed with rendering our process of memory visible and physically accessible to the public.

James Young, the historian and leading writer on Holocaust memorials and commemorative modern sculpture, has undertaken in-depth research into the form and function of contemporary memorials, with a particular focus on the significance of Holocaust memorials within contemporary German society. In the 1990s, he coined the term ‘counter-monument’ in reference to Germany’s post-war memorials which subverted traditional memorial forms through tools such as

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² While in America it is known as the Vietnam War, in Vietnam it is called the American War.
reflection, inversion and invisibility, as well as focusing on the victims, a feature given prominence by Lin with Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a work which resembles a giant tombstone.³ Young’s research has had a profound influence on the way memorials are discussed and experienced, and the term ‘counter-monument’ is a common label used to categorise monuments and memorials that utilise particular formal qualities or methods of production and placement to speak to ideas concerning loss, remembrance and absence. Initially used to describe Holocaust memorials, this term has subsequently been used to explain other public memorials, as a way to help people understand how this particular memorial functions and why it exists in the shape it takes.

Incidentally, what is not acknowledged by Young in his literature is the prelude to the counter-monument trend, which is referenced by Lin and later memorial artists. After the First World War, memorials world-wide consisted of basic obelisks with the names of those dead or missing as a result of the war; these were designed as communal sites of remembrance, often constructed in a simple, classical design that could be replicated in different contexts. One example from 1927 is the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing (Fig. 2) in Ypres, Belgium, dedicated to the British and Commonwealth soldiers killed in 1914 during defensive warfare against German forces.

While Young’s counter-monument definition sets up the criteria for recognising and analysing the formal and aesthetic qualities which constitute a counter-monument, Young does not acknowledge the precedent for this which can be found within Minimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s. Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris denounced “spiritual values” and heroic “historicising narratives,” choosing instead to create art which intensified and called attention to the spatial and temporal relationship a viewer had with the work.⁴ There are similarities here with counter-monuments, which focus on the process of remembering the

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⁴ Robert Morris, “Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions),” Art in America 77, no.11 (November 1989): 144.
suffering of victims rather than upholding and propagating values about heroism or patriotism. Although the manifesto of Minimalism was essentially anti-memorial, the formal and aesthetic qualities of Minimalist art have been adopted by memorial artists. Why has Minimalism become an appropriate language for memorials and monuments? Arguably, simple geometric forms allow for an individualised and contemplative response and, without the overt symbolism evident in traditional war memorials, Minimalist objects can speak to public art audiences who differ in terms of their social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, contemporary counter-monuments which allow audience participation and create an immersive installation-like environment make the audience aware of the time and space they are in, in relation to the memorial, just as Minimalist art aimed to do. Although Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* has been heralded as influencing the counter-monument trend, conceptual Minimalist artworks created in both public and gallery contexts can be presented as counter-monument’s antecedents, for the similarities in formal and aesthetic concerns.

When Young carried out his initial research, he was writing shortly after the works he discussed had entered the public realm. Since the 1980s and 1990s, memorial works which follow a similar trajectory to Young’s counter-monuments have continued to be built. Writing in the 21st century, one can see the development of a history of counter-monuments which have a direct influence on artists working today. Not only do these monuments honour the events or people they were built for, but they have now also come to memorialise a cultural and artistic phenomenon: the process of memorial sculpture itself and our society’s inherent desire to publicly memorialise the tragic, significant or defining moments of our ever-developing history. Young’s thesis revolves around the critique of traditional monuments, which often present a finished idea and thinking process rather than encouraging a critique of historical events. Contemporary memorials, on the other hand, raise awareness of their inability to replace or substitute the
public’s personal and collective memories; rather they are there to challenge the viewers to analyse the past, and their own memorialising process.5

Why are memorials prolific in our contemporary landscape, and what function are they deemed to serve? What forms do recent memorialising works take, and what conclusions can be made in undertaking an analysis of the aesthetics of contemporary memorials? The aim of this essay is to extend and contribute to Young’s discourse, firstly by presenting an overview of the works he considers to be the archetypal counter-memorials, and secondly by applying his counter-monument theory to other 20th and 21st century memorials which defy traditional memorial forms but were not addressed in Young’s initial research. These include both permanent and temporary memorial forms which emphasise a continuation of Young’s counter-monument theories. Furthermore, this essay will present the argument for understanding that contemporary memorials not only memorialise the events they were made for, but signify and memorialise a culture of memorialisation and the process of making memorial sculpture. By presenting a timeline of public memorials and monuments which defy traditional memorial forms and invite their audience to become active participants in the work’s presence, this essay will discuss how certain memorials can be both self-referential and critical whilst also memorialising or commemorating the people or ideas they were built to honour.

For the purposes of this discussion it is important to clarify the definitions of the terms ‘memorial’ and ‘monument.’ Writer Cher Krause Knight says that monuments are congratulatory, triumphant, and physical manifestations of moments of celebration or victory.6 In comparison, memorials are commemorative; they provide an opportunity to grieve and reflect by remembering a tragic or profound event.7 Additionally, to paraphrase Young,

7 Knight, Public Art, 23.
society erects monuments to always remember, and memorials to never forget. Arguably, an object can perform both functions; a work can commemorate whilst ritualising the process of remembering. Although ‘memorial’ and ‘monument’ connote different forms and functions, they are often used interchangeably by artists as well as writers.

The body of this text will compare and contrast a selection of memorials and monuments, in chronological order, to emphasise the influence earlier memorials have had on the concepts and aesthetics of contemporary memorial design. The language used to discuss counter-monuments and the issues they deal with has similarities across time and place; themes of loss, absence, reflection, and inversion are repeatedly found and utilised both by artists and writers. The artists Jochen Gerz, Rachel Whiteread, Horst Hoheisel, and Micha Ullman, among others, call attention to and criticise the purpose and function of traditional memorials by actively engaging the public in the memorial process. Tactics of disappearance, impermanence, destruction, and inversion are utilised to challenge traditional memorial forms and their purpose in the public space. The artists’ gestures or process of making, and the desired active engagement of the public, are integral to the power of counter-monuments; the conceptual nature of these memorials is as significant as the physical memorial itself.

By way of conclusion, I will also mention two memorial projects which are in the process of being realised, to illustrate the importance of recognising the earlier memorials and monuments as influential and informing memorial projects today. Also, by referring to current memorial projects I aim to elucidate the point that the discourse surrounding memorials and monuments is an ongoing discussion, which still has an impact in our societies today.

Over the years, Holocaust studies has developed into its own academic field of inquiry, with a great deal of research, input and sophistication; also, the number of Holocaust memorial across Europe and America is large, well-researched, and

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expansive in terms of form and audience. While I have alluded to Holocaust memorials in this text, this essay is not intended to be an overview or a summary of Holocaust memorials. Rather, I have selected Holocaust memorials and compared them with other memorials to both war and public tragedies, to present an analysis of form, content, appearance, and the conceptual basis for these, rather than engaging with the religious, political and cultural discourse which encompasses Holocaust memorial studies.

Memory forms and defines us.\(^9\) Whether memorials are understood as necessary social sculptures, or reminders which unnecessarily prolong feelings of guilt, sadness and fear, they are important structures within the fabric of our historical and contemporary landscapes.

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