

Spatializing Memory: Bodily Performance and Minimalist Aesthetics in Memorial Space

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Commemorative Public Art & the Dilemma of Representation

The typology of commemorative public art in western societies has remained relatively constant since the time of the Egyptian civilization, the earliest examples taking the form of monuments to war, paying homage to the power of divine forces, gods and kings. Classical forms such as obelisks, columns and arches appear as the predominant memorial types. Until the mid-nineteenth century, these forms were used consistently by memorial designers, artists, architects and builders, particularly in relation to war memorials. Wars were traditionally remembered in terms of the triumphant victory of the state, rather than any reference to ordinary soldiers. From the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards, however, a steady shift emerged away from the celebration of state power to the more complicated memorialisation of war through the sacrifices and lost lives of individual soldiers.

The need to recognise loss and commemorate the dead was a universal pre-occupation, particularly in the decade after the Great War – “...the need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive.” (Winter, 1995, p 28) In some cases, this architectural exploration encouraged the development of traditional motifs into new forms while others explicitly drew on religious themes or symbolic motifs. Prior to the Second World War, public commemorative art operated within the figurative tradition, coupled with architectural motifs such as arches, columns and obelisks. Figurative representation allowed for clear, unambiguous meaning in the representation of the past and a means for communicating an agreed system of cultural and social values.

In the period after the Second World War however, a period marked by the social, political and moral impact of events such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Holocaust, the certainty of historic events and their meanings began to be widely debated. Giving material form to historic events such as these became problematic. The singular, defining scope of figurative representation could no longer respond to the challenges of an era defined by discontinuities and uncertainty. Memorialisation of the Holocaust in particular required significant

rethinking of traditional memorialisation responses. Abstraction, on the other hand, offered the possibility of supporting divergent meanings and interpretations of the past.

In the aftermath of the Second World War therefore, a new language of memorial design began to develop, leading to the appearance of greater degrees of abstraction in commemorative art. Quentin Stevens argues that three interrelated factors have impacted on public memorial design, resulting in this increasing tendency towards abstraction – “the interest in formal abstraction in sculpture of the time, the developing interest in challenging the spatial relationships between the work, the viewer and site, and the need to respond to the artistic challenge of representing problematic aspects of the past.” (Stevens, 2008, p 2)

Minimalist Aesthetics in Memorial Space

Contemporary approaches to public memorial design are situated and directly influenced by the legacy of Maya Lin's 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The memorial, consisting of two 247 foot long black granite clad walls sited below grade and connected in a v-shape at a 125 degree angle, is a cut into the earth and is seen as a scar, the memory of a wound. The names of more than 58,000 American dead and missing from the war are inscribed in chronological order according to the year of death or disappearance. Other than the names of the dead, the only other text that appears on the memorial is located at its apex, representing the beginning and end points of the war. In the design of the memorial, Lin rejects the conventional heroics of military monuments and in its place presents a poignant, contemplative, apolitical design.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial appeared in a context when public art had become an increasingly accepted form of articulating public space. The positive critical reception of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial design recognised its direct influences from the sculptural traditions of late 1970s minimalist work and the site-specific public art of the time. Early critics of the winning design focussed on its apparent similarities to minimalist art. Works such as Richard Serra's 'Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation' (1970-71) and 'Shift' (1970-72) reveal similarities in form and materiality.

Criticism of Lin's design from the non-art world however, began soon after the design was publicly revealed. The design was initially criticized as not being sufficiently heroic, “a black gash of shame.” (Scruggs and Swerdlow, 1985, p 81-82) In March 1982 as a response to appease critics of the memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund agreed to the incorporation of figural group

of Vietnam soldiers and American flag to be placed near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Later additions to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial have also included a memorial to women serving in the war. The criticism of Lin's design however, dissipated quickly after its dedication when it became clear that it had a profound emotional response in visitors.

Following the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, minimalist design strategies have become the default aesthetic for public memorial design in the West. As a thematic term in the visual arts, 'minimalism' tends to be used primarily to describe one of the seminal movements in contemporary art, the work of a range of American artists who developed a new form of abstraction in the 1960s. While not a defined artistic movement nor ever precisely defined, the term 'Minimalism' refers to an avant-garde art aesthetic that evolved in the United States in the 1960s and is primarily associated with the works of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris. (Meyer, 2000, p 15) Predominantly found in sculpture, minimalism is marked by single or repeated geometric forms and an overt rejection of illusionism. As a reaction against the dominant contemporary aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s, minimalism sought to remove all evidence of the hand of the artist, in particular any trace of emotion or spontaneity.

Early critics of minimalism reacted against its reliance on simplicity and abstraction, seeing it as an attack on the possibility of meaning in art. Minimalism's detractors focussed on two forms of artistic shortcomings. Firstly, minimal art was seen as excessively reductive art, works that were too 'simple' in content and aesthetic experience. Secondly, minimal art was seen as lacking in real artistic output, often being seemingly too easy to make. While presenting itself as formal art in the tradition of the great art movements of the twentieth century, to its detractors minimalism appeared as a latter day form of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Minimal art was thus "based on an internal contradiction: presenting itself as 'high', formal art, it was not legible as such; it was not art-enough." (Meyer, 2000, p 18)

Art critic Michael Fried argued that minimalism was in fact a form of literalism, emphasising minimalist works literal qualities, rather than its minimal or reductive means. Fried rejected numerous traits of minimalist works that focussed on their objecthood, including qualities such as 'spatial recession', 'scale' and 'duration', arguing that in focussing on these traits of objecthood, minimalism was promoting an awareness of the physicality of the artwork and the viewer's spatial relationship with it. Fried argued that this awareness of the objecthood of minimalist works are distractions from the state of focus, or 'grace' that was required to contemplate modernist art.

The debate around Minimalism revolved around form and materiality as well as context, or how the works were encountered, that is the relationship with the viewer. Even in the modernist tradition of Western sculpture there was an understanding that sculpture was a defined entity that was separate from other objects in life and experienced primarily by sight. Modernist sculpture was experienced across a space that defined the difference between the real world and the world of illusion of the sculpture. The transition point between these two worlds was the plinth, which both physically and conceptually separated the work from everyday life in the same way as a frame of a painting does. The minimalist eradication of the plinth affected both the form of the sculpture and its perception. A new relationship between the viewer and the work was brought into existence.

Modernist art was intended to evoke in the viewer a transcendental experience whereby the creative expression of the artist opened a new visual experience for the viewer. In contrast to Modernist intentions in sculpture, Minimalist works change the emphasis from formal and compositional relationships within the sculpture to a relationship with the viewer. Placement of the work within the confines of the gallery space or landscape is orchestrated by the artist so that the viewer becomes aware of their movement through space. The physical situation of the minimal work is therefore as much a part of the work as the object itself.

Minimalist sculpture is therefore more corporeal than visual, it engages the viewer on a sensual and phenomenal level rather than a literal or simply aesthetic one. The viewer becomes part of a bodily experience mediated by sculpture. Minimalist sculpture “intrude(s) on us in such a way as to make us acutely aware of its physical presence in our space.” (Potts, 2000, p 188) Sculpture therefore moves from the formal aspects of the art object – scale, colour, composition – to the viewer’s response and self-awareness.

Susan Best notes that minimalism is typically interpreted as “anti-subjective, anti-expressive and anti-aesthetic” (Best, 2006, p 127), generally understood to mark the beginning of the anti-aesthetic tradition in Western art and the rejection of the subjective dimension in art. Best argues that minimalism has been positioned erroneously as the beginning of the anti-aesthetic tradition and that rather than seeing minimalism as a rejection of conventional aesthetics, it was more a “refiguring of aesthetic problems” (Best, 2006, p 129) and a “shift from an aesthetics of production to an aesthetics of reception.” (Best, 2006, p 131)

Minimalism stresses the temporality of perception, an interest in the body and in the *presence* of objects. Minimalist sculptures in particular, through their size, scale and relationship with the gallery interior or external landscape sought to facilitate an embodied experience of the artwork.

The viewer's bodily presence is thereby registered against the size, scale and form of minimalist sculptures making them aware of their physical movement, their sensory reactions and the physical context of the work and its spatial relationship with it. Minimalist sculptures, often physically large and dominant in terms of their physical context, rely on interaction with its audience in order for the work to be understood.

Because of the minimal physicality of the artwork - its visual flatness, use of reductive materials, simple geometric shapes and repetition of form – the viewer is not absorbed in its illusory qualities and hence its potential to refer to things beyond itself. Because the viewer is not drawn to the illusory qualities of the work, focus is drawn to its physical qualities and its context, both physical and sensory. Changing qualities of light and shadow, openness and enclosure, depth and frontality, reflectivity and flatness, produce a rich embodied experience when coupled with the interaction of the boundaries of the artwork's site and the presence of other viewers.

Minimalist Aesthetics and the Legacy of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

It can be argued that the success of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial popularized what had previously been regarded as the difficult formal language of minimalist art. At the same time, its popularity initiated a surge of interest in formal memorialisation and the construction of other memorials in the United States, particularly those that dealt with painful events.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial challenged the idea of memory represented as a knowable object and changed forever the popular conception of what a public memorial should be and how it should work. The benchmark set by Maya Lin's design changed the context for future memorial design. Visitors would now expect to physically and emotionally interact with a memorial and to be moved to a point of catharsis:

“Today's most progressive and innovative memorials have in common two important elements: a strong sense of site and an interactive nature. Maya Lin is clearly the pioneer in this regard, for she was the first to apply successfully the contemporary aesthetic of site-specificity to a commemorative function. Her Wall bears the most salient features of this new memorial type: a rich and multilayered involvement with the site; a blurring of traditional distinctions between sculpture, architecture and landscape architecture; the creation of a phenomenal, if not actual, enclosure which demarcates a sacred space; and an extended horizontal dimension, which encourages visitors to experience the place over time.” (Capasso, 1990, p 61)

Commemorative public art design has continued to evolve since the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, however much of its development, it is argued here, is focussed on the architectural vocabulary of memorial design rather than a concern for meaningful engagement between participant and space. Many memorials built post-Vietnam Veterans Memorial appropriate its formal elements without understanding the site specificity of the work, both physically in terms of its setting, and socio-culturally in terms of its historic context. Hence the growing repertoire of standard memorial design elements that continue to appear in many variations – reflecting pools, stone walls, walls with names, fountains, lawns and groves of trees are common elements employed in many memorial designs.

Minimalist Aesthetics and Bodily Performance in Memorial Space

The philosophical basis of Minimalist art is grounded in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Robert Morris uses the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to describe the experience of the minimal work as a temporal encounter between the body, the work and the space containing the work. Describing the experience of a viewer moving around a minimalist work, Morris makes a comparison between the experience of its physical shape against the mental image of its form. For Morris, the goal of the new sculpture is to allow this form to become visible to a spectator moving around the object.

The Minimalist subject, unlike its Cartesian precursor, is a subject that perceives in relation to the conditions of the spatial field experienced. That is to say, the Minimalist subject perceives in an ever-changing temporal sense. As Merleau-Ponty describes:

“But the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p 354)

The body, through its sensory organs, particularly sight, touch and hearing is inevitably involved in all perception. The body therefore, as the zero-point of observation of the world, becomes the key element in our spatial construction of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not seen as an object in the world but the very mechanism in which we perceive our world, including the perception of space. Here space is not seen as an abstract set of co-ordinates or an ether from

which the world is structured. Merleau-Ponty argues that lived experience of the body-in-space is the key dynamic from which all conceptions of space are constructed:

“In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p 162)

Minimalism was therefore grounded in a world perceived by the body rather than an art of the object. Minimalism also rejected traditional composition thereby often assuming repetitive forms, pushing art towards the utilitarian and the anti-artistic. On the surface, this has compounded the misreading of minimalist art as reductive.

The success of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its incorporation of minimalist aesthetics set the benchmark for future memorial design. Memorials that followed in its aesthetic wake however, have not been able to match the power of Lin’s design. Post-Vietnam Veterans Memorial designers have generally failed to understand the power of minimalism beyond its aesthetic language. The failure to understand the conceptual grounding of minimalist aesthetics has resulted in the consumption of the visual language of minimalism rather than its experiential basis. This is key to understanding why contemporary memorial design invariably focuses on the visual rather than the experience of the visitor.

In order to understand how personal and collective memory is formed, the experience of the visitor and the acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible become crucial. For sociologist Paul Connerton, ritual performances such as commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are the key ways in which memories of the past are conveyed and sustained.

Connerton argues that “memory is sedimented or amassed in the body” through social practices that are either “inscribing”, those which involve a cultural means of storing information, or “incorporating”, bodily actions which “re-enact(s) the past in our present conduct.” (Connerton, 1989, p 39) Incorporating practices, Connerton argues are processes of remembrance and are crucial to understanding how spaces and objects evoke memories.

C. Nadia Seremetakis suggests a connection between the senses, cultural agency and memory, arguing that while the connection is grounded in embodied performance, the interaction between

the senses and memory objects accumulates over time as an “emotional and historical sedimentation” (Seremetakis, 1994, p 7) within these objects:

“The sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts – acts which open up these objects’ stratigraphy. Thus the surround of material culture is neither stable nor fixed, but inherently transitive, demanding connection and completion by the perceiver.” (Seremetakis, 1994, p 7)

Memory is thus seen as a practice mediated by embodied acts through material forms. The material forms are seen as being sensory forms in themselves, “... of having the potential to provoke the emergence, the awakening of the layered memories, and thus the senses contained within it.”¹

Minimalist Aesthetics and the Spatialization of Memory

Minimalist aesthetics stress a concern with the embodied presence of objects, rather than the objects themselves. It is argued that the aesthetics of minimalism have the potential for mediating memory, to establish the grounding for the communicative and experiential aspects required for effective memorial design. Successful memorial spaces, it is argued, are those that are designed from the basis of bodily and sensory engagement with the memorial space and the events that are represented within it, rather than those that are designed with a focus on the material artefact of memory.

The aesthetics of minimalism are key to the potential for memorial spaces to spatialize memory. Minimalism, if understood and employed as an art practice that is more corporeal than visual, has the potential to engage the memorial participant on a sensory, embodied level, rather than simply a visual one. The memorial participant then becomes part of an embodied experience of memory, mediated by architectural form.

Through the abstract qualities of the aesthetics of minimalism the memorial participant is invited to subjectize the memorial design, to introduce their own autonomy or identity. Minimalism, as a bodily art practice, has the potential to provoke the self into reflexivity. The ambiguity of minimalist aesthetics calls for self-awareness and performance, transforming the memorial participant from spectator into performer.

Through an understanding of the corporeal basis of minimalism, its focus on the sensual and the phenomenal level, memorial design becomes focussed on the exchange between participant and space rather than the making of the material object. Effective memorial design, it is argued, needs to be understood as an ongoing process, constructed and re-constructed through the engagement and participation of the memorial participant in acts of remembrance.

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