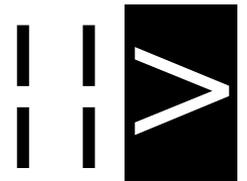# Quasi memory. interactive monuments and memory constructions

written by Theodora Vardouli for the postgraduate course on *Architecture and Information Technology* of the Inter-Departmental Postgraduate Program *Architectural Design - Space - Culture* . professor Dimitris Papalexopoulos [10.2009]

¦Introduction¦

Person/ a thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection and consider itself as itself,
the same thinking thing, in different times and places[1]

In 1970, the American philosopher Sydney Shoemaker in his work *Persons and their Pasts*[2], while investigating the function of memory in the constitution of personal identity, suggested the ambiguous term quasi memory, referring to a disconnection of memory from personal experience and implying that one can remember things that are not included in one's direct personal experience. This can be summarized in the enouncement that through a mechanism of memory transfer, *A's memory does not necessarily require A's personal experience.*

Besides its invention within a rather fastidious discourse engaging mostly with methodological, almost technical, approaches of issues that have always occupied philosophical thinking and intersect with metaphysical interpretations (coincidence of personal identity with personal memory, survival and transfer of memory outside the person) the term quasi memory, extracted from its strict context, produces interesting connotations. A scheme is formed, where memories are perceived as elements of personal or collective history, without having ever been experienced by the subject of these memories.

The imaginary construction of the collectivities' memory as a remembrance of times and events with which they never intersected but which they utilize to form their collective identity seems to follow this mechanism. In a horizontally actual civilization, that seems to suffer from the pollution of the present the reminiscence of lost pasts, that were never really lost, obtains the dimension of a mass obsession that seeks and discovers imaginary past scenarios, constructing a convenient collective past for a desirable collective future. It is not this process of constructing the past based on an imaginary future, nor the exaggeration of the experiences of loss of the old or the authentic in a constantly dematerializing and accelerating civilization that we intend to discuss. Although the mere observation of this process would constitute a fertile ground for the development of an entire discourse about memory, we intend, instead of the process, to concentrate on its evidence, on the objects that simultaneously operate as carriers and actors of this quasi memory that is transferred, consolidated and incorporated in the collective identity.

We begin by attempting to establish analogies between the relationship monument - collective memory and tool - collectivity. This analogy allows us to circulate around a discourse concerning the destabilization of the object its effect on the collectivities that are constituted around it.

Transferred into our field of study this discourse is translated in the destabilization of the monument and its impact in the construction of the collective memory of the groups that refer to it. We will follow two parallel axes, discussing both a de facto destabilization, inert characteristic of the process of the collective memory construction, as well as a deliberate effort of achieving it, through the redefinition of the monument as an interactive object. Ending with questions instead of a conclusive answer, we will finally discuss the potential of the affirmation of the monument's instability in a process of *democratization of memory*[3].

---

[1] John Locke, quoted by Sydney Shoemaker in his article Persons and their Pasts (Shoemaker. Sydney, Persons and Their Pasts, American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 4 (□ct., 1970), p. 269-285, University of Illinois Press, North American Philosophical Publications // Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009360)
[2] please see note [1]
[3] Nauta, Lolle, The Democratization of Memory, in Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation, Cantz, 2001.

¦on [quasi] memory¦

In his book "On Memory" Kostis Papayorgis develops a speculation on memory's role in the constitution of self. He notes that the process of remembrance is a medium of maintaining the lost life. Memory, he continues, although it is differentiated from the experienced time, since it is located in the moment and cannot exist as an abstract measure, cooperates with it, attributing to the present the temporal depth of its past. *Ego endures time and its transformations because of its synthetic unity, of its possibility to actualize through recollection its past forms perceiving them as parts of a unity, of a whole: of a personal time*[4].

Both in an individual and in a collective level the detachment from the obsession of identity constitution is extremely difficult. *The perception of time as an element that separates us from being ourselves, as a destabilizing factor of identity, meets counterbalancing forces that reject time as constant motion and seek within it stabilities, narrations and representations* [5]. Memory is a possessive movement in the past that elicits the idea if being in time[6] and offers an appeasing sense of unity and reference.

It is nowadays a common place observation that in the field of personal memory, the recollections of the past cannot be considered as evidence, since they subordinate to the exact necessity that they serve: the constitution of an identity that although it is formulated to serve the present and its future projections, is legitimized through the invocation of the past.

The subjection of memory in the field of desire and its interpretation as a process that draws its references mostly from the present and the future and less from the past, is not applicable only in the personal level. In the collective level the distance that divides the experience from the recollection is neither temporal nor a result of psychological distortions: It is completely objective. Groups, not having the possibility to connect memory with personal experience develop their own *memory technologies*[7]. That is to say socially defined ways, which first confirm the existence of a common past and then proceed to its recollection, or better, its reconstruction.

Traditionally, both in architectural theory and in practice, there has been a broad discourse interconnected with an almost metaphysical speculation of surpassing human time. The renown Adolf Loos motto that Architecture lies in monuments and in graves, as it is transferred by Charles Jencks, is indicative of Architecture's signification as a tool of preservation and memory storage. *Like a medieval memory theater, (it) allows for information to be stored. Architecture is a form of inactive DNA, a type of frozen time that elicits thoughts of the past* [8]

Besides the obvious placement of Jencks' words in the heart of postmodern discourse, his description of architecture-as-monument in almost operational terms is very interesting. Architecture is discussed as a tool , in which a group of subjects attributes a version of their present and which when they cease to exist passes onto another group of subjects that use it to recall what is now their past. This idea of dealing with the monument as an tool is particularly attractive as it escapes a descriptive discourse, and concentrates on the process in which the tool is used, incorporating it in what we earlier referred to as *memory technologies*.

---

[4] Papayorgis K., On Memory, Athens: Kastaniotis editions, 2008

[5] Bergson H., Matter and Memory (Matiere et Memoire, 1896 transl. Paul N., M. / Palmer W.S.), Zone Books, 1990

[6] "Here is a way Deleuze puts the problem: rather than thinking of ourselves, our actions and our inter-relations as being "in time", we should think of time as being "in us" or "in them" in a way that may divide us from our given selves (public and private)"_ Rajchman J., Time Out, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999, p. 152-157

[7] Jameson F., Time and the Concept of Modernity, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999, p. 208-217

In opposition to narrations and written works which -exactly because of the fact that they are reproduced in the present- always remind of the temporal gap between the present and the past to which they refer, the monument's spatial dimension creates the illusion of bridging this gap. Through a series of unconscious connotations, the experience in the present, of a space that was constructed in the past in order to preserve it in time, equals with the experience of this past. By attributing in space and its constructions the capability of being beyond and over time, as well as with the logic of image - evidence, quasi memory is transformed into memory, through an illusionary process of extracting experiences from the past that the monuments store and transfer.

The operation of the monument as "evidence" attributes to it a central role in the formation of a *sacred history* (Schwartz, 1982), of a commonly accepted idealized past, loaded with ideas of grandiosity and followed by feelings of loss, whose existence offers to collectivities a sense of common origin and therefore of common destination, as well as a malleable ideological foundation that legitimates their eventual choices.

¦quasi monument _ the destabilization of the object¦

In the mnemonic representation there are four eyes, two of the other-time and two of the actual ego. Inside us reside multiple egos that remember each for themselves[9]

Lets make a short pause to recapitulate the elements that we have introduced in the conversation. We have acknowledged the monument as a tool -in the wider sense- of memory storage and transfer. In this discussion we seem to have introduced two subjects and one object.

The first subject is the group that constructs the monument referring to a specific event which it chooses to preserve in time.

The second subject is the group that utilizes the monument to draw the stored information.

The object, finally, is the monument itself, upon which the subjects act in different times. Thus a time bridge is created, since the monument preserves within its presence the action of both groups and both times.

The first subject that constructs the monument invests it with a certain version of its present, indicative of the prevailing ideological and political structures as well as the social hierarchies. These hierarchies are condensed in an image, followed by the faith that this image will still be their ultimate symbol when things will have changed.

If the moment of the first subject's action, linked with the object's (monument's) production can be located in time, the second subject's action is characterized by an intense instability and variability. The process of viewing the past through the present, which we earlier analyzed, implies a different each time signification of an object that is otherwise stable in its form and properties. *This process follows constantly recycling courses with emerging new interpretations, transforming each time the monument into the fetich of an illusionary undisturbed tradition*[10].

[8] Jencks Ch., Architectural Time, Between Melancholy and Narrative, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999, p. 176-191

[9] please see note [4]

[10]Fatsea R., History - Memory - Architecture: A fundamental relation for the safeguarding of places of collective meaning today, Architects, SADAS-PEA Magazine, issue 45– period B, May/June 2004, p. 52-54

The attribution to the monument of the role of historical evidence, gives to these interchangeable significations the certainty of historical truth. *Groups safeguard the integrity of their memory by basing their references in the environment of their immediate experience*[11], *ignoring the fact that the reading of their environment is culturally, socially, politically and ideologically defined and refers more to the imaginary construction of their identity than an undeniable historical truth*[12].

The realization that memory is nothing but a constant repetition and rearrangement, a reinterpretation and redefinition of spatial and temporal relations, has obviously consequences in the way that we perceive the monument, which we previously defined as a tool of memory storage and transfer.

The intention of surpassing time and the changes it brings, may be expressed in the monument's form and structure, but as we earlier argued, is completely absent in the field of its signification and function. The storage may be stable, but the transfer is completely selective, allowing us to read the monument as a quasi object, as a platform where the multiple games of the tool and the user are set. It is indeed the social relationships that activate the monument extracting its stored memory. Without the operation of these social bonds, the monument stays inactive, invisible, or as Robert Musil would say *"as if it has been constructed to repel attention"*[13].

¦interactive monuments and the liberation of memory¦

The affirmation of the unstable character of the monument, which led to its characterization as a quasi object, was attempted in the context of a specific theoretical scheme linking tool and collectivity and attributing to them the roles of object and subject. However the procedures we previously described, always lead to a memory construction that seems incontrovertible and which is always produced around an object (monument).

This process reminds us of Massumi's reference to a freeze of the collective within things[14]. Such an interpretation would attribute to the tool, the characteristics of a subject, transforming it into an actor, catalyst of the collectivities and the relationships that are organized around it.

The monument as a quasi object is followed by the treatment of the groups that refer to it as partial subjects, whose collective organization cannot be cut off from it.

The conscience of the memory's instability as well as of the dynamic and interconnected relation between tool and constituted collectivity, seems to be an inert characteristic of the collective memory construction process, which however remains subject to a hegemonic version of history. The boundaries of change express the hierarchy and the power structures of the groups and are then vested with a pretense of absolute stability.

Thus is risen the question whether acting upon these dynamics could lead to a conscious liberation of memory, in its recognition as an open process in constant motion. This would require the acceptance of the monument as an interactive object, as well as the relocation of memory in its actual time, the present.

[12] Halbwacks separates the sentimental memory of groups from historical memory Halbwacks names historical memory an orthological recollection mechanism, that even though it remains cut off and theoretically uninfluenced from the sentimental memory of the social places it inspects, it keeps talking their language through a more long term perspective.
Halbwacks M., The Collective Memory, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1980
[13] Musil R., Posthumous papers of a living author, transl. Peter Wonsman, Archipelago books
[14] Translation of the phrase petrification du collectif aux choses, found at http://www.ntua.gr/archtech/lessons/med/less-03-03-05.pdf

In response to this question, of a liberation of memory through a deliberate destabilization of its actors, has stood a series of artist that replace the monument with mnemonic interaction, giving particular emphasis not in the object itself, but in the groups with which it comes in contact and the procedures in which it participates.

These efforts are not irrelevant from a, historically defined and relatively recent, climate of reconciliation and restoration of a more "truthful" memory, able to have a healing effect even to the most traumatic phases of its past and to engage even wider parts of the population.

We will refer to some of these efforts which we consider indicative of different directions and in which is expressed this intention of memory liberation, attempting also some short comments.

¦a]confession and atonement . the end of nostalgia¦

Beginning this reference in examples that are indicative of the monument destabilization, we would first like to observe a shift of the monument's meaning, as a result of events that have characterized the preceding century, as well as of the emergence of structures broader than the national state.

Traditionally, memory and the conscious effort to preserve, it was linked with what was recognized as history's positive phase. Memorable heros, legendary battles, spirituality and religious dedication, the grandiosity of power, constituted the main monument's content, which as the centuries went by, obtained certain symbolisms, depending on the cultural context in which it was incorporated. Negative inscriptions were left to oblivion, which operated therapeutically, covering the Past's problematic stages.

Today's globalized reality is invested with an emphasis in universal, intercultural constants, the rejection of which leads to marginalization. The presence in this global construction of countries whose past "threatened" this idea of a unified humanity, could not have happened without a process of confession and atonement. History's negative face is transformed into a monument to declare without any doubt the acknowledgment of past mistakes and the intention to never repeat them. The discreet monuments of the rejected German early 20th century history in the squares of Berlin, are indicative of such an intention.

In addition to the above we would like to refer to the example of the Peter Eisenman Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, mostly because we believe that the discourse that he develops in relevance to it, in his article *Time Warps _The Monument*[15] includes some very interesting observations on a reinstatement of the monument under the circumstances that we analyzed.

Eisenman quotes Marcel Proust who in *Remembrance of things Past* describes two types of memory, *on the one side nostalgia, in touch with a sentimentality that remembers things in the past not as they were but as we want to remember them, and on the other side a living one, active in the present with no nostalgia for a remembered past.*

---

[15] Eisenman P., Time Warps _ The Monument, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999, p. 250-257

The mass assassinations of the last century, as Eisenman observes in the same article, like the Holocaust or Hiroshima, have led to a conclusive rupture between memory and nostalgia. Memory, therefore cannot but be constantly activated in the present, as an experience escaping the symbolic imagery of the traditional monument and connected with the experience of time.

Quoting Eisenman directly: *When the iconic function and the indexical function in architecture are detached, the result is the possibility that in each repetition there is the potential for an unpredictable result. This result is both a locus of the memory of real time as it was formerly known and of virtual time as it is known in the present. The monument is the loss of possibility of icon or index. No beginning, no end, no meaning, no experience of time or space; it is memory as only the former possibility of memory*[16]

The potentialization of memory through its transportation in the field of immediate experience is particularly interesting as constitutes, both in a symbolic and an actual level, a first movement towards its liberation, transferring it from the symbol to the experience and the action.

¦b]superposition and reversal¦

A next act of destabilization of the monument is the attack in its primary symbolism, through the addition in its formal narration of an image that overrules it, inaugurating a process of memory reversal.

We refer here to the work of the Polish artist Krystof Wodiczko, who has realized from the 80s more than seventy large scale projections on monuments and architectural facades worldwide, attempting to comment on their function in the formation of collective memory. Some of his most renown works are the projection of a nuclear missile on a military memorial in Stuttgart (1983) and the projection of the Swastika on the embassy of North Africa in London, during a protest for the apartheid(1985). In 1996 Wodiczko added sound and motion in his projections and started working with the communities around the chosen intervention sites, attempting to give voice to the memory narrations of the marginalized groups that reside under the monuments' shadow. His work *The Homeless Projection: A Proposal for the City of New York* (1986) was exhibited in a closed space in collaboration with Jana Sterback, but aimed for an intervention in the entire city fabric, as the title implies.

Only physical, public projection of the myth on the physical body of the myth (projection of myth on myth) can successfully demythify the myth. The look, the appearance, the costume, the mask of the building is the most valuable and expensive investment. In the power discourse of the "public" domain, the architectural form is the most secret and protected property. Public Projection involves questioning both the function and the ownership of this property (1983)[17]

The emergence of the problematic stages of history and their transformation into the facade or the monument's soundtrack, disjoints the illusionary sense of an imperturbable continuity, rendering its narration relevant and political again. The rigid monumentality is replaced by the temporality of the sound and the moving image, while the action of transforming the monument in a projection screen, acquires a strongly symbolic character, emphasizing the monument's function as a platform of interchangeable significations, instead of a constant image.

[16] please see note [15]
[17] http://art-history.concordia.ca/eea/artists/wodiczko.html, last visit on 09/10/2009

¦c]mnemonic interaction¦

The final stage of this destabilization attempt is the monument's complete dematerialization and the refusal of its duration. This logic is based on the belief that no space can accept memory as a duration, as a stable event and that memory can only be realized as the interaction of multiple versions of the past by different groups and individuals.

An example that we believe that can be inscribed in this direction, is *Memory Cloud*[18] by the group Minimaforms that took place in Trafalgar square, London, on the 8th and 10th October 2008. It is an interactive installation, where smoke clouds are sprayed over one of London's most historical squares, and are used as a three-dimensional projection medium for short phrases that the audience sent via SMS to a central system and which were then reproduced with laser beams. This work's aim is declared to be the production of a dynamic, hybrid space where personal inscriptions are projected as an evolving text, activating the built environment through a virtual discussion. *Memory Cloud* aims for the mobilization of social interaction through the production of an environment that is formulated through a collective action of space inscription.

The realization of the inevitable temporality of the monument and its affirmation as an event that belongs to the present and is linked with action constitutes the basis of its redefinition. The developing tension between the immaterial presence of smoke and the imposing scenery of Trafalgar square's facades, as well as the possibility of equal participation of the accumulated crowd[19] in the formation of the final text-inscription is indicative of this intention.This happening's phantasmagoric and rather representative character rises questions on its success in the production of a true mnemonic interaction.

The question emerging here, is whether the intended game of memory and oblivion, personal and collective, is annulled through its staging. Do these events, along with Hirschhorn's "altars" and temples" and Sophie Call's voyeuristic pictures of the passers-by, that replace Berlin's official memory, manage to generate this interaction or just represent its intention?

¦conclusion . on the democratization of memory¦

Can we still devise new ways to present this time that is no longer subordinated to prior movement, prior history, or prior image, that allows instead of the old juxtapositions or simultaneities disparities, hybridities in the possible worlds of our relations with one another?[20]

Such an interpretation that rejects space and its representation linking it with an inevitable reproduction of established relations, would probably lead to the conclusion of the necessity of the rejection of the monument itself, as spatial construction, and to its replacement by events that embrace time as change and constant production of difference.

[18] http://www.minimaforms.com/memorycloud/
[19] without of course overlooking the fact that a cell phone access was required, that although its commonness, cannot be taken for granted
[20] Rajchman J., Time Out, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999, p. 152-157

This speculation demonstrates close affinity with a broad discourse that investigates the impact of time and space as alternative grounds for the expression or the suppression of the political. The use to the term democratization, when we refer to the demand of memory liberation, is not at all coincidental.

Such a demand relates the liberation of memory with a trial of re-politicization, since the term democratic includes the recognition of the political, its symbolic encircling but not its neutralization[21]

We therefore seek a memory that remains political and avoids the danger of naturalization.

Closing with this question as an open demand and not attempting to give a definitive answer, we state as particularly interesting in this direction, Yannis Stavrakakis's opinion as it is analyzed in his article Antinomies of Space. From the *Representation of Politics to a Topology of the Political*[22]

Having already rejected the idea of the suppression of space in the name of the event, Stavrakakis proposes the replacement of representation through spatial relations, with the model of a topological diagram, which as he notes, provides the opportunity to rethink space in a radically different way, a way that does not represent or define, that destabilizes the existing boundaries and bipolar relations.

The use of the topological metaphor in this memory discourse offers a very interesting scheme that incorporates the notions of change and time and accepts the relationship between the collectivities and the tools as an inert characteristic of its creation. A democratic society, he continues, should have the conscience of its need for representation, for the production and establishment of its own space, but at the same time should have the conscience of the impossibility of a conclusive such representation.

In this exact paradox appears to lie the substance of democratization: in the recognition of an irresolvable tension between the obsession of representation and its inert temporality and in the bet of the recognition of the dialectic relation between space and the non-spatial, representation and the non-representational and the radicalization and safeguarding of this topological relationship. Perhaps the democratization of memory lies in the recognition of its complexity and the preservation of its openness, an openness that does not reject but potentializes both in a theoretical and in a practical level, its representation.

---

[21] Stavrakakis Y., Antinomies of Space. From the Representation of Politics to a Topology of the Political, in Bavo (ed), Urban Politics Now. Re-imaging Democracy in the Neoliberal City, NAI Publishers
[22] please see note [20]

¦references¦

Kouros P., *Mnemonic interactions as contemporary art practices in the city*, Architects, SADAS-PEA Magazine, issue 45– period B, May/June 2004, p. 83-86

Papayorgis K., *On Memory*, Athens: Kastaniotis editions, 2008

Fatsea R., *History - Memory - Architecture: A fundamental relation for the safeguarding of places of collective meaning today*, Architects, SADAS-PEA Magazine, issue 45– period B, May/June 2004, p. 52-54

Bergson H., *Matter and Memory* (Matiere et Memoire, 1896 trans. Paul N., M. / Palmer W.S.), Zone Books, 1990

Eisenman P., *Time Warps _ The Monument*, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999

Halbwacks M., *The Collective Memory*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1980

Jameson F., *Time and the Concept of Modernity*, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999

Jencks Ch., *Architectural Time, Between Melancholy and Narrative*, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999

Nauta, Lolle, *The Democratization of Memory,* in Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation, Cantz, 2001.

Rajchman J., *Time Out*, Anytime, Anyone Corporation, 1999

Stavrakakis Y., *Antinomies of Space. From the Representation of Politics to a Topology of the Political*, in Bavo (ed), Urban Politics Now. Re-imaging Democracy in the Neoliberal City, NAI Publishers

Shoemaker S., *Persons and Their Pasts*, American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Oct., 1970), University of Illinois Press, North American Philosophical Publications

[+]

http://art-history.concordia.ca/eea/artists/wodiczko.html, last visit on 09/10/2009

http://www.minimaforms.com/memorycloud/

http://www.ntua.gr/archtech/lessons/med/less-03-03-05.pdf

http://www.culture.pl/en/culture/artykuly/os_wodiczko_krzysztof

http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wodiczko/

http://www.galerieperrotin.com/artiste-Sophie_Calle-18.html

http://www.stephenfriedman.com/index.php?pid=11&aid=9