

# Heroes between Materiality and Myth. The Memorial Grove<sup>1</sup> for the Danish Resistance as Performative Site

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## **Abstract**

The most significant Danish warrior burial is arguably the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen for members of the Danish resistance movement during World War II. This article places the memorial within Danish history and the reception of WWII and argues for its particular qualities as a modernist re-working of a discredited monumental tradition with a particular focus on plain materials and a low architectural scale. The memorial affords a heightened sense of materiality and nature as a practical example of a philosophy of presence. The park-like memorial can also be seen as a performative ground for instilling aspects of identity and collective memory for both individuals and Danish society. Future uses of the site can either go in the direction of recreation or toward immersive education.

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## Introducing Danish memorials and war graves

[1] Seemingly, the first popular initiative to erect a Danish monument to commemorate an armed conflict came after the battle of Copenhagen (1801), a narrow defeat in a large naval confrontation between British and Danish-Norwegian forces around the harbour of the city. Following the plans of the engraver G. L. Lahde (1765-1833) and the neo-classicist sculptor Johannes Wiedewelt (1731-1802), a subscription led to the erection of a small hill

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<sup>1</sup> A more official yet less precise translation is "The Memorial Park".

reminiscent of Neolithic and Viking-age burials on top of a shared mass grave for both naval officers, seamen and citizen-volunteers (Fig. 1).



1 The Memorial Hill for 2 April 1801, Holmens Kirkegård (photograph: Wikimedia Commons, license CC0 1.0)

The monument was topped by an obelisk and a memorial plaque bordered by rough-hewn stones, and the area was planted with oak and other symbolic greenery.<sup>2</sup> Thus a fusion of classical and Nordic iconography was introduced within a landscape setting – themes which would assert themselves in later war memorials.

[2] A very significant monument resulted from the First Schleswig war (1848-1851); an indecisive struggle to determine the status of the German duchies belonging to the kingdom. The Danish sculptor H. W. Bissen's (1798-1868) statue of *Den tapre Landsoldat* ("the brave conscript") celebrating peace and victory by holding up a beech branch was placed in Fredericia in 1858 and is presumably the first modern monument exclusively depicting and dedicated to the common soldier (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Per Wessel-Tølvig, *Mindehøjen for 2. april 1801*, København 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Ulla Qvortrup and Anders Engelbrecht, *Den tapre landsoldat, Fredericia 1858-2008: Det første monument over den ukendte soldat*, Fredericia 2008.



2 H. W. Bissen, *Den tapre landsoldat*, erected 1858, c. 3.75 m, Fredericia (photograph © Villy Fink Isaksen, Wikimedia Commons, license CC BY-SA 4.0)

[3] The monument points innovatively forward to the future tradition of using broad synecdoche in celebrating and mourning the enlisted commoner through statuary and cenotaphs for the Unknown Soldier. Once again, the project was secured by popular subscription, but naturally no similar initiative was at the time allowed for the German nationalists of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg, who had nominally lost the war. Stylistically, Bissen normally worked in the neo-classical idiom of his teacher, Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844), visible in the facial features, but chose a more naturalistic and contemporary style of dress for the figure. Initial proposals for a topic from Nordic myth and legendary history were rejected by the committee, reflecting how an alternative iconography of classicist bodies in Norse garb never found broad appeal, despite being promoted by prominent people.<sup>4</sup>

[4] Denmark as a nation sat out WWI, but thousands of Danes did participate – either as draftees due to their residence in lands now part of the German Empire, as volunteers for either side, or as sailors participating in ostensibly neutral commerce. Due to these historical circumstances, no unified Danish template for soldier burials was developed as it was for most of the warring nations. A number of Danish speakers and nationals are buried in German war cemeteries, mainly around the former western front, while those who died due to German mines and U-boats were buried locally to the extent in which their bodies could be recovered.

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<sup>4</sup> Lars Olof Larsson, "Über den schwierigen Umgang mit den nordischen Göttern", in: Michael Müller-Wille and Lars Olof Larsson, eds., *Tiere, Menschen, Götter: Wikingerzeitliche Kunststile Und Ihre Neuzeitliche Rezeption*, Göttingen 2001, 9-38.

[5] While thousands of soldiers from both sides found a final resting place in Denmark, society as such felt little need to discuss war monuments and soldier's burials or to formulate any coherent ideas on the topic. Previously, fallen soldiers from the two Schleswig wars had to some extent been commemorated collectively as they were re-buried in larger graves in civilian cemeteries, and various local initiatives set up markers and plaques. Later on, a need to coordinate the care for these divergent monuments and graves was felt to be a public task, especially after the loss of the German duchies in the Second Schleswig War in 1864, and from 1883 a War Graves Commissioner was appointed.<sup>5</sup>

[6] Two major monuments in Denmark do commemorate the WWI from the explicit perspective of participation and death. The first is the more soldierly monument (1934) in the *Memorial Park* in Aarhus, Jutland by sculptor Axel Poulsen (1887-1972) and architect Axel Ekberg (1882-1935). Inside a large limestone enclosure with the names of more than 4,000 casualties, four monumental reliefs – *Marching Out*, *War*, *Peace*, and *Homecoming* – memorialise the ambivalent participation in the war, which included both war parties. Aspects of glorification are downplayed and themes of division, loss, and reunification are put centre stage.

[7] The other monument is *The Sailor's Monument* (1928) by sculptor Svend Rathsack (1885-1941) and architect Ivar Bentsen (1876-1943) in Copenhagen harbour. On an overlarge triangular pediment, which mimics a ship stern – and alludes to the winged *Victory of Samothrace* – a bronze angel looks to sea. Limestone reliefs on the sides of the structure show seamen on an exploding (sailing) vessel and others coming to rescue.<sup>6</sup>

[8] Interestingly, both WWI monuments are kept in a restrained modernist classicism so popular in the inter-war period in both Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup> The idiom carried significant connotations of both classical and modern art. As a style, it can be equally seen as a response to the upheavals following the world war and the resultant art world *rappel à l'ordre*,<sup>8</sup> and as an informed artistic play with styles both ancient and modern.<sup>9</sup> Programmatically, the

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<sup>5</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Erindringssteder i Danmark: Monumenter, mindesmærker og mødesteder*, København 2010, 103.

<sup>6</sup> The monument was restored and the reliefs recreated in 2011 in travertine. Camilla Stockmann, "Genskabt monument møder hård kritik", in: *Politiken* [20 November 2011], <http://politiken.dk/kultur/kunst/art5035288/Genskabt-historisk-monument-m%C3%B8der-h%C3%A5rd-kritik> (accessed 11 May 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, eds., *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Leger, De Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930*, exh. cat., London 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, New Haven, CT 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See Gottfried Boehm, "An Alternative Modern: On the Concept and Basis of the Exhibition", in: Gottfried Boehm, Ulrich Mosch and Katharina Schmidt, eds., *Canto D'amore: Classicism in Modern Art and Music 1914-1935*, exh. cat., London 1996.

modernist classical style could suit both progressive and reactionary politics; it was either understood as upholding the classical within a modern world, or it was seen as a tempering of the past to the needs of the present.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, and as expressed in both WWI monuments, the human, mostly male body was the main carrier of meaning; both in its stylised anonymity and its stoic heroism. This style would be radically challenged with the next, major memorial on Danish ground.

## Memorialising WWII in Denmark

[9] Only following WWII, where Denmark was occupied by Germany from 1940 to 1945, came the need for a prolonged discussion of memory and memorials. The Danish military was largely passive during 9 April 1940, when the country was occupied, and only few casualties arose from this day and the sporadic fights that broke out around 29 August 1943, when the Danish government finally resigned. There is consequently no single burial ground or major memorial for Danish soldiers who lost their lives during the occupation, and the local military memorials that do exist are few and relatively discrete.

[10] A considerable number of monuments related to WWII instead centre on the Danish resistance movement and to a lesser degree on the civilian victims, but most simply refer to the occupation and the liberation of 4-5 May 1945. In many cases there is also a combination of commemorative functions – resistance as well as occupation and liberation are remembered on one stone. At least 1,265 monuments in total are related to the war and spread out all over a country of today 5.6 million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

[11] After the war, various interest groups tried to "have their say" in how to commemorate the occupation. Chiefly among these were the decision-makers at a local level, the politicians and political parties at a national level, and the resistance movement whose members were only loosely organised and politically very divergent. Politicians and political parties at the national level were to some degree tainted by the general cooperation with the German authorities until 1943, while the resistance movement, who had considerable public appeal, mostly lacked political experience, organisation, and a common goal. In the work of historians Claus Bryld and Anette Warring about the collective memory of the occupation, it becomes clear that "official" Denmark took the reins in writing the narrative of the war and occupation, and that, after the initial spurt of commemoration, the resistance movement as a whole rapidly lost influence.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the considerable number of at least 17,000 German refugees and about 10,000 German soldiers buried on Danish soil are not a part of any collective consciousness.

<sup>10</sup> See Rasmus Kjærboe, "The Style in Itself: The Classical, the Modern, and Modern Classicism in Three Breakthrough Sculptures by Svend Rathsack, Johannes C. Bjerg og Einar Utzon-Frank", in: *SMK Art Journal 2010-2011* (2012), 134-147.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Anders Bjørnvad, *Krigens Monumenter*, Odense 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Claus Bryld and Anette Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring*, Roskilde 1999, 275-277.

[12] In the commonly accepted view of the occupation, which was soon established after the war, Denmark was redeemed from collaboration with its German occupiers through the efforts of the Danish resistance movement.<sup>13</sup> The resistance has therefore – to most intents and purposes – become associated with a need for memorialisation otherwise related to soldiers and national armies. Private individuals, who acted on personal initiative and for very different reasons, have metamorphosed into the idea of a unitary, national and almost official militia who fought for the nation, when the actual military did not.

[13] Thus, the particular history of national war memorials in Denmark together with a highly charged version of history forms the background for the importance of the Memorial Grove at Ryvangen and how it became the main commemorative site in connection to WWII.

### How the Memorial Grove at Ryvangen came to be

[14] Following the liberation, the bodies of approximately 202 men and women were found in the lightly forested area of an army training ground in the suburbs of Copenhagen.<sup>14</sup> Most of these were members of the Danish resistance movement, who had been executed and subsequently buried by the German occupation in the years 1943-1945. Of these, some were repatriated, while 106 were reburied after the ground had been drained and dedicated as a memorial in August 1945. A separate area was subsequently set up with commemorative markers for 151 missing casualties, and a third zone was dedicated to the reburial of 31 members of the resistance movement, whose remains were brought back from concentration camps, mainly Neuengamme in Hamburg and its subcamps.<sup>15</sup>

[15] The Memorial Grove as a site was only officially finished in 1950 and was planned by the official state architect Kaj Gottlob (1887-1976) and the head of parks in the local municipality Aksel Andersen (1903-1952) in collaboration with the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. As Denmark has a national church, grave sites normally fall under its jurisdiction, and the Memorial therefore became the only fully state-controlled monumental commemoration.<sup>16</sup>

[16] Today, the Memorial Grove appears more or less as it has for the last 60-odd years. The area of the memorial has been expanded several times but the original rectangular enclosure hidden by trees and steeply rising several metres

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bryld and Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring*.

<sup>14</sup> The total number of deaths arising from the German occupation was officially given as approximately 4,279, but this number seemingly does not account for killings enacted by the resistance movement against Danish collaborators and others. Adriansen, *Erindringssteder i Danmark*, 458 n82.

<sup>15</sup> Johannes Fosmark and Hans Andersen, *Mindelunden i Ryvangen. En beretning om, hvordan og hvorfor den er skabt samt om, hvad der er sket her fra 1945-2003*, Rødovre 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Einar Løwe, "Indrettelse af Mindelunden i Ryvangen, 1945-50", in: *Vore Kirkegårde 17* (1951), 62-71.

above the highway has stayed the same. The original zone itself takes the form of a park-like area of winding paths, trees, and various shrubs with a large lawn in the back to the south. The green of foliage and vegetation is predominant everywhere but with a definite and intentional lack of flowers. Four built-up areas serve a distinct function: The portal, the memorial wall with its pergola, the large grave field, and the grove for concentration camp victims.

[17] The *entrance portal* takes shape as an elegant, modernist *propylaeon* cast in concrete and covered with beach pebbles on the outside (Fig. 3). Visitors ascending the stairs are taken up and away from the busy traffic and brought towards the light, both actually and metaphorically. Entering the portal and climbing the stairs therefore functions as crossing a liminal zone, the border between sacred and profane. The Memorial Grove is thereby framed as a ritual place outside of mundane society.<sup>17</sup>



3 Entrance portal to the Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, Tuborgvej 35, 2900 Hellerup (photograph by author)

[18] The *memorial wall* runs the length of the eastern side of the grounds, starting just left of the stairs (Fig. 4). Built in unadorned brick and mortar with rectangular plaques in Danish limestone for each of the missing, the whole length is covered by a low roof of roughly timbered pine. The ground is paved in common *chaussé* stones of granite, and debarked, stained pine trunks support the structure, which stands open to the rest of the memorial. The long, low structure presents itself as almost aggressively plain through the use of materials common to Danish street paving and unpretentious house building. Only a middle section carrying a piece of relatively difficult, modernist poetry by Martin A.

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<sup>17</sup> Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality", in: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1979), 465-499.



Hansen (1909-1955) with a theme of loss, nation, and rebirth seems to insist on a specific interpretation of the open monument.<sup>18</sup>



4 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, memorial wall and pergola (photograph by author)

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<sup>18</sup> Thus, some tension exists between the "open" nature of an experience of the whole of the Memorial Grove which is the central argument of this article and the more "closed" and "directed" message carried by Martin A. Hansen's poem. The poem, given its position, could even be interpreted as an official key to understanding the memorial wall and by extension the whole of the Memorial Grove. But the difficulty of the text, which employs traces of a cyclical, national romantic imagery, in a sparse, modernist structure, makes it rather opaque. The physical placement renders it readable only head-on at close quarters in an almost cramped environment which similarly hinders it becoming a "master text". Rather, Martin A. Hansen's words stand more as suggested meaning - something which a visitor has to find and figure out for himself. In the author's imperfect translation:

Freedom fighters

Died for Denmark but never recovered

Battered your nation won its gift

Sorrow could sing

Happiness cry

Freedom : Freedom : Lightning flash by graves

New as dawn

This you inherit

Plow earth : plow sea

Bear family : bear law

And remember still

Your daughter's pact

Your son's guard



[19] The large *grave field* lies further from the entrance and consists of a low, plainly cut, and now weathered platform in Danish sandstone with identically shaped, narrow grave markers ringed by heather (Fig. 5). Seen from the grass field in front of it, it is screened by a background of tall evergreens. In the middle rises a pietà-like granite sculpture of a mother with her dead son by Axel Poulsen – the only overtly religious connotation at the whole site which, to the distress of some at the time, otherwise lacks Christian iconography.<sup>19</sup> The sculpture was personally commissioned in 1945 by then-minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs in the interim government, former resistance member Arne Sørensen (1906-1978), and was subsequently heavily criticised.<sup>20</sup>



5 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, grave field (photograph by author)

[20] The last area, the *grove for concentration camp victims* brought back to Denmark, takes form as a forest clearing behind the grave field with scattered grave markers directly sunken into the ground, their shape echoing the plaques of the memorial wall and the graves of the large field (Fig. 6). A circular stone depicting a grille or prison bars with oak and beech leaves centres the small area and the circular path. Thus, the whole of the memorial shows only two instances of "traditional" representational art – this and the pietà.

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<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, "Korset i Ryvangen", in: *Vore Kirkegårde* 15 (1946), 146-147.

<sup>20</sup> Bryld and Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring*, 275-277; Peter Koch, "Modstandsbevægelsens kunstneriske udvalg", in: *Arkitekten* 53 (1951), 52-65.



6 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, grove for concentration camp victims (photograph by author)

[21] In the Memorial Grove, the repeated use of considerably large fields of unadorned brick, paving stones, or fields of grass and vegetation together with the almost complete lack of ornamentation and finish is striking (Fig. 7). The rough and half-polished materials form a subdued tenor which is amplified by the general use of a low building scale which avoids the traditionally monumental. Instead, and in the relative absence of imagery, the shape and colour of the vegetation, the small paths, and the areas of grass and paving come to take up an almost sign-like character – but without any direct referent.



7 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, detail of path (photograph by author)

### Considering the design of the Memorial Grove

[22] The Memorial Grove seems paradoxically both a continuation of and a deliberate break with aspects of the western tradition of warrior-monuments. It is

clearly in dialogue with other soldiers' burials which place individuals as members of a group through overt and implicit rhetorics. Even though it memorializes very different people, from communists to conservative nationalists, they are all subsumed under a collective identity by the memorial.

[23] Looking at a broader tradition, the idea of civilian burials in nature of the Park Cemetery-movement plays a precursor role, as do the explicitly soldierly *Heldenhaine* of Germany and their associations of death, sacrifice, and the cycle of life.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the pathos and heavy, sculptural and architectural ornamentation of WWI and some WWII memorials is abandoned at the Memorial Grove as are references to triumph and the martial.

[24] The choice of a sparse Danish modernism for the memorial seems to be no coincidence. The functionalist idiom, as expressed in buildings by the architect Kaj Gottlob since the 1930s, is obviously in deliberate opposition to the eclectic historicism of many traditional war monuments and soldiers' burials. The vernacular impression of the roughly timbered and the feel of the different materials and their plain treatment is a deliberate tempering of any grandiose pretensions. Patina, tactility, and the play of the colours inherent in wood, stone, and tile gains significance in the absence of other imagery. As such, the materials themselves can also be seen to refer to an unpretentious mobilisation of national (and Nordic) resources.

[25] The references to classicism without ornamentation and ostentation – the portal, the use of columns, and the low, temple-like platform, for example – are particular to a brand of Nordic architecture from the inter-war period. Gottlob was inspired by the Swedish Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940), author of *Skogskyrkogården* in Stockholm, and was a part of the general movement to distil rational tectonics from architectural tradition.<sup>22</sup> In this revision of tradition, architecture was not meant to create images or signs so much as express its own essence.

[26] The Memorial Grove could, in this light, be seen as being occupied with "an ontology of dwelling" as the Nordic classicism has been characterised by architect Demetri Porphyrios. That is, as an attempt at finding the most essential elements of architecture in a wide notion of the classical.<sup>23</sup> This means an architecture reduced to its essential functions: as a place for the living (and the dead) to stay. For the Memorial Grove, this search has resulted in a refusal of a now discredited architecture of the grandiose and spectacular. Instead, the combination of the practical and matter-of-fact with still recognisably classical shapes seems to be an attempt to say and express something very frank: this is a roof, this is a wall, this is a path, and these are materials.

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<sup>21</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford 1990, 87-89.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Hartvig Skaarup and Jens Chr Varming, "Kaj Gottlob", in: Karen Zahle, Finn Monies and Jørgen Hegner Christiansen, eds., *De Gamle Mestre*, eds., København 2000, 74-81.

<sup>23</sup> Demetri Porphyrios, *Classicism Is Not a Style*, London 1982.

[27] The Memorial Grove is therefore also a *modernist* reworking of the relation of the classical to themes of the Nordic and the landscape which was first introduced with the monument to the war dead of 1801. The design of the Memorial Grove is in this case as ideologically laden as the memorial tradition it implicitly critiques. With its belief in plain materials and plain architecture, the Memorial Grove appears to be a celebration of *the essential*, something posited as more "true" than any discredited tradition can muster.

### Myth and authenticity in modernity

[28] Most visitors to the Memorial Grove know the commonly told story about the Danish resistance.<sup>24</sup> By applying the structural concept of "Myth",<sup>25</sup> it can be seen to serve as a simplified frame for all understanding of the German occupation of Denmark - to the extent that the occupation has simply become the story of the Danish resistance movement.

[29] Three short and strategically placed, but visually discreet, poetic texts by Martin A. Hansen, Kaj Munk (1898-1944), and Halfdan Rasmussen (1915-2002) anchor this understanding of the dead fighters as the sacrifice the nation had to make in order to secure a future for its sons and daughters. All three exhibit metaphors common to Christian and nationalist poetry through an emphasis on romantic conceptions of nature, death, and birth.<sup>26</sup> The grove as a physical and memorial site is therefore of chief importance for the same narrative expressed in the poems which tells that, in the eyes of the Allies and the world, Denmark as a nation and a people was redeemed through the actions of the few, some of whom are commemorated here. It is still this officially sanctioned, collective memory which is activated during the ceremonies and memorial services held in connection to various anniversaries; but it also appears in popular history writing and - to some degree - in school books.<sup>27</sup> The Memorial Grove is therefore both a synecdoche of the whole of the occupation and a thanksgiving for its happy resolution.

[30] As stated, the use of unadorned materials, the avoidance of ornamentation, and the shunning of representational art except for the pietà sculpture and the unobtrusive, horizontal relief of leaves and bars can be interpreted as a reworking of a previous tradition for soldier burials. Stylistically, it draws upon a Nordic modernism of the inter-war period, and this also manifests itself in the unironic, sincere belief in the ability of materials to speak.

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<sup>24</sup> The number of visitors was 24,952 in 2002. Karen Jespersen and Tove Fergo, "Spm. Nr. S 3199: Hvor mange besøgende har der været i Mindelunden de sidste 10 år?", § 20 - queries, The Danish Parliament, Copenhagen 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London 2009, 109-164.

<sup>26</sup> The three authors were in their time all considered major voices, were associated with the resistance and were seen to represent both left and right wing ideologies.

<sup>27</sup> Bryld and Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring*, 275-277.

[31] Modernism as a broad designation for several societal movements can be seen as a reflective reaction to the experience of modernity.<sup>28</sup> Modernism as an *artistic* and *aesthetic* movement often seeks authenticity in order to resolve the dissolution of all that was previously believed to be true, certain, and solid.<sup>29</sup> Allegory and elaborate artifice is therefore shunned, and instead direct, unambiguous relations are sought. Much of modernism claims that aesthetic truth can be found in the existence of "natural" signs that are not wholly arbitrary but essential and true symbols of what they designate. In art, form and content they should therefore be one, indissoluble unity.<sup>30</sup>

[32] By the end of WWII, any kind of monumental figuration can be seen as suspect allegory, even the previously heralded modernist classicism. How else could the athlete's body of classical tradition be so easily co-opted for the purposes of both the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships?<sup>31</sup> Any truth and essence to be revealed by the union of content and form must now reside in the largely abstract, non-figurative realm of materials, colour, light, and nature.

[33] As regards the essential and authentic, the Memorial Grove delivers on several accounts: it is the actual place where members of the resistance movement were taken to be executed and it is also their final resting ground. This authenticity is amplified in the way the site is given form and meaning. The use of simple materials and simple architecture promises a genuine and non-ambiguous (modernist) experience absent of allegory and illusion – an experience which, in the end, seeks to go beyond discourse itself.

### Between discourse and experience

[34] The Memorial Grove is a place where discourse is given weight and shape through a modernist aesthetic appeal to truth and sincerity. It is also, arguably, the most important public monument of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Denmark as it works to resolve potentially ambiguous and painful memories. As a type, it would not have made the same sense before the war as it departs too radically from the highly ornamental and figured modernist classicism of, for example, the two premier WWI monuments in Aarhus and Copenhagen, or, for that matter, the very traditional monumental commemorative pathos of various grave sites from the two Schleswig Wars. Neither could it have been conceived much closer to our time. The postmodern loss of grand narratives investigated by Jean-François Lyotard might be overstated,<sup>32</sup> but the modernist-romantic belief in immediate and intuitive truth revealed by nature, honest materials, and essential

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*, London 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Harmondsworth 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", in: *October* 12 (1980), 67-86.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Dawn Ades, ed., *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators*, exh. cat., London 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1984.

architecture seen at the Memorial Grove has been thoroughly challenged with the advent of postmodernism.

[35] But not everything has to do with words and meaning. Already at the time of its completion in 1951, Peter Koch (1905-1980), an architect and member of the resistance movement's artistic committee, expressed the view that one day the artistic value of the memorial would step to the fore.<sup>33</sup> Elaborating on this view, we might say that at some point when the past is, if not resolved, then at least felt less urgent, matters of aesthetics and memorialization switch places. The aesthetic comes to carry the weight of almost any monument that stands the test of time. In this regard, what gives pause for thought is how the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen presents a deliberate possibility of an aesthetic experience, which falls outside narrative discourse.

[36] With no one obvious central shrine and no vertically oriented focal point, which gives a feel of culmination, the casual visitor to the Memorial Grove must instead rely on her own walking from point to point in order to build meaningful experiences. There is no single viewpoint from where the whole of the area can be taken in – there is no panoptic position – and by the rough quality of the paving and the very low scale of architecture, the visitor's glance is continually pushed downwards to take in only the ground and the nearest surroundings. The serial effect of simple materials in repetition is strongly reinforced – stone upon stone, tile upon tile, tree after tree – all these contribute to a suggestive, abstract rhythm. A casual visit takes shape more as an open-ended walk or stroll where movement and rest interchange, and to some extent, the site invites visitors to explore rather than direct them onto one certain path.

[37] With these qualities, the Memorial Grove, as modernist and tradition-bound as it is, also displays some of the hallmarks of minimalist art and the expanded sculptural tradition that was soon to bloom in the post-war period.<sup>34</sup> As a piece of landscape gardening, it offers few traditionally pleasing pictures or vistas and instead pushes the completion of the picture onto the visitor, ideally transforming her into a participant; into someone who has to find either meaning – or something else. The "something else" suggested here is precisely that elusive part of aesthetic experience which has to do with the taking in of your physical surroundings, which escapes traditional sense-making.

### Materiality and presence

[38] The literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has suggested that aesthetic experience oscillates: At times, we interpret in order to find meaning, and at other times we simply experience a filling, non-discursive presence. Normally, we are occupied with understanding the world, but at times the materiality and thus the basis of it all is revealed through these fleeting moments of presence. To Gumbrecht, this means that visual arts, music, sports, or a place such as the

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<sup>33</sup> Koch, *Modstandsbevægelsens Kunstneriske Udvalg*, 52-65.

<sup>34</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in an Expanded Field", in: *October* 8 (1979), 30-44.



Memorial Grove, for that matter, might offer both meaning and something beyond meaning to those who experience.<sup>35</sup>

[39] Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* shows an interesting engagement with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and in particular the 1935-1936 essay, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. While Heidegger himself was sceptic of too obvious parallels between differing things, there are similarities between his treatment of the Greek temple as presented in his text and the workings of the Memorial Grove, not least in the remnants of a romantic search for an alternative spirituality.

[40] According to Heidegger, a temple is a living work of art which belongs in its particular world and culture. As such, it embodies the whole culture, its many connections and meanings – the temple is meaningful. At the same time, by virtue of its belonging, the temple also helps the Greeks to feel the presence of the more basic constituents of their world – its material foundations which the temple brings to "sing" – something which normal buildings or artefacts with a prosaic function in mind cannot do. To Heidegger, this also goes for modern art works which show the same struggle between the two interdependent registers that make up everything that is: the prosaic world and the mystic earth it rests upon.<sup>36</sup> In other words – good art invokes both a cultural meaning and something else, something more primordial and basically material.

[41] Taking Heidegger's self-seriousness down a notch and relying more on Gumbrecht's re-working, we could also say that, for short moments of time, artistic works have the potential to make us feel alive. Art helps us experience the presence of the very same stuff that has gone into its production. Since we and the art works we experience are both part of a continuum of everything that exists, the material presence that some art works might reveal can provoke feelings of deep resonance. But as Gumbrecht rightly points out, this is a fleeting experience marked by extreme temporality.<sup>37</sup> Very soon, we fall back on words and meanings.

[42] Following this, the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen appears as a well thought through staging of aspects of both meaning and presence – or Heidegger's world *and* earth.<sup>38</sup> The official memorialization of the fallen resistance fighters is specifically intertwined with an experience of walking, turning, pausing, and

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<sup>35</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, CA 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes", in: Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, 1-74, here 27-32.

<sup>37</sup> Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 58-70.

<sup>38</sup> The Heidegger reception in Denmark was non-existent at the time, and there is no line traceable back to his influence. I will argue that at this historical place in time the phenomenology of Heidegger or Maurice Merleau-Ponty on one hand and modernism in art and architecture on the other hand both shared in some of the same concerns of resolving the alienation of modernity. Incidentally, Heidegger revised the text of *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* for re-publication in 1950 (and again in 1960).

wondering while freely sensing underneath an open sky. Visitors are thus enrolled in an active and participatory search. The myth of the resistance – the stories told and the popular conception – is certainly supported by the site, but it is not the only given outcome, and it is not the only aesthetic product of a visit.

[43] At the Memorial Grove, there is simply so much other "stuff" which stands outside of the central myth – things like shrubbery, tiles, wooden beams, and paving stones in abundance, which seem not to contribute to any narrative meaning yet seem to possess importance and demand attention anyway.

[44] One should think any art work might provoke feelings of both meaning and presence since both are effects dependent on the viewer herself. A significant point taken from Heidegger, though, is that intimations of presence still have to happen within a resonant cultural horizon. The specific art work or building has to be open in specific ways to allow presence in ways recognisable to the same culture. In this regard, the Memorial Grove at Ryvangen can be characterised as an effective and deliberate staging of presence effects for a post-war society vary of the type of pathos-filled art and mass spectacle which had come to be associated with totalitarianism. It is a staging which runs opposite to tradition by instead revolving around the rather mundane physicality of natural materials.

[45] For Heidegger – as well as for Gumbrecht – presence effects have to do with the spatial immediacy of objects and of the physical world. Presence is "Earth". Here, the intended sacrality of the Memorial Grove works as a focal lens, which, in the absence of overpowering, traditional memorialization, equally well turns to a focus on the physicality of so many insignificant things: algae spotting the mass of gravestones (Fig. 8), the colour shifting from green over red to purple in the abundant heather, the irregular, rough surface of the overlong wall of tiles, the undulating grass of a not perfectly planed ceremonial lawn together with all the other subtle material shifts and changes that occur where products of human labour meet nature.



8 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangen, grave field, detail (photograph by author)

Due to a character of the vernacular and the abundant signs of its own construction, these "artefacts" feel not like errors, but as deliberate variations. All these instances are in themselves without particular meaning – but can at any time feel both present and true.

[46] In retrospect, the architect Kaj Gottlob himself wished for an even more indeterminate architecture. In an animated description he remembers his first visit to the newly discovered burial ground just after the liberation:

*The rough clay, the weeds and the silence of this hidden place behind the edge of the forest spoke wordlessly of the hard conditions endured by those who were buried here. Perhaps it could have stayed so by letting the terrain remain untouched and the uneven surface of the ground stand out through close cropped grass with the random shape of the graves shown by sunken stone borders.*<sup>39</sup>

### A part-conclusion: Performing memory

[47] Two interpretations of the shape of the Memorial Grove have been raised in this text. The first has claimed that the specific mixture of modernist, classical, and vernacular shapes was an attempt at creating a functioning memorial which could carry the official myth of the Danish resistance movement despite a now partly discredited tradition of memorials and monuments. The second has claimed that the openness, lack of linearity and focus on the movement of the visitor along with a pronounced accentuation of plain materials and nature allows for an experience of something non-discursive – of the presence of things, and perhaps of life itself.

[48] It is also this second perspective – the deliberately planned openness of the Memorial Grove to experiences beyond narrative and myth – which helps explain how the site is more than just discourse through other means. This type of aesthetic and experiential effect of memorials, which is not easily reduced to description, often runs the risk of being overlooked in academic analysis. It is my contention that the Memorial Grove as a memorial chiefly has a dynamic relation with its visitors, and that both perspectives – of meaning and of presence – can help explain the function of the memorial. Without acknowledging the experiential aspect as a deliberate intention in the design, the Memorial Grove is hard to understand; something which is probably true for many more sites in Europe and the rest of the world.

[49] One important discussion remains, though, which is too often left out in descriptions of memorials, and this regards their *active* use for the rehearsal of collective memory. As a ritual site, places such as the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen are the staging ground for a number of visits, private as well as public. Official celebrations take place around 4-5 May, and the Memorial Grove has for a number of years functioned as an itinerary for the laying of wreaths by foreign dignitaries; and every day the Memorial is open to private citizens. It must be

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<sup>39</sup> Kaj Gottlob, "Mindelunden i Ryvangen", in: *Arkitekten* 53 (1951), 41-52, here 41. Translated by author.

stressed that the actual visit – in time and space – is the event around which both meaning and presence revolves. And precisely in the cyclic nature of these visits lies an important point about repetition.

[50] As argued by the sociologist Paul Connerton, the collective memory of societies is largely insured by the performative practice of its members. Shared memories are shaped through repetition based on body, movement, ritual, dress, and behaviour, not just through clinical reproduction of discourse.<sup>40</sup> Societies need places and things around which collective memories are rehearsed and structured through repetition. In her seminal work on performativity, the philosopher Judith Butler has similarly argued that even *personal* and *bodily* identity depends on the repetition of norms and values – what we might call a collective memory, really – coming largely from the outside.<sup>41</sup> Repetition, collective memory, and subjectivity seem to be entwined and presuppose each other.

[51] Extrapolating from Connerton and Butler, it is possible to say that collective memory such as that invoked by the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen presupposes both repetition and engagement with the physical world. Memories and remembrances are made durable and given shape by being "hitched" to the material of the world itself. In order to become internalised, identity and memory similarly need to be rehearsed by the individual. Here, physical objects and physical settings function as both anchor and staging ground where individuals and societies can work with memory through bodily participation.

[52] Any but the most dismissive or fleeting visits to the Memorial Grove partake in some form of performance. A visit is therefore also, to some degree, a way in which aspects of personal identity can be worked out while personal recollection connects to a larger collective memory. As the Memorial Grove unites aspects of discursive meaning with more uncertain feelings of bodily enactment, intangible myths and stories are given the fullness of experience. This reveals that the aesthetic presence as theorised by Gumbrecht might not wholly stand in opposition to discourse, but seems to be to some extent also mixed up with the performative iteration of meaning.

[53] If there is such a double occurrence of meaning and presence at a site such as the Memorial Grove in Ryvangen, it might also explain why memorials are still seen as especially effective ways to perpetuate and shape collective memories. The growth in recent years of monuments requiring bodily participation to complete otherwise latent meanings could be explained in this way. A focus on presence, the non-discursive and performativity can thus help explain why societies still need physical monuments – and why the best of these monuments still feel so engaging in an age of evermore virtual culture.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge 1989.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London 1993.

## Postscript: Uncertain futures

[54] For now, the Memorial Grove is entering an uncertain future. As a memorial and as a performative site it contributes to shaping personal and collective memory through direct experience. What happens when the last witnesses to WWII die out and present preoccupations turn to other, more urgent matters? Additionally, the 2011 dedication of a newly designed *Monument to Denmark's international effort since 1948* at the historical Copenhagen barracks *Kastellet* close to the city centre signals new and more contentious themes from the recent past (and possible future) for the collective to grapple with. On the more practical end, ceremonial functions in connection to state visits will also be likely to find their focus here.

[55] The existence of memorials is also a way to handle painful memories by delegating a task of mourning and remembrance to somewhere else, and to enable forgetting.<sup>42</sup> The Memorial Grove in Ryvangen can be seen as exactly that – a way of overcoming or silencing the plentiful ambiguities of the five years under German occupation. This slide into obscurity seems inevitable for the majority of causes witnessed by memorials, and, as Peter Koch noted with foresight in 1951, with the coming of new generations, myth *will* lose its hold.<sup>43</sup> At some point aesthetics probably will have to take centre stage. But a later intervention in the makeup of the Memorial Grove seems to complicate this observation.

[56] In 1977 an area where most executions took place just south of the original Memorial Grove was officially added to the site. Bronze casts of the three wooden poles that had been used for fixing the victims before their execution are placed inside the original earthen enclosure (Fig. 9).

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<sup>42</sup> Adrian Forty, "Introduction", in: Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, eds., *The Art of Forgetting*, Oxford 1999, 1-18.

<sup>43</sup> Koch, *Modstandsbevægelsens Kunstneriske Udvalg*, 52-65.



9 The Memorial Grove at Ryvangel, the execution site added to the memorial in 1977 (photograph by author)

[57] The general area preserves the feel of a mixture of park and spontaneous growth which marks the public park to the south and east. But the replica poles add distinct dramatics to the memorial function of the whole area. In contrast to the largely symbolic original Memorial Grove, the execution site and specifically its bronze markers work through pronounced indexicality. As with any cast or imprint, they point to the absence of something which once was – to the poles, of course,<sup>44</sup> but metaphorically also to the victims who once stood here. This kind of deliberate insertion of an arresting metaphor is a hallmark of allegory.<sup>45</sup> While all of the original Memorial Grove bears indexical traces of its violent past – it is, after all, an authentic burial ground – this reliance on hyper-realism and melancholy is something new. To some extent it seems a postmodern response to the largely modernist Memorial: myths will no longer work if only invoked politely, it needs the shock of a Barthesian punctum.<sup>46</sup>

[58] With the incorporation of this and another, minor execution ground in 1990, the whole of the Memorial Grove has had its area considerably expanded. While the original site retains its character, the new grounds seem closer to the park which surrounds the site and takes up the remainder of the army barracks area vacated by the Danish military in 1972.

[59] Two paths, not necessarily divergent, point forward from here. As already argued, the Memorial Grove as a total complex might in the future become more of a park with an added aesthetic dimension, and where the myth of the Danish

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<sup>44</sup> The original pine poles are still kept in the holdings of The Museum of Danish Resistance.

<sup>45</sup> Owens, *The Allegorical Impulse*, 67-86, here 72.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York 1981.



resistance plays a secondary part. Today, the large *Assistens Kirkegaard* in Copenhagen shows the harmonious integration of both recreative and commemorative needs as it is used as both a burial ground and a park where people picnic and play.

[60] On the other hand, it is conceivable that the Memorial Grove can still fulfil a need to connect with an idea of a collective, national past. In the absence of any urgency or living witnesses, this will need to happen through the introduction of much more explicit narratives and possibly also aspects of the kind of pathos already seen with the inclusion of the execution poles. The recent success of large budget WWII resistance movies such as the Dutch *Black Book* (2006), Danish *Flame & Citron* (2008), or Norwegian *Max Manus: Man of War* (2008) point to this demand for national pathos, as does the hugely expensive Danish tv-series *1864* (2014) about the Second Schleswig War. In this case, popular and non-invasive education via smartphones and tablets is one way to do things, as the Memorial Grove has already been supplied with QR codes.

### **Guest Editors of Special Issue**

Christian Fuhrmeister and Kai Kappel, eds., *War Graves, War Cemeteries, and Memorial Shrines as a Building Task, 1914-1989. Die Bauaufgabe Soldatenfriedhof/Kriegsgräberstätte zwischen 1914 und 1989*, in: *RIHA Journal* 0150-0176

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