MECHTILD WIDRICH, *MONUMENTAL CARES. SITES OF HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY ART*

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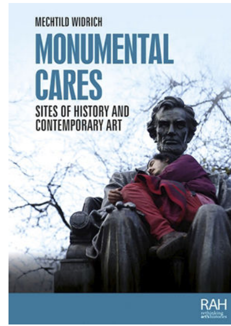

Reviewed by
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The cover image of Mechtild Widrich's *Monumental Cares. Sites of History and Contemporary Art* shows contemporary artist Emilio Rojas curled, apparently sleeping, in the lap of Chicago's seated turn-of-the-century Lincoln monument. The image is strikingly perfect in how it encapsulates not only the book's concerns, but the larger stakes of Widrich's scholarship across the scope of her career. The monument that memorializes the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, is an embodiment of national pride and authoritative historical discourse through its connection to the country's dominant narrative of its own origins. The large, symmetrically composed sculpture of Lincoln set atop a thick plinth in a park is moreover the type of object that most people think of when they hear the term "monument". Rojas, in this performance entitled *He Who Writes History Has No Memory* (2017–2018), foregrounds the vulnerability of his body and suggests sleep as metaphor for the selective blindness of official history, as the artist literally closes his eyes to the world. At the same time, Rojas's act proposes a subversive and whimsical use of city space and its markers of history through the performance's reference to the opening scene of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), in which Chaplin's

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goodhearted "tramp" character is found sleeping in the arms of a statue newly unveiled by a pompous mayor. Rojas's performance thus brings to the Lincoln monument a counterproposal for memorial practice whose web of referentiality crisscrosses media, geography, and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The cover image acts as an allegory for the way that traditional monuments and the debates about whether to keep the ones that commemorate racist, violent, and colonial histories are but one thread in *Monumental Cares*. The book addresses those debates but its project is also broader, looking at the power of images and artworks to address violence. The book is also centrally concerned with the kinds of public sphere to which the reception of images and artworks give rise, especially in combination with myriad forms of digital mediation. Widrich elaborates this core focus through six thematically driven chapters which cluster geopolitically diverse artworks and mix highly canonical artists with those who have been marginal to dominant histories.

In the book's introduction, Widrich posits a straightforward and convincing rationale for why monuments have recently become so contested: they spatialize a connection to history in the present, occupying public space to "crystalize myth or political morality tales *staged* as the past" (pp. 1–2). Monuments are thus key hinges between history on the one hand and present-day conceptions of the public sphere on the other. History, within the scope of the book, appears as a process of collective negotiation across the specific material terrain and discursive channels of the public sphere. Widrich moreover takes the term "monumental" to imply not just large objects in outdoor spaces, but also the way in which addressing history is a collective and not individual pursuit. The monumental thus indexes "both problems too large to be tackled alone, and the making visible to others of our engagement with such problems" (p. 4). In addition to using *monumental* to segue from formal description into a sense of collective ethical imperative, Widrich also employs the concept of *care* as a way of explaining both the material attention and the protection that monuments and sites of atrocity need, and the necessity of present-day political engagement that violent histories demand. In Widrich's analysis of individual artworks, care can indicate an artist's investment in a certain problem or history, but it can also describe performance-based or other material strategies for engagement with a site. For example, Emilio Rojas, in another performance entitled *The Grass Is Always Greener and/or Twice Stolen Land* (2014), rolled and unrolled strips of sod over a twenty-five-hour procession from the University of British Columbia south to the Musqueam Community Centre, in commemoration of the theft of the land from Coast Salish peoples. Rojas's work marked a violent history of colonial land theft while at a material level consisting of care for the grass itself as it disintegrated progressively over the performance, becoming harder and harder to hold together and dirtying the artist's white clothing.

Care in the current humanities is the epitome of what Mieke Bal described in 2002 as a "traveling concept", that is, a concept that moves between disciplines, addressing problems specific to each one but also raising questions as it intersects with particular methodologies and disciplinary frameworks. Bal saw such concepts as key to rigorous interdisciplinary inquiry, and as better tools for teaching interdisciplinarity than attempting to teach methods across disciplines.[1] In the past decade, *care* has been deployed in feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies in ways that address the enmeshment of interdependence with capitalist systems of exploitation and inequality, while simultaneously helping to imagine structures of relationality and survival that might counter those systems and enable new kinds of thriving.[2] *Care*'s historical association with gendered labor makes it an excellent fit for the dual stakes of celebrating relationality while critically analyzing inequalities in the distribution and valuation of labor. Indeed, Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese posit care as fundamental to social movements as such.[3]

For Widrich, *care* performs a pivot that lets her broaden the focus of the book from monuments in a narrow sense to broader questions about political engagement, about how to conceive the nature of politically engaged art relative to deep and fundamental past wrongs that cannot be undone by action in the present. This fanning out towards bigger questions of the political nature of art relative to history is grounded in Widrich's overarching investments in questions of performance and public space, and in her pluralistic model of audience. These investments, and the broader focus on the political nature of contemporary art, set *Monumental Cares* apart from Erin Thompson's *Smashing Statues. The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments* (2022), which focuses more specifically on monument debates and advocates for the removal of monuments to the histories of colonialism and slavery in the United States. Whereas Thompson takes a position which aims to be morally normative, Widrich sees monument debates less as a problem in search of a concrete solution, than as a heuristic that points towards "the *need* not just for public commemoration, but for history, and its appearance in public space – [its] 'obdurate' material [...] can be many things, forms and sizes, but its materialization

1
Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide*, Toronto 2002, 5.

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For critiques of the oppressive histories inherent in practices of care, see Michelle Murphy, Unsettling Care. Troubling Transnational Itineraries of Care in Feminist Health Practices, in: *Social Studies of Science* 45/5, 2015, 717–737 and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care. Coercion and Caregiving in America*, Cambridge, MA 2010. Nakano Glenn traces the devaluation of care labor to both gendered domestic labor and slavery. For work that sees care as the foundation of radical politics and relationality, see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinta, *Care Work. Dreaming Disability Justice*, Vancouver 2019 and Hil Malatino, *Trans Care*, Minneapolis 2020.

3
Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, Radical Care. Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times, in: *Social Text* 38/1, 2020, 1.

is paramount" (p. 208). In this formulation, the creation of history comes across as a process that itself constitutes the public sphere, and that gives rise to various material forms – including but not limited to traditional monuments – that index how understandings of the past have been and continue to be navigated.

Monumental Cares demonstrates both explicitly and implicitly that alongside their diversity of forms, contemporary monuments meet hugely diverse audiences who bring their own histories and experiences to the work. Those audiences may or may not share physical spaces, because images of art, information about sites, and of course historical narratives now circulate so widely online. Indeed, the ways that social media modify the notion of site-specificity is an important contemporary reality with which the book seeks to grapple. It places this analysis front and center in Chapter 1 through a genealogy and resituating of the art historical concept of site-specificity, which contends with a giant in this area: Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002).[4] Widrich writes that site-specificity, with its emphasis on subjectivity and memory, can constitute an important corrective to official memory discourses and their problematic assumptions about citizenship and belonging. But art historical conceptions of site-specificity also need to be updated to include forms of mediation (particularly, but not only, digital ones; p. 28). Social media are already a key part of contemporary viewers' sense of commonness and serve as a reminder of the importance of individual agency in accessing history, especially given the fact that certain sites will not signify as authentic to all residents of a particular place (p. 74). Widrich points out that Kwon's conception of the discursive site "seldom included the techniques of mediation linking the bodies of artists with audiences there and elsewhere" (p. 31). She is also unconvinced by Kwon's most substantial proposal for the political nature of art: that artists can, without reifying authenticity, use site-specificity to juxtapose "fragments" that reveal the "relational specificity" arising in conditions of ongoing movement and displacement.[5] Widrich sees this model as too ethically ambivalent and as lacking in specificity (p. 31). Indeed, the example Kwon illustrates at the end of the book, of Gabriel Orozco's cute reproduction of the skyline of Manhattan with scraps of garbage, photographed against the real skyline, seems to pose less urgent ethical questions than Widrich's examples in this chapter, such as the stained-glass windows memorializing Confederate general Robert E. Lee that were installed in the Washington National Cathedral in 1953 and are now in storage.

4 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA 2002.

5 Ibid., 166.

I agree with Widrich about the deficiency of Kwon's argument when it comes to questions of the ethical and the political, and I would go a step further to argue that this dimension of Kwon's argument is itself a mark of the ambivalent intervention her book made within its own discursive context. The book's reference in its title to "locational identity" is telling in terms of this ambivalence. Arguably, *One Place after Another* was an attempt to take stock of the transformations of the American art world that occurred over the course of the 1980s and 1990s by tracing a lineage going back through Minimalism, which would act as a counterproposal to what Kwon saw as the objectifying nature of identity politics. The evolution of Kwon's thought in this respect can be observed by putting *One Place after Another* alongside the 1993 *October* roundtable "The Politics of the Signifier. A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial". In this conversation, Kwon argues forcefully that art institutions position minoritized artists so that "they have to fulfill a kind of implicit performance contract if they're going to get some time on stage", extracting a supposedly political performance of identity in ways that flatten aesthetic investigation.[6] Compared to the stance she expresses there, *One Place after Another* comes across as a more nuanced statement that acknowledges the importance of art that grapples with contemporary sociopolitical realities, while still carefully shying away from ideas about authentic sites or identities as the anchors of that engagement. Perhaps in connection with that balancing act, the book also tends to avoid an emphasis on images, whether in terms of image-heavy artworks or in terms of close analysis of documentation images.

Monumental Cares, on the other hand, revolves centrally around images, including photographic artworks, drawings and paintings and their reproductions, documentation photos of performances, and digital images generated by members of the public of subjects ranging from mass protests to site-specific artworks. Widrich is curious about the creation and circulation of images via social media and the kinds of reception they engender, about the tensions between documentation images and site-based live experience, and about artists' engagement with images, especially their acts of image appropriation and use of archival material to create performances. An example of the latter is Romanian artist Alexandra Pirici's evocation in *Leaking Territories* (2017) of the death of eighteen-year-old Peter Fechter in 1962 when he was shot trying to cross the Berlin Wall (p. 36). The book's final chapter is particularly effective in terms of analyzing the sometimes controversial nature of images that remember violence. It revolves around an analysis of an image of Ai Weiwei reenacting the widely circulated photograph of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, who drowned in 2015 while crossing the Mediterranean Sea with his family in an overburdened migrant boat. The photograph of Ai's reenactment was taken by Indian photographer

[6] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Sylvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, The Politics of the Signifier. A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial, in: *October* 66, 1993, 18.

Rohit Chawla and shown at the 2016 India Art Fair in New Delhi, prompting outrage about the inappropriateness of the image and the commercial context of its initial circulation. Widrich traces discomfort around the image to the corporeality of its reenactment, "since it concerned the restaging of a small child's body through what we might call the 'signature' body of Ai Weiwei, so large, so recognizable, and so full of a certain kind of power and authority" (p. 177). While Ai is known for his political activism on refugee issues, Widrich argues that the reception of this work was in fact shaped by the fact that it wasn't received as a work of art because of its inseparability with its circulation, as a performance staged for the camera and viewed at the art fair and online.

As opposed to seeing conditions of commercial circulation as polluting or perverting the political quality of the image, Widrich argues that "rampant circulation on the art market is neither new nor a break with traditions of political image circulation" (p. 177). She grounds this argument historically through an analysis of Honoré Daumier's lithograph commemorating fourteen civilians killed by the National Guard in Paris in 1834. Daumier's image made the violent killing of innocent civilians palpably present through the strategic combination of different factual elements of the massacre, and the presentation of the bloody scene in the private space of the home (pp. 179–184). It was also first circulated as a form of advertising and fundraising, sent out to the customers of a subscription series of "lithography for freedom of the press" (p. 179). In Daumier's print, Widrich reads a parallel for the realist rhetoric of Ai's presentation of the scene of Kurdi's death as legible and transparent, a mode of realism that she argues is a persistent, viable option in contemporary art (p. 189). Widrich argues that ultimately, the discomfort surrounding Ai's reenactment of Kurdi's death may come not from a lack of authenticity, but from an indecision about distance (p. 191). The latter again resonates with Daumier: the staging of a violent scene of public atrocity in a domestic space, and the placement of the viewer as witness to the kind of sight that only either the victims or perpetrators would have had. Ai's use of his own body to restage a political crime thus both collapses and imposes distance (p. 193), highlighting the powerful yet unstable results of performance in a politically realist mode.

In a moment when deaths such as Kurdi's are habitual, it is easy to feel that the present is an endless repetition of historical violence. Do contemporary public spheres simply carry forward past violence, whether it be racial, gendered, or economic, and if they do, what power does commemoration ultimately hold? In her analysis of Louise Bourgeois's monument in Vardø, Norway, to the women burned as witches there in 1662–1663, and the National Monument to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, a.k.a. the National Lynching Memorial, Widrich offers a succinct yet poignant way of approaching this question. Monuments make visible how racial violence, colonial domination, and misogyny are as urgent now as in decades and centuries past, "though of course differently mani-

fested and, crucially, articulable in public discourse and art" (p. 93). In this sense, Widrich emphasizes the concrete role of commemoration and in making speakable the hitherto unspeakable. At the same time, she is careful to attend to the ways that commemoration itself can become normative.

This critical perspective comes clearly to the fore in Chapter 2's textured analysis of Holocaust remembrance in Austria and Germany, a practice which has become part of the European political status quo, even as anti-Semitic attacks have increased in frequency and violence. Widrich seeks to analyze the normative dimensions of Holocaust remembrance and its authoritative claims about authentic sites against the grain of diverse populations, and a relationship to live witnessing that changes as time moves forward:

> how should the history of the Holocaust, for so long considered both unique *and* of universal moral and political significance, be taught today – that is to say, in a time when eyewitnesses have become rare, totalitarian regimes and human rights abuses proliferate, and many residents of Germany and Austria are recently arrived from the Middle East? (pp. 55-56)

Widrich points out that a common mode of connecting such diverse audiences to historical violence is to emphasize parallels to people's personal experiences of, for example, ostracization or inequality, which is fundamentally different from binding them through a shared political or aesthetic interest (p. 66). A work which Widrich sees as successful in indexing the experiences of diverse viewers as witnesses to history in a changing present is Yael Bartana's 2021 monument in Frankfurt to the Kindertransport, the evacuation of Jewish children from Nazi territory into Britain. A slow-moving carousel inscribed with phrases of heartbreaking farewell between parents and children, the monument invites contemplation while literally putting visitors in motion, becoming something that they navigate based on their diverse ages, embodiments, and other factors. In sum, Chapter 2 is a highly nuanced treatment of Holocaust commemoration that carefully unpacks the moral imperatives that fuel its necessity, while also reflecting the critical spirit of artists who have deconstructed its role in the European political status quo – such as Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša's performance as robotic drones charting a GPS-tracked path through the Berlin Denkmal in *Signature, Event, Context* (2008).

Across these widely varied objects of analysis and the histories they commemorate, one of the things that stuck with me the most about *Monumental Cares* was Widrich's particular authorial voice. On the whole, the book seems to resist confidently over-selling the cohesion of its case studies, letting them instead exist together in a way that poses analytical challenges and ethical conundrums for both the author and her readers. As a guide, Widrich seems to be showing us her work, as it were, opening up the text as a space of

active reflection and problematization. While the result may sometimes feel a little wandering, it is also crucial to the ethical voice that she articulates in the text, as someone actively coming to terms with the problems posed by history for contemporary art, in a world where the proliferation and circulation of images and narratives prevents any history from being definitive.