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Verbeelde herinnering

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2012

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Weijers, W. J. G. (2012). *Verbeelde herinnering: Essays over naoorlogse beeldende kunst en het culturele geheugen*. Vrije Universiteit.

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Summary

IMAGED MEMORIES

ESSAYS ON POSTWAR VISUAL ART AND CULTURAL MEMORY

In the last decades memory studies have spread widely in the humanities. This rather recent focus on memory and temporality as a cultural phenomenon stands in contrast to the privileging of the future in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Memory has become a vital part of the dynamics of culture, and the various ways in which these developments have been described, analysed and explained are themselves symptoms of this 'memory turn', or even memory boom.

This dissertation is concerned with the way cultural memory is inscribed in a divergent group of works of art. It starts with a discussion of the improvised and fleeting memorials that appeared on the streets of Manhattan after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and the monument *Reflecting Absence*, which was erected to remember the victims of that assault. Memorials like these, different as they may be, are directly connected to social and cultural, and even political remembrance. In the other sections of this book, I discuss artworks shown in galleries and museums. Although these venues are public institutions, the artworks shown here are not designed for a general remembrance or a public cause. Yet, in one way or another the works of art I discuss also deal with memory. In Joseph Beuys' installation *Palazzo Regale*, an installation designed to remind us of the artist after his death, the artist presents himself lying in state in several historical and cultural disguises. Kara Walker's black silhouettes refer to times long past, not only in their rediscovery of the technique of the paper cut-out, but also in their depictions of race and gender relations under slavery. At the same time they refer to social and political issues of our own days. The same goes for the two paintings that share the title *Jerusalem*, but seem to have hardly anything else in common. In picking *Jerusalem* as the title for their paintings, however, German artists of the age of Gerhard Richter (1932) and Anselm Kiefer (1945) use *Jerusalem* cannot escape a connection with recent history and memories that still occupy many of us.

The idea of a social or collective memory is often connected to the writings of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), who stated that individuals cannot think about events in the past without relying upon social frameworks ("Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire"). Susan Sontag, however, criticizes the idea of collective memory, arguing that what is called collective

memory is not a remembering but a stipulating of what is important. Memories are actualized done away with according to the interests they may serve. In this way collective memory comes close to ideology. Aleida Assmann also thinks that the notion of collective memory is not very useful and prefers to distinguish between social, political and cultural memory, which may, however, overlap. She argues that social memory – memory as it is experienced within groups, families and societies – is bound to three generations and disappears with the death of those involved. Political memory is not tied to personal experiences but remembers by way of symbols, texts, pictures, rituals, ceremonies, memorials, etc., in order to create more or less homogeneous group identities. In this way institutions and collectives mediate memories. Cultural memory is also a mediated memory. It uses language, text and pictures in order to preserve and continue cultural identities. Assmann further distinguishes between stored memories (*Speichergedächtnis*, archival memory) and active memories (*Funktionsgedächtnis*, functional memory). The latter she characterises as a ‘working memory’. Although these two forms of memory are often intertwined, the working memory deals with active participation in social settings. Cultural memory, even if it sometimes seems to require only individual participation (e.g. in reading a book), mediates between individual and social participation. All kinds of media can take part in this mediation of remembrance, from films to toys, from parades to digital databases and magazine covers. Marita Sturken has called these media ‘technologies of memory’: not so much vessels of memory in which memory passively resides as objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meaning. The works of art analysed in this thesis can be seen as such technologies of memory. They actualize the past in the present by means of a ‘working memory’.

Individual memories can only have cultural relevance in social contexts. There has to be a willingness or desire on the part of some social group to select and organize representations of the past so that individuals will embrace them as their own. Cultural memories are thus negotiated, present-oriented and relative. Such an orientation of cultural memory studies towards the present (or the ‘present past’ as Huyssen has called it) is often regarded to be in opposition to historical studies. Yet a sharp epistemological distinction between memory and history is hard to draw. Both memory and history are subjected to the selection, interpretation and distortion of the past. Historians realize all too well that present conditions and insights influence and even determine to some extent the way they investigate the past – as the history and dynamics of their discipline has shown. For their part, memory studies are subjected to historical contexts. Richard Terdiman has described the connection between the advance of modernity and the crisis of memory, which took place at the moment when the past seemed to become a foreign country, to paraphrase the title of David Lowenthal's book. According to

Terdiman, this crisis led to an obsession with remembrance, which not only made the past into history, but also revived the past in the present by means of culturally constructed representations. Representation plays such an important part in modern memory that representation and remembrance – both stand-ins for an absent referent – sometimes seem to coincide. The past is itself not present in a representation (e.g. a souvenir): “loss is what makes our memory of the past possible at all”, writes Terdiman. The paradox of remembrance is that the past enters the present because it is so inaccessible.

Ann Rigney has strikingly described cultural memory as the circulation of memories in mediated form. Cultural memory thus does not depend upon actual experiences but upon the exchange and transfer of mediated memories. Since it is impossible to remember everything from the past, we will only select and represent those instances that seem somehow valuable to us (Rigney calls it the principle of scarcity: culture is always in limited supply). And since we relate to the past from a constantly changing, unstable present the relevance of the past changes constantly too. At the same time, however, these selected memories do create a common frame of reference in society by way of repetition and recapturing. They contract in, albeit unstable, sites of memory that attract all attention in a cultural economy of scarcity (a maximum of meaning in a minimum of signs) until a new counter memory redirects the attention to other sites. Any active societal working memory recaptures, recycles, reshuffles and re-mediates memory practices. Such redirections often lead to conflict, especially in the case of the representation of traumatic experiences. Conflict may also rise among groups with different or antagonistic memories.

What does it mean for a work of art to remember? In looking at and interpreting works of art, one cannot do without cultural memory. Works of art are involved in both individual and collective memories. Even if an individual may think his or her memories to be subjective, fragmented and inaccessible to other people, art deals with mnemonic experiences that are (potentially) shared. Aleida Assmann thinks that works of (contemporary) art can be subversive compared to collective and common forms of remembrance, which often aim at making memorial practices more uniform and eschew provocation.

Artworks cannot remember, feel or think, nor do they have a soul. Yet they can function as ‘go-betweens’ (W.J.T. Mitchell) in our social structure. By means of artworks, we construct and represent our relationship to the world. As such, a work of art can embody memory, or even perform memory. Andreas Huyssen’s analysis of Doris Salcedo’s sculpture *Unland: The Orphans Tunic* (1997) is a case in point. The sculpture consists of two tables jammed into each other with their inner sets of legs broken off. The uneven surfaces of the tables show the traces of their use and age. One of the tables is covered with very thin silk, which also covers a small part of the

second table. On that table the silk is stitched onto the wood with human hair. Through the fragile and vulnerable silk and its title *The Orphans Tunic*, the sculpture also refers to a story of a girl from an orphanage, and to the poem *Stumme Herbstgerüche* by Paul Celan, in which a line reads “A strange lostness was palpably present” (“Eine fremde Verlorenheit war gestalthaft zugegen”). Yet the visible scars of use and abuse on the tables’ surfaces and legs alone bear witness to the lawlessness and violence in Salcedo’s *Unland*, Colombia. These traces alone show the spectator that the sculpture is not simply there as an object *in* the present, even though it is very much *of* the present. It leads the viewer back to some other time and space that is absent, yet subtly inscribed into the work. Thus, the sculpture as an object (its material, tactile and corporal form) performs the process of memory.

A work of art oscillates continuously between what Ernst Ulrich Gumbrecht calls ‘meaning effects’ and ‘presence effects’. The word presence does not refer (or does not mainly refer) to a temporal but rather to a spatial relationship to the world and its objects. Presence effects are those effects that a work of art not only embodies but also produces, brings forth. These presence effects are, however, always permeated with absence and are inevitably ephemeral, because we can only encounter them within a culture that is predominantly a meaning culture, writes Gumbrecht. This dissertation investigates the dialectics between presence (and absence) and meaning in a number of case studies. It does so from the perspective of memory and its ambivalences, as to remember always also means to forget.

The first chapter, “Figures of Absence. Public Memorials for Ground Zero”, describes processes of what I call ‘cultural memory in the making’. Various memorials were erected on and around Ground Zero in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, in an almost obsessive desire to fill up the disappearance of people and buildings – as if to erase the erasure. This rush to remember led to all kinds of small, improvised, ad hoc monuments that resembled roadside monuments in their use of photographs, flowers, toys and other personal belongings of the missed and deceased relatives and friends. Arthur Danto observed that by day’s end the city was transformed into a ritual precinct, dense with improvised sites of mourning. These altars of loss transgressed the boundaries between personal and public memory. No artists were involved in their (mostly rather conventional) designs. These fragile constructions could not be kept in museums or commercialized in the culture industry.

On the other hand, and already in the first days and weeks after the devastating assault, the first proposals for a more lasting memorial appeared in the press. Among them was Philippe de Montebello’s idea to keep a huge, skeletal and jagged steel fragment (a modern ruin) of one of the buildings as a relic of the destruction. Another proposal by the architects Gustavo Bonevardi

and John Bennet was called PRISM ('Project to Restore Immediately the Skyline of Manhattan'). Their idea was the immaterial re-erection of the twin towers by means of thousands of xenon lamps placed at the perimeter of the vanished towers and beaming their lights into the sky. This proposal was actually executed several times in the years that followed. First called the *Towers of Light* the name was changed to *Tribute in Light* in order to not just remember the buildings, but also the people that disappeared with them. Both Daniel Libeskind's design for a *Freedom Tower* and his plan for a new *Ground Zero* with a 'wedge of light' and a 'park of heroes', were highly ideological and were put aside in due course, for reasons that had to do with safety, law, finance and power. Only Libeskind's master plan for the site was kept. For the official 9/11 memorial a competition was held and a proposal by the young architect Michael Arad called *Reflecting Absence* was chosen and finally, with a lot of changes, built.

In the second essay, "Minimalism, Memory and the Reflection of Absence", I analyse Arad's design for the 9/11 memorial against the backdrop of theories of minimalism from the late 1960s and 1970s. The design featured two huge negative spaces, each occupying a footprint of the obliterated Twin Towers, with screens of water cascading into gigantic pools, and then falling down even further into smaller square pools. In the footprint of the North Tower, there was to be a hole in the middle of the lowest recess. Below this opening, another space was to be created, open to the sky. This space would house a big, dark, stone box, which Arad considered to be the touchstone and centre of the memorial. It was meant to contain the unidentified remains of victims. Many reviewers have described Arad's *Reflecting Absence* as Minimalist and argued that with its Minimalist language of geometric, 'timeless' forms it could rise above cultural, economic or socio-political differences and transcend conflict. Perhaps that is why a minimalist aesthetic is so often used in the design of memorials. Nothing but the emphasis on timelessness and transcendence, however, could be further from the theoretical considerations of the artists who developed Minimal art in the early 1960s. They rejected widely recognised artistic values such as the creation of transcendent beauty and the expression of complex inner feelings. Robert Morris wrote: "I was out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with 'up', as well as every other whiff of transcendence." How could such an apparently radical negation of anything usually connected with memorialisation be turned into a preferred 'style' to symbolise and reflect upon destruction and loss?

What, then, is the relationship, if any, between the theories and practices of Minimalism as it was developed in the 1960s and its 'fate' as 'the default mode for our memorial culture' today? For a possible answer, I return to three texts from the 1960s, texts that have by now reached an almost canonical status within postwar art history: "Specific Objects" by Donald Judd, "Notes on Sculpture" by Robert Morris and "Art and Objecthood" by Michael Fried. I relate these texts to

more recent insights by Alex Potts and James Meyer with regard to viewer participation in minimal art. Fried thought Minimalism to be a theatrical form of art since the Minimalist object insists on engaging its surroundings (space, time, and the beholder), as a result of which no line can be drawn between sculpture and viewer. The experience of a minimalist sculpture is potentially endless because there is no clear-cut climactic moment, which leads according to Fried to “some form of repetitive looping”, with its rhythm of passing through repeated circuits, “making one acutely aware that time moves on and that one never comes back again to exactly where one was before”. Such experiences of the endless presence of absence, however, come close to a process of mourning and that is why Arad’s black box in *Reflecting Absence* in the footprint of the north tower could also be seen as an object very well suited for its task. However, as Rosalind Krauss has written, minimalism aimed to relocate the origins of a sculpture’s meaning in the outside, no longer modelling its structure on the privacy of psychological space but on the public, conventional nature of what might be called cultural space. The implication of this is that Arad’s design focuses on the intensity of staged experiences for a mass audience, which will be absorbed in an overwhelming, spatial configuration. Such a fate will locate the memorial in today’s culture of the spectacle, as a theme park of grief.

In “King, Saint, Revolutionary: Joseph Beuys’ *Palazzo Regale* as Portrait Historié” I approach Beuys’ installation *Palazzo Regale* from the perspective of a *portrait historié*, that is a picture in which the sitter presents him- or herself in the guise of some other person he or she identifies with (e.g. Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*). Late in 1986 *Palazzo Regale* (‘Royal Palace’) was installed in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples by Beuys himself, his last installation before he died in January 1987. This essay describes how in this particular work Beuys tried to live on posthumously in an ensemble that he himself directed to the last detail. Two glass cases contain memorabilia from Beuys’ own life as an artist, like the fur coat and the cymbals in the showcase in the middle of the room and the rucksack and walking sticks in the case in the corner. All these attributes can be traced back to earlier performances by Beuys in which they often played a prominent part. On the walls of the room Beuys hung seven brass panels covered with a varnish containing gold dust. In the winter of 1991-92 *Palazzo Regale* was installed in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf in a special room just off of the main route in the museum, where it still can be seen today. The room’s curved ceiling resembles a vault and gives it a chapel-like look. Together with the cast iron head (another leftover from an earlier artwork) the fur coat in the central case indicates a person laid out in state. Beuys called this case a *Fürstengrab* (a king’s tomb). In the second case, one can also detect, with some imagination, the deposition of a human figure (the rucksack is the head, the walking sticks are the shoulders and arms, the meat rolls the legs). Even though these figures do

not at all resemble Joseph Beuys, these relics of an artist's life can be interpreted as stand-ins for the artist because of their direct connection to the artist's oeuvre and their lay out in humanized form. Thus *Palazzo Regale* is a kind of indirect self-portrait – indirect because this self-portrait contains an amalgam of historical and cultural references in order to represent Beuys as a king, a saint and a revolutionary. The installation may be called a 'memory sculpture'. On the one hand, it is not centered on spatial configuration alone, but inscribes a dimension of localizable, even corporeal memory into the work. On the other hand, it evokes recollection by relying on the frameworks of social memory. The fragments and relics Beuys chose from his artistic past are brought together in a new narrative which is elaborated in such a way that it articulates memory as a displacing of past into present. Beuys' use of the past, however, is not just the use of his own past. In a remediation of memorial forms he relates, among many other references, to the dialectic unity of the 'gisant' and the 'transi'. The gisant refers to the social identity of the dead person when still alive (the central figure in Beuys' installation), the transi to the decomposed dead body (the figure in the corner), as a kind of *memento mori* that undermined the aspirations of the gisant. This double figure was also used to depict the dual status of the king: "the King has in him two Bodies, a Body Natural and a Body Politic" (*Plowden's Reports*, 1571). Another reference in *Palazzo Regale* concerns the distinction that was made in earlier times with regard to the body of Christ between a *corpus verum* (his real body that is symbolized in the host in the Eucharist) and a *corpus mysticum* (his mystical body, later identified with the institution of the church). One more reference is a rather direct personification (by means of the cast iron head in the central case) of a redeemer through the historical figure of Anacharsis Cloots, who came from Beuys' hometown Cleve and was involved in the French revolution – another of Beuys' *alter egos*. All in all, *Palazzo Regale* celebrates Beuys' artistic calling as a revolutionary, royal messiah in a complicated performance of memory.

"The Rememory of Kara Walker" is an essay on the imagined and imaged memories of the artist Kara Walker. The silhouettes, "all cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elisabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause", as part of one of her titles reads, depict the dark shadows of racial and sexual relations that had been banned from memory for a long time. Now they are shown and narrated in the outmoded medium of cut-out paper. These black cut-outs display all kinds of racial and sexual stereotypes, the gothic ghosts of a past that haunts the present. Yet at first sight, some of Walker's murals seem to picture a longing for a time long gone, as in *Gone: A Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and Her Heart*. Not only does the cut-out technique that was popular in the 18th Century direct our thoughts towards times long past, but we also get the impression that what is depicted is a narrative of a romance between a southern belle and a Clark Gable

under the moonlight while the crickets fill the warm air with their sounds. However, once we take a closer look at the various scenes, we discover that a civil war is going on between men, women, children and animals who abuse each other in all kinds of ways, but in particular along the lines of race and gender. All these scenes are rendered in black and white – a levelling of difference that seems to contradict what is actually depicted. These incidents are as alarming as they are grotesque and seem to deal with the myth of the sexuality of black people whose feared sexual activities are deemed disgusting, dirty, or funky; they are considered less acceptable and are distinguished from the white norm, even though, writes Cornel West, they are often perceived to be more intriguing and interesting. During slavery the sexualisation of blacks was seen as the confirmation of the exotic wildness of the black woman. Sexualised representations of black women were allowed while the same kinds of representations of white women were absolutely impermissible. Kara Walker's work was condemned for undermining black identity politics, and some

African-American artists have criticized her for depicting myths of the sexuality of black people. According to the ancient myth of Dibutades (she traced the contour of the shade of her lover while he was about to embark on a long journey away from her), a silhouette is based on an actual, indexical trace of a person – in Dibutade's case meant to keep her lover close to her while he was absent. Walker, however, does not base her figures on actual traces in her work. She shows us the contours of people she never met and memories neither she nor we can have. Her scenes therefore belong to what Alison Landsberg has called 'prosthetic memory'. These memories occupy Walker's 'rememory', a neologism used by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* to indicate the act of remembering or revisiting a memory, whether physically or mentally. Walker's visual language is based upon the *Scherenschnitt* but also refers to the pseudo-science of, among many others, the Swiss 'physiognomist' Johann Caspar Lavater, who around 1800 tried to deduce a person's character, intellectual abilities or criminal inclinations from his or her profile. Another important historical source for Walker are the so-called 'slave narratives', autobiographical stories about the lives of slaves, often censored and rewritten by abolitionist ghostwriters.

The last and by far longest essay, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem", tries to contextualize two very different paintings by two very different artists. The only feature these two paintings seem to have in common is the title *Jerusalem*. Though the artists Gerhard Richter (1932) and Anselm Kiefer (1945) differ in age, they both developed their work in the 1960s (Richter was already educated as a painter in the GDR before he went to the BRD in 1961 and more or less started over again at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf). In the oeuvres of both artists, there are lots of references to German history and memory, especially to the Second World War. In such a

context, any painting called *Jerusalem* would be charged with connotations that go far beyond the simple existence of that city. Kiefer's painting seems to lift Jerusalem (whether the city itself or a metaphorical allusion to what the city stands for) out of history – a strategy he uses in other works too and one that is severely attacked by critics like Benjamin Buchloh who condemn Kiefer's approach as regressive and mythologizing. Richter, on the other hand, seems to have been concerned with the real Jerusalem, as he has painted the actual city after a photograph he took from his hotel room during a visit in 1995. However, Richter has blurred his picture to such an extent that Jerusalem can hardly be recognized in the painting.

Kiefer's *Jerusalem* is discussed within the context of the exhibition *Anselm Kiefer. Bilder 1986 → 1980*

in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (December 20, 1986 – February 8, 1987) and described as a painting that marks the transition in Kiefer's oeuvre from works about German history and German mythology to works based on Jewish history and mythology. Richter's *Jerusalem* is analysed as part of a larger series of paintings within his oeuvre dealing with the Second World War and its aftermath, and the problems of representation and the representable, of history, memory and politics, in the specific context of post-Auschwitz Germany.

Kiefer's and Richter's paintings are in many ways opposites. Yet one may ask whether they also have something in common. As they both deal with a complicated *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, I use Michael Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory' in order to put into perspective the artistic polemic and to stress that cultural memory always has to do with the complex entanglement of all kinds of practices of memory. I use the productive dynamics of multidirectional memory, of course without downplaying the differences between these artists, their paintings and the questions these paintings ask. Both Kiefer and Richter take part in multiple processes of memory that develop in different directions. Moreover, with their *Jerusalem*-paintings they both take on the almost impossible task of representing the Holocaust, even if they do so in an indirect way. In that sense neither painter surrenders himself to a passive melancholia, but tries to employ more productive ways of mourning.

If Richter's art is usually identified with a self-conscious, somewhat anachronistic practice of postmodern history painting (e.g. his *18. Oktober, 1977* about the Baader-Meinhof group), the same goes for Kiefer's work. Kiefer's art also reflects the ways in which we try to come to terms with history, memory and art in the twentieth century, by showing us paintings full of hermeneutic undecidability. Both *Jerusalems* are the result of conflicts between remembering and forgetting. Both re-remember a ruined past in an oblique manner and both use an amalgam of trivial and art historical clichés (from the sublime to the tourist snapshot). With their *Jerusalem*-paintings Kiefer and Richter thus show divergent *and* convergent practices of memory.

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