

Issues in the Collection and Conservation of American Vernacular Memorial Art

ABSTRACT

A new category of artifacts is beginning to overwhelm museums, historical societies, and other institutions and even private conservators. I am referring to these artifacts as “American vernacular memorial art.” They are the materials that are left as mementos at makeshift memorials or spontaneous shrines, such as in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The conservation of these artifacts is quite unique and problematic due to the damage they have suffered serving as outdoor memorials, some for many months at a time.

These new vernacular memorials raise unique and important issues in art conservation and museological ethics. Many museums don’t know whether these materials should even ethically be collected or how much of these materials to collect. There are a variety of opinions as to whether these materials will offer an historical perspective in the narrative of an event. In addition, there is also tremendous disagreement over the actual conservation procedures for these artifacts.

There has also not been a comprehensive narrative of American vernacular memorial art. We need such a narrative because this phenomenon has now become a prominent part of the contemporary American visual landscape.

INTRODUCTION

“American vernacular memorial art” is memorial art by common people, not commissioned artists, which has developed a multitude of new forms of expression in the United States. Memorialization has evolved from the private and personal to public, demonstrative, and collective

displays of mourning. From individual mementos such as posthumous portraits and treasured locks of hair kept privately by the bereaved, a plethora of sidewalk and cyberspace memorials now confronts the American public. These new vernacular forms have affected the attitudes and policies of public institutions and the design and development of public memorial sites and museums.

These types of tragic events and reactions are certainly not unique to the United States (witness the reaction to Princess Diana’s death). Rather than exploring this as a worldwide phenomenon, this research focuses predominantly on American events and institutions, which are already facing a growing pressure to address this type of collection.

Books and articles have been written on post-mortem photography, cemetery art, religious shrines from Eastern and Western traditions, spontaneous shrines, roadside memorials, graffiti art, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the AIDS quilt, and the sociology and psychology of the grieving process. However, they have not been tied together as a comprehensive narrative of American vernacular memorial art. Such a narrative would chronicle its evolution, connect these different forms of expression, and give us a basis for understanding contemporary vernacular forms of memorial art. We need such a narrative because this phenomenon has now become a prominent part of the contemporary American visual landscape.

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions raised by this new phenomenon:

- What is American vernacular memorial art?
- How has it impacted museum collections?
- What conservation issues does it raise?
- What ethical issues does it raise?
- What is its place in the narrative of American art history?

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN VERNACULAR MEMORIAL ART

The artifacts of American vernacular memorial art have long been regarded as curiosities of the macabre in relatively obscure historic collections. Some of the earliest examples of American vernacular memorial art are the posthumous paintings created by itinerant portraitists in the late seventeenth century. Commissioned by the mourning family, these works were displayed in the family home and generally remained in their possession.

As described in Burns (1990), hand-rendered memorial tributes to George Washington became very popular after his death in 1799. This gave rise to a national vernacular trend to memorialize others. These tributes were created in the form of needlework samplers, quilts, jewelry containing a lock of hair (or made entirely out of the hair), watercolors and oil paintings — and, if the family could afford it, mourning attire. The leading artisans producing these memorial mementos were young women who were taught these arts in finishing school.

In 1835, Currier and Ives offered to the public inexpensive lithographic prints that individuals could purchase and personalize to memorialize their loved ones. Instead of portraits, these prints incorporated the standard iconographic elements of the times, such as willow trees, urns, and weeping women and children. These cheap prints effectively made obsolete the more expensive and labor-intensive hand-rendered mementos.

With the advent of the camera in 1839, the family now might have a photograph (a daguerreotype or later process) of the deceased. This could be remounted and reframed within a black housing to serve as a memorial. In case a previous photographic portrait did not exist, traveling photographers specializing in post-mortem portraits of the deceased could create a memento for the family. Such post-mortem photography continues to this day, when families sometimes take their own photographs at the funeral home.

Another nineteenth-century memorial phenomenon was the development of the pastoral landscaped garden cemetery. One of the earliest in America was Green-Wood Cemetery, which opened in Brooklyn, New York, in 1838. Families commissioned huge monuments and memorial sculptures of their own design for their loved ones. As noted in Richman (1998), Green-Wood gave the American public its first appreciation of sculpture in general, becoming such a popular Sunday destination that it led directly to the development and creation of the first large American public park, New York City's Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead.

In the first half of the twentieth century, memorials to common citizens began to appear in public, with the erection of statues and plaques listing the casualties of the Great

War. (This is distinct from memorials to famous individual statesmen and members of the officer class who traditionally came from the elite and educated classes.) These war memorials were commonly placed in parks or in town squares throughout America.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the memorial traditions of new immigrant communities began to emerge in the United States. The ancestor shrines of Asian communities and the public shrines of Latino and other Catholic immigrant communities were echoed in the American landscape. These took the form of roadside memorials to accident victims, of graffiti memorials on the sides of buildings as reported by Feur (2002), and even of "R.I.P." tags on automobile rear windows or on the subway cars that passed through the heart of the inner city.

In the ghettos of America, what began as an underground movement to memorialize the victims of drug wars and gang shootings evolved into a new form of urban mural painting. As noted by Cooper and Sciorra (1992), this subversive display shocked many citizens and public officials, for not only did it deface public property, but it glorified and memorialized some of society's more notorious citizens along with the innocent poor. The forms and styles of this "gangsta art" have grown and now are found in mainstream advertising and throughout the music and video media of America. A number of the graffiti artists have parlayed their skills into legitimate businesses.

The 1970s marked a turning point in the evolution of American vernacular memorials from the familial to the public milieu. Most people are not aware that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was built in response to a grassroots movement started by a single veteran, Jan Scruggs. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund raised approximately \$9,900,000 entirely through private donations — no federal funds were needed.

Scruggs then lobbied Congress for a site for the memorial. As described on the Web site of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior (2002), President Carter signed legislation to provide a site in Constitution Gardens near the Lincoln Memorial in 1980. The Memorial Fund held a competition to choose the architect, which was open to any U.S. citizen eighteen years of age or older. An architecture student, Maya Lin, won with a design that incorporated every known American casualty of the Vietnam war, now familiarly known as "The Wall."

Since the creation of the Vietnam Memorial, people have left thousands of objects (letters, photographs, dolls, teddy bears, and even a Harley Davidson motorcycle) below the names of their loved ones, creating impromptu personal (but public) shrines. From the beginning, these gifts have been collected each night from the memorial site, archived, and cataloged by a Parks Department employee, himself a Vietnam Veteran. I believe this to have been the

first major institutional collection of American vernacular memorial artifacts. As noted in Updike (2000), some of these materials are also now on permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

In 1985, another group outside the mainstream met in San Francisco to document lives they feared history would ignore, the lives of AIDS victims who were their friends and lovers. A folk memorial form of the quilt, conceived by gay rights activist Cleve Jones, was adopted by the gay community and quickly spread throughout the country and the world. It culminated in the AIDS quilt, as described on the Web site of the NAMES Project Foundation (2002).

Building on long-standing folk tradition, the quilt is comprised of more than forty-four thousand panels commemorating the lives of family members, friends, or lovers who have died from AIDS. Within the three-by-six-foot standard size established, invention and improvisation reign.

Since the mid-twentieth century, an increasing number of sites of human tragedies have become "hallowed ground." Among these are memorial museums or parks at Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the U.S. detention camps for Japanese-American citizens, the sunken ships at Pearl Harbor, and even the rediscovered hulk of the Titanic.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial is another turning point in the growth of direct, public expression on hallowed ground. On April 19, 1995, a domestic terrorist blew up the Murrah Federal building, killing 168 people, including children, and deeply shocking the nation. Immediately afterwards, people started leaving memorial tributes on the construction fence surrounding the bomb-

ing site. This became the first large-scale spontaneous shrine to emerge on a fence or wall that had not been created specifically for purposes of remembrance (fig. 1).

As noted by Linenthal (2001), the survivors and the victims' families, who were instrumental in the entire design process of the official memorial, insisted that some of the site's original perimeter fence remain as part of the official memorial. "The Fence" not only continues to collect expressions of grief about the original bombing, but also now, in a sense, serves as America's Wailing Wall. The author recently observed numerous commemorations there of the attacks of September 11, 2001. In a subsequent interview, Jane Thomas, Collections Manager at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, mentioned collecting tributes from the Fence to various policemen and firemen who were killed at other locations in the line of duty.

The official memorial includes a field of 168 empty chairs, each inscribed with a victim's name, as described on the website of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Trust (2002). People have been leaving an outpouring of mementos on these chairs as well.

The nature of what people leave on the chairs is different from what visitors usually leave under the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall. Most visitors here did not know the victims personally. They often leave souvenirs of their visit, such as business cards, key chains, driver's licenses and license plates, badges, or just their names on any available surface they have on hand. As Grider (2001) notes sagaciously, people are commemorating in this way that "they were there" as witnesses or pilgrims. This sense of pilgrimage is what leads Grider to call these sites shrines rather than memorials.

Similar spontaneous shrines arose at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, site of the killing of students and teachers in 1999, and at Texas A&M University, site of the collapse of a bonfire structure that killed twelve students, also in 1999. Numerous shrines sprang up at the sites of the former World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the crash of Flight 93 in Pennsylvania in September 2001. The spontaneous memorials for the World Trade Center victims were on a scale and of a duration never before seen. The creation of lasting permanent memorials on these sites still continues to draw tremendous controversy and public interest.

Many of the spontaneous memorials in the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks began with the posting of leaflets asking for information on missing persons. They evolved to include thousands of memorial candles, flowers, poems, prose, and simple



Fig. 1. The Fence at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, photographed April 2003.

messages and pictures on sidewalks and walls. The firehouses of New York City were also sites of a tremendous amount of vernacular and charitable participation.

The posters seeking missing persons from the World Trade Center attack were eerily reminiscent of the posters seeking missing political victims in Argentina and Chile, *los desaparecidos*. As described in Dolf-Bonekamper (2002), relatives and friends of the missing in those countries continued to post these leaflets well beyond realistic expectations of the victims' return. After the World Trade Center attack, relatives and friends also continued to post "missing" leaflets for weeks afterwards. The walls where these leaflets were posted often grew into spontaneous shrines as other people added their own tokens of tribute, grief, and support.

There were also long-standing memorial walls or fences near Trinity Church, Saint Vincent's Hospital, Saint Paul's Church, and other less visible sites such as the wall of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Little Italy. As of 2006, a display of hand-made memorial tiles still adorns an undistinguished fenced area near a make-your-own ceramics store, Our Name is Mud, at the corner of Greenwich and Seventh Avenues (from where one once had striking views of the iconic Twin Towers).

In at least one case, a grassroots memorial effort has grown into an actual new "institution." In Shanksville, Pennsylvania, near the site of the crash of Flight 93 on September 11, the Reverend Alphonse Mascherino bought a small, abandoned church building and created a non-denominational "UAL Flight 93 Memorial Chapel." The chapel is being incorporated as a non-profit educational institution, with plans to include a memorial depository, visitor's center, and library. The Rev. Mascherino is working entirely outside of established government and museum protocols in the establishment of this memorial. He relies on unsolicited donations and his own and contributed labor for the realization of his vision. Throughout the chapel, Mascherino is incorporating and repurposing American symbols, such as his *Thunder Bell*, *Torch of Liberty*, *Patriot Tree*, and *Peace Totem Pole*.

The events of that September also inspired two separate photographic exhibits started by individuals in New York City. Both of these showed hundreds of photographs by amateurs, tourists, and professionals that poured in from everywhere, many with no attribution to the photographers. Thousands of people came to view these exhibits, both in New York and as they toured the world. Both *Here is New York* and the September 11 Photo Project have published books of photographs with the same names. You can also buy individual photographs from these exhibits (with all proceeds going to charity) and this is still an ongoing endeavor (fig. 2).

These photographs and books constitute a new form of memorial art, which we could call "American vernacular

memorial photography." While people have, since the beginning of photography, kept memorial portraits and pictures from funerals, for the first time people are buying pictures of an event from amateur photographers, not photojournalists, to act as a memorial.

Other organized and impromptu memorials have appeared in cyberspace. Professional and amateur writers collected their stories about September 11 and created websites memorializing the event. The *New York Times* ran an unprecedented series of reportorial portraits of the thousands of victims. It continues to run on the *New York Times* Web site and a large portion (with, presumably, the rest to follow) has been published as a book entitled *Portraits of Grief*.

THE LEGITIMACY OF VERNACULAR MEMORIALS AS ART

In order for vernacular memorials to qualify as a legitimate aspect of art history, we must establish that they are a form of art, not just historical artifacts. To begin with, modern vernacular memorials are a direct evolution of earlier forms that are generally recognized as memorial art.

For example, early American memorial portraits are often included in the American art collections of major museums and are discussed under American art history in standard textbooks. Memorial quilts and samplers also receive the same treatments. Black-bordered cartes-de-visite and post-mortem photographs are acknowledged parts of photography's history as an art.

Yet while modern vernacular memorial art follows in the tradition of memorial art, the modern form has evolved



Fig. 2. Polish Soldier Memorial across the Hudson River from the burning World Trade Center, September 11, 2001, copyright Hue Way (Wei He) 2001. This photograph appeared in both *Here is New York* and the September 11 Photo Project.

in important ways. In the past, when people were moved by a loss, such as of a family member, they would create their own personal items of memorial art. Usually these would be in forms prescribed by the culture of the times, such as jewelry made from a lock of the deceased's hair, or a child's drawing displayed at home, or a special headstone or statue at the cemetery.

Now, however, people are using an unlimited, imaginative range of materials, media, and visual forms. Individuals create homemade memorials for people who are neither family members, personal friends, nor famous statesmen. Moreover, rather than display these mementos mori at home or in their local community, they bring them as offerings to sometimes faraway sites and place them alongside the offerings of hundreds of other people, as parts of huge, impromptu assemblages.

In modern art, many artists have tried to reproduce a childlike spontaneity in their work. They juxtapose everyday objects with the strange or uncanny to create emotional effects. Now in these memorials we have huge, truly spontaneous collages, which communicate visually, directly, and with tremendous visceral impact.

These collages are formed in a unique collective process, which brings together disparate individuals from all walks of life, from a multitude of ethnic, socio-economic, religious, and regional groups. The way people place their contributions also has its own unique aesthetic. As Grider (2001) observes, "These sacred folk art assemblages . . . reveal a coherent organizational principle in the arrangement of memorabilia which usually results in an aesthetically satisfying appearance." The fence, wall, or sidewalk is transformed into a powerful sculptural element within the community landscape.

The intensity of people's emotional reactions to horrific events and tragic accidents is the catalyst for these monumental acts of artistic creation. We can see evidence of this intensity when people arrive at the site, and through an overwhelming need to add their own personal expression to the assemblage, improvise with whatever materials are at hand. People literally pull the shirts off their backs, or utilize unused children's disposable diapers, and write or draw on them and attach them to the fence. They are participants in a mass historic public performance.

Another recent example of mass participation in an artistic form of memorialization is the AIDS quilt, which is considered the largest organized community arts project in the world. Together, the quilt and these spontaneous shrines probably constitute the largest collective artworks in the annals of art history.

The items that make up the collages of spontaneous shrines are often artistically interesting in their own right. In addition to individual pieces of inspired homemade art, there is a range of "repurposed" objects that is stunning in its variety. There are memorabilia such as baseball caps and

tee shirts, baby pacifiers, cheerleader's megaphones, and teddy bears. There are religious and cultural symbols such as Christian crosses and angels, Japanese origami cranes, Native American dream-catchers, and the piles of stones that Jews leave on headstones.

While there is a common "vocabulary" of items at the various memorials, as noted by Grider (2001), there are also specific forms of expression that evolve at particular sites. For example, at several memorials near the Pennsylvania crash site of Flight 93, which went down on September 11, people have painted messages on small stones. At the memorials for the NASA astronauts killed in the breakup of shuttle Columbia, Grider noted a proliferation of balloons, perhaps tokens of safe flight or ascent to heaven.

Spontaneous shrines, once ephemeral, were viewed as simple reactions to local tragedies or historical events. The fact that they now in many cases become permanent dynamic shrines demonstrates that they are developing a long-lasting aesthetic of emotional value to many people. Zeitlin and Harlow (2001) have discussed people's use of art, song, and dance as an important part of the contemporary grieving process. The Fence at Oklahoma City, which has become a permanent, evolving work of vernacular memorial art, is a prime example of this form of expression.

There has been a well-documented, oft-repeated pattern throughout art history of new forms of expression not being considered "real art." Examples are photography, Impressionist painting, graffiti art, outsider art, and various folk arts. The public understanding of aesthetic value evolves over time to legitimize these new forms of expression.

The public's use of popular, iconic imagery, such as stuffed teddy bears and renderings of broken hearts, also conflicts with traditional notions of, and attitudes towards, collectible art. Numerous museum personnel have described these collections to the author as being devoid of artistic merit and historic content, while others think the opposite. I expect that this high-art/low-art division regarding vernacular memorials is evolving along the same path that folk art and outsider art traveled in becoming recognized, established genres within the art world and in museums.

Professional artists may have well-formed theories of impermanence as a form of artistic expression that conflict with curators' and collectors' desire to promote permanence of the artwork. We can see here that vernacular artists without these conscious theories, common people creating collective forms of public expression, also create conflicts with traditional notions of curatorship and permanence.

THE IMPACT OF VERNACULAR MEMORIAL ART ON MUSEUMS

In a few short years, a number of major American museums and institutions have started to collect the materials left at memorial sites that would otherwise be destroyed by weather or vandalism. The National Parks Service has been collecting the materials left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Smithsonian has been adding some of these artifacts to its permanent collection. Pamela West, director of the Museum Resources Center, as quoted in Updike (2000), said that in the beginning, as the collection was forming, "We had to invent what we were doing. . . . It is like doing history in reverse." She then goes on to say, "Instead of a bunch of curators deciding what is preserved, we take just about everything. . . . The public are the curators; we are the caretakers."

Jane Thomas, Collections Manager at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, has been collecting and cataloging the materials left on the Fence and on the chairs at the Memorial. She also described to me how there were no established guidelines or policies for conserving living, evolving memorials.

In Pennsylvania, the Somerset Historical Center has been collecting, archiving, and conserving materials left at the Flight 93 crash site memorial. They are acting as long-term temporary custodians on behalf of the National Park Service, which will eventually create a permanent memorial/museum at the site. This could take five to ten years, depending on available funding. This places a huge burden on a small, local historical society, and is an example of

how institutions have recognized the need to collect vernacular memorial artifacts, even though the necessary facilities, personnel, and funding are not yet in place (figs. 3–4).

Since there are no guidelines for creating these kinds of collections, museums have had to turn to experts in related fields. Dr. Sylvia Grider, an archeologist and folklorist at Texas A&M University, has developed some of the first techniques for systematically collecting and cataloging these materials, using methods borrowed from archeology. Her associate, Dr. Wayne Smith, has adapted techniques from marine archeology to help conserve water-damaged materials from these outdoor memorials.

Ed Linenthal, a noted historian and author, has been instrumental in guiding institutions and collections through this uncharted territory. Other official memorial sites and museums also help by establishing models for these new vernacular memorial sites.

In New York, the Museum of the City of New York, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York City Municipal Archives have been actively collecting, archiving, and photographing items from a multitude of spontaneous memorials related to the September 11 attack. As described in the Web site of the Museum of the City of New York (2002), the museum, in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institute, has archived materials from baseball caps to teddy bears, along with smashed fire engines and debris of the former Trade Center itself. The museum intends to preserve these artifacts for museums, memorials, and historic trusts throughout the United States.



Fig. 3. The temporary Flight 93 memorial site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, April 2003.



Fig. 4. Detail of the temporary Flight 93 memorial site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, April 2003.

In an interview Ellin Burke, collections manager at the Museum of the City of New York, described how their limited resources are being overwhelmed by the sudden addition of these new collections with their incorporation of eclectic, problematic materials. Laura McCann, deputy director at the New York City Municipal Archives, said in another interview that space, money, and other resources were sorely taxed in housing the collection of artifacts left from the World Trade Center memorial in Union Square Park.

Another curator of a small New York City museum dedicated to the uniformed services decided to simply throw out their entire collection of September 11 memorial artifacts. Her reasoning was that the collection did not reflect the museum's mission statement or intent and that the entire collection of September 11 memorabilia was artistically insignificant and without historical merit. (This curator did not want her remarks attributed and is not included in the reference notes.)

VERNACULAR MEMORIAL ART AND ISSUES IN MUSEOLOGICAL ETHICS

These new collections create new kinds of ethical issues for museums and other collectors. For example, in many cases the site of memorial and occurrence are identical. Should the location be left undisturbed as a gravesite, or transformed as an active memorial?

Should people's artifacts be left outside in a memorial setting or be brought inside to be preserved? Does removing memorial artwork from a shrine destroy its artistic merit? Its spiritual power? How can ephemeral materials be protected without negating their spontaneous nature? Is it more respectful of memorial creations and those they commemorate to leave them in situ, even if they are vulnerable to weather and vandalism or prey to souvenir-seekers? What of the desires of the creators of the memorial, and what to do when intentions clash?

In some cases, institutions decide at a certain point to photograph, then dismantle and archive the site. In other cases, the site is left undisturbed permanently or for an indefinite period, deferring engagement with these difficult issues of creation, intent, and custody.

At Oklahoma City, if a victim's family has placed an item on the Fence or on a chair, they have the option of having it left there as long as they wish. Other items are removed after thirty days. Thus there is a privileging of objects separate from aesthetic merit.

Most items left at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, except foodstuffs and flowers, are cataloged and archived. Teddy bears, of which thousands have been left, are reused in a new enterprise, Project Hope. They are labeled, conserved, and sent to the victims of September 11 and other disasters throughout the world — exporting

them in new acts of comfort separate from the intent of the artist/contributor.

Other institutions have different policies. The Somerset Historical Center allows items to stay out at the temporary memorial site indefinitely, until the artifacts are in danger of falling apart, to serve as memorial, at which point they are collected, archived, and conserved. Texas A&M University photographed, dismantled, collected, and archived the bonfire memorial site within weeks of the disaster. The Museum of the City of New York dismantled and collected all sections of the Bellevue Wall after they had been on site for months.

Unintended cultural effects result from the nature of the materials being collected. In Oklahoma City, Jane Thomas described the problems arising from the placing of Native American symbols, such as dream-catchers, at the site. As she says in her survey response, "only Native Americans may use eagle feathers (an endangered species). . . . [These] items may be removed only by persons who have been blessed by the Shaman. . . . None of our staff has yet been blessed. However, we will take that step in the future." In addition, she mentions "some items [Native American artifacts] . . . are to protect the site. They would serve no purpose if we took them into the archives. Therefore, they are left on the site."

In a subsequent interview, Thomas described how people have left foodstuffs as memorial items. These attract birds, which can leave corrosive droppings on the memorial artifacts. She has tried to discourage these kinds of items, but other caretakers have placed no such limitation. Barbara Black, curator at the Somerset Historical Center, mentioned to me that she wishes not to influence what sort of artifacts are brought to the memorial site and realizes that many items will not be salvageable.

Other items that identify individuals by name or image have raised privacy issues. As long as the item is part of a larger memorial, it's considered to be in the public domain. But if an item is displayed or reproduced separately, you must obtain a release from the individual or from the estate. Jane Thomas regularly finds herself consulting with legal experts on these matters.

Barbara Black, in her survey response, described some issues stemming from the recent nature of the events: "Do we save everything? If not, how selective can we be without knowing the full importance especially when the historical significance of September 11 is still not known?" She cited the lack of institutional guidelines for collections, such as how much conservation is appropriate for these artifacts.

She also mentioned that for government museums, the religious nature of some items could be problematic (probably due to the separation of church and state). As the materials and nature of vernacular memorial art con-

tinues to evolve, new ethical concerns will no doubt continue to arise.

VERNACULAR MEMORIAL ART AND ISSUES IN CONSERVATION

Vernacular memorial art, in its many historic forms, has always posed particular challenges to conservators. Cemetery headstones, for example, are a form of vernacular memorial art that needs long-term protection from the effects of time, weather, and vandalism.

Modern memorial murals by graffiti artists have their own set of conservation issues, as mentioned in Cooper and Sciorra (1994). Some murals were painted on permanent walls such as construction perimeters. Sometimes a property owner regained control of owned space, or rival cliques sought visual dominance by painting over a graffiti artist's effort. Ravaged by environmental effects or by vandalism, defacement, or outright destruction, these murals have generally been conserved in the form of restoration by repainting the vandalized originals or repainting the mural at another locale. Questions of intention and authenticity multiply.

Even legal outdoor memorial murals pose problems in terms of permanence. The artists may have used house paints and aerosol spray paints that were not necessarily meant for exterior use. These paints of recent manufacture have not stood the test of time in other contexts, let alone in a harsh exterior environment.

Wild fluctuations of temperature and freezing-thawing cycles can wreak havoc on a painted surface, let alone its support (brick, stucco, and/or wood). The capillary effect of water on a painted surface can cause paint cracking and deconsolidation. Salt effervescence from stucco surfaces may leach out onto and bloom across the mural's surface. Paint can crackle, lift, and chip off. Pollution, soot, and car exhaust can also darken and corrode the paint.

Ultraviolet light from the sun is probably one of the most destructive forces in rendering a painted memorial impermanent. The sun will fade, bleach, and obliterate colorant over time and cause binders to deteriorate. Murals are particularly susceptible to this. While intending the murals to be permanent, an artist may not have considered that, in an exterior setting, care and maintenance would be necessary if the mural were to survive.

Another form of vernacular memorial with difficult conservation issues is the AIDS quilt. It is exhibited nationally and internationally, presenting difficult conservation issues. The quilt is handled extensively, which is at odds with museum protocols. While many museums and institutions have exhibited it, it is left in the care of grassroots volunteers without conservation training, resources, or experience.

The author conducted a survey of the various chapters of the NAMES project, and responses indicated that there was indeed noticeable damage to the quilt panels caused by handling, transportation, and display. As the quilt has grown, these de facto archivists have had difficulty finding places to store the panels. They have had to stop showing early parts of the quilt that are now too damaged or fragile to handle. Conservation concerns have dictated restrictions on materials for the making of new panels, enforcing standardization not present at the quilt's inception. The chapters have learned from experience to prohibit the use of materials such as paper or sequins in the construction of panels, so as to extend the life of the quilt.

Since the quilt is a composite of various mixed media, some of the disparate materials are already causing adverse reactions. There is staining and rust from metals and staining and failure of adhesion from glues. With age, textiles and paper have become embrittled, and tears, damage and fading are frequent problems with the quilt. However, parts of the quilt made from polyester fabric might fare better than others over time. I believe that frequent handling and the lack of adequate storage, institutional care, or conservation will prevent the quilt as a whole from becoming a permanent historic artifact.

The most obvious conservation problems associated with artifacts from spontaneous shrines come from their exposure to weeks and months of weather, sunlight, and pollution. Fungus and mold are very common. For example, Smith and Grider (2001) describe in detail the emergency conservation of waterlogged bibles left at the memorial to the students killed by the collapse of the bonfire structure at Texas A&M University in 1999.

In my subsequent interview with Grider, she also mentioned the difficulty of conserving items such as the students' "grodes," coveralls that they wore throughout the bonfire construction and that were subsequently stained with blood, sweat, and urine. Barbara Black, curator at the Somerset Historical Center, wrote in her survey response: "Plastic of every type, cellophane tape, masking tape, duct tape, rusted metal, brittle paper, laminated paper continue to be problematic in their long term care. . . . With the increase in 'memorialization' of current events, the museum world has been tasked with new issues."

In New York, following the September 11 attack, many of the memorial walls were constructed with similar materials. Other problems arise from the media themselves, such as markers, fugitive inks, photographs, etc.

The Wall of Hope and Remembrance on the outside of Saint Vincent's Hospital in downtown New York was a long expanse of posters of the missing, prayers, and photographs that were collected by the hospital and taped to the wall in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. It was encased in acrylic plastic on a south-facing wall in direct sunlight for most of the day. This illustrates quite

vividly how an attempt to save or render permanent a memorial can go seriously awry. Baked by the sun, the colorants had faded, the pictures became ghostly images, cellophane adhesives had failed, paper was torn, curled, or lying loose at the bottom of the encasement. Humidity became trapped under the protective layer, fostering massive mold growth that has discolored and structurally damaged and weakened the paper.

Even vandalism has been a factor in rendering impermanent this attempt at permanence (figs. 5–6). Newspapers dated long after September 11, 2001, had been found stuffed behind the protective Plexiglas covering, tearing the fragile paper behind. Stickers and scratched graffiti on the face of the plastic obliterated the images it encased. The hospital could not remove this collage of materials and bring it inside, as it was part of the hospital's exterior wall. Ironically, the manner in which the hospital chose to conserve the memorial outside encouraged its deterioration.

In an article in the *New York Times*, Haberman (2006) reported that the wall was finally dismantled in 2006 after a winter storm ripped apart the Plexiglas covering. The wall was never intended to be a permanent memorial. "The permanence of it came later on, when we realized it had great significance to people," Sister Kevin noted. The hospital claims a new wall will be constructed, better protected from the elements, using copies of the original artifacts.

The Bellevue Hospital Wall of Prayer, another spontaneous outdoor memorial in New York City, was a plywood construction fence consisting of forty four-foot-by-eight-foot sheets of painted plywood that also became covered with the iconic materials of the post-September 11 reaction. After two months outdoors, the wall was dismantled and collected by the Museum of the City of New York. Eighteen plywood panels have now been conserved by the Northeast Document Conservation Center, under the direction of Walter Newman, director of paper conservation.

The conservation of this artifact resulted in a complete disassembling and reassembling of the various layers of papers, tapes, yarn, and other materials posted on the wall. Tapes of every sort, such as electrical, duct, packing, paper, cloth, various cellophane and plastic tapes, all had to have their corrosive adhesive coatings removed. Papers all had to be removed, cleaned, flattened, and tacked to Mylar sheets cut to individual sizes as a barrier protection from the wood.

Individual sheets of paper, which had been encapsulated by homemade methods and were too moldy to be reassembled, had to have digital replicas made. Tapes also had to be backed by protective Mylar before being reassembled onto the panels. In the spring of 2007, Walter Newman's paper describing the Document Center's con-



Fig. 5. The Wall of Hope and Remembrance, St. Vincent's Hospital, 2003.



Fig. 6. Detail from the Wall of Hope and Remembrance, 2003.

servation efforts will be published by the Institute of Paper Conservation.

The Wall of Prayer will never be exhibited in its original form because of its massive size. Parts of it will be exhibited indoors; however, it will never be seen in its totality. Since the fence is now in institutional care with plans to use it as an exhibit, it could be considered to be a permanent, but out-of-context, memorial. The conservators and museum collectors on this project had to walk a fine line between careful conservation techniques, aimed at preserving a memorial for future generations, and the visceral, authentic narrative provided by the original dirt, stains, and rips.

At other locales in New York City, such as St. Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church, spontaneous shrines were created on buildings' exterior wrought-iron fences. Most of the items, where possible, were individually collected. But only some of the items could be kept, not perishables like food and most flowers and plants. As a result, you cannot

reconstruct anything like the original spontaneous shrine with the juxtaposition of materials and the compositional whole that made it so powerful. Only parts of the whole may be saved and made permanent.

After the September 11 attacks, Union Square Park in New York City became one vast memorial site and happening. Masses of people came there to participate in collective grieving and mourning. After two weeks, the impromptu memorial was removed by the New York City Parks Department. The New York City Municipal Archives has archived some of the materials collected. Floral and botanical matter has been disposed of, as have candles and other perishables. The remaining materials, paper, posters, and small sculptures, have been archived out of the context of their original placement.

Numerous firehouses and police precincts in New York City have their own vernacular memorials. In an interview in 2005 Paula Schrynemakers, a conservator who has worked on conserving some of these memorials, said that lack of money for conservation supplies, the memorials' environmentally unfriendly location, and the sheer size of some of these memorials create tremendous obstacles and impediments to conservation. Most conservation is done on-site, in situ.

As written about by Collins (2006), the installation of *Elegy in Dust: Sept. 11th* and the Chelsea Jeans Memorial at the New-York Historical Society presented unique conservation and installation problems. The exhibition presents the contents of a storefront located a block away from the former World Trade Center. The storefront of jeans, sweaters, and other apparel was covered in the toxic dust, ash, and debris of the fallen towers. Originally encased by glass by the store's owner, David Cohen, the site quickly became a vernacular shrine and "a place of pilgrimage for thousands of tourists, mourners, and recovery workers in the year after the attack" (Collins 2006). This memorial remained at 196 Broadway for a year until October 2002, when the contents were transferred to the New-York Historical Society.

Because this toxic dust might contain the remains of those lost and missing in the towers attack, the artifacts must be treated with the utmost reverence and respect. "It is always dangerous to disturb toxic dust, but this dust is historic, and possibly sacred" (Collins 2006). Senior conservator Alan Balicki notes about the artifacts, "Here I am, trying to preserve what I normally clean off.... It's strange to be so carefully preserving something that is so destructive."

The handling of these challenging relics forced the museum personnel to work inside a temporary tent of polyethylene to shield the rest of the museum space from the carcinogenic dust and toxins. To protect themselves, they had to wear hazard suits and respirators with com-

pound filters. The suits were specially made of Tyvek to reduce static electricity that would disturb the dust.

Whereas the Oklahoma City National Memorial used artificial dust to depict the aftermath of the bombing, this New York exhibit may be the first time that the actual toxic dust has been used in a museum setting. The exhibition case itself had to be specially constructed to provide a completely reliable seal. The actual toxicity of the dust is still unknown. The dust's potential corrosive effect on the apparel's fabric is also unknown; however to date it appears not have caused deterioration.

THE IMPACT OF VERNACULAR MEMORIAL ART ON CIVIC LIFE

The plethora of vernacular memorials that arose throughout New York City and the surrounding region in the aftermath of the September 11 attack have generated the greatest number of examples of civic issues related to this phenomenon.

How does the public planning process intersect with families' private grief? Should spontaneous memorials be allowed to permanently encroach on sidewalks and other public spaces? If the site is in the middle of a city, how can the city resume its necessary activities without destroying the memorial? Should memorials be removed for safety reasons (as in the case of roadside memorials that can distract drivers)?

Initially, spontaneous memorials were celebrated or tolerated by the neighborhood and public but, as time and environmental degradation weathered the appearance of these memorials, public opinion changed and tolerance waned. On the other hand, as reported by Wilson (2002a and 2002b) in the *New York Times*, the dismantling of some of these memorials also caused dissent.

As reported by Iovine (2003), the number of official memorials in downtown Manhattan — to commemorate not only September 11 but the Irish Potato Famine and the African Burial Ground, the Museum of Jewish Heritage (a Holocaust memorial), and numerous others — caused the columnist Jimmy Breslin to dub this area "Misery Mile" (in contrast to Manhattan's famous "Museum Mile" uptown). There were also reports (Saulny 2003) of a large theft of mementos from a spontaneous memorial next to the State Supreme Court building that was being cared for by one of the court officers.

The simple existence of these sites and memorials causes controversy. Governments and the broader public see them in terms of historic locales, but the needs of the living, economics, and land use can be at odds with the stigma of residing in a cemetery. These public locales have become "sites of hurtful memory," as named by Dolf-Bonekamper (2002), since they can cause a tremendous amount of emotional pain for victims' families. Divergent points of view

collide, yet the urge to create memorials to loved ones persists, regardless of time, location, or medium.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that American vernacular memorial art represents a new kind of art collection that is significantly impacting museums and citizens. It presents unique and significant problems in terms of their collection, conservation, and exhibition. It also creates religious, moral, philosophical, and ethical issues.

These issues will not fade away but will likely increase. Once the memorial and museum are completed at the World Trade Center site, the public will, in all likelihood, interact with these as they have with the Vietnam Veterans and Oklahoma City memorials, for years on end. There will be a new, living, evolving, spontaneous collection of materials to be dealt with.

We need to develop conservation techniques appropriate to these massive collections of diverse, ephemeral materials. The conservation community has to form some cohesive, unified approaches to the preservation of these materials. We need to properly position vernacular memorial artifacts in the narrative of American art history. We need to maintain a dialogue and suggest policies and guidelines to help the diverse institutions, groups, and individual conservators who are struggling to care for these important, meaningful, and historic artifacts.

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