

Dialectics of Monument and Counter-monument: Memory at Kent State

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"All awareness of the past is founded on memory" and "the remembered past," according to David Lowenthal, "is both individual and collective."¹ In this way, memory, as a form of awareness, differs from historical knowledge: it is wholly personal, first-hand, and our own. Collective memory is related to personal memory but, according to Maurice Halbwachs and Paul Connerton, takes the form of ceremonial acts. These acts are shared, repeated, and subject to change, but are within a system of other memories, social structures and beliefs.²

Monuments today negotiate private and public memories, commemorative acts, and shared spatial practices. The memorials at Kent State University demonstrate this negotiation, as well as complexities of official and unofficial commemorations. The official memorial competition in 1982 asked competitors "to create a memorial in relation to the site of the May 4 tragedy through which a person, tracing the path of the events... will gain a deep sense of the events of that day" and "arrive at a broader realm of feeling and understanding." The document also states that the memorial should not be "accusatory or laudatory" or "be a source of further dissension" but be a "reflective site emphasizing inquiry and learning."³ By this account, the Kent State memorial is, as James Young would describe, a complex mixture of monument and counter-monument: it is consoling and fixed and both passive and inviting.⁴ More importantly, however, the memorial competition attempts to frame the way members of the community, regardless of their involvement, will relate to past and present histories. Among counter-

memorials, Young calls this temporal relationship a "counterindex," an alternate way to construct relationships between time, memory, and history. At Kent State, the intersection of time, memory, and history at the official memorial site is complicated by contested histories and spatial practices occurring before and after National Guardsmen shot gunfire into a crowd, wounding nine and killing four on May 4, 1970.

The history of conflict on the Kent State campus is controversial thus the text of the competition document masks politics, agency, and the complexities of failed deliberations among students, the administration and public authorities. The significance of this suppression is that the document precedes and subsequently circumscribes the official memorial and, therefore, an official memory of events. In addition, informal commemorative practices on the Kent State campus have shifted the site of memory away from the official memorial. Representations of events foreshadow this shift. To this end, this paper considers the representations of events, spatial practices, and commemorative space as semiotic constructions that can and do reveal the role of monuments today and, at Kent State, the making of a dialectic between a monument and counter-monument.⁵

Representations and Spatial Practices

Images of May 4 permeate media sources, communicate the terror of protest, the space of conflict, as well as expressions of loss and remembrance. Beyond these images, however, are drawings that represent events

as evidence, as fixed entities and tactical maneuvers. This kind of evidence is as solid as it is precarious: lines, based on historical accounts, reveal attitudes, judgments, and assumptions about the historical actors, history, as well as the temporal and spatial frame of the events themselves.

An FBI drawing used during the Federal Grand Jury in 1973 and 1974 depicts a perspectival view of bodies lying on the ground dead or wounded.⁶ The drawing also shows the movements attributed to the National Guardsmen and protestors, the use of tear gas, and the presence of National Guard rifles. Bullets, however, are absent, an omission that illuminates a core aspect of the courtroom deliberation, namely the potential innocence of the National Guardsmen, as well as later and deep-seated disagreements about the nature of the Kent State conflict. For most, the guilt and burden of killing fellow American citizens naturally falls on the National Guard. For others, the shootings are difficult to comprehend and assimilate into the history and subsequent memory of May 4, particularly when the day is considered in the context of other events.

Other drawings are seemingly more definitive, published long after the events. These depictions, like the FBI drawing, illuminate important landmarks and ideas but often measured, showing events in plan.⁷ Taylor Hall, Prentice Hall, the Victory Bell, the ROTC building, and Blanket Hill emerge as important physical and spatial entities: they are reproduced again and again in text and in image as though their continued representation solidifies their role in history. Blanket Hill and its adjacent parking lot, in particular, are the site of the fatal shootings and are significant territories of contestation and memory formation

In 1977, plans for a gymnasium annex near Blanket Hill stirred controversy. A perceived need to preserve the space led to a 62 day sit-in on Blanket Hill, an event which came to be known as "Tent City." The protest was staged to peacefully inhabit the site until the campus administration backed down and changed their plans to build the annex near Blanket Hill. Miriam Jackson, in her history of Tent City, asserts that the general sentiment among students, survivors, families, and the residents of the Tent City – categories which are not

mutually exclusive – was a desire to leave the land as the a memorial to the victims of May 4.⁸ While the initial hope of the Tent City coalition was to stop the construction of the gym annex, their efforts failed and the gym was built as planned. Apart from the protest, the gym annex has historical significance: it is temporally situated between official and unofficial commemorative activities in so far as May 4, 1975 marked the last official commemoration and subsequent formation of a student group called the May 4 Task Force.⁹

In other aspects of commemoration, the May 4 Task Force was more successful. The group stymied a proposal for a "memorial arch," symbolic of military victory, near the site of the shooting. They also organized annual commemorative ceremonies including rallies and, more importantly, continued the practice of candle-lit vigils. In addition, the May 4 Task Force advanced the idea of a memorial competition, a proposal that took hold and gained acceptance among members of the administration in 1982.¹⁰ To understand the complexities of this competition and the formation of memory at Kent, it is important to consider the spatial-events in the days before the shootings and the location of the Kent State May 4 Memorial, dedicated in 1990. This comparison illuminates the role of other sites, namely the Victory Bell and the ROTC building, and questions the categories of monument, counter-monument, individual and collective memories, as well as the notions of fixed and changing relationships among time, history and memory.

According to many accounts, but the Competition guidelines in particular, conflicts began May 1 when students, in response to President Nixon's radio and television address, gathered at the campus Victory Bell and ceremonially buried, as enactment of its death, a copy of the U.S. constitution.¹¹ In the evening, with warm weather, some alcohol, and indignation over the U.S. occupation of Vietnam and Cambodian territory, students moved toward the center of town. A motorcycle group and others joined them. Eventually, a bonfire was lit and several shop windows were broken. When the police arrived, they dispersed the crowd. The mayor, after surveying the scene, declared a state of emergency and called the Governor of Ohio, who in turn dispatched the National Guard. Nearby bars were closed by local authorities,

hundreds of people were suddenly in the streets and, with the aid of tear gas and riot-gear, the police moved the crowd toward campus.

The following day, the Competition guidelines describe how many students, appalled by the vandalism, helped to clean up downtown, while the University administration obtained and issued a notice of injunction prohibiting damage to the buildings on campus. By 8 pm, however, over one thousand people surrounded the old wooden barracks, home to ROTC on campus. The building was set on fire, and the firemen who were unable to extinguish the blaze eventually left the scene. By midnight Saturday, May 2, the National Guard cleared the campus, forcing students as well as non-students into dormitories for the night.

On Sunday, authorities met and misunderstandings brewed between the student leaders and the administration. At dusk, a crowd gathered near the Victory Bell and, despite the temporary ban of assemblies on campus, did not disperse. At 9 pm, the National Guard read the Ohio Riot Act and discharged tear gas. The demonstrators, however, reassembled at the intersection of East Main and Lincoln Streets and blocked traffic. The Competition guidelines report that the crowd believed officials would speak to them, but none arrived. Eventually the gathering became hostile, and at 11 pm the Riot Act was read again, followed by another release of tear gas. Several were injured in the confusion. At noon the following day, two to three thousand people gathered on the Commons near the Victory Bell. This assembly, after a skirmish, ended when National Guardsmen fired bullets into the crowd, wounding nine and killing four. Immediately following the tragedy, campus was closed.¹²

Depictions of Kent that include the locations of confrontation May 1 through 4, and the eventual memorial site, reveal complexities among conceptions of time, memory, and history. In particular, such representations show a cluster of activity near the Victory Bell and an oscillation of events on and off campus. The ROTC building, a spatial and temporal anomaly with respect to the patterns of events, suggests an ideological territory within the larger spatial framework. Representations also illuminate the arbitrary nature of the campus edge: the spaces of downtown were,

like the Victory Bell, an equal if not a more destructive backdrop for assembly and protest.

Memory

The official site of the memorial is adjacent to, but not amidst, the physical spaces of contestation. Its dislocation avoids interaction with the site of tragedy. In addition, the memorial's history as a competition is fraught with controversy. Veterans groups opposed the construction of a memorial on property belonging to the State of Ohio, efforts to fundraise were reportedly under-whelming and the built memorial is a fraction of its proposed size and cost.¹³ The built design, the result of strict competition rules, is not the original winning entry by Ian Taberner.

Taberner's proposal straddled the path between Prentice and Taylor Halls. It overlooked the commons and Victory Bell, where the conflict began, as well as the Parking lot, where the conflict ended. The proposal interrupted the path five times, providing four spaces for contemplative mediation and one for group gatherings. Each contemplative space aligned with an interruption in a wall, one for each room. Nine, regularly placed carvings, grouped three at a time, covered the same wall. Wayne Charney has asserted that the memorial, akin to Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, is an elegy, an un-heroic expression of loss.¹⁴ But regardless of its merits, Taberner and his proposal were disqualified because of his Canadian citizenship.

The first prize went to the original second place entry by Bruno Ast. His original proposal was adjacent to the path, a single room, with a paving pattern that symbolized the thirteen individuals most affected by events May 4. The singularity of the room, its extension over and into the landscape, as well as the cuts in both the walls and floor of the primary space dramatize the impact of events. Ast describes these openings as "vectors of history," visually connecting sites and events of May 4 with the site of the memorial.¹⁵ Budget cuts severely limited the memorial such that its built form is smaller in scope and impact. The official memorial, therefore, has been conditioned by compromise, politics, and authoritative decisions void of aesthetic concerns.

Like some counter-monuments, Ast's memorial permits various interpretations, but the history of events surrounding May 4 leads to the following question: can official memorial processes involving community input, compromise, and politics amount to a monument that "counterindexes" time, history, and memory? Prior praise for the Kent State May 4 Memorial situates the project as part of a larger shift in memorial design. This shift, attributed to the decline of commemorative objects, an increase in "experiential spaces," as well as the changing nature of events and individuals being commemorated, also represents restraint: the absence of a didactic message or commentary.¹⁶ Such an absence situates Kent's memorial as a counter-monument but the way in which it counters relationships between time, history, and memory is silent; it requires but does not demand individual attention, contemplation, and reflection.

Memorial competitions, like Kent State, are scripted procedures with guidelines and design criteria. They contain ideological assertions and community desires regarding the form or feeling of memory. Recent memorial competitions, such as the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition, asks competitors to "remember and honor the thousands and innocent men, women, and child murdered by terrorists in the horrific attacks of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001," to respect the site "made sacred through tragic loss," and to recognize "the endurance of those who survived, the courage of those who risked their lives to save others, and the compassion of all who supported us in our darkest hours."¹⁷ Similarly, the Oklahoma City Memorial competition asks competitors to honor the mission statement by remembering "those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever" as the result of the explosion April 19, 1995 and to propose environments that "offer comfort, strength, peace, hope, and serenity."¹⁸ Kent State, like New York and Oklahoma City, commemorates tragedy and loss but differs in the way that the local community has developed collective commemorative activities.

Kent's annual commemorative practices, particularly the annual candle-lit vigil, leads to another question: can collective commemorative performance "counterindex" time, memory, and history? Paul Connerton,

building on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, argues how collective memory is conveyed and sustained through commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. Here, the body is socially constituted: it is "culturally shaped in its actual practices and behavior."¹⁹ Bodies therefore contain shared, if not societal, memory and can transcend material objects and spaces. But at Kent State, in the place of what used to be functional parking spaces, are now markers that delineate the location of each victim May 4. These markers, once informal and temporal, codify an inextricable relationship between site, event, and memory. Even though the engagement of these sites is active, the repetition of activities constructs memory, monumentality, and a relationship between history and memory that is fixed.

The coincidence of event, site, and memorial is a strategy in design and in recent memorial design competitions. The memorial in Oklahoma City is, in many ways, a physical manifestation of a "house of memory": victims are recognized on the site of the former Murrah building and survivors are recognized near the "Survivor Tree."²⁰ The World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition is another example: competitors were asked to make the footprints of the World Trade Center towers visible.²¹ This coincidence leads to another, final question: is the specificity of site narrowing the distinction between memory and history?

At Kent State, the spatial practices of the annual vigil, the parking spaces, and memorial competition challenge the notions of "counterindexing" in at least two ways. First, the coincidence of commemoration in the parking lot and events May 4 bring notions of history and memory closer together. The significance of this collapse is particularly poignant at Kent State where history is contested. Second, the memorial and parking spaces share the roles Young attributes to monumentality and counter-monumentality: they participate in the formation and development of collective memory, as competition procedures and as ceremonial acts, and they cultivate personal and changing relationships with history. Together, the sites are in dialogue, honing our awareness of place and of the precarious distinction between the individual and collective, memory and history.

Endnotes

1. Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pages 193-4.
2. Connerton, Paul, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser, translator and editor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
3. *Kent State May 4 Memorial: national open design competition*, Kent State University, 1985, page 2.
4. Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), page 30.
5. This approach is akin to Kenneth Foote's research that addresses how cosmological principles of design can be identified in the landscapes of contemporary American society ("Stigmata of National Identity: exploring the cosmography of American's civil religion" in *Person, Place, and Thing: interpretive and empirical essays in cultural geography*, Shue Tuck Wong, Ed. *Geoscience and Man*, Vol. 31. (Baton Rouge: Geoscience Publications, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University. 1992)) and Edward Linenthal's research examining the relationship between Americans and their commemorative environments (*Sacred Ground: Americans and their battlefields* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993)).
6. William A. Gordon, *The Fourth of May: killings and cover-ups at Kent State* (New York: Prometheus Press, 1990). The Federal Grand Jury did not begin hearing the case until December of 1973 and the charges against the guardsmen were dropped because of insufficient evidence.
7. Representations of events appear in several sources, including Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State: a challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1973) and *Kent State/May 4: echoes through a decade*, Scott L. Bills, editor (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982).
8. Jackson, Miriam R. "Brothers and Sisters on the Land: Tent City, 1977" in *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990*, Susie Erenrich, editor. (Woodridge, CT: Viet Nam Generation, Inc. and Burning Cities Press, 1995) pages 101-115.
9. Canfora, Alan. "The may 4 Memorial at Kent State University: legitimate Tribute or Monument to Insensitivity?" in *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990*, Susie Erenrich, editor. (Woodridge, CT: Viet Nam Generation, Inc. and Burning Cities Press, 1995), pages 89-100.
10. Ibid, page 92.
11. Several sources contain accounts of the events May 1 through 4, including *Kent State May 4 Memorial: national open design competition*, Kent State University, 1985, Robert O'Neil, John P. Morris, and Raymond Mack, *No Heroes No Villains* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1972), pages 99-106, Joseph Kelner and James Munves, *The Kent State Cover-up* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), pages 1-2, and Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State: a challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1973), pages 30-60.
12. *Kent State May 4 Memorial: national open design competition*, Kent State University, 1985.
13. Canfora, page 95.
14. Charney, Wayne. "Et in Arcadia Ego: the place of memorials in Contemporary America" in *Reflections*, No. 6, Spring 1989, pages 86-95.
15. *Kent State May 4 Memorial Design Competition*, James E. Dalton, editor (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1988), page 19.
16. Amundson, Jhennifer A. "What's Behind the Wall: why progressive public memorials are designed for private commemoration" in *Reflections*, No. 10, Spring 1995, pages 50-65.
17. *World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines* (New York: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003), page 18.
18. *Oklahoma City Memorial: an international design competition* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Memorial Foundation, 1996), page 9.
19. Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), page 104.
20. Tullius's "house of memory," from the early middle ages, is elaborated in Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pages 50-81. The "survivor tree," described in the Oklahoma City Memorial competition guidelines, survived the explosion.
21. *World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines* (New York: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003), page 19.