

## **Memento Mori: Mourning, Monuments and Memory**

By Heather Cameron

“By violently stopping the flow of time, [photographs] introduced a *memento mori* into visual experience” – Martin Jay *Downcast Eyes* p. 135

The click of the camera shutter stops time for an instant and freezes the subject in a sort of visual *rigor mortis*. In the early days of photography, the long exposure times and aptly-named guillotine shutters required subjects to stand deathly still to obtain an image that wasn't blurred. Later flash lighting and improved materials for faster shutters made shorter exposures possible and the stiff long pose was no longer necessary. However, the exhausted powder and smoke or fused flash cubes still drew attention to a moment irrevocably passed.

Despite millisecond exposures and a photographer's best coaching, the subject of a photograph can still look like a deer caught in car headlights. i.e. wearing a surprised look that suggests an awareness of the proximity of death. It is this awareness of death that led Barthes to categorize photographs as “flat death” (Barthes, 92). It is where the subject becomes an object. Life, which exists as change through time, is frozen, stopped in a way comparable only to death.

Photographers can make the living corpse-like and corpses look like the living. Death portraits have been a part of photography since its beginnings. These portraits were styled by the photographer with the body depicted sleeping either in a reclining or sitting position. The body was coloured to make it seem lifelike. Unlike the painted *memento mori* of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, however, which depicted general themes about the inevitability of death and had a circulation among a wider public, photographic death portraits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were for family use. Since the portraits depicted a singular death and not Death as a character, for example Dürer's engravings might, the portraits were deemed too intimate for a wider audience. Later, with the rise of undertakers, the death portraits would often be done with the body in its casket and photographers had less leeway to style the portraits.

Cultural historian Dan Meinwald argues that these death portraits were part of the growing culture of American individualism and self-definition.



These portraits represent a certain way of thinking about death and mourning. According to a 19<sup>th</sup> century theory, the pain of separation could be reduced by having a portrait of the deceased; it served as a way to preserve a mental picture of them. Because of the relative expense of photography most families did not have many such portraits. Death portraits were often the only portraits families would have of infants or elderly people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dead, as often inscribed on their tombstones or photo cards, were “Gone but not forgotten”. These cards were a visual

stimulus to memory of a specific individual as much as they were a personal *memento mori*: a reminder that we will all die.

Freud wrote in *Mourning and Melancholia* that the mourning process consists of repeated reality testing and the acceptance that the loved individual is no longer present. Slowly and painfully, all of the libidinal attachments to that person need to be withdrawn back into the self. What, then, is the purpose of looking at a photo that depicts a dead loved one apparently sleeping? Is this not in some way a denial of the reality of death? Perhaps a better method would be to have unretouched graphic photos of death to remind us of what has happened to our loved one and what will inevitably happen to us.

A new form of portraits of the dead came into being in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these cases, the photographs were not made for the family to remember their dead but as documentation of the actuality of the death or, better put, murder. Think of the horrific photos of groups posing smiling alongside lynchings, the murdered Ché Guevaras, or the photographs of German troops posing beside mass

burial pits. Good ol' boy hunting photographs, with hunters posing with their kill also fit the rubric of "Look! I was there. I killed this!". In all these case, photography is being used to document proof of death instead of being used as a tool to document a life/Life. Later, crime scene photography would become a key tool in forensic work and bootlegged copies lusted after modern *memento mori* on the internet.

Marcelo Brodsky, a photographer based in Buenos Aires, explores the theme of the disappeared in Argentina in the 1970s in his latest work "Good Memory". According to Brodsky, the impulse for the work was his fortieth birthday and a desire to revisit the theme of identity. "Photography, with its precise ability to freeze a point in time, was the tool I used for this purpose." He began by looking at snapshots of his childhood and school photographs. He decided to enlarge his eighth grade class photo from 1967 and began to search for his classmates. Those he could find, he photographed against the backdrop of the enlarged class photo. He then set out to discover what had become of the classmates he had been unable to locate. Four from his class of 34 were presumed executed by the military junta. Brodsky wrote the details of the missing on the enlarged class portrait. The result is a portrait which shows rows of boys and girls, some with their heads circled with what looks like wax crayon. Some of these circles have a diagonal line drawn through them; these are classmates assumed to have been tortured, drugged and thrown into to a watery death from a Navy helicopter by the military authorities. By the time his research was done 98 students from the school had been identified as victims of the Junta.

In October 1996, Brodsky organized with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Línea Fundadora, the Argentine Historical and Social Memory Foundation, the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires Students Association and a group of former students, a ceremony in memory of the school's 98 disappeared, called Memory Bridge.



Brodsky erected a display in the hallway of his old school and collected comments from various students. Brodsky said he wanted to give the present day students some sort of context for the deaths of their peers. “The pictures were something that remained of the ninety eight disappeared classmates, a tool to convert them into real, accessible people. We had to know what and whom we were talking about.” In addition to the assembly and the photo installation in the foyer of the school, Brodsky photographed today’s students’ faces reflected in the glass of his installation: “The portraits of those reflections” , says Brodsky, “constitute a fundamental part of this project, as they represent the instants of the transmission of experience from one generation to the next.”

Photography however, is not up to this job. It cannot transmit experience from one generation to the next. It cannot be a bridge. If anything, photography is an interruption in transmission, a halting as one of Brodsky’s commentators makes clear.

Photography is not supposed to tell; it shows. If a picture says we exist we must exist. Photography journeys through history, against time. Photography is an always vain attempt to stop time, to formulate errors in its flow. In each picture, what is no more and will never be again

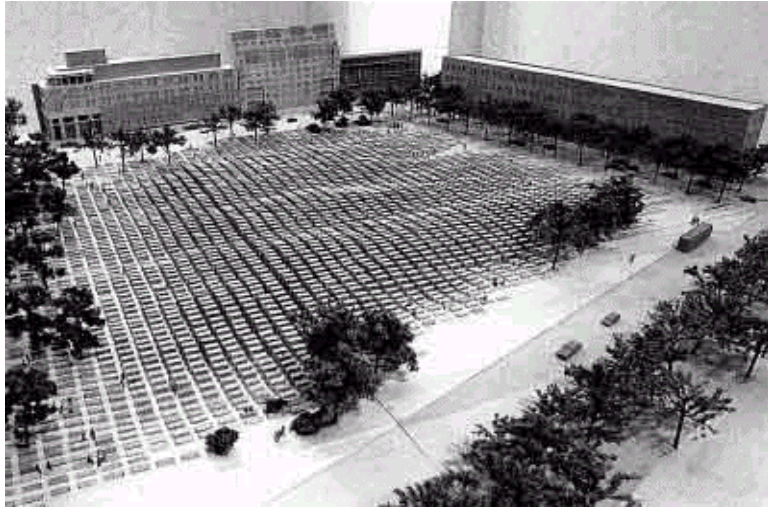
is presented as though it still were, with the lasting bloom of flowers on wallpaper. We are seized, momentarily, by the puzzlement of facing the lost, by the emotion of this encounter. Sadness comes later. Photography is always cruel. It sets the clarity of its impotence before us. (Caparrós)

Another part of the Good Memory project draws out Brodsky's nostalgic interpretation of memory even further. Brodsky provides us with two virtual photo albums of domestic and holiday scenes, complete with captions of his friend, Martin, and younger brother, Fernando, both victims of the Junta. José Pablo Feinmann, commenting on Brodsky's collection of images of Fernando, says: "He will be just one of many victims in a country devastated by the obscenity of death without bodies, without earth, without rest. This picture of him foretells the destiny that the executioners wanted to give his face, erasure from reality, from existence, and from memory." Feinmann concludes that Brodsky is trying to restore Fernando's space in memory, to rescue him from death and oblivion. Can photography do that? Or does photography bring into sharper focus the idea that psychic or inner memory is being taken over by technological means of memorialization? Rather than bring us closer, the photographic image just draws attention to the distance between us and the lost object. Brodsky's memory bridge is extending ever backward in time without a chance of meeting its object.

Brodsky's technique in creating the photographs reflects the distortion and layering of memory. There are three generations and layers of portraits. First, the "original" class portrait by the anonymous school photographer which Brodsky enlarges, writes on and ultimately uses as a backdrop for the second generation of portraits. The second generation of portraits comprises those which Brodsky shot from 1992-1994 of his school comrades from 1967 against the background of the enlarged and distorted old classroom portrait. Brodsky then makes a third generation of portraits by photographing the reflections of the young viewers in the glass of the second generation portrait. The disappeared are only present undistorted in the original class portrait. In the next generation, they have been enlarged and circled and used as a backdrop. The disappeared cannot be re-photographed by Brodsky against this backdrop. They are not doubled like the survivor classmates. They are present only as a grainy

enlargement behind their old classmates, giving context, giving depth to the portrait. The disappeared are also absent from the third generation portraits. Already distorted in the second generation the glassy reflections of young faces in the portraits removes the ability to identify the original people sitting for the portrait. They have become abstracted, despite Brodsky's intentions. Our memory too is a constant process of writing and rewriting, crossing out, overlapping images and distortion. It shifts and flows and moves without a fixed foundation. Through his choice of photographic technique Brodsky reveals that the Memory Bridge project, like memory itself, is necessarily always a distortion despite his search for certainty and closure.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, to be built in the centre of Berlin, reflects a very different approach to memory and representation. Unlike Brodsky, who scoured archives to try to create a complete list of the disappeared from his school, architect Peter Eisenman argued for the futility or obsolescence of such an approach. The Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima have brought us mechanisms of mass death. "An individual can no longer be certain to die an individual death. Thus architecture can no longer remember life as it formerly did. The markers which were formerly symbols of individual death, and individual life must be changed." (Eisenman 1998) The Holocaust, according to this logic, is unrepresentable. A list of names of victims (a suggestion by another architectural team in the competition) is necessarily incomplete, and therefore inadequate.



Instead of a list of names, Eisenman proposed an undulating “field of memory” of 1800 rectangular concrete pillars between 0.5 and 4.5 meters high in what appears to be a regular grid pattern. They are made from

polished concrete<sup>1</sup>. The pillars, or stelae, are leaning either forwards or backwards and have less than a meter space between them so that visitors have to pass one by one. The tipping stones<sup>2</sup> have led some commentators to compare the memorial to a Jewish graveyard. Eisenman denies that he is trying to represent anything. Instead his point is to show how no meaning or understanding is possible: “In our monument there is no goal, no end, no working one’s way in or out. The time of the experience grants no further understanding of something because no further understanding is possible.” (Eisenman 1998) The ordered grid perceived at a distance gives the visitor a sense of security, but Eisenman argues that this grid is disturbed by the various planes of the monument: there is a different axial orientation at ground level than at the top plane. The apparently stable grid is shattered. This shows that all grids and rational systems disintegrate with time and provide false comfort. Eisenman is searching for the moments of instability in an apparently stable system. Echoing Adorno and Horkheimer on the danger of reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Eisenman argues: “It suggests that when a system is supposedly rational and ordered grows out of scale and out of proportion to its intended purpose, it in fact loses touch with human reason. It then begins to reveal the innate disturbances and the potential

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<sup>1</sup> In January of 2002 Eisenman suggested clothing the pillars in natural stone. This was denied because of the additional cost and second a belief that the manufactured nature of the concrete said something useful about the mechanized murder of the Jews. The Berlin Senate has budgeted for anti-graffiti sealant for the concrete pillars. They are anticipating the desire of others to disturb the monochrome sea of concrete.

<sup>2</sup> Eisenman explains that the apparently randomly tipping stones are not placed arbitrarily but rather have been plotted based on a master street grid of Berlin. This approach parallels Daniel Liebeskind’s with the Jewish Museum on Linden Strasse. The zig zagging form of the museum attracted comment and various explanations from Liebeskind including that he plotted the locations of the residences of people part of the German-Jewish cultural scene in pre-war Berlin and then connected them with lines. These lines were used as axes for his building. Hence “Between the Lines” Liebeskind’s own name for the Jewish Museum. (Liebeskind 1998,9)

for chaos in all systems of seeming order; all closed systems of a closed order are bound to fail.” (Eisenman 1998) This statement is as true for the visitor’s experience of moving through the space of the monument as it is for the greater themes of the risk at the heart of the promises of totalitarian political systems.

James Young, Holocaust expert and the only foreign member of the committee to select the monument, argues that the modulating space of the memorial help visitors to confront their duty to remember. The flow of the memorial “gives form to a type of remembering that is neither frozen in time nor space. The feeling of such instability will help the visitor to resist the impulse to isolate the project of remembering, and instead strengthen his own role in anchoring his thoughts in himself.” (Young 1998)

Eisenman’s architecture, then, functions like a psychoanalysts’ consulting room in that it is designed to help contain and support memory. Freud’s consulting room in Vienna was chock full of antiquities, books, rugs and glass cabinets, forever interpretable. Eisenman has opted for the pared down aesthetic of modern consulting rooms, airy and monochromatic -- a distractionless projection ground for memory.

Young argues that the very lack of photogeneity of the memorial is its strength. The size and design of the site cannot be appreciated from ground level. It cannot be taken in in one God-like glance. No souvenir postcard is adequate. According to Young, visitors will then be forced to remember how they felt visiting the site rather than trying to remember on the basis of photographs shot at the site. He states: “It won’t be photo snapshots of the site that will be retained in the memory, instead the real experience of the visitor<sup>3</sup>, and what they remembered while they were at the site” (Young 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> This sort of claim to “real experience” and memory is problematic to say the least. However, it is a theme in new architectural projects in Berlin. The architecture critic of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* levelled the critique of Disneyland fun-house architecture against Liebeskind’s Jewish Museum which he argued was too prescriptive in terms of using unconventional architecture to manipulate the emotions of the visitor.

In contrast, the huge photo realist gravestones of slain mobsters in Yekaterinburg, Russia do not require such complex contemplation. They are unabashedly representative and focused on demonstrating the slain mobster's material wealth. While Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe shows how death is a radical break, these mafia gravestones seek to erase the violence of the death and petrify the deceased in a casual stance of youthful nonchalance. The gravestones are huge and depict the mobsters in life-like poses at the height of their power. The portraits of the dead mobsters demonstrate youthful vigour and economic power through the choice of clothes and accessories. Some are sporting Adidas track suits and close cropped hair; others wear silk shirts and designer suits and dangle car keys from their fingers. The ostentation of the gravestones is heightened through imbedded precious gems.

The stones themselves are marble, granite or malachite. The life-like images are either hand-carved or machine-made through a combination of computer aided design (CAD) and automated micro-hammer work. In the latter case, a photograph of the deceased (with car keys if desired) is scanned into a computer and a half tone image is created. This image, consisting of various sized black dots, is now fed into a CAD system which controls a conveyor and hammer machine. The expensive stone is tightly held to minimize vibration. The extremely small diamond tipped hammers can tap high resolution images into the stones better than any work by hand. Diamond hammers have replaced lasers, which literally vapourized the stone under their beams. This work is very expensive with some of the gravestones costing in excess of 64,000 USD.

The iconography of these gravestones is a reverse of the standard Russian Orthodox marker. Instead of a large cross with a small icon of a saint or porcelain portrait the deceased, which focus on the soul rather than the flesh, these monstrous memorials flaunt the material existence of the deceased: youth, vigour, economic success. In their extravagance, these stones succeed in a sort of photographic resurrection.



Their violent death in a hail of bullets is erased through careful embalming methods perfected for the care of Lenin's body. (Matich 1999). The halftone image of a shot up gangster bleeding onto a public street on page one of a tabloid newspaper is replaced by a larger than life computer generated gravestone of the gangster at his youthful best. All the violence of his death is superseded by the permanence of his image in stone.

These grave markers become pilgrimage sites for mob families to gather and feast on expensive luxuries beyond the imagination of most of the Russian public. In Medieval times the faithful would seek to be buried as close as possible to the saints interred inside the church, in order to avail themselves of their protection while waiting for the day of judgement. (Meinwald) Russian mobsters seem to have rediscovered this tradition with people seeking plots in the shadow of their crime land "protectors".

The gravestones at Yekaterinburg represent in a crudely literal fashion photography's fate to petrify. Unlike Brodsky's brother and school colleagues, who left no body to resurrect or redeem, these photo monuments are the perfect memorial for those who lived and died in the public eye. Eisenman's Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe resisted Brodsky's call to put a face to every death in order to guard against the threat of abstraction and forgetting. Photography and representation however, have their limits. Perhaps it is only in an imageless environment like Eisenman's undulating "field of memory" that we can reflect on this.

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## Image List:

p. 2 Infant Death Portrait found at [http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/terminals/memento\\_mori/](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/terminals/memento_mori/)

p. 4 Class Photograph collage Marcelo Brodsky at <http://zonezero.com/exposiciones/fotografos/brodsky/default.html>

p. 7 Architect's Model of the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe

p. 10 Gravestones in the Yekaterinburg cemetery <http://www.anomalies-unlimited.com/Russian.html>

## Abstract:

Memento Mori: Mourning, Monuments and Memory explores the relationship between photography, memory and death. The work of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Eduard Cadava is employed to explain the history of the photographic memento mori, or remembrance of death, and the role of this highly technologized art form in this century of mechanised mass death. The second part of the essay explores three types of memorials: the work of Argentinean photographer Marcelo Brodsky, the huge photo realist gravestones of Russian mobsters in Yekaterinburg and the new Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe to be built at the heart of Berlin. Though these examples the themes of the limits of representation, individuality of memory, and various strategies of photographic memorial will be explored.