

*Politics and the Art of Commemoration. Memorials to struggle in Latin America and Spain.* By Katherine Hite. London And New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp.147.

Can art save us where politics has failed? This is an intriguing little book about the possibility of political redemption through art. The author takes us on a journey through Spain, Peru, Chile and Argentina, moving between the representation of politics and the politics of representation to describe the politics of memorials in detail. The book is also a personal journey through those places, written in an engaged voice rarely found in books on politics and commemorations.

The journey begins in Spain, at the ‘Valley of the Fallen,’ built and sponsored by Franco after the Civil War and now a contested site of commemoration. The chapter serves as a contrast for other sites across the ocean, as the Valley of the Fallen is, in many ways, Franco's own monument. This places it in tension with the other memorials. Though it is a contested site, the Valley of the Fallen is how the victors of the Spanish Civil War wanted this war to be memorialized.

From Spain, the book moves to Peru and the privately sponsored memorial ‘The Eye that Cries.’ This is a chapter about the representation of trauma through compassion. Can abstract art mourn violence? Can art draw together victims and perpetrators trying to come to terms with the 70,000 victims of violent death in Peru? These are intriguing questions. In her discussion, Hite is honest about the limitations of art in politics. But nevertheless, she introduces us to artists and engaged people trying to come to terms with divided pasts which do not recognize any grey zones, but only victims and victimizers. The Dutch sculptor Lika Mutal intended

to memorialize all victims of violence, the so-called guilty and the so-called innocent connecting this kind of art project to the truth commissions prevalent in Latin America, another form of the politics of trauma.

From Peru, the journey takes us to Paine in Chile. This chapter is about how second and third generations deal with the violent past of their parents and grandparents. Here Hite utilizes in a very creative way Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" taken from her research on second and third generation Holocaust survivors. The memorial in Paine, 930 wooden poles that create a 'forest,' deals with the abduction, disappearance and killings in that rural community. Like Hirsch, Hite looks at the role of photographs as a way of connecting to the dead and the presence of ghosts of the past through the modern death mask of the photo. In the case of Paine, this mediation is produced through faceless poles, providing a more haunting atmosphere. There are disturbing questions here concerning the role of nostalgia (or melancholy) in commemorating your dead family members and what role such nostalgia plays in the politics of reconciliation.

From Chile, Hite travels to Argentina to look closely at the *bicis* of Fernando Traverso, a project which started in Rosario, Argentina and traveled from there to many other places in the world. Traverso spray-painted bicycles throughout the streets of Rosario. These bicycles were the symbols of Argentinian citizens disappearing from the streets and often leaving only their bicycles behind. Hite introduces here the idea of counter-monuments, a concept developed in Germany by second-generation Germans critiquing the tendency of monuments to comfort and provide closure. Again, we see how issues related to Holocaust memory travel to other places and are integrated in local memory politics.

The chapter is about Argentina, but also about trans-national collaboration between artists in different settings. Hite looks at the *bicis* as an illustration how art travels and creates global connections with other settings. This makes it quite clear that the politics of memory cannot be grasped anymore through an analysis of the local. Traverso's *bicis* can now be found throughout the Americas and Europe. They have become part of a traveling, multi-directional and cosmopolitan memory.

The four cases develop themes applicable to other contexts. Thus, not only will students of those four countries find this book inspiring, but everyone interested in the politics of memory and representation will find something of interest. In each chapter, we learn about the relevant violent past before encountering the memorial site under investigation. But can art utter truth about politics? This question hovers over this book.

Uttering the truth about historical injustices and making this gesture together with the former enemy is considered liberating and therefore redemptive. This is at least attempted in the Peruvian memorial while the mutuality of remembrance is absent from the Spanish state-sponsored Valley of the Fallen. Truth commissions in particular are said to have these redemptive qualities, and as such are part of other reconciliatory acts. In this sense, history and politics, through the medium of art, have been turned into trauma laboratories that probe whether forgiveness, given state-sponsored mass atrocities and other extreme human rights abuses, can have some meaning in political and personal ways. In politics, the question shifts from a quest for absolute justice to one in which states look for the *best* outcome possible at a given time and in light of available resources. “Best” can be assessed only against the available alternatives, and not in terms of how far they fall short of ultimate goals such as human rights or justice. But this is clearly not the

end of the matter. We may or may not like psychological or aesthetic concepts explaining politics, but there seems to be a kind of return of the repressed, traveling ghosts from the past that lurk and bother the post-conflict arrangements. This is where Hite's study starts off. And this is where art fits in. Art does not have to play the dirty game of politics. The need to make tragic compromises after violent conflict is the domain of politics. Artists can observe these processes and comment on them, but they are playing a different game.

This book tells stories of people engaged in the politics of memory. We learn about shock, denial, pain, guilt, anger, depression, and loneliness directly from the people involved. Usually books about memory and memorials are deeply engaged with theory. This book prefers to be engaged with people and how they make sense of the past. In my opinion this is the true strength of the book, even though other readers may be disappointed while searching for deep layered theoretical musings on the subject.

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