



All That Is Solid Melts Into Air? *ephemera* and the Monument

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abstract

Monuments are meant to last forever within a particular expressive and material form. It is this that enables monuments to commemorate and celebrate past events and communicate images and ideals in such a way that they influence how people think and what people do. Consequently, this enables monuments to shape the past, the present and the future. The problem is that monuments cannot last forever, at least they cannot within the forms initially assigned. Instead, people interpret monuments in an infinite number of different ways, and the matter with which monuments are created is driven by independent forces with the power to change any monumental form. In conclusion, the eternal is removed from the monument and replaced with the ephemeral. And if not even monuments can last forever, what can?

Three questions: What objective or intended function is it that informs the construction of monuments? Are monuments capable of fulfilling this function or objective? And finally, if only more briefly and in conclusion, what consequences may this have for the future research agenda of *ephemera*?

I

A monument is traditionally conceived as something constructed in stone or bronze to commemorate and celebrate significant past events or people doing great things in the past, and monuments are typically associated with epitaphs and tombs, statues and obelisks. This conception is confirmed by the word's etymology, which originates from the Latin verb *monere*, 'to remember'. From this assumption, one can argue that the task, function or objective of a monument is to work as a device into which the celebratory memory of a significant event or a great person is stored, and from which it can be retrieved. As devices for storage and retrieval of celebratory memories, monuments also construct and express memories, and they do so by portraying images, which make us see the hagiographic aspects of certain historical events or persons. At the bottom line, one can see how monuments are directed towards the past and towards history. And one can see that the commemorative function of monuments is about transcending or overcoming time. People who have died and events that have been brought to an end are given a prolonged existence

and enabled to live on in monuments. Whereas living events and living beings have a most finite period of existence, these seem to exist in eternity.

II

The power of monuments and their ability to transcend time is not however just a matter of celebratory commemoration, remembrance and memory creation. Monuments are not merely historical edifices directed towards the past. Perhaps more importantly, they are also directed towards the future. This is what Deleuze and Guattari suggest in a rather complex argument put forward in *What is Philosophy?* (1994). Although the monument is created by the preservation of materials such as bronze and stone within a certain expressive form, Deleuze and Guattari insist that the monument is also about the preservation of sensation. More specifically, they say, it is about preserving the percepts and affects that are produced by materials that pass into sensation and start speaking to us as images. And as such, the monument is dissociated from any real relations with materials and instead becomes “a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 167). Consequently, these blocs are never like the past really was or ever will be. In other words, they do not reflect or imitate events or people themselves. Rather than making us remember the past, Deleuze and Guattari argue that they make us fabulate. And since they make us fabulate, they do not so much make us think about the past as they make us think about the future. Since they transcend time by projecting the future (rather than the past) into the present, the real function of the monument is not so much to commemorate a great historical event or person. It is more to influence the thinking and action of the present population in such a way that a similar great event or person may return in the future. In other words, it is about shaping the past so that we can shape the present and the future.

But in order to be effective in transcending time, projecting the future into the present and influencing how people think and how they act, the monument must transcend space. As this makes the actual visibility and image of the monument crucial, Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on blocs of sensation must be complemented with a discussion of the material constitution or make-up of the monument. In order to have a place in time, the monument must be visible and have a place in space. As well as being visible outside its own time of creation, the monument and the image it portrays must be visible outside its own spatial point of location. This is a matter of size and shape. But in order to endure temporarily in space, size does not necessarily mean that bigger is better. Against winter storms and riots roaming the streets, for example, a smaller monument may stand stronger and longer. With regards to temporal endurance in space, it is also important that the materials applied in the construction of the monument possess a minimal degree of solidity, and that they are assembled with techniques that secure the solidity of the monumental construction as a whole. This is crucial if the monument is to resist abuse over time from spatial forces such as wind, humidity, weather and pollution, as well as withstand pressure from changing cultural sentiments.

However, even if the monument seems to be rock solid, the image that it portrays can never guarantee the return of the event or person to which the image refers. The image

only actualises the possibility that a certain event or person will return and we can never know whether the future of which the monument speaks will ever arrive. This is first, because monuments and the images expressed on their surfaces are always freely interpreted by spectators, and second, because not even monuments are rock solid.

III

Interpretation is a matter of reading, and in *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre argues that the monument is the only architectural edifice in which the reading precedes the creation itself. This is because monuments are meant to evoke a particular reading or a particular interpretation, that is, they are meant to commemorate and celebrate a particular great event or person. Buildings, on the other hand, at least buildings without monumental status, are simply places to dwell. And non-monumental artworks are first created, only to be read or interpreted after the moment of their creation. Unlike the monument, art, or at least abstract art, is not invested with one single intended meaning. Instead, its very purpose and beauty lies in its ability to give rise to a multiplicity of different possible readings and interpretations. This is because abstract art does not have form in the Platonic sense of the word. Unlike the monument, which results from the imposition of form onto matter, abstract art results from creative processes that merely activate matter and put matter to work, as formless matter. In abstract art, one is therefore never certain about the purpose to which matter is put to work. Consequently, the abstract artwork does not pacify matter. Instead, matter remains active in the abstract artwork, which means that the reading and interpretation following its creation is surrounded by fundamental openness.

This interpretative and semantic openness is however not limited to abstract art, but also intervenes in the monument. Even if its creator seeks to assign a particular form to the monument in order to ensure that it is read or interpreted in a particular way and expresses a particular meaning, this can never be fully achieved. Different people will potentially have different opinions about any particular monument.

Moreover, monuments, if only to a lesser extent than abstract works of art, are penetrated by a material openness. Not even a monument can guarantee that matter is pacified and put to work for the purpose and the meaning that was initially intended by its sponsors and creators. This has to do with the relationship between matter and form in the sense that the stage when matter is put to work is not necessarily followed by a concluding and final stage that shapes initially formless yet working matter into a particular and eternal form. It is possible that the matter making up a monument may escape form altogether and yet again work at its own speed and actively move into a wide variety of different directions.

IV

The idea that matter is active and capable of escaping fixed forms and recreating itself along lines of flight is central to Deleuze and Guattari's argument in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). Here they are not really concerned with monuments, but rather with the nature of

things. But insofar as monuments are things, there is no reason why we should not take their analysis seriously when thinking about the nature of the monument.

At the centre of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion is the critique of Aristotelian hylomorphism. According to hylomorphism, all the things in the world result from a combination of form and matter. Active forms are imposed wholly and totally upon passive matter, and *voilà*, the thing is produced. Indeed, within the framework of hylomorphism, it may be more adequate to speak in terms of content than in terms of matter, as formed matter cannot do anything on its own. Somewhat ironically, matter existing as content inside a form (i.e. inside a form of content) is empty, as it is void of any independent power of expression. Expression or meaning resides with the form alone, and becomes organised within a form of expression.

In response to hylomorphism, Deleuze and Guattari insist that no forms are absolute. And consequently, forms of content and forms of expression can never fully and completely dominate content and expression so as to organise the two into a stable and conclusive relationship where the former is represented by the latter. In other words, since matter cannot be completely confined within a specific form of content and fully formed into content it is not mirrored in a corresponding form in which one particular meaning is expressed. Instead, matter moves around freely and independently, working towards its often disparate and incoherent aims, producing expressions and enunciations that have no responsibility to a particular form.

This leads Deleuze and Guattari to leave the hylomorphic language of forms of content and forms of expression altogether, and instead speak in terms of variables of content and variables of expression. Their change in terminology has however nothing to do with a wish to emphasise a sense of causality whereby independent variables may be seen to determine dependent variables. Rather, they want to emphasise the way in which matter is a matter of variation and variability, change and fluctuation. And more specifically, as it draws our attention to the movements of matter, this notion of variables of content and variables of expression indicates the degree to which content and expression is deterritorialised or reterritorialised, the degree to which content and expression are carried away or stabilised.

As matter moves around, it intervenes into and disrupts different forms, whether these are supposed to perform monumental tasks or not. And by so doing, matter exercises effects and makes things happen. That is to say, matter performs functions on its own to such an extent that Deleuze and Guattari start speaking in terms of Matter-Functions. However, none of these functions or effects could ever be grasped within a project of prediction, no matter how systematically or imaginatively inclined its staff might be. If one starts looking, what one would tend to find are casualties rather than causalities. Whether or not the active and independent movements of matter in the future will reinforce or undermine the intended meaning behind the construction of any one particular monument, we therefore cannot know for sure. If we go along with the position that all matter is active and to some extent formless, we have to recognise that all matter also has the power to escape the monumental form. And consequently, even if all that is solid does not melt into air, we should at least be aware of one thing – that the extent to which the monument can enjoy stability and transcendental power enough to fulfil its function of shaping the past, the

present and the future is limited. And that the extent to which the monument can exist as a monument – in time and in space and in eternity – cannot be taken for granted

V

When we speak of ephemera or the ephemeral, we usually want to imply the opposite of the eternal. Like the mayflies that share the name, ephemera only have a most temporary existence. They are dead the day after they are born. And since we traditionally associate the monumental with the eternal, we also tend to draw a firm distinction between ephemera and monuments. In light of the above discussion, maintaining the dichotomy between ephemera and monuments becomes fundamentally problematic. Not even monuments can exist as monuments forever. They might not be ephemeral in the strictest sense of the word, which means that they would be gone the day after their erection. But they might be gone, or at least drastically *changed* a lot earlier than their sponsors and creators had hoped for.

This reassessment of the monument and the relationship between monuments and ephemera may also pose some questions to the readership, contributors and editors of the journal *ephemera*. One might for example consider the extent to which organisations are monuments. After all, there are numerous examples, both historical ones and contemporary ones, of entrepreneurs, corporate founders and business, political and religious leaders who have sought to live beyond the finitude of their own lives by investing in the organisations that they have established and run. Further on, one might consider the extent to which such organisations are able to commemorate and celebrate their founders and long-time leaders, so as to prolong their finite lives and so as to shape the thinking and action of current organisational members. One might also consider the nature of organisation and organisations more generally, and ask whether organisations have a stable and enduring existence, or whether organisation is more a matter of temporal and ephemeral arrangements and processes.

So perhaps we should also ask ourselves whether or not the existence of a journal such as *ephemera* removes us from the ephemeral and re-embeds us within the orbit of thingness. Of course, it may be inevitable that we turn *ephemera* into some kind of monument for organisational research. But as long as we recognise the limitations of any and every monument and any and every thing, and are aware that *ephemera* is at base a precarious and fragile project, this may or may not be a problem.

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