

## REVIEW

# Surface as Screen and Performative Monuments: A Review of (1) Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* and (2) Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art*

*Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Giuliana Bruno, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 288 pages, 80 color and 10 b/w illustrations, 2012

*Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art*, Mechtild Widrich, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 256 pages, 2014

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Where does an artwork begin and end? To what extent does it live an isolated life, independent of the cultural settings by which it is surrounded, mounted on a pedestal, so to speak, and to what extent is it sustained by our interaction with it and with the settings in which it is embedded, or even through criticism and interpretation? Where should we look for the place of encounter between the viewer and the work, between the world and the work? Can we locate this concretely as a surface membrane that may take physical, metaphorical or even mental form, and along which contact and communication take place? Or should we focus on larger politico-historical and concrete architectural settings in relation to which meaning is produced? From two different perspectives, Giuliana Bruno, Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University, and Mechtild Widrich, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, engage such questions in two recent, thought-provoking books.

**Giuliana Bruno's** book, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, considers the question of materiality in relation to the many different screens that permeate the contemporary world and the visual forms these entail. Her focus is on how this is engaged and reflected in contemporary art and architecture as well as in related 'media', such as film and fashion. Bruno argues that critical engagement with contemporary art and architecture may allow us to formulate new conditions for materiality. Or, rather, she alerts us to a 'potential for reinvention of materiality' (2) as born out of the broadening of media

relations, that is, of the expansion of the visual field of screens, of our present. The place where mediated reality and the concrete physical spaces that surround us intersect is the screen itself – in art but also in the flickering light of digital screens by which we are increasingly met in every-day situations, or as conjured up by the vacillations between transparency, opacity and reflections of glass or polished surfaces of many contemporary architectural developments.

As a surface, the screen posits its own materiality and will therefore always transcend its apparent nature of being a blank, neutral surface on which any mediated reality may be cleanly projected. For we must remember that a screen is an inherently noisy environment for the transmission of meaning. The book presents a series of readings of how we may interpret this 'noise' as a quality of a surface. It is done in a beautiful and complex writing style through which different argumentative layers are formed in parallel but often intersect, and the readings unfold a palette of themes that weave in and out of each other throughout the book. Bruno investigates the quality of the screen as a medium by examining different types of surfaces, including projective screens for moving images, still-sitting screens such as the canvas of a painting, or how the reflective properties of architectural surfaces provide them with screen-like qualities, an example being the glass foyer of the 2006 Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio by the Japanese firm SANAA. She notes that the word 'medium' refers to a condition of 'betweenness' (5) as a point of contact between work and world, and she describes this joint as possessing haptic qualities (19–20).

Bruno's book covers a vast material, and includes interpretations of works by contemporary artists such as Tacita Dean, James Turrell, Bill Viola, Olafur Eliasson, Robert Irwin, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Rachel Whiteread, as well

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as a number of recent architectural projects by well-known practices. Here, she turns to examples such as the above-mentioned play between a simultaneity of transparency and reflection in the Glass Pavilion by SANAA, the dotted permeability of Herzog et de Meuron's De Young Museum in San Francisco (2002–2005), and the imagined screens of the film-like viewing experience created by the ramps in Zaha Hadid's design for the MAXXI museum in Rome (1998–2009) or in Diller Scofidio + Renfro's contribution to the Highline Park in New York City (2009–2011). Bruno shows how, at the surface-level, such works hold the potential of transcending the visual field and being 'haptic' in a triple sense, concerning 'touch', 'touching' and 'being touched'. This haptic element suggests transformations which potentially alter our own relation to the surfaces of the works. This may be seen as an example of the contemporary transformations or 'refashionings of materiality' (94) for which Bruno is on the lookout, although it is important to keep in mind that this potential for transformation largely hinges on heavy interpretive effort on behalf of the onlooker.

Bruno also urges us to remember that a screen may not necessarily be flat, and a major theme of the book concerns questions of rugged surfaces, such as fabrics or fabrication, pleats and folds. She argues that a rugged surface holds a potential for being a space of commonality, thus expanding the haptic dimension to an interpersonal level. That is, the rugged, noisy character of a surface seen as screen or medium may make it into a *locus* for 'intersection' (75). In very concrete terms, it holds the potential for being a place that gathers difference, a place where human relations – relations that otherwise seem distant in time and space – may come together, and even give rise to unexpected forms of participation. Here, Bruno draws on a Deleuzian conceptual apparatus of the fold and argues for the necessity for developing a 'texturology' (48). This ties into a series of speculations in the book about the material-medial constitution of screens, drawing on contemporary work by media scholars such as Mark Hansen (2004). One example she considers is the self-fuelling relationship between formal experimentation in architecture and digital design tools, both of which contribute to developing designs that provoke new uses of materials and evoke new forms of responses (93–94). One radical example in which art and architecture are joined is Pae White's *Metafoil* (2008), a stage curtain for the Norwegian practice Snøhetta's Opera House (2000–2008) in Oslo. In this way, the readings in the book become a way of revealing hidden relationships between different forms of media, relationships that currently shift and that negotiate the question of the dividing line between work, world and viewer in ways that prompt us to re-consider the nature of those very divisions. Yet, since the argumentation takes as its cue the visibility of the screen as a membrane which makes something come to the surface, creates presence and nearness, freely mediating between an 'inside' and 'outside', the question of *how* such changing forms of materiality can also create new forms of distance is left aside. If Bruno's hugely impressive work of

uncovering the medial quality of surfaces therefore may be said to leave out questions about the shadows cast by the shifting cultural relations she engages – about how changing forms of visibility simultaneously render other relationships invisible – as an exercise in mapping out the cultural conditions of materiality of our present, it provokes us to address the nature of these very conditions in new and compelling ways.

In **Mechtild Widrich's** book, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art*, we are taken on a journey from highly urban forms of performance art of the 1960s and 1970s to practices of commemoration and memorialisation in urban contexts of the most recent past. The study starts out with the observation of a remarkable historical and puzzling fact that 'young, oppositional performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s became the foremost monument designers of the 1980s and 1990s (and remain so, to some extent, in the early twenty-first century)' (4). The book traces this history and the transformation in the practice of such artists. One example is the Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT, whose work, which largely refers to the concrete context of the Austrian capital Vienna, posits a key place in Widrich's study. It does so while simultaneously discussing the vexed relationship between performance art and commemorative monuments in this period. If performance art is temporal and fleeting and often demands the participation of its audience, monuments evoke ideas of being everlasting and unchanging, instituting a fixed narrative about the past. Widrich shows how this shift from performance art to commemorative monuments in recent decades means that questions of social and political urgency enter the dusty scene of public art in cities. As she writes, 'performance artists, in working in public space, came not just to resemble monuments in their performances but to be interested in just those problems of political representation and its relation to the spectator [...] They thus reoriented public art around an intersection of performance and the monument [...] which in its paradigmatic form I call the *performative monument*' (4–5). This statement sets the scene for the broader material explored in this eye-opening study.

When it comes to the more recent works discussed by Widrich, an example being Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin (2003), she emphasises that this and other publicly commissioned art works develop in a period in which the monument as such is largely discredited as authoritarian (7). Despite this fact, a large number of such 'monumental' sites of commemoration of this type have emerged in various urban contexts around the world in the last couple of decades. Scholars such as Jay Winter (2002) have called this phenomenon a veritable 'memory boom', and Andreas Huyssen described this surge as a 'cultural obsession of monumental proportions' (Huyssen 2003: 16), one which, arguably, can be said to nurture, as I have argued elsewhere, a largely urban form of 'memory culture' (Staiger and Steiner 2009). Widrich convincingly argues that within this representational environment, the 'performative monument'

has become a privileged mode of reckoning with the past. Widrich's study therefore not only provides a deft reading of the trajectory in the work of a certain group of artists from the 1970s up to the present; it also provides an original new reading and historical contextualisation of the recent memory debate in a way that touches on crucial issues about how the present negotiates ideas about the past within the horizon and representational environment of the contemporary city.

So, how do two apparently opposite forms of artistic expression, performance and monument, merge into one? First, Widrich questions the assumption that performance art hinges strictly on a pure sense of presence where the 'live act provides unmediated access to the *performance* in question through the artist's body' (18). Indeed, she shows that documentation of the performance act, such as photography, often is equally crucial as 'a distillation of the *idea* of the action' (19) and that the *idea* of an audience is vital for the production of meaning taking place within the performance and with respect to its afterlife (5–60). Crudely put, this means that even in its purest form, 'performance' moves towards 'monument' in the material in question, and we have to do with art pieces that often are closely interwoven with their architectural setting and with architecture more generally as a form of representation. If a significant inheritance from performance art may thus be said to be the central place that the *site* of the performance occupies, we should not be surprised that the commemorative work of the performance artists are developed in a close relationship with particular urban sites. Insofar as this hinges on a dynamic relation between work, setting, audience and the urban context, it should be evident that, as Widrich writes, a performance inevitably rests on an element of fiction (25). The material in question therefore also needs to be approached from a reception history point of view, an approach that constitutes a central methodological tool in this study.

When it comes to the commemorative art works in question, it is important to keep in mind that, in the German context, as Widrich urges us to remember, the memory boom of the 1990s and beyond should be seen on the background of the unification of East and West Germany in 1990 (145–49). The many sites of commemoration in this context are thus part and parcel of a wider battle over what kind of past the two newly joined nations may be said to have in common. And, unsurprisingly, conceptual and even ethical ambiguities sit closely to each other in these works, works that largely originate in official commissions, many of which can be found in Berlin, the capital city of the united Germany. In her readings of pieces such as the afore-mentioned *Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, Widrich aptly shows how these ambiguities play out and with what consequences. She concludes that they often build on 'misunderstandings of the postmodern

turn away from master narratives and towards individualised experiences of history, as bodily affect and narrated memory lead to politically ambiguous results in the most ambitious commemorative project' (169). For, as she writes, in this particular case, 'finding your way' in space and in memory are not the same thing (174). Exclusive reliance on individual 'experience' rests upon a potentially problematic identification between self and history, such as the idea of assimilating oneself to Holocaust victims via bodily discomfort (176). Despite the winding nature of the problems of representation of these highly urban art forms, Widrich concludes that 'important questions of political and historical responsibility in public space can be addressed through delegation of authority by a performatively equipped monument' (201). Yet, simultaneously, her argument demonstrates how particular strategies of bridging the inevitable gap between work and viewer of the performative monument become stifled and repeated as well-known representational forms. Such forms are born out of the particular cultural concerns of a particular period, the question of commemoration in a post-1990 context – and, in this case, even a precise geographic context of Germany and Austria and, in particular, the two countries' capitals. By linking the concrete encounter with material objects in urban space with a call for our participation as *critical* subjects, however, the performative monument may negotiate that vexed boundary between historical presence and distance, between the work, the viewer and the world, in intricate and illuminating ways.

By prompting this form of self-reflection, both of the books discussed here ask valuable questions concerning how we may interpret art and architecture in a way that illuminates current issues of cultural urgency. When it comes to the readings themselves, they both translate such questions into critical scholarship in a way that surpasses and suppresses trite, binary conceptualisations of a piece of art or architecture as an autonomous 'work' and as something that only gains presence in the minds and eyes of the beholder.

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