An interactive, mobile, and temporary memorial for the EU Memorial

The EU memorial – speculations on public sculpture made part of the Speculations on Space urban interventions by the Bauhaus Kolleg 2006-07 in the European Capital of Culture 2007 programme in Sibiu, Romania. The aim of this intervention was to go against the typical character of a memorial, to provide a space for reflection and interaction.

Typically, a memorial is set to be an eternal reminder of a past moment, event, personality, or in fact, the mark the authority and values of those who erect it. It is a monument for the present of the erection as much as it may commemorate a past event. The location of the memorial is thought to be long lasting, even though reversals of political authority and the changes in reigning values and ideologies have tended to modify, relocate or remove memorials. Generally, therefore, a memorial is erected to be eternal, set in specific location to function as a reminder of the current power holders and values of the time.

So called counter- or anti-memorials go against the typical memorials. One of the first instances of a counter-memorial (or anti-memorial) would be the commemoration of not a victory but a loss. A move to this direction was already commemoration of the unknown soldier rather than the victorious war hero, whereby the move also was towards the masses of soldiers lost in the war from the victorious leader of the troops. Koselleck (1979) argued that this is a sign of the process of democratisation in a memorial erecting polity. A more recent form of counter-memorials is a structure which is not made to last but to wither away. Or, rather than erect from the surroundings, they mould into them. They could start growing grass to mark their age and finitude, rather than the eternity.

Discussing memorials, anti-memorials and public art Malcolm Miles (1997) wonders whether memorials could be turned from the top-down ideology- and place-markers into democratic ones. He names the well-known Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, DC. by Maya Lin as a one that creates its own public by offering a chance for participation or reflection. Besides markers of space and time, memorials also create audiences – and, beyond that, publics.

EU flag memorial

The EU-flag intervention went against the current proposed currents in memorials and counter memorials in a variety of ways. First of all the memorial project only lasted for four days. It was not all the time present in the cityscape. It appeared and disappeared. In this way, it played with the idea of a moment rather than monument.
Even if monuments were eternal or long-lasting, they are only noticed in moments: they are captured with a camera, seen as landmarks for something, used as a meeting place for a moment only. Therefore, I argue, that a monument is noticed or reevoked in memory and forgotten again. It becomes part of the everyday street furniture, that goes unnoticed – until it becomes an object of tourist attraction or political debate, for instance.

The temporary memorial intervention, furthermore, migrated to different parts of the city from the town's main square. It was not bound to its surroundings, but it created space where it appeared. (The locals were surprised to see the memorial where it appeared, outside of the old town, the city core, where all the ECC events were located.) Rather than creating its occupying a place of its own with a plinth or a base the EU memorial was tied to the existing street furniture: a public well, flower pots, trash cans, etc. It formed a surface for interaction, gathered people, became alive memorial through participation. Even though temporary and not set in stone or bronze, it was “democratic” in the sense that Malcolm Miles seems to have intended.

The memorial intervention consisted of an EU flag, pole, ribbon, notebook and the tools for making a new design for an EU flag: a dark blue door mat and a set (three sets) of florescent stars fixed with a sticking surface. There was a “cultural worker” present as to facilitate the process. People were invited to write what Europe is for them in the notebook (“Europa este..?”) and to make an EU flag of their own. The cultural worker that I represented in the process would then take the picture of the flags and their author(s). Though still within the traditional framework of the stars on a blue background, the memorial played with and contested the canonised shape of the EU flag to invite new visions and meanings of Europe.

While each flag lasted only moments in the city, the new designs were captured on camera and stored. They could be used as a reminder – even a memorial – of the event, or of the memorial itself. They could be turned into another memorial: virtual or exhibition. And this is actually what happened. The virtual site of an EU memorial became http://euflagmemorial.wordpress.com. The pictures of the intervention were also exhibited at the Bauhaus Kolleg. The momentary presence in the cityscape was turned into a more long-lasting presence in the virtual world.

The intervention also gathered people around the flag. The passers-by paid attention to the memorial, and in this way noticing – and even the momentary reflection implied – could be seen as participation. At times, there was a crowd of people discussing the project, Europe and the designs being made. It created a public – and sense of sharing the symbol, even as the visions put forward were different.
Emancipation in public space?

“No, you must be joking. You are asking me to make a new EU flag?”

“Yeah, come on, it’s a lot of fun.”

The first emancipatory move about the memorial was about participation. On the one hand it was about the EU: somebody from the imaginary “Europe” is actually interested in you, and you can take part in an action. On the other, it was the European Capitals of Culture. Yet another top-down project, where grassroots programmes find it difficult to gain their space. Almost all the events of the ECC in Sibiu were in the newly polished old town. The intervention reached people in the oddest places – up to a food market and out of city shopping mall.

The second emancipatory move was over the EU flag: deconstructing the political symbol to a set of stars on a blue base, and reconstructing these into a meaningful or otherwise beautiful form. It is not very usual to be playing with a serious political symbol – especially with a doormat. The intervention was also contesting the assumptions that there is a set of views about Europe and the form and future of the EU itself – and that these visions belong only to the power-keepers on the national and EU level. In contrast the memorial was at the street level inviting visualisations from random passers-by. This was the crux of the intervention – however playful. The forms of “three pillar Europe”, “shooting star”, “united community”, “home”, “solidarity and friendship in a smiley-face”, or the simple placing of stars as the “big” countries and “small” countries, including Romania on the space offered by the mat were telling of the different conceptions.

In short, the action brought to the street level both the EU and the ECC. The EU flag as a political symbol was reappropriated for the participants, their voices were heard and designs reproduced online. Perhaps the experience will result into a more personal and less “subjected” relation to the supranational political setting. That would include the possibility for contestation and a plurality of views.

It was the participants who constituted the EU memorial. As the author of the piece, I was present only as the facilitating cultural worker, to explain what was going on. Perhaps I wouldn’t have been needed at all? But of course, the experience was emancipatory also for me. After years of work on the commemorative public art and political identities I could now make the intervention and see how it became an EU memorial for those moments in Sibiu. I made it out of the academic world, the field of theory and critique, to concretise my idea in the public space actually engaging with people passing by and seeing their visions, hearing their thoughts on Europe. It was a lot of fun, really, although the process has a more serious side – with the work on the results and perhaps on chances to gather more of them.

European identity
Crucial for the project was that it was not only an invited high-class artist or star architect that could make the design. This was also not a utilitarian project, where the purpose would be to find a solution, a design for a common symbol. There have been projects on EU flags before. An alternative design for an EU flag is not a new issue. In May 2002 a competition was held to invite new designs. The winner was the journalist turned to star architect Rem Koolhaas with the barcode flag (http://www.guardian.co.uk/eu/graphic/0,7367,712100,00.html), and the runner’s up included a smiley-face with stars on blue surface (see http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,719533,00.html). Following the discussions on the symbolic deficit of the EU during the Dutch presidency of the EU and Romano Prodi's European Commission, Koolhaas from the Netherlands proposed a new EU flag. This “bar code flag” represents all the member states of the EU through their national flags, and the common market an idea at the core of Europe. 'Koolhaas attempts a switch in the representation of the EU from the traditional image of the state to a sphere of everyday life every citizen is involved in: the consumption of goods in a “common market,” representing part of the political raison d'etre of the EU', Pribersky recalls and adds: 'his drafts insist on the potential tension between the member states and the EU level'. (Pribersky draws on Süddeutsche Zeitung 10 September 2004. Andreas Pribersky, 'Europe as a symbol in political image constructions', Semiotica 159-1/4 (2006), 143-150, p. 147.) Pribersky's research in Central Europe (Austria, Slovakia and Hungary) suggests that this tension is a real one, since the national symbols are usually present when the European symbols are represented. The national is usually called for when the Europe is being discussed. (Ibid., 148-9)

The play on a universal symbol rather than the reproduction of national symbols left nationalities aside – or did it? Being Romanian now means “European” in the extended sense: with rights to vote and participate in the common market (though fully only after a few years). Anssi Paasi writes recalling maps of the EC that excluded everything that did not belong to the political unit:

"Europe" was a process that defined itself and excluded those that were not participating in the process. A fitting illustration is Finland, where a whole discourse emerged about "entering" into Europe, when the state became an EU member in 1995, while nobody in Finland has probably ever thought that the country is not part of Europe. This process is now occurring in the new candidate states as well. Political actors in the former Eastern Europe have been actively defining the meanings of Europe.’ (Anssi Paasi, 'Europe as a social process and discourse; considerations of place, boundaries and identity', European Urban and Regional Studies, 2001: 8, 7, pp. 7-28, p. 13)

Clearly, for the Romanians and others in Central and Eastern Europe inclusion into the European Union was confirming or proving their Europeanness – while it also implies alongside the NATO membership the inclusion in the “Western World”. One of the participants to the EU memorial intervention wrote it was her life-long dream to belong to Europe (the EU). The play on stars, however kept the nation present, too. Romania was always one of the stars, even if the configurations of the stars differed.
Asked to write what Europe is, the participant most often referred to it as a continent, whereas others called it a “land” or country. There was a distinction made between Romania and Europe: Europe was a homogeneous undefined whole, and Romania was another. In discussion when talking about the big stars and small stars, big countries such as France, Germany and England emerged. Sometimes Romania was a big partner, more often one of the small ones. Among the passers-by there were also Moldovians, who told me: “But we are not in the EU, at least for many years, still.” The conceptions of Europe started to differ, with a distinction made between Europeanness and the EU.

Paasi, a geographer, stresses the discursive rather than the essentialist basis of geographical units. “Europe” as well as any “regions” are products of processes created by actors and institutions, making of landscapes and boundaries to identifies. He analytically distinguishes four simultaneous aspects of the process of making a region such as Europe: 'It is a process through which a territorial unit becomes and established entity in the spatial structure and is then identified in political, economic, cultural and administrative institutionalized practices and social consciousness and is continually reproduced n these social practises.’ (p. 16) The EU flag making was dealing with the symbolic-political level through a social practise. The action continuously reproduced the consciousness of Europe and Europeanness, but the shapes of the designs differed. The plurality of conflicting designs and process itself, contributed to the making of the memorial and EUrope.

Public space and interaction

The memorial also worked as a tool for analysing public spaces. In a traditional squares of the inner city (Piata Mare on Thursday and Piata Mica on Sunday), people were not too surprised to see it. Many of them were simply spending time on the square and also seemed more relaxed and ready to engage with the intervention, than in the other places. The flow of people was slow but constant on these squares. In two of the other places, there was a more rapid flow of people. In front of the state socialist time department store Dumbrava (Friday noon) and the post-communist out of city shopping centre (Saturday noon) people did not spend much time – but these spaces were clearly for passing by and occasional stopping. People were happy to engage, and surprised to see an art intervention in this unconventional place.

Precisely the flow of people made the marked apart these places from the market square. In the food market, people were more reluctant to engage with the intervention. On a Saturday afternoon everyone seemed to know each other on the square. Social control was higher and therefore also the fear of 'losing face' by engaging in a silly-looking activity such as making a flag with florescent stars and doormat was greater. It took really long until one of the stall-keeper's son was persuaded
to make the flag – even though it was obvious that he fancied the thought from the beginning.
Making the flag one was always surrounded by others overlooking the process. In the other places
these were occasional passers-by, not the usual crowd. The participants here included kids, an
alcoholic and a middle-aged man with religious Romanian nationalist views. In the other places the
people engaging with the memorial were of much diverse backgrounds – including women and
people in all age groups.

While in the other places I had encountered many people who knew English, German or some
other language – or were happy to try interacting with a foreigner - in this place it was also the
most difficult to communicate in English or without a common language. I took with me a
Romanian friend. She was quite annoyed by the reluctance of people to communicate – or the way
in which they communicated. Here for instance the EU was not received with the same
appreciation as elsewhere generally.

The places could also be distinguished between through the exchange value of the memorial. In
the main square Piata Mica – with social and political character – people were participating
recognising merely the symbolic value of the flag. In the out of city shopping centre the non-
commercial character of this action in contrast to the other signs and places was obvious. Outside
Dumbrava and on Piata Mica – a flower market square – some passers-by were asking whether
they had to pay for this action. On the food market they asked whether I would pay for them to
participate. The memorial action could demonstrate different usages and characters of spaces.
Could one, however, also draw conclusions of the character and meaning of the EU and the
significance and function of Romania's membership in the different places and among different
people in Romania – or would they be a bit hasty and stereotyping?

It is important to see the particularity of the EU memorial intervention in Sibiu – the way in which it
engaged with people and places, while also its universal value. It is interesting to start
hypothesising and testing how it would be to run a similar intervention in another place, country
and culture. Stories and pictures of the people engaging with the intervention in Sibiu can be found
in other sections of this webpage – to give us an idea or two about, the EU, Europeanness,
memorials and interaction in public space.

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