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PRIVATE MEMORY IN PUBLIC SPACE

Abstract

Commemoration in public space is usually associated with the creation of official objects related to important events or individuals, most often in the form of monuments or plaques. In the paper, the author considers alternative forms of commemoration which, by existing in the social space, invade privacy, taking into account not only artistic activities such as *Stolpersteine*/Gunter Demnig's "stumbling stones" but also, for example, candles or flowers at accident sites. So, the author examines non-monumental forms of commemoration and considers the questions related to the reception of these objects, including their penetration into common cultural spaces.

Keywords: public monuments, intergenerational trauma, memories, counter-monument, the individualisation of the dead

I INTRODUCTION

This article concerns the subject of incorporating private memory into urban public space. Without going into detail about the specific features of public space, I will use the basic distinction in urban studies between public, semi-private and private space. Public space can be defined as accessible "to the entire community and visitors from the outside, where the city's intense life takes place, with the most important objects of social, service and cultural importance, that is objects-symbols".¹ However, the openness of this space is regulated by legal norms and, to an even greater extent, by the established habits of its users. This means that individual statements appearing in public space merge (usually) with a barrage of visual and auditory

¹ Kazimierz Wejchert, *Przestrzeń wokół nas* (Katowice, 1993).

stimuli and, as a result, become inaudible.² Public monuments, with their large-scale effect and monumental form, should resound most clearly and loudly in this space. They respond to the political need to commemorate significant events, great people, great victories, and – especially concerning the Holocaust – great crimes.³ They are a collective expression and – because for a long time, public space was treated as separate from the private sphere – monuments function mentally outside of the area of individual memory; they also ignore everyday life, saturated as they are with a multitude of texts and voices, indifference and haste.⁴ The openness and collective nature of public space are disturbed when individual misfortune hopes to exist within it.

II

ARTISTIC INCORPORATION OF PRIVATE MEMORY INTO URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

Olga Tokarczuk,⁵ in one of her lectures from 2018, talks about the common space of experience: “first, it is the external world agreed to and

² Among others, Zygmunt Bauman, *Między chwilą a pięknem. O sztuce w rozpedzonym świecie* (Łódź, 2010).

³ An analysis on political connections is carried out by Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments, Art in Political Bondage, 1870–1997* (London, 1998). All the numerous realistic monuments to John Paul II and the statue of Lech Kaczyński in Warsaw testify to the durability of this tradition. In reference to the subject of this article, it is worth mentioning the monuments commemorating crimes committed during the Second World War, both the earlier ones, such as Monument of Struggle and Martyrdom – the monument unveiled in 1969 in the area of the former Majdanek concentration camp (Wiktor Tolkin and Janusz Dembek), the International Monument to the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp (1967, Pietro Cascella, Giorgio Simoncini, Jerzy Jarnuszkiwicz, and Julian Pałka), and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (2003–2005, Peter Eisenman).

⁴ Cit. in Aleida Assmann, who refers to the terminology “das individuelle, das soziale, das politische und das kulturelle Gedächtnis”, in *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München, 2006); ‘Individual memory’, ‘social memory’, ‘political memory’ and ‘cultural memory’, in Aleida Assmann, ‘Four Formats of Memory: From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past’, in Christian Emden and David R. Midgley (eds), *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-speaking World since 1500* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁵ At this point, it is worth emphasising not only the artistic value of the writer, but also her social sensitivity and psychological education. These considerations concern the creative process, but they can also be used to address its reception.

created daily by the media, business, travel and all external human activity, secondly – the internal world that creates reservoirs of common memory, the experience of myths, stories going back to the origins of our species”.⁶ Private memory is associated with personal, individual memory, in which one’s personal recollections are also stored. This is mentioned by Maurice Halbwachs, one of the pioneers of memory research, who attempts to go beyond psychoanalytical explanations.⁷

Epigenetic research is currently an interesting way to explain the problem of transmitting personal, traumatic memories to someone else’s memory.⁸ On its basis, it was established that private, often tabooed; psychological wounds can be passed on to subsequent generations at the genetic level, thus creating a chain of intergenerational trauma. In this way, personal pain becomes a supra-individual experience, still remaining in the private sphere, but turning into a memory of traumatic experience for future generations. For further study, it seems vital to embed memory in the human genetic structure, in its corporeality.

These different methodological perspectives are juxtaposed because – despite the considerable achievements in research on memory and its different levels of functioning – we have not yet fully grasped the mechanisms which would allow us to explain the possibility of implementing individual memory in the public space, whilst maintaining the personal, intimate character of the former. What also remains unexplained is how the conditions for the private reception of such messages are created. However, these different approaches seem to merge in works, or rather artistic activities, treated as both the subject of research and subjective statements. Therefore, artworks are not only discussed but also treated as a way to inscribe memory

⁶ Olga Tokarczuk, ‘Kraina Metaksy’, in *ead.*, *Czuły Narrator* (Kraków, 2020), 258.

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, ‘The Social Framework of Memory’, in *On Collective Memory*, ed., transl. and with an introduction Lewis A. Coser (Chicago–London, 1992). [First edition: *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*; Paris, 1925]. Jungian psychoanalysis was such an attempt.

⁸ For epigenetic research, see Bessel van der Kolk, *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Biological Sequelae* (Washington DC, 1984); Douglas Delahanty (ed.), *The Psychobiology of Trauma and Resilience across the Lifespan* (Lanham MD, 2008). About intergenerational trauma writes Mark Wolynn, *It Didn’t Start with You. How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle* (New York, 2017).

into the social discourse, precisely by means of the intimate and small-scale character of their expression.⁹

It is also no coincidence that I refer to works of art which, through bodily and mental experiences, attempt to introduce the recipient to private memory thanks to – and despite – its placement in public space. In fact, the work of art becomes the basis for its interpretation. The artistic projects discussed here also allow us to preserve a certain privacy of speech, which is important in relation to the topic under discussion.

Private pain or tragedy is manifested spontaneously at the sites of accidents, which mainly affects the closest circle of people, an example of which are roadside crosses, candles and flowers. These completely private, often even kitschy places, which are located in the ruptures of public spaces,¹⁰ encourage motorists to reduce their speed even if for a moment, which means that the death of a nameless, unknown person somehow moved us, did not leave us indifferent and at least caused us to consider our own mortality.¹¹ As it turns out, the public space is saturated with such private ‘memories’ that we pass in everyday life, perhaps rarely registering them fully consciously but nevertheless keeping them in the recesses of memory.

III

GHOST BIKES: PRIVATE MEMORIALS

Sometimes privacy is also incorporated into public space thanks to its affinity to mourning, as evidenced by white bicycles called ghost bikes, which commemorate the death of cyclists. “The ghosts honour the memory of the dead [even if he remains anonymous], as well as a warning to others and a silent support for the right to safe

⁹ I do not believe that the intuitive character of these statements diminishes their analytical value. See the explanations in further footnotes.

¹⁰ The importance of existential ruptures, which (suddenly) open in everyday life and give it meaning, is examined by, for example: Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Warszawa, 1992; 2nd ed., Kraków, 2018). Interstitiality is one of the most important themes in Jacques Derrida’s philosophy, though it is one that will not be developed here.

¹¹ By writing ‘us’, ‘our’ in the further fragments of the article, I am referring to the often predictable reaction without attempting to precisely identify the social group representing these supposed stances.



Fig. 1. A ghostbike on Pelikanslingan in Slussen, 2011; Wikimedia

movement by cyclists”.¹² Jo Slota initiated these installations in 2002, and the idea was taken up by bicycle activists and victims’ families around the world.¹³

White bicycles accompanied by artificial roadside flowers prove that, to come into existence (and not only, but to be) in public space, actions are needed, ones which respect individual sensitivity, while giving it form and a universal dimension. The examples discussed below are understood as making private memory present in the public

¹² The authors of the Wikipedia entry write “A ghost bike is a bicycle roadside memorial, placed where a cyclist has been killed or severely injured, usually by the driver of a motor vehicle”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_bike [Accessed: 22 Aug. 2021].

¹³ Jo Slota, ‘Ghost Bike – An art chronicle by Jo Slota’. An artist from San Francisco; for the purposes of his project, he searched for an abandoned old bike, painted it white and photographed it, and posted the photo on his website: ghostbike.net [Accessed: 22 Aug. 2021].

space, which is achieved thanks to their artistic form: they have not lost their intimately small scale and have retained the ability to evoke a personal response in pedestrians.

IV

MEMORIAL TO THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE

One of the projects that envisaged entering someone's personal space was Rudolf Herz and Reinhard Matz's competition proposal from 1997 to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.¹⁴ This project was created when the traditional formula of a 'collective' monument was losing its impact, especially regarding the commemoration of the Holocaust.¹⁵ It was also a time of expanding discussions on the problem of collective memory, based on Pierre Nora's propositions of *lieux de mémoire*/sites of memory.¹⁶ The artistic affiliation of these artists, who were associated with conceptual art, is also important. It is within its framework, as well as in minimalist art, that the idea of the established concepts of art and its reception was questioned in the 1980s. The works of such artists as Carl Andre, André Long and Richard Serra were not only to be perceived visually,

¹⁴ Rudolf Herz and Reinhard Matz, *Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Denkmal*, ed. Matthias Reichelt (Nürnberg, 2001). See also Rudolf Herz, 'Die Widersprüche liegen auf dem Tisch. Ein Entwurf zum Holocaust-Mahnmal', in Klaus Herding and Bernhard Stumpfhaus (eds), *Pathos, Affekt, Gefühl. Die Emotionen in den Künsten* (New York, 2004).

¹⁵ Various controversies surrounding the monument are mentioned by Karolina Szulejewska, 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Contribution to an analysis of the German memory of the Holocaust', M.A. dissertation supervised by Dr. Iwona Kurz in the Department of Polish Studies at Warsaw University (Warszawa, 2014), pdf: <https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/9320/K.%20Szulejewska%2C%20Pomnik%20Pomordowanych%20%C5%BByd%C3%B3w%20Europy.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, [Accessed: 30 April 2022]. This work also contains a comprehensive bibliography with such works as, for example, James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (London, 1993), 26–48; Michael S. Cullen (ed.), *Das Holocaust-Mahnmal. Dokumentation einer Debatte* (München, 1999); Ute Heimrod, Günther Schlusche, and Horst Seferens (eds), *"Der Denkmalstreit – das Denkmal?" Die Debatte um das "Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas" Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin, 1999); Michael Jeismann (ed.), *Mahnmal Mitte. Eine Kontroverse* (Köln, 1999).

¹⁶ Pierre Nora, 'Mémoire collective', in Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds), *Faire de l'histoire* (Paris, 1974), 40.

but were meant to reach the recipient's consciousness and sensitivity through bodily experiences.¹⁷

In the 1997 competition to select the project for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe [*Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*], both artists departed from the assumptions underlying such a monument.¹⁸ They proposed that the plot of land meant for the monument be sold and the obtained funds devoted to financing the foundation's activities to help victims of modern disasters. The prominent and visible sign of commemorating the victims was to be a kilometre-long paved segment of the A7 motorway near Kassel, where the speed limit would be reduced to 30 km/h. This motorway segment would be preceded by an overhanging bridge with a sign stating 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', and nearby gas stations would carry publications about the victims of the Holocaust. The plan was a reference to, among other things, the Nazi program of building highways as 'Hitler's roads', so it was not only meant to commemorate the victims of Nazism, but was also concerned with the issue of the responsibility the German nation bore for the crimes of the regime. Artists "looking for a form that enables living memories, propose a monument that interferes with everyday life by referring to the symbol of German self-confidence, in which they inscribe a destructive element with a memory function".¹⁹

¹⁷ For a publication from this time, concerning the discussed works and addressing this topic, see Harald Szeemann, 'Zeitlos – Kunst von heute im Hamburger Bahnhof. Eine Ausstellung der Stadt Berlin', Kulturstadt Europas 1988 in Zusammenarbeit mit der Werkstatt Berlin (Berlin, 1988); also, Renate Wiehager (ed.), *Tradition and Tendencies of Minimalism from 1950 to the Present/Tradition und Tendenzen Minimalistischer Kunst von 1950 bis Heute* (Berlin, 2010); Kathrin Baumstark and Andreas Hoffmann (eds), *Minimal Art. Körper im Raum, Ausstellungskatalog* (München, 2022).

¹⁸ The first competition was announced in 1988 and was initiated by Lei Rosh. The winner was Christine Jakob-Marks, whose work was never completed. The second competition in 1997 yielded two finalists: the architect Peter Eisenman and sculptor Richard Serra. After alterations imposed by the organisers and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Serra left the project, and Eisenman's monument was unveiled in 2005: Justyna Ewa Majewska's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe': <https://histmag.org/Pomnik-Pomordowanych-Zydow-Europy-w-Berlinie-8119> [Accessed: 5 May 2022].

¹⁹ Cindy Schmiedichen, 'Rudolf Herz und Reinhard Matz. Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Mahnmal' <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/mahnmal/herzmatz.html>. Here we can find detailed descriptions of the project [Accessed: 5 April 2021].

The vividness of memories was also to be guaranteed by the activities of the foundation; the speed limit and the physical discomfort of driving on cobblestones were meant to remind motorists of Nazi German extermination, memories of which are concealed in everyday life with ordinary activities.²⁰

Although Herz's and Matz's project was preceded by 'anti-monuments'/counter-monuments created in the 1980s,²¹ the question of form received the most attention.²² The focus on form was understandable, taking into account that the artists sought to activate individual memory by interfering with the participants' daily activities, displacing them from the role of viewers or recipients.²³

While the idea of stimulating collective memory by invading the private sphere of pedestrians and jolting them from their everyday comfort is persuasive, this type of interference raises my doubts, if not concern. Although the creators assumed that the motorists' irritation –

²⁰ The topic of transportation commemoration in everyday life was discussed by Moshe Zuckermann, 'Was hat die Autobahn damit zu tun?' in Herz and Matz, *Zwei Entwürfe*, 136, <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/mahnmal/herzmatz.html> [Accessed: 5 April 2021].

²¹ For example, Horst Hoheisel's 'Aschrott fountain' in Kassel from 1987 or Jochen Gerz's 'Place of the Invisible Memorial in Saarbrücken' from 1990. For more information about the topic of classical memorials and anti-memorials, see Wojciech Szymański, 'Miejsce pamięci – pomnik – anty-pomnik Artystyczne strategie upamiętniania na terenie krakowskiego Podgórze', *RIHA Journal* (17 June 2015), Special issue 'Contemporary Art and Memory', part ii, 0122 (Polish version), 0123 (English version) available at *RIHA Journal* [Accessed: 5 May 2022].

Discreet forms of commemorating collective events are used more and more often, which (in the author's impression) confirms the need to reach the individual sensibilities of the audience. An example may be the 'Monument to the Victims of the Pacification on Tiananmen Square', in Wrocław on Oławska Street (Igor Wójcik, Robert Jezierski and Joanna Czarnecka, 1989, replica Marek Stankiewicz, 1999). The emotional potential of such testimonies is evidenced by the fact that the original version was destroyed "by unknown perpetrators", https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomnik_ku_czci_Chi%C5%84czyk%C3%B3w_z_Tian%E2%80%99anmen, [Accessed: 5 July 2022]. At this point, it should be clearly emphasised that a Chinese bicycle crushed into the pavement has a decidedly different meaning than a ghost bike.

²² Rudolf Herz, 'Reinhard Matz. Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Mahnmal', <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/mahnmal/herzmatz.html> [Accessed: 28 Jan. 2022].

²³ It is important that the project be "understood as a sensual mental experiment": Cindy Schmiedichen, 'Rudolf Herz und Reinhard Matz. Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Mahnmal', <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/mahnmal/herzmatz.html> [Accessed: 28 Jan. 2022].

and most likely also aggression – would not be directed against the victims, I do not think it would be possible to avoid it altogether. Contrary to Aleida Assmann’s assertion that the project “creates conditions for collective *mémoire involontaire*, or collective, passive memory”,²⁴ an escalation of negative reactions among daily commuters cannot be ruled out. Since the problem of violating the boundaries of privacy by “the compulsion to remember” has not been sufficiently considered in this work, it carries a great risk of misdirecting the emotions of motorists against not only the Holocaust but also the “compulsion to remember”, if not the victims themselves.²⁵

V

BERLIN-BIRKENAU PROJECT: ŁUKASZ SUROWIEC

In the Berlin-Birkenau project from 2012,²⁶ Łukasz Surowiec managed to avoid this danger with his attempt to activate social memory by making people aware of the individual dimension of suffering and persuading them to experience this suffering personally. As part of the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, around three hundred young birch trees, taken from the area of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, were planted in city parks and historical sites. Small signs were placed next to them with information about the place of origin of the plants.²⁷ As a result, these trees have become more

²⁴ Aleida Assmann: ‘Erinnerung als Stolperstein’, in Herz and Matz, *Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Denkmal*, 88.

²⁵ Cindy Schmiedichen mentions this, though she finally appreciates the novel concept of the anti-memorial and posing new questions concerning the social function of memory: Cindy Schmiedichen, ‘Rudolf Herz und Reinhard Matz. Zwei Entwürfe zum Holocaust-Mahnmal’, <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/mahnmal/herzmatz.html>; cf.: Rudolf Herz, ‘Die Widersprüche liegen auf dem Tisch. Ein Entwurf zum Holocaust-Mahnmal’, in Herding and Stumpfhaus (eds), *Pathos, Affekt, Gefühl*.

²⁶ For a broader discussion of the topic, see Jacek Małczyński, *Perspektywa historii środowiskowej* (Warszawa, 2018), 195–207. In this article I have included interpretations that were not noticed by the author. See also Sara Herczyńska, ‘Czym dziedzictwem są brzozy? Wokół pracy Berlin-Birkenau Łukasza Surowca’, *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 1 (2018), 75–83.

²⁷ Planting trees was one of the parts of the project. Surowiec treated the idea of planting these trees in Berlin as a kind of reversal of the camp legacy, which was meant to provoke the Germans to reflect on the problem of responsibility for Nazism. After a period of adaptation, trees were chosen from the artist’s garden



Fig. 2. Łukasz Surowiec, Berlin-Birkenau, digging up birch trees in the Birkenau camp, 2012; the author's personal collection

than silent witnesses of history or an illustration of the natural cycle of rebirth, which stands in contrast to the linearity and finitude of human life. The artist pointed out that “the trees in Birkenau drink water from the soil mixed with ashes and breathe the same air in which the smoke from burnt bodies rose. There is something of these people in these trees”²⁸ – they are therefore a record of them, hidden in the transformed matter; they are literally ‘places of memory’.

which would be able to take root in the city, which in this case may bring to mind unfortunate associations of selections in the camp, though the weaker birches remained in the garden. Standing as an example of his sensitivity, the artist later put a withered birch, framed like a picture, in an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2013). “The second part was the two-hundred seedlings, which sprouted out of the seed gathered from the Birkenau camp. These seedlings became a part of the exposition in the Kunst Werke, where the public was allowed to take them and plant them in their private gardens. A book of addresses was created – almost a thousand addresses. I declared that after twenty years, I will see how they are growing – it is about that time now...” – this is from private correspondence with the artist, to whom I am grateful for his generous assistance. In the article, I refer only to the first, completed part of the work.

²⁸ ‘Surowiec: Berlin Birkenau. Łukasz Surowiec w rozmowie z Danielem Millerem’, *Krytyka Polityczna*, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/surowiec-berlin-birkenau/> [Accessed: 5 June 2021].



Fig. 3. Łukasz Surowiec, the plan of Berlin-Birkenau, 2012; the author's personal collection

It is worth recalling here that in Jewish cemeteries, “the trees whose roots grow into the tombstone cannot be moved because they belong to the deceased, they touch them with their roots”.²⁹ Transporting the trees to Berlin would indicate that the deceased were never buried, and that their bodies were defiled during their lifetime.

However, their place of origin needs to be described for these trees to be distinguished from the thousands of other trees and treated as memory incarnated. These minor informational signs require one to stop and look down, thus triggering the memory of the events meant to be recalled. Bowing the head when looking down automatically becomes an involuntary gesture of paying tribute, and when one reads the written information, one releases not only the birch trees, but also oneself, from everyday life, which is governed by the right not to remember. However, although they trigger memory and remind

²⁹ Justyna Żukowska-Łyko: <https://histmag.org/Zydowska-sztuka-sepulkralna-Kamienie-pelne-symboli-14828> [Accessed: 11 Dec. 2021].

one that the past exists, they seem to do so without the excessive compulsion found in Hertz's and Matz's project.

The project's initial idea was not to commemorate the war's victims but to "give the city something that will remain there longer than the exhibition itself".³⁰ Not only was our attention meant to be directed at the victims of Nazism, but also – to an even greater extent – it was meant to compel both us Berliners and visitors to reflect on modern times. The birch trees from Berlin-Birkenau return the deported dead to the place where the crime was born; they introduce responsibility for the past, which in itself is inseparable from memory, and they render the pedestrians witnesses to history with an obligation to rethink it.

Humanised by the ashes of the dead, the trees were transported to Berlin, thereby introducing to the common social space both the memory of the crimes and the spectres of those who perished in the camp. A particular tree individualises the dead and thus induces reactions on the part of each individual pedestrian.

VI

STOLPERSTEINE: GUNTER DEMNIG

Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine* also directs pedestrians' attention to the specific people killed by the Third Reich. The commemorative cobblestones began to be placed in 1996, and by 2022 some 75,000 *Stolpersteine* had been embedded in pavements across Europe, most of them commissioned by the families of the deceased.³¹ Over the many years of the project, *Stolpersteine* has become a means of artistic

³⁰ Małczyński, *Perspektywa historii środowiskowej*, 195. The exhibition was the 7th Berlin Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2012, and its main theme was 'Art as a method of practicing politics and influencing reality'.

³¹ Information concerning the project can be found on the following website: <https://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>. *Stolpersteine* are created in cooperation with Michael Friedrichs-Friedländer, who casts the cobblestones, which are then arranged by Demnig. See also the official website of Gunter Demnig: <http://www.gunterdemnig.de/>. This project has been discussed in many publications, for example, Julia Röttjer, 'Können Stolpersteine polnische Spuren sein', in Peter Oliver Loew, Andrzej Kaluza, and Julia Röttjer (eds), *Lebenspfade. Ścieżki życia. Polnische Spuren in Rhein Main. Ein historisches Mosaik* (Darmstadt, 2019); Petra T. Fritsche, *Stolpersteine – das Gedächtnis einer Straße* (Berlin, 2014); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, 2010).

commemoration of former inhabitants and has also been mentioned in novels.³² For example, Simon Stranger writes about them in his book *Keep Saying their Names: A Novel*:

According to Jewish tradition, everyone dies twice. The first time is when the heart stops beating..... The second time is when the name of the deceased is mentioned, read, or thought of for the last time, fifty, or a hundred, or four hundred years later. This second death made the German artist Gunter Demnig start casting cobblestones in brass, engraving them with the names of Jews murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War, and embedding them in the pavement outside the houses where they once lived.... He calls them Stolpersteine – [stones over which we stumble].³³

Since anyone “who wants to read what is engraved on them [the stones] must automatically bow his head over them”,³⁴ this stumbling initiates a gesture of paying tribute to the dead. It also activates the memory of a specific individual, and each subsequent stumble sustains this memory. What is more, noticing, even half-consciously, any other cobblestones can trigger the imagination, which begins to create the thought of “people who at once fell in love, who dreamt of the future”, who lived.³⁵

The process of ‘reviving’ is helped by the discrete form of these cobblestones, which are not obtrusive for pedestrians; they instead invite one to form a connection, even personal contact. Physically stumbling across them, which is an act recorded in the body’s memory, may even open the possibility for the idea of death – circulating in public discourse – to take root in the memory and transform it into a recollection – perhaps foreign, but familiar, even one’s own. It seems that this process of activating and transforming memory

³² Unfortunately, I did not note any other, previously read novels.

³³ Simon Stranger, *Keep Saying their Names: A Novel* (New York, 2020), 9. The novel received the Norwegian Bookseller’s Prize in 2018. The additional fragment in brackets appears in the Polish translation, but is absent in the English version of the book: Simon Stranger, *Leksykon światła i mroku*, transl. Katarzyna Tunkiel (Kraków, 2018), 6–7.

³⁴ Susanne Cordes and Małgorzata Matzke, “Kamienie pamięci” jako dzieło życia. *Ich twórca kończy 70 lat*, <https://www.dw.com/pl/kamienie-pami%C4%99ci-jako-dzie%C5%82o-%C5%BCycia-ich-tw%C3%B3rca-ko%C5%84czy-70-lat/a-41143944> [Accessed: 4 May 2021].

³⁵ Simon Stranger, *Keep Saying their Names: A Novel* (New York, 2020), 471.



Fig. 4. Gunter Demnig, laying the *Stolpersteine*; courtesy of Stiftung-Spuren-Gunter-Demnig

also brings an awareness of individual absences, removing them from the great void created by the annihilation of millions of lives.

Not only are *Stolpersteine* directed at contemporary pedestrians, but more importantly, they assume the individualisation of the dead. Out of an inconceivable number of about six million victims, single individuals who lived at that particular place emerged. Identifying these victims, without drowning out the mass scale of death, gives the dead their individuality and ‘shifts’ them towards life, albeit a past life, but one rendered distinct in someone’s personal consciousness. Thanks to this, the dead begin to function in the extended circle of memory of strangers, not bound by ties of kinship, religion or nationality. It is no coincidence that *Stolpersteine* commemorate other victims of Nazism: Sinti, Jehovah’s witnesses, homosexuals and people with disabilities.

It seems inevitable to associate *Stolpersteine* with epitaph plaques placed on the floors of churches, which were primarily meant to invite prayer and were an expression of the deceased’s humility, reminding

us of the inevitability of death, to which all are equal. A significant difference was that these plaques were placed in a sacred sphere inside the church, as a house of God, which was reserved for the most influential believers.³⁶ The Christian tradition of epitaphs in the context of the victims of the Holocaust shows that Demnig remains within his cultural memory and, on its basis, creates a gesture of penance and reconciliation.

However, *Stolpersteine* are located in the profane sphere – outside the protection of the temple, the gate and God – and remind us of how the Nazis killed, which not only degraded life but also deprived us of the dignity of death. Although trampling on tombstones is disrespectful to the dead in every culture, the *Stolpersteine* project intends to have people stumble across them: to have people take notice, to draw their attention, and thus to remind them of who had once lived in the marked places. Nevertheless, *Stolpersteine* have invited controversy, for example, from the Jewish community: the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Charlotte Knobloch, feared that walking on these stones may be regarded as trampling on the memory of Holocaust victims.³⁷ The Polish Institute of National Remembrance also released an official statement claiming that “We consider the *Stolpersteine* concept of the German artist Gunter Demnig to be highly controversial and generally contradictory to the culture of remembrance adopted in Poland. Ordinary pavement is used for utility purposes, and it is difficult to recognise it as a place of special respect”.³⁸

Nevertheless, for most recipients/witnesses, the artist’s gesture turned out to be unambiguous and persuasive; this was also the case for the descendants of the deceased, who have since proposed laying such

³⁶ Demnig also refers to this when he writes about the honour of walking over epitaph plates in churches. He emphasises that *Stolpersteine* are not tombstones, as they are not placed over the remains of the dead, <https://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/> [Accessed: 3 May 2022].

³⁷ Cit. in Marcin Kostaszuk and Marek Zaradniak: ‘Przechodniu, tu mieszkali sąsiedzi’, *Głos Wielkopolski*, 5 (2 Jan. 2011); Margarete Moulin, ‘Stolpersteine in München: Der Streit ums Gedenken’, *Taz* (8 Aug. 2016); Susanne Schröder, ‘Gedenken an Münchner NS-Opfer. Bürgerbegehren fordert “Stolpersteine” auch in München’, *Sonntagsblatt* (9 March 2018); Eliza Apperly, ‘Stumbling Stones: A Different Vision of Holocaust Remembrance’, *The Guardian* (18 Feb. 2019).

³⁸ <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/dla-mediow/komunikaty/80628,W-odpowiedzi-na-informacje-zawarte-w-artykule-dotyczacym-kamieni-pamieci-o-ofiar.html> [Accessed: 5 May 2022].



Fig. 5. Gunter Demnig, *Stolpersteine* – reaction of a passer-by; courtesy of Stiftung-Spuren-Gunter-Demnig

stones, for example, next to their family's houses.³⁹ A somewhat paradoxical confirmation that *Stolpersteine* activate enclaves of individual memory in public space is the report from the unveiling of a *Stolpersteine* of the Zernik family in Wrocław in March 2020. The family celebration was accompanied by speeches, with candles and stones appearing next to the *Stolperstein*.⁴⁰ As awkward as it may sound, the fact that the *Stolpersteine* are enriched with elements used in accident sites confirms their close relationship with spontaneous, authentic mourning gestures. Further emphasising the message and highlighting the not-too-visible cobblestones is meant to individualise the dead in public space. However, when placed in the sphere of everyday life,

³⁹ <https://www.dw.com/pl/kamienie-pami%C4%99ci-jako-dzie%C5%82o-%C5%BCycia-ich-tw%C3%B3rca-ko%C5%84czy-70-lat/a-41143944>, and many others [Accessed: 5 May 2022].

⁴⁰ <https://chidusz.com/stolpersteine-w-polsce-ipn-szczecin-bedzin-wroclaw-krakow-procedura/>.

Stolpersteine are exposed to various, also hostile, behaviour. But even that does not negate the reason for their existence, as it triggers further discussions and keeps the memory alive. After neo-Nazis dug out the cobblestones on the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* in Greifswald in 2012,⁴¹ the *Stolpersteine* asserted their existence by the emptiness they left behind. The small pit left in the pavement does not obscure the memory of the commemorated events; quite the contrary, it revives history, reminds us about the actions of the Nazis and launches further acts of opposition and commemoration on the part of ordinary people. This clearly proves that these cobblestones have inscribed themselves in the individual memory/consciousness, and that the dead ‘strangers’ are accepted among the circle of people who you want to remember.

VII CONCLUSIONS

Although birches are much more visible than cobblestones, both of their messages are similarly discreet, neither aggressive nor oppressive towards pedestrians. Hundreds or thousands of them exist, yet they retain their individuality and direct attention to the individual rather than the collective beings. Artistic activities drawing on individual sensitivity, commemorating persons rather than ideas, trigger the private memory of collective events. They engage in a more intimate and personal dialogue as they function in the public space.⁴² Perhaps, in the case of *Stolpersteine* and Berlin-Birkenau, the purpose is not so much to commemorate the dead as to remind us of their lives, of their existence before their death – to distinguish a single person from the group of victims of Nazism, to remember this person as someone’s grandfather, grandmother, father or wife.

⁴¹ <https://www.uni-greifswald.de/universitaet/geschichte/universitaet-internationalsozialismus/stolpersteine/> [Accessed: 4 May 2022].

⁴² This issue is raised by Ewa Rewers in reference to Paul Celan’s poem *Sprich auch du* [And You Say It], and Derrida’s reflections related to it: “I consider the discovery of this place [between emptiness and form] to be very necessary, since it removes the temptation, which the philosophical discourse tends to succumb to, the temptation to confer a specific reading experience with a universal dimension, annihilating this single, personal moment of being called, marked by ‘and you say it’”, Ewa Rewers, ‘Pustka i forma’, *Teksty Drugie*, 2/3 (2003), 304.

Rudolf Herz and Reinhard Matz in their attempt to appeal to the individual sensitivity of motorists and the role of a participant questioned the tradition of a public monument but still made use of its large scale. Łukasz Surowiec and Gunter Demnig definitely renounced this tradition. Despite all the differences between the two artistic projects, they both lead to particular relations on an intimate scale. An individual pedestrian notices a single tree or a stone, an object which, with its unobtrusive presence, makes one aware of the absence of one of the victims of extermination, and a momentary pause creates a kind of meeting space. These intimate forms of commemoration, especially *Stolpersteine* and Berlin-Birkenau, are ‘interstitial’ works: they can be treated as mini-monuments, although that seems by contradictory by definition. They do more than just honour the victims, they embody their memory.

In the case of Berlin-Birkenau, the question also concerns the interpretative potential found in works of nature. Birches growing wild were replanted several times as part of an artistic project, which did not differ from typical gardening. While remaining a part of nature, they become a semaphore, a cultural message, because they are imbued with meaning.⁴³ However, the problem here seems to be the precariousness of associations: if the signs next to the Birkenau birch trees are either lost or destroyed, the birches may cease to be the embodiment of camp prisoners, consequently becoming ordinary trees, unable to evoke associations and activate any memory. But does this mean they no longer contain “something of those people” that they were meant to commemorate?

The examples discussed earlier deviate from the official character of monuments, as they propose a meeting place, thanks to – as Demnig says – mental stumbling,⁴⁴ which opens a space for a cross-generational conversation. This place becomes all the more important due to the inevitably dwindling number of witnesses and participants of the events commemorated; as a result, these events cease to be “an experience in the past, but [become] history. History, not memory”.⁴⁵

⁴³ Krzysztof Pomian, ‘Jak uprawiać historię kultury’, *Przegląd Historyczny*, lxxxv, 1 (1995), 1–13, here 7. Also, *id.*, *Zbieracze i osobliwości* (Gdańsk, 2012).

⁴⁴ <https://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>.

⁴⁵ Norbert Frei, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (München, 2005), 8. Full quote: “Aber darin liegt ein Element der Selbsttäuschung, denn die

While occupying public space, works of art that refer to private reception inscribe themselves into a specific place and thus change their identity: from an ordinary pavement and a simple birch tree, they create places of remembrance. Moreover, by activating the individual memory of collective events, they disturb the public space, which is not only supposed to be official and in line with current historical policy, but should allow for a private experience. Perhaps this is how one can explain the internalisation of someone else's memory, experienced personally, through individualised traces found in the public space.

We can assume that the Nazi crimes, and, above all, the Holocaust, several decades after the war, have become a permanent element of both the collective consciousness and the subconscious. The interpenetration of different types of memory has its own psychological as well as sociological, and cultural justification thanks to the functioning of memory on different interpenetrating individual and collective levels. This is confirmed by Aleida Assmann, who writes about incorporating the subjective experiences of an individual into ever-wider circles, into the memory of "family, neighbourhood, generation, society, nation, and culture".⁴⁶

The examples cited earlier – both artistic and 'amateur' works – appeal to empathy, which makes it possible to experience someone else's memory as your own. Furthermore, these examples allow us not so much to worship the dead as to resurrect them. This is because artists, like the families of victims, transcend the effect of large numbers and large scale, which does not diminish the horror of the millions of victims of the Holocaust or the anxiety over the number of accident victims.

In the examples above, art – as it establishes its formal rules and even when it goes against the grain of these rules – seems

Wahrheit ist, daß fast niemand sagen kann: *Ich erinnere mich!* Für die allermeisten von uns ist die Hitler-Zeit keine erlebte Vergangenheit, sondern Geschichte. History, not memory. ... wofür das Stelenfeld in der Nachbarschaft des Brandenburger Tor fortan steht: für eine Zukunft der Vergangenheit, die eine Gegenwart ohne die Überlebenden sein wird?"

⁴⁶ Aleida Assmann, 'Cztery formy pamięci', in Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), *Między historią a pamięcią. Antologia* (Warszawa, 2013), 40. This is a Polish translation of 'Four Formats of Memory: From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past', in Christian Emden and David R. Midgley (eds), *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-speaking World since 1500* (Cambridge, 2002).

to ensure the noticeability of small traces of memory; it gives them a supra-individual level while remaining at the level of individual expression. Even if this leads to a certain institutionalisation of forms of memory, the authenticity and individual experiences are preserved. In addition, the inclusion of one artistic work into another art genre, which is carried out, for example, by Simon Stranger, indicates that the synergy effect has been activated, confirming the possibility of not only preserving, but also constantly activating individual memory.

transl. Marcin Tereszewski

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