

Constellations ° Assemblies: How can we rethink the memorial? Transcript

Emma Underhill 0:05

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the fifth of our online *Assemblies*, *How can we rethink the memorial?* I'm Emma Underhill, Founding Director at UP Projects. And for those that need a description, I'm a white woman with blonde, shoulder-length hair and blue glasses. I'm wearing a red and white pattern top and I'm sitting in a white room in front of a bookshelf. My pronouns are she/her. To give you a bit of background the programme of six *Assemblies* are all taking place here in our online event space *The Hall* between March and November of this year. The programme forms part of our wider *Constellations*, learning and development Programme curated by UP Projects working in partnership with Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial and generously supported by the Art Fund, Arts Council England and Constellations Patrons. Through the *Assemblies* we are exploring lines of inquiry that we feel are most vital for the public art sector to pursue right now. Today's event explores questions around memorialising, the role that a memorial might play in the 21st century, and how we might consider alternative approaches to developing memorials. This is a subject that feels particularly pertinent to UP Projects as an organisation that has recently been involved in the commissioning of The National Windrush Monument at London Waterloo station. And we are continuing to explore questions relating to monuments and memorials through discussions and public programming this autumn. I'm absolutely thrilled that today's event will be jointly moderated by Neysa Page-Lieberman and Jane M. Saks, from the inspirational organisation Monuments to Movements based in the US. It's currently 6am for them so huge thanks and kudos to them for joining us so early in the morning! Monuments to Movements is an international organisation that envisions, develops and commissions public artwork that monumentalises movement-making and collective action. They offer a new vision and an evolving process that's not just inclusive of the world's diversity but centred in restorative justice. And I'm sure we'll hear more about this approach as the discussion unfolds. I'm also very excited that they will be joined by Ingar Dragset of Elmgreen & Dragset, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta of Raqs Media Collective who both bring incredible expertise and experience to this complex topic. But before I hand over to them, I would just very quickly like to run through some virtual housekeeping. So, if you experience any technical issues during the event, please use the chat function at the bottom of your screen to chat with our dedicated tech support. On the right of your screen, you will see our Slido bar where you can post questions for our speakers using the Q&A function. And you should see a question there now, so please do check it out and try submitting your answer. And it's important to note that our moderator and speakers will only be picking up questions from the

slideshow Q&A and not from the chat function. So please do make sure you put your questions in the Slido to ensure they get answered. We have British Sign Language Interpretation available for this event. So, if you need a BSL interpreter, please message us in the chat. And our tech assistant will give you a dedicated access link. And if you'd like to access closed captions, please select the CC button at the bottom of your videoconferencing screen to read along. And also, just to note that we will be recording the event today. I think that's all of the technical info. So, without further ado, I'm really delighted to hand over to Neysa and Jane to kick off the discussion. Thank you.

Neysa Page-Lieberman 3:48

Hello, thank you so much for that introduction, Emma. We're so excited to be here as well. We really share your enthusiasm. This is our first co-moderated discussion with UP Projects - first collaboration with UP Projects and *Constellations* ° *Assemblies*. I'm Neysa Page-Lieberman, she/her pronouns. And with Jane Saks we are the Co-Founders and Co-Artistic Directors of Monuments to Movements. I am a white cis woman with medium length brown hair and glasses and wearing a multicoloured pattern top and sitting in front of a rose-coloured wall with white shelving and art and books on the shelves. We'd like to talk a little bit about the framing of this programme and how we're using the mission and collaborative process of M2M to address the enquiries of UP Projects that Emma has just laid out in rethinking monuments and memorials. So, a brief bit about M2M to contextualise this framing. So, Jane and I are based in the United States, Chicago and Kansas City respectively. And our collaborators are in South Africa, Norway, Dubai, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Chile and many places in between. We found it M2M in 2020, at a time when we were being asked to engage with the upsurge and monuments being contested. So, as we were being asked to write or give interviews, we kept seeing these gaps and blind spots in the conversation and the prompts we were being given. So, the questions posed to us were often very similar. What should we do with these problematic monuments or who should replace the coloniser that my community just knocked down? And we saw this rush to topple and replace and find these new heroes really problematic because the old assumptions and processes desperately needed a shift. We asked ourselves what is possible when we imagine work, fight and create together, we imagined building art through feminist strategies, including equitable participation and ethics of care, and celebrating our commonalities and differences. So instead of rushing to carve out another sole individual for a huge plinth, we can envision, develop and commission public artwork that monumentalises movement making and collective action. We embrace a new vision that is not just inclusive of the world's diversity, but paradigm shifting based on intersectional, feminist frameworks, and always centred and restorative justice. So, we are so thrilled to be here, and especially excited that we get to centre the innovative practices of Elmgreen & Dragset and Raqs Media Collective in this conversation, artists who are boldly interrogating

notions of representation, power, history, visibility and future possibilities through their public works. So, before we launch in, we want to talk just a little bit about today's prompts. So, we've started, you all have probably seen the first prompt already to identify your community. And so, this is a two parter, we'll release the other question shortly. This is an exercise we've used quite a bit in workshops with colleagues and collaborators, and our movement builder network. And we've also used it to commission our short essays for our *Deeper Story* series. And this is in recognition that most of us have not seen our story of our community monumentalised in public space. So, we are asking you to start doing that now. And we'd love to take a peek at that now and see how people are answering this. And then again, pretty soon we'll release the second part too. So, if we could look at that. Okay, so this is also the first time that we've asked people to be so concise. Oftentimes, people have a couple minutes talking about this. And so, to get this down into just a few words is really impressive. And I'm seeing things that, you know, I've never seen before, sometimes people define this much more literally, and this is really conceptual, and poetic, and really beautiful. And the words that are popping out, I believe are the ones that people have, have listed more than once, as far as I understand a word cloud to use. And so, some of those are "fluid", "divided", "supportive and caring", "generous", "disenfranchised", "shifting and porous". There's "hyperlocal", "next to international", "warrior mothers", "curious". And so, this goes on and on. And you know, this is like I Jane and I will absolutely interrogate this later. It's so - it's so interesting and I love how it's so dynamic. And obviously you all are responding to each other's definitions of how you identify community, which is really beautiful. So please do continue doing that. And now I get to move on to artists introductions, which you will hear are very, very brief and in no way do them justice. However, I know that you can access fuller bios through UP Projects' resources. So, our first speaker is going to be a Shuddhabrata Sengupta of Raqs Media Collective. So Raqs Media Collective based in Delhi, was founded in 1992 by Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddha Sengupta. The word 'raqs' in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness attained by whirling and being in a state of revolution. Rex defines this as kinetic contemplation, and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world and with time, raqs practices across several media including installation, sculpture, video performance, text, lexica and curation. Recently, they were the artistic directors of the Yokohama Triennial 2020 called *Afterglow*, and their work has been exhibited at biennials across the world, including Documenta, Venice and Istanbul. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Laughter of Tears* at Kunstverein Braunschweig. And my German is my pronunciation is flawless as I'm sure you just heard, and *Pamphilos* at Fast Forward Festival 6 in Athens and *Still More World* at The Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha. Raqs' work opens the possibility of conversation that embodies a deep ambivalence towards modernity, and a quiet but consistent critique of the operations of power and property. The second presentation will be by Ingar Dragset of Elmgreen & Dragset. Michael Elmgreen and

Ingar Dragset are based in Berlin and have worked together as an artist duo since 1995. They've held numerous solo exhibitions worldwide, including most recently *Fondazione Prada* in Milan, Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Finland, The Nasher Sculpture Centre in Dallas, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and this November a solo exhibition at By Art Matters in Hangzhou, China. Well known works include *Prada Marfa*, a full-scale replica of a Prada boutique in the middle of the Texan desert, and *Short Cut* a car and caravan breaking through the ground that is now in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. In Berlin, the artists won the competition for a *Memorial to homosexuals persecuted under the national socialist regime*, which is permanently installed in Tiergarten park since 2008. In 2021 Elmgreen & Dragset were awarded the 14th Robert Jacobson prize of the Würth Foundation in Germany. In this past spring 2022, they received the NY Carlsberg Fondet prize. So, we're going to go ahead and begin presentations back-to-back starting with Raqs Media Collective. We're really looking forward to this. Thank you.

Raqs Media Collective 11:51

Thank you, Neysa. Could I share screen now? Just a moment. Yeah. Right. So, as I said, thank you, Neysa, and thanks to UP Projects, to *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* and *Monuments to Movements* to share these 10 minutes of thought with you, which are a way for us to think through some questions or conundrums of memory, and especially the memory of power and its effect in our lives. I want to start by sharing this picture, what you can see is a man with a lovely smile and a great coat. He's a soldier and a poet. At the end of the Second World War, they cradled in his hand, the head of Adolf Hitler, which someone's decapitated off a statue, which is an interesting way to think about what happens when monuments fall: you can carry bits of them home, turn them into, you know, pedestals for your potted plants or whatever it is that you want to do. And this for us is a kind of little visual maxim for ways of thinking about power and memory to smile, when the statues come down, not just to be consumed by rage, but also be consumed by humour and by pleasure. So, we're very interested in breaking things down as you can see. This is sectioned off statue, it's a design for a work that we'll see a little bit more of. They're part of a set suite of sculptures which make up *Coronation Park*, which is both a suite of sculptures as well as an invitation to walk past them as you would on an avenue. And each of the set of sculptures have a plaque on which we've paraphrase words from an essay by George Orwell, a writer who we come back to more than once and it's an essay called "Shooting an Elephant". An early instance of how someone at the heart of power recognises its hollow core. And you can see for instance, these circles which are the plaques - some of the things written on them are - he became a sort of hollow posing dummy he wore a mask, and his face grew to fit it. It was at this moment, as he stood there with a weapon in his hands that he first grasped the hollowness, the futility. In the end, he could not stand it any longer and went away. What happens when a statue leaves its pedestal? This is

a question that we can ask quite legitimately once all the movements that want to remove monuments to power, and empire and domination have succeeded, as we hope they will. The empty pedestal for a sculpture is a good place to think about departures of all kinds. What for instance would the departure of power from its pedestal look like? Spaces around memorial sculptures are designed to have us look usually up at those who have wielded massive amounts of power. Here one can usually find monarchs, military men, national heroes, some on horseback, some with weapons in hand, all in regalia, and the presence of us, every man, every woman on the square below creates a ripple in the patterns of force that mark the daily life of power. The questions we're interested in is, what does this do to concealment of symbolic power on the pedestal on the square? So, *Coronation Park* was an attempt to think this question through in sculptural form, and it took us from *Coronation Park*, which is an actual place - a derelict place in Delhi, where a few relics of empire are still held to the heart of our practice. It is the last resting place of a few relics of commemorative Imperial statuary, often along what is called now the redesigned central vista of New Delhi, which now has new statues replacing the old ones but more or less with the same effect. Today, these statues are derelict, so we are interested in their distressed state and what happens to them because power is a flux it stands and then it begins to decay. And we're very interested in decay and be able to think with and remember decay. So, who exits? Who enters? Who gets to stand on stage? And who gets to speak in memory? is central to politics. Ceremonial spaces and situations are usually designed with a view to creating an effective representation of the durability, as well as the pomp and circumstance of power. Eventually, all forms of power in their turn are rendered vacant by the passage of time. Like the regalia left behind by an Emperor, who went out in search of his new clothes we all know the story by Hans Christian Andersen of the of The Emperor's New Clothes. And here when we turned the one of the *Coronation Park* sculptures into a proposal for the Fourth Plinth, we basically left the robe hanging behind and as if the emperor had vacated. So, in my language, Bengali, there's a poet called Nirendranath Chakravarty. I won't ask you to remember that name. But he has a beautiful poem called "Ulongo Raja" or "The Naked King". And it goes like this - I'll read a bit. "Everybody can see that the king is naked, but everyone keeps clapping away. Everyone shouts Bravo, bravo, bravo. But in this crowd of grovelers, the child has nowhere to be found. Where is the child? Is he being held hostage in a secret mountain cave? Or is it that while playing with soil and grass and stones he's fallen asleep? Go find him any which way you can? Let him confront the king. Let him stand fearlessly in front of them. Let his voice drown the den of that crowd saying bravo, bravo and ring out. Hey, King, where are you close." The heads of kings and queens and big men and women are the currency of our time. Crowns change heads, time marches on, registered often by the issue of stamps and coins and currency notes. We carry memorials as loose change in our pockets. Heads they win, tails you lose. Some headless figures offer a conundrum. Is the figure a cessation of finality? Or is it far from being

finished? Is it unable to be finished? Or it cannot be finished? Or is the person making the image not in a position to finish it? Or is it that the head has met its own finality and thus, cannot represent itself? Sometimes sovereign power grows heads that it refuses to claim as its own. Afraid, it removes from the scene all traces of blood, conjuring, bleached antiseptic scenes. The 18th century Viennese man from Africa, Angelo Soliman, who began his life as a slave morphed into the "royal moor" when he became a courtier of the Habsburg, and the "noble moor" and then finally nearly the "physiognomic moor", he became a decapitated anatomical specimen. And then to the "mummified moor" whispers of other ways of remembering, this is a death mask of the decapitated head, which was then preserved as a museum specimen. The extent of this head shadow leeches further into time. What happens when the empty robe meets the head of the physiognomic moor? Two ways of thinking about memory and power face each other, as they do in *Hungry for Time*, an exhibition that we curated recently at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Here as the empty vice regal robe turns into digital dust. The moor's had shadow demands consideration, turning its neighbour - a hologram - into a "hollowgram", a telegram from history to hubris. The hologram is an interesting form of political technology, it has become the medium of choice for chieftains like Erdogan to Modi in India who distribute their presence in rallies and public meetings to simultaneous projection of giant holograms. A hologram shows the people that the processes that rule them are radiant, omnipresent, and spectral, live and not live dead and flickering, electrical and electoral all at the same time. See how they stand, stay, leave and hover, as a ghost. History, however, marks the fact that power can never be eternal. Eventually, all forms of power in their turn, are rendered vacant. By the passage of time, power becomes its own ghost and often returns to haunt itself. Bending - history is a is hubris in drag. The maintenance of power in the contemporary world has to count for the fact that the machine that runs power is broken. But in order to stay afloat, it must put out its Spectre and pretend otherwise. And so, the operations of power become a loop of signals, messages, media events, virtual viral presences, leaders avoid questions but offer an endless stream of Twitter feeds. This too is a kind of digital debris, pixel dust. The question for us is how to make sense of the accumulation of memorials and the mountains of stony as well as digital debris which seem at present to go hand in hand. How would we like to remember the absence of memory? Thank you very much. I'll stop here.

Elmgreen & Dragset 22:27

Shall we go straight to my presentation? My name is Ingar Dragset, I'm one half of the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset. I'm sitting in the studio in Berlin. I'm white cis, gay man wearing a white t-shirt with a black print matching my salt and pepper beard. More salt than pepper nowadays! Let me see my screen just disappeared. I will share a PowerPoint with you today. That's mostly showing one - a case study if we could call it for today's discussion. See, I'm getting some help from this side to

share this and if we go full screen maybe the presentation there. Hope you can all see that? I'll go back to the very first image. I'll walk you through a memorial we realised here in Berlin, that was inaugurated or unveiled in 2008. It's the *Memorial to the Persecuted Homosexuals under National Socialism*. And to give you a little bit of context this is the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* that was realised some years prior to the memorial for the homosexual victims and designed by Peter Eisenman. You're probably familiar with this work that sort of feels like a whole look over of the city of Berlin bordering to Potsdamer Platz and Tiergarten and here you see the pin dropped is the memorial to the homosexual victims of the Nazi era. We participated in a competition and our proposal was selected three years prior to the realisation of the work. Initially, the Holocaust memorial on the other side of the street was supposed to be a memorial for all victim groups. But after many years of discussion, this was abandoned, and it became one could say rightly so for many reasons a memorial exclusively to the Jewish victims of the Nazi era. But this opened up, of course, a lot of other discussions, but they've - the other victim groups. Prior to the decision in parliament and German government are realising a memorial to the homosexual victims, there was a group and initiative that worked 14 years and really put a lot of pressure on the government to have such a memorial realised. The one other monument that is realised nearby as well is the memorial to the Roma and Sinti. We decided quite early on to make a sort of relationship visually between the memorial to the Jewish victims on the other side and appropriated the minimal aesthetics or Eisenman's memorial as you see here. We also made a concrete "stelae", you know, like a cube, as you see here, that is slightly larger than the ones on the other side. And it's maybe leaning a little bit more to some extent. But we wanted to make it very clear in our memorial, that this is a memorial to a specific victim group, where you're not in doubt of what you see, which is the case often with abstract memorials that they after a while become invisible in their abstractness. So, inside the memorial, we have recreated a film that people could peek at through this small window. It shows in the initial film that we made, two men engaging in a kiss. And through this window, you can be maybe maximum two, but more comfortably one person. So, it's also a memorial that's maybe large and can gather people around it. But it also has a certain intimacy in the way that you engage with it. One person at a time as well. We've worked with - we're not filmmakers - so we didn't trust ourselves to make the film exclusively on our own. So, we collaborated with the late Robby Müller, the famous Dutch photographer, and also Thomas Vinterberg, the Danish filmmaker on creating this film. And here you see the two young men kissing exactly on the spot where the memorial later on, was built. So, it's a very clear message that you're sending here. In many ways, we also chose a case because it's, in our opinion, something that most people can relate to. And it's also something that shows intimacy and shows also a sense of the positive signal as well. Because as important as it was to remember the past and the horrors of the past in this context, we did also not want to make a proposal and a memorial that only shows

in a way the tragical past and maybe hurts the people in the current state and in the future. What happened after the inauguration of the work was that a big debate took place. There were discussions about the gender representation in the work. And we held some public debates in Berlin and on the basis of the critique of the memorial, we decided to open it up as a platform and propose this to the German government. And after some discussion forth and back, there was agreement about making a sort of recurring competition, where new films can be shown in the memorial. In the years following, and hopefully, for all future, after some years, a new film was shown by Gerald Backhaus, Bernd Fischer and Ibrahim Gülnar that you can see here. The basis of each competition is that the film has to include a same sex kiss. And in the current film by Yeal Bartana, an Israeli artist living in Berlin you see, also a same sex kiss, but you see an increased use of historical material in the background, and also maybe a stronger play on gender identities. Yeal Bartana's film was inaugurated on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary of the memorial. So, in 2018, where the so far highest-ranking politician in Germany came to give a speech. And that was Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and the President of Germany. He held a very touching speech where he also asked for forgiveness for not only what the Nazis did during the time they were in power in Germany, but also what happened after World War Two both in East Germany and West Germany, where the so called "Paragraph 175" was to a big extent in effects into the 70s. You see, on many occasions, people leave objects in front and there are certain dates that commemorates the victims of the war: you have events in front of it, you have kisses, flowers are laid. Here you see Rudolf Brazda who is photographed here together with the then mayor of Berlin and he was one of the last survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp and was imprisoned as a gay man. And I'll end with this picture with the flowers in front of it on a winter's day.

Jane M. Saks 34:15

Hello, am I on? Yeah, thank you. I'm Jane Saks. And my pronouns are she/her. I'm a Jewish queer woman with medium brown hair, wearing a black shirt with slits near the shoulder, and I'm in front of a white wall with a half of a half of an artwork showing by Jim Hodges. And I'm so happy to be here with all of you. And thank you both for those presentations. There's a lot to unpack, and I hope that we'll be able to do some of that. One of the things is that I want to ask everybody to answer the second question that we have in our polls. Neysa presented the first one, and this is, you know, how would you describe your community? I mean, no, sorry. How would you describe your community and then describe a monument to your community, what that might be in three to five words. And you can include location, and medium and experience and theme. And I'm going to let our two panellists kind of kick us off with that, but I want you to put in your answers. Think about it a little bit while we're having a conversation, but really think about describe a monument to your community, and what it might feel like, look like, be

like, how one might experience it. And so, I want to ask the two of you to do the same if you could, and Ingar and Shuddha to put in the way you might envision that. So, I'm also happy to start kind of thinking about, about some of the ideas that you both brought up, and really, you know, M2M believes that memorials can move away from commemorating events and people and locations and traditional manners and, and both of your collectives' work really addresses that. And really thinking about collective imagining of new futures, right, and new ways of remembering a future that really yet to be? So, you're really redefining the past, the present and the future. And I wonder if the two of you could talk a little bit about the ways you believe this, and what it feels like in your practices. Do you want to start Ingar?

Elmgreen & Dragset 37:02

Yeah, sure. I mean, I feel there's many, many questions in one.

Jane M. Saks 37:06

Yeah, that's the way we roll here. Yeah. It's a sandwich.

Elmgreen & Dragset 37:13

Yeah. Well, I feel, you know, with the, especially with the memorial in Berlin to the homosexual victims of the Nazi era, I think we're pointing towards a different way of commemorating in the way that we opened it to become a platform more than a memorial that's done by one artist and, and only showing that the view or like, as an uncertain time. I think, since we, you know, realised in the more or less way, as well, in 2008, the world has changed a lot already, now we're in 2022. And I think in the last years, we've become so much more aware of different identity, gender identities, we learned so much more about race, about the world in general. And our hope is, of course, that a memorial like this can reflect some of this development in society. So maybe that's the way we have to think more in the future is like how can a memorial live on become more, be more alive, and be more current? And that's especially important maybe a context where you cannot add to the context because that's of course another way you can keep things alive. Now we saw like Raqs Media Collectives such a proposal for the Fourth Plinth in London, which I think because a great proposal and the Fourth Plinth is like you know, a space where people have been able to comment on what's already in there and comment on, you know Britain on the current political state and so on. We ourselves realise the project on the Fourth Plinth in 2012, where we put a little boy on the rocking horse on the plinth, also a bronze sculpture like many of the other sculptures that you find on Trafalgar Square. But of course, through that we wanted to comment on what you otherwise find on those on those plinths that are there like King George IV, for instance, or several like war lords, like Nelson himself in the middle, you know, of this square kind of celebrating a violent past. And through that, you sort of make a bit of an anti-war statements, and hopefully

something that makes you see that what's surrounding somebody in a different way. So that's another other way, again, like creating more platforms like this.

Jane M. Saks 40:29

I mean, I think for both of your work, um, you know, it's really, it's kind of always lives in the past and present, because, you know, those robes still exist. And, you know, even in looking at your memorial, we have to go to this place and look in this small screen, and we know, as queer people like, it's still not safe, right? And so, I think all of the work, really, that you're both doing, really, and your collectives really tugs at that, you know, are we going to be the same? Or are we going to be different? Shuddha, do you have anything to add to that question? Wait, you're muted?

Raqs Media Collective 41:14

Yes, certainly, thank you Jane, and Ingar with both very thoughtful prompts. One of the things that has struck me and struck us is also the question of trying to remember those who disappear, those who cannot be remembered. I was a bit at loss for words, when asked to describe myself because within me are histories of disappearance. So, you know, I mean, it makes very little sense for me to say I am one third of a collective, I'm a man of a certain age, because that's what you see, what you don't see are the things that have disappeared in me, right? And it's what you don't see, so if you're addressing someone who doesn't see say: "Look, this is why I am I want to talk to them about what even those you can see can't see, right?" Because when people disappear from history, often what happens is that the memory of their disappearance also fades. So, our archives are full of gaps of people who we know very little about because their disappearance itself has disappeared. I think the post Second World War history of Europe is a very fortunate one because there's been an effort to keep the memory alive of those who went away. Many parts of the world, the disappearances disappeared, and like there are unknown soldiers from the First World War onwards, monuments to the Unknown Soldier, we've often thought about what it would mean to have the anti-monument to the unknown citizen, because they cannot be memorialised. And in the impossibility of their memorialisation is, I think one of the most urgent tasks for us, how do we name the unnameable? How do we remember that which we have forgotten? They're like blurs. And when I was seeing this beautiful work by a, by - the monument to the homosexuals victims of the second world of Nazism, it was wonderful to see these images because depending on the focal length from what you see them, they will either resolve in focus or they will become blurred. Should you tear up while seeing them, which I'm sure is a centre is an event that occurs, they will become blurs. And it's the blur, that figure that moves in and out of resolution that we're thinking with a lot right now. Because people in our cities disappear. They disappear into the prison system; they disappear into unknown assailants and their motives and their tasks. They disappear into the grey zones of

how the state works in our societies. And the difficulty of thinking about them is what engages our mind a lot. I don't know if that answers your questions?

Jane M. Saks 44:08

No, I think that's a wonderful answer! And between the two of you because, you know, we will never catch up, right? We are beings who live in the past, present and future. And so, we're always disappearing. And so that idea of that happening now and I know you know it's a political prisoners day, and that idea of how we create systems for people ideas to actually disappear. And what does that mean about how we memorialise or how we capture something and then how we remember it? I always think about how we tell a story so many times that we actually start un-telling it, you know, we leave pieces behind, and it becomes smooth and straight and linear. And that's actually a narrative - it's never that. Let me just move on to an idea, you two are really uniquely positioned to talk about, you know, deep collaborative work, right? And you've created collectives, or you know, co-created collectives, and collective practices, which is also a very interesting way to work. And I'm wondering about your experiences with collective action and collective creation, again, collective imagining, collective thinking, and how is it important to you as artists and thinkers? And then how is it important in the world that you work collectively? And that's a simple question. So, you can't give me any pushback Ingar. But just briefly talk a little bit about what that means about the way you locate your practice in the world, and how you locate yourselves in the world.

Elmgreen & Dragset 46:00

I mean, one mistake people make thinking about collaboration is that they think you lose yourself in a collaboration. I think it's such a win-win situation, I mean, you're never alone, but you're also constantly, you know, paired in a way, you're constantly surprised. And you actually get to use I think more of yourself, because you're always in a way challenged, it's hard to challenge yourself all the time. I mean, we get lazy, of course, but you can't get lazy if you always have one or the two or more people around to challenge you. So, you know, and I think it also makes you more willing to collaborate wider as well, once you start in this dialogue, internally. In your practice, we're always well, very happy to move into, you know, other situations where we work more, you know, bigger performance pieces, or take on curatorial projects, occasionally, the most challenging one being the Istanbul Biennial a few years back where we curated the biennial calling it *A Good Neighbour* in a very, very complicated political time in Turkey. I mean, it's always complicated in Turkey, but this was particularly complicated. And that was a really fantastic experience. And I think those kinds of collaborations also allow us to look at our, you know, our fields of interests, and, and get many other voices in, because of course, there we were talking about meaning of home in a meaningful way, in a wider sense. There are so many things we cannot talk about, because we are not

from the places, we are where we live, where we do and so on. And, you know, we're both cis male and so on. So, speaking from, for instance, like a woman's perspective, speaking from conflict and so on, is something we don't feel we can do ourselves, but we can be part of maybe facilitating some of those contexts or open up for the discussions and, again, making yourself a platform.

Jane M. Saks 48:38

Thank you. But the, you know, this idea that, you know, being in a collaborative pushes you and I think that's really central the term, this idea of collective action, it doesn't mean that we're not individuals in that way. But there's certain things you can only do together, like create just society, right, you know, and then there are only things you can do as an individual. And so, I think that's a great, great insight. Shuddha, do you want to answer that question?

Raqs Media Collective 49:10

Sure, we've been a collective for now 30 years, we started life as a collective. So, I don't quite know what it means to be an artist outside the collective. But we've thought between ourselves, and we are one woman, two men. We met as students in film school and enjoyed working together enjoyed fighting and arguing with each other, which we do till today. And one of the things we've been thinking about in terms of collectives is not to treat them only as accumulations. They're not just aggregates, that there's an arithmetic to collective formation. But there's also more importantly a geometry. And we've always found ourselves as a triangulation that always changes its shape, its acuteness, its volume. So, Joseph Beuys used to talk about social sculptures, so when Raqs Media Collective moves or travels or works, it's changing shape and form. And that dynamism, that formal dynamism or morphological dynamisms of the collective is very key to us. Like what Ingar said, we've often worked with others, curated large biennials, and also work with other collectors, with other collective practices like architects or software programmers or theatre directors. And sometimes even with the presence of the work of art, there enters the kind of relationship that is collective. I mean, I remember very distinctly the three of us stepping into your Prada store in the middle of the desert. And then we were changed by that experience, and I think so was the store. Now, what happens between the store waiting for visitors in the desert and when visitors enter it, is that something changes there immediately. You know what I mean? So, there's a, there's a third presence that begins to accumulate, and it begins to condense when people meet. And that is a form of collectivity as well. I'll just end by saying there's a beautiful poem by Turkish poet, Nâzım Hikmet. I'm sure you encountered him in the course of your stays in Istanbul Ingar. And he has two lines, which says: "In solitude like a tree. In solidarity like a forest." Which is a lot like what I feel in relationship to the, to the singularity of personhood, and the infinity of relationships that one has every day, especially if you're part of a

triangulation of three people. So, we're both in the forest and we're both on our own. Yeah, we're on our own and in the forest.

Jane M. Saks 52:04

No, I mean, that's a wonderful insight. And I would add to your geometry like physics, right, you know, in that there is an energy and a power, but when combined in ways that aren't often controllable, right, then there's a reaction and a reaction. And so, it is forever changing?

Raqs Media Collective 52:26

As a prompt for the Shanghai Biennale, we took a science fiction novel by a Chinese writer, which is based on a physics problem called the three-body problem. Because the relationship between any two bodies is always simple...

Jane M. Saks 52:39

Right!

Raqs Media Collective 52:40

...it's mutual, its attraction of gravity, the moment you introduce the third, you, you open the doors of the infinite.

Jane M. Saks 52:48

I absolutely agree. And I, my mother keeps quoting me as a child, I said, you know, gravity is optional. And she said, you are going to have a great life. All right, I'm going to actually there's a question from the audience. And it also ties into something that Neysa and I were really interested in. And then this will move after we kind of talk about this question a little bit, we'll move to Neysa, who will start reading out some of the added, you know, answers from the participants in the audience and, and then kind of moving into a Q&A, but I'm very interested in power, I think of it as a, as an actual food group in our international diet, you know, where, whoever you are, wherever you are, and wherever you will be. And I think about it in terms of disappearing power, which both of you have talked about, and kind of half present power, and the space, that power leaves the space that power takes up, and really thinking about what space power holds and offers, takes away. I mean, it's a constellation of relationships to power. And so, I'm wondering what you think about in terms of your work and the relationship of power structures and systems, individuals, and then someone in the audience said, you know, really, can you talk about older monuments and the power that they hold in these modern times, right? You know, are they still holding the same power that they did or has that also changed? Do you want to start to Shuddha? Actually, I know it's political prisoners day. And you...

Rags Media Collective 54:08

I noticed it was the day yesterday...

Jane M. Saks 54:43

Yesterday. I mean, it's today?

Rags Media Collective 54:46

For me, it was yesterday and yes, I wrote about a friend of mine who's in prison and going to see him. So that's an interesting property, that's an interesting situation, I have to go through many protocols to enter the prison, to talk to a prisoner - power is face to face with me. But what is also face to face with me in that event is the power that this young man holds in his body, when he's not broken by the prison system. So, we tend to think of power as that which oppresses us all the time. But there's also the power we hold within ourselves and in our histories and in our communities. And it's very important for us as artists, not to forget that there is a constitutive power as well as power of assemblies, there's a power of, of being in the embrace of someone and multiplies. Even in a kiss like your, like your amazing memorial proposes. But so, there's power and counter power. And it's, it's important for us to realise that we are not ever powerless, right? We charge each other's batteries a lot of the time. Your other question, which is a little it's a little more difficult for me to think through, which is, maybe I'll come back to it after, after we hear from Ingar and that'll give me a little space to think I was so taken up with power.

Jane M. Saks 56:13

It's hard not to be. Ingar, do you want to briefly answer that, and then we will move to Neysa and really open it up?

Elmgreen & Dragset 56:25

Well, I, you know, I haven't worked directly with older sculptures, or I don't know with power, it's like, you know, it's difficult because of course, the more you do, the more power you have, in a way. And that's, I think you get a second back to what I said earlier, it's like make sure that you give voice to others in your, in your practice as well. That you don't, you know, only want to hear your own voice in a way in every area in every context.

Rags Media Collective 57:11

Yeah, I remember what I wanted to say now. So, if I can come back very quickly? We've often worked with archival material. I mean, it's we're interested in questions of history and memory. And often you're dealing with the relics of power. So, one of the things that immediately strikes you is that there is we have reasons to be grateful for decay. It's like one of those things like gravity, which is not optional, decay is not optional. Things break down. And part of our work as artists

or thinkers is to observe the fact that nothing, no claim to power is going to be eternal, things are going to saturate, are going to fall. Right. No matter what people do to shore them up, eventually they fall. It's also interesting to pick up the things that have fallen and give them other lives. Which is the which is the reverse move. It's to it's to take what has been buried, what has been discarded into garbage, bring it back up, reanimate it with life and make it walk. So, one of work that we once did took a we found a biscuit from the Paris Commune in archive in Manchester, and it was lived in a box that just said biscuits from the Paris Commune. So, we took that biscuit we made a 3D mould of it. And the biscuits were baked into 3D mould and were eaten. So, it was a way of, you know, taking what had been thrown away, using it as nourishment returning to its memory power as a food group, if you like, returning to its memory as nourishment and then walking on. But the most important thing for us to is in our practice is to always register the fact that things are not immutable. So, the word "raqs", meaning revolution, meaning whirling, produces a sort of kinetic model of contemplating the world and then gives us different vantage points where we see things changing all the time, blurring all the time.

Jane M. Saks 59:21

Thank you.

Elmgreen & Dragset 59:22

This makes me think, of one work we realised a few years ago when we were invited by Kunstverein Warendorf in Lüneburger Heide in Germany, maybe a place most of you have not heard of. But they have some sculptures placed around in the landscape around the little village where this Kunstverein - this gallery is located. And our proposal was to make a park for - *Park für unerwünschte Skulpturen* - *A Park for Unwanted Sculptures*. So basically, they allowed us to take over like a football field size meadow, sort of in the village, and we put those little white picket fence around and made a sign above saying "this park for unwanted sculptures" in German. And it's a sort of open invitation. So, people can basically place their sculpture not a garden dwarfs or whatever they call them here, like the decorative objects, and when they say it has to be some sort of standard to the job. But at some point, we had, you know, Vito Acconci was there for a few years. And there's this several reasons, maybe behind people placing objects there. It can be companies that have no use for the art, or they don't know who the artist is, you don't know the reputation, it was artists that could not have shown this work but something commissioned, or they never got paid for it by the town, things like that. So, it becomes like this kind of weird, dynamic sculpture park, in the end.

Neysa Page-Lieberman 1:01:17

Thank you so much for that, we're going to take a minute to look at the poll. So, if you are able to look at it, pull it up on your screen. Oh, there we go, perfect! So

again, we've never done this before, with a word count this very, very brief word count. And it forces everybody to really focus in right on, on what a monument to your community might look like. And I can't believe some folks that got it down into one word, like "journey", "restorative", "prominence". And of course, some of the more prominent ones are "colourful", and "a garden", which we're doing in our work right now. The garden as a monument so I love to see that. "Changeable", "sustainable food source", you know, and it would be fun to kind of move these around, right and see what, what comes together to combine some of these. You know, oftentimes, when Jane and I ask this to a group, it takes paragraphs and for people to answer this, and they talk really big explosive parties and feasting and interactive light shows, you know, and so having to like focus in and it seems like people were quiet with this, and really introspective. And so, thank you so much for sharing these with us. And I hope that, that you enjoyed this exercise. And it made you think about your own representation and your own power in representing yourself in a public space. So, we have a few more minutes. And there's one question that has risen to the top. It is, "how do you navigate between the expectations of the quote "commissioner", and the desire to destabilise traditional approaches, and pursue new ways to memorialise?" So, would one of you like to take that?

Elmgreen & Dragset 1:03:13

I have a very simple example maybe from my hometown in Norway. I'm from Trondheim, Norway, it's like two degrees below the polar circle. I was asked by the city together with Michael, of course to come up with a proposal for the new square they were building in front of the railway station. And I felt it was sort of hard - hard to live up to the expectations. You know, like, I had a feeling that a certain idea this like was shortly after the fourth plane truly be a big bronze sculpture or something in our representative for the city and I thought I can't really live up to this. And what we came up with was basically like a sort of abstract "stelae", but it's, it's sort of draped in a white cloth. You know, these kinds of fabrics that you throw our sculptures before unveiling. So, it's a sculpture in the permanent state of being just about being unveiled. So, it's more or less off to the, to the, to the viewer - to the visitor to this monument to decide for what's maybe hidden under this veil, you know, wish for what it could be in the future. So, it's a very open monument in that sense for the City of Trondheim.

Neysa Page-Lieberman 1:04:47

Shuddha, would you like to contribute?

Raqs Media Collective 1:04:49

Just to say I'm a great fan of Trondheim!

Elmgreen & Dragset 1:04:52

Oh, yeah. Well, I'm surprised you've been there, but they have a good university for instance!

Raqs Media Collective 1:04:58

I've been to university actually! And I think this question of expectation and deliverable is always going to be one fraught with tension. But it can be a productive tension, because you can, you can, we don't, we don't dismiss the, the escalation of expectations that comes with the publisher, with the public commission. Often there are, the expectations are one thing when you're asked - when you're invited, and then the expectations actually change with time, they change during the process of making the change even after, after the work is made. So, what we try to do is to keep - is to produce a work that that is also able to be more than one thing for more than one purpose, which is not to say that it has no central focus or meaning, perhaps that it's that was a secret, but to allow for interpretative fluidity to elect - to enable people to tell as many stories as they like about the work. So, we encourage people to tell us what the work is; not for us to tell them what the work is. And those when people start telling stories about a work, they begin to believe what they say. So, their expectations turned into sort of reality in a way. And we've often found that helped. Once we made a work in a museum of posts and telecommunications which sort of indexed the complex structure of the Mahabharata, which was an epic - Sanskrit epic. We told the story in 10 minutes to 18 Museum docents, there's an 18-volume epic, which we told the story in 10 minutes. And then we said, now it's your story, you have to tell the story. Every person in that team of docents completely transformed the story. But that's the point. I think the point is to allow work to become the property of those who become its custodians, its viewers and to tell their stories.

Neysa Page-Lieberman 1:07:03

Thank you, you know, so we're going to wrap up now. And I kind of wanted to wrap up on what, what you're saying about this need to be responsive, right? So, we talk so much about how we need to evolve our current, our current processes and systems for monumentalising. But that, that's constantly happening, right? We don't just need to think about a generation now, what would future generations want to see? How do we monumentalise for our children and grandchildren? It could happen that you have to - that you have to evolve many times in one day, when you're working with communities when there's all of these different stakeholders and commissioners and community members that have expectations for, for the representation of the community they feel attached to. And of course, your two collectives are so uniquely poised to do that, because you're doing that with each other all the time. And you've been doing this for decades! So, it's the - it's the best way you know how to function, right? And so, when you get into these situations, you're nimble, those muscles are ready to go? And I think that that's,

um, you know, I think that's why your work resonates with so many people and, and why you've brought such richness to this conversation today. So, we want to thank you, Jane and I want to thank both of you, and UP Projects, and everybody for joining us today. So, thank you for having us.

Emma Underhill 1:08:43

Thank you so much Neysa and Jane for moderating the discussion so thoughtfully, and to Shuddha and Ingar for your inspiring presentations, and really thought-provoking discussion. There's so much more to unpack. And as ever, there's never enough time, but I'm really looking forward to further conversations over the coming months, through our autumn programme and through other events. Thank you to Lizzie, our BSL interpreter. And thank you so much to our audience for participating and for the comments and questions that you shared. We really want to listen and build on your feedback for future events. So, to that end, you'll see in the Slido bar a questionnaire and we'd be really grateful if you could take the time just to complete it before you leave. I'd very much hope we'll see you at the next and final *Assemblies* event for this year's programme, which is on Wednesday 2nd November. And the focus of this event is being informed by the in-depth analysis and the critical thinking creative conversations that have been undertaken by the *Constellations* ° *Cohort*, who've made suggestions of other lines of inquiry that they feel are really important as a sector - for us as a sector to consider that our programme hasn't yet explored, so please do look out for that event. We'll be announcing further details through our social media channels in a couple of weeks. And also, via the *Constellations* email newsletter, where we'll also share a written summary of today's event by our Curator of Learning and Live Research, Elisabeth Del Prete. We'll also be uploading a recording of today's event on our YouTube channel that will include captions and BSL interpretation, which again, you'll be able to link to from our website. As you saw on the slides at the beginning of the event, we're endeavouring to keep the *Constellations* programme free for participants and event attendees. So, if you are able, we would really really appreciate it if you could consider making a small donation to ensure we can keep the programme free, you should be able to see a link to donate in the Zoom chat. And you can also use the QR code on screen. Thank you. And finally, another huge thank you to our amazing speakers, to the Art Fund, the Arts Council, Barrington Hibbert Associates, *Constellations* Patrons and supporters for supporting this programme, to our partners Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial, to Jes Fernie our Curatorial Advisor and to the fantastic team at UP Projects. Let's keep the conversation going and I really look forward to seeing you at the next one. Thank you!