

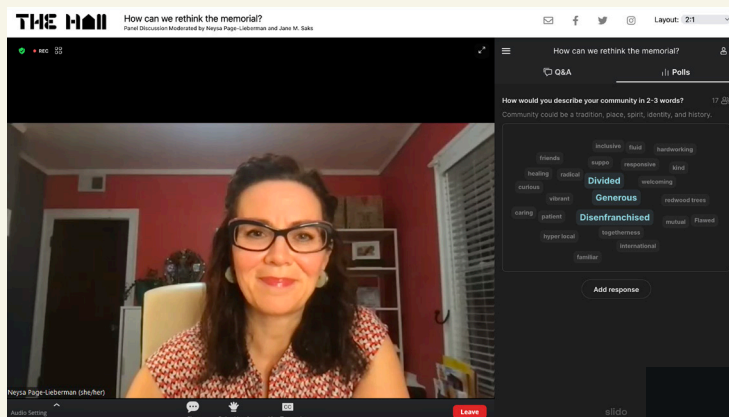
MEMORIALISING THE FUTURE

**By Elisabeth Del Prete, Senior Curator
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Memorialising the future is a text written in response to *How can we rethink the memorial?*, the fifth of a series of six online *Constellations* ^o *Assemblies*. The event took place on 14 September 2022 and was held within UP Projects' digital participation space, *The Hall*. *How can we rethink the memorial?* was moderated by Neysa Page-Lieberman and Jane M. Saks, Co-Founders and Co-Artistic Directors of *Monuments to Movements* (M2M), and invited artist duo, *Elmgreen & Dragset* and artist group, *Raqs Media Collective* to explore how memorials can offer platforms to commemorate while also inspiring us to collectively imagine new futures.

Neysa began the event by talking about the way in which M2M was founded in 2020 in response to the need to engage with the upsurge of questions relating to monuments and contested public spaces. How should we deal with problematic monuments being removed? How can and should these empty spaces now be occupied? Noticing gaps and blind spots in the public debates around public spaces, M2M set out to shift old assumptions and processes through approaches based on intersectional feminist frameworks, restorative justice, and collective action.

The point about empty monuments was immediately picked up by Shuddhabrata Sengupta, one third of Raqs Media Collective, whose presentation encouraged us to make sense of the relationship between memorials and power by asking: "what does it mean when a statue leaves its pedestal?" In reference to this question, Shuddha introduced *Coronation Park*, an assemblage of plinths, sculptures and plaques, previously installed in the Giardini at Venice Biennale in 2015, and later at the Whitworth in Manchester, which appropriates the style of nineteenth century imperial statuary.



*Neysa Page-Lieberman, Monuments to Movements (M2M),
How can we rethink the memorial?, 14 September 2022*

Figures, however, appear in distorted and spectral forms, with either truncated, hollow, bending or headless bodies, referencing to the way in which the legacy (or demise) of imperialism still haunts nations today. At the core of Raqs Media Collective's practice is the understanding that power is hollow, that it is constantly in flux and inevitably destined to decay. "All forms of power eventually are rendered vacant by the passage of time". It is precisely the decline of power that works such as *Coronation Park* ask us to reflect upon, becoming even more relevant today when we are confronted with complex questions around empty pedestals. Shuddha also adds that memorials are only one of the many strategies used by operations of power to project an artificial sense of longevity. These can manifest as "a loop of signals, media events, virtual and viral presence (...) leaders avoid questions but offer an endless stream of twitter feeds". Shuddha's intervention encouraged us to make sense of the relationship between monuments and power and to look at other ways in which exercises of power project themselves and exert their influence.

Ingar Dragset, from the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, centred his presentation on the *Memorial to the Persecuted Homosexuals under National Socialism*, located in Berlin and unveiled in 2008. The memorial not only followed three years of work the artists undertook to develop and realise their proposal, which was selected as part of a competition, but is also the result of a group initiative that worked for 14 years prior to put pressure on the government to get such a monument realised.



*Shuddhabrata Sengupta,
Raqs Media Collective - Coronation Park,
How can we rethink the memorial?, 14 September 2022*

Situated a walking distance from the *Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe* designed by Peter Eisenman and another monument dedicated to the Roma and Sinti communities, Elmgreen & Dragset's work establishes a visual connection with Eisenman's memorial by adopting its minimal and abstract aesthetic and using concrete material. Yet by showcasing a film of two men engaging in a kiss made by Robby Müller, the artists make it clear that by remembering those who were persecuted during World War II, the work intends to celebrate the LGBTQAI+ community in contemporary society. "We didn't want to make a memorial that only shows the tragical past and maybe hurt the people in the current and future state (...) We chose a kiss because it's something most people can relate to, it shows intimacy and sends a positive signal".

Through its large concrete brick shape, the work enables groups to assemble around it, for occasions such as for example the 10th anniversary of the memorial when high ranking politicians gave speeches asking for forgiveness for the atrocities committed during and after WWII. At the same time the video is only visible through a small window which intends to create an intimate experience among viewers, further emphasised in the film.

Following the two presentations, Jane from M2M asked the speakers whether monuments and memorials should move away from commemorating, towards collectively imagining new futures. In response to the question, Ingar talked about the importance of creating platforms that enable other people to express themselves. Is there a way for memorials to live on? After the

launch of the memorial, Elmgreen & Dragset were able to get the approval from the German government to launch a regular competition for artists and filmmakers. By showcasing new films shown within the memorial on a regular basis, the work has managed to resist permanence, evolving over time and being responsive to changes in society.

This point also links to the conversation the speakers had about power. While for Ingar power is about using one own's sense of influence to give voices to others, Shuddha reminds us that we are never completely powerless. Power is not only a force that oppresses us but also the strength that we hold within ourselves to face oppression, which could manifest in simple and intimate gestures such as a kiss or an embrace. Collaboration is key to all members of the panel who have all initiated collectives and collaborative practices. When prompted by Jane to think about their experience with collective action and thinking, Shuddha talked about how Raqs Media Collective has come about, with the three members of the group meeting as students in film school 30 years ago.



*Ingar Dragset, Elmgreen & Dragset - Memorial to the
Persecuted Homosexuals under National Socialism,
How can we rethink the memorial?, 14 September 2022*

Very much like Joseph Beuys' idea of life as a 'social sculpture', a porous entity that is shaped by encounters with other people, Raqs Media Collective also collaborates with other collectives, as well as architects, software programmers, theatre directors, etc. Drawing a distinction between the singularity of individuals and the infinity of relationships we are potentially exposed to every day, we are reminded of the power of collective action through a quote by the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet: "in solitude like a tree, in solidarity like a forest".



Jane M. Saks, *Monuments to Movements (M2M)*,
Ingar Dragset, Shuddhabrata Sengupta,
How can we rethink the memorial?, 14 September 2022

During the final part of the event, a member of the audience asked the speakers about the process of public art commissioning, more specifically how they navigate between the commissioners' expectations, and the desire to destabilise traditional approaches to pursue new ways to memorialise. Acknowledging that the expectations from the commissioner and the public are fraught with tension, both artists made a point about the possibility to use that tension in a productive way. Ingar talked about *Forventning [Expectation]*, a commission Elmgreen & Dragset realised in Trondheim, Ingar's hometown in Norway where the duo was invited by the city to come up with a proposal for a new square in front of the train station. In recognition of the difficulty of living up to the city's expectations, the duo realised a sculpture representing a white stela draped in a white cloth made of stainless steel, lacquer and black diorite. The intention is to represent a public artwork in a permanent state of just about to be unveiled. "It's more or less up to the viewer to decide what's hidden under this veil and what it could be in the future". As pointed out by Shuddha, expectations often change over time, even after the work is made, so there is often a

strength in producing work that has more than one central purpose or meaning. "We encourage people to tell us what the work is (...), when people start telling stories about the work, they begin to believe what they say. The point is to allow a work to become the property of those who become custodians". The event offered inspiring insights into the relationship between memorials and power, whether monuments can resist permanence by evolving over time, and how memorials can inspire solidarity, reminding us not only of our strengths as individuals but also as members of wider communities. The questions posed to the audience by M2M over the course of the event strengthened this latter point, asking us to identify what communities we might feel part of, and what a monument to these communities might look like and/or be experienced.

In carrying out research into monuments and memorials over the past two years, I have often found myself coming back to a quote by George Orwell from his dystopian science fiction novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is very much rooted in the idea of control. "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past". Past, present and future appear not as fluid entities reflecting our inner subjective experiences, but rather as projections that need to be carefully crafted into objective narratives that people subscribe to. What if there is another way? Can the open-ended approach used by Elmgreen & Dragset be a blueprint for negotiating between past and future, between remembering and speculating on future alternatives? And as we frame the impermanence of monuments through a positive light, how can Raqs Media Collective's research inspire us to embrace rather than resist the impermanence of power?

You can now watch [How can we rethink the memorial?](#) as an accessible event recording with closed captions and BSL interpretation.

"What does it mean when a statue leaves its pedestal?"

- Shuddhabrata Sengupta,
Raqs Media Collective

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