

COLLECTION ON DISPLAY:

MOMENTARY MONUMENTS

Christine Borland, Marc Camille
Chaimowicz, Dani Gal, Christian
Jankowski, Fabrice Gygi,
Mathilde ter Heijne, Ragnar
Kjartansson, Teresa Margolles,
Henrik Olesen, Thomas Schütte

Collection on Display returns with *Momentary Monuments*, an exhibition of works that explore the significance and function of the monument broadly conceived for a wide-ranging discussion of memory and forgetting. The show unites art from our collection familiar to friends of the museum with rarely-seen pieces and new acquisitions that make their debut in Zurich.

Monuments are integral to the historic inventory of Europe's cities and towns. They were set up to attract attention and are inevitably listed in city guidebooks, and yet many of them blend into the urban fabric so fully that they are almost invisible. Still, monuments have always been flash-points of ferocious political and social debate. Whether a particular monument commemorates an individual or—like the majority of monuments built in the twentieth century—a historic event, there is no universally shared remembrance. Commemoration—memory itself—is always informed by our subjective vantage points.

A monument is a manifesto of sorts, articulating the views of particular social or political groups in the public arena, and so it is inevitably fraught with ideology. It expresses a perspective on history as well as the political and moral self-image of its creators, their aspiration to define the meaning of history and their claim to power over the public sphere. More than other public acts, how we engage with monuments—from commissioning them and having them installed to dismantling or even vandalizing them—reflects our attitudes to history. That is why every major political upheaval has entailed outbreaks of iconoclastic fury: the razing of monuments signals a fundamental reinterpretation of history.

The classical eighteenth- or nineteenth-century monument is a pre-democratic invention. A privilege that had been reserved for princes and military leaders in the Renaissance and Baroque periods was gradually extended to statesmen, church dignitaries, poets, thinkers, and last but not least, artists. As the set of people who achieved immortality on a pedestal changed, so did the monuments themselves; new types emerged that were designed to commemorate not individuals but historic (usually war-related) events and/or an anonymous mass of victims to be honored. Regarding the form of monuments, preferences slowly shifted from figural depictions to symbolic abstractions and even “architectonic” models.

Curator:
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The art history of monuments and the debate over their design had long been closely associated with the evolution of sculpture and statuary art, but now, toward the end of the nineteenth century, “monument specialists” appeared on the scene whose work was no longer bound up with the larger art discourse. The representational needs of monarchs as well as the educated upper middle classes had stoked a mania for monuments, and public spaces came to be littered with sculptural art of rapidly declining quality. The split between the two fields still defined the (art) history of the monument in the second half of the twentieth century, now complicated by the readiness with which monument culture had adapted to fascist ideology. That is why artists who had defied the pressure to conform their work to the Nazi regime’s representational program tended to take a critical view of the monument as such. The young artists of the 1950s and 1960s used it as a motif and subjected it to critical interrogation, ironic refraction, and withering parody. Since the 1970s, more and more artists have become interested in gathering traces of history and of how societies have engaged with it, and explore ways to translate their findings into contemporary artistic formats.

Momentary Monuments brings together creations by artists working today who examine the recollection of specific historic events, scrutinize the construction of conceptions of history, or use the idea of the “monument” as the point of departure for an analysis of the power to define history and shape the representation of authority in the public arena. Some explicitly work with the monument as a motif, while others create their own visualizations of memory, framing their proposals as open questions rather than definite answers. Yet others spotlight what we remember and what we do not wish to be reminded of—or envision aesthetic registers that may allow them to broach the unspeakable without illustrating it. In this sense, the title *Momentary Monuments* reflects the fact that these works of art do not aspire to immortality, they do not claim to be right: rooted in their time, they grapple with the past as well as present.

In *L’Homme Double* (1997), **Christine Borland** (b. 1965) puts the means of classic representational sculpture to the test: can it visualize latent psychological traits of someone who may be regarded as the embodiment of evil? She hired six academically trained sculptors to create busts of the Nazi villain Josef Mengele, Auschwitz’s charismatic “Angel of Death.” She gave them two portrait photographs and written accounts of Auschwitz survivors to work with. Her correspondence with the artists is part of the work and on display together with their creations. Mengele’s “pleasant” appearance and demeanor cannot be reconciled to his cruel acts, and despite the sculptors’ talent and skill, their conventional busts remain surfaces that tell us nothing about Mengele’s soul. Borland’s ensemble is not only a critical “portrait” of National Socialism, but also a radical interrogation of a culture that articulates collective recollection through the creation and installation of likenesses of ideologically tainted characters.

The photographic series *Shoe Waste?* (1971/2005) by **Marc Camille Chaimowicz** (who was born after World War II) documents a piece of conceptual art of the same title. In the original performance, conceived for public settings, Chaimowicz installed a collection of old shoes he had painted silver at heavily frequented places in London. Loosely arrayed, they sat in the streets for several hours, forcing pedestrians to wend their way past them. The coat of paint relieves the shoes of their original function and subjects them to an aesthetic sublimation, yet they still stand as allegories for their absent (vanished?) wearers, and these peculiar arrangements evoke images associated with the Holocaust that are part of our collective memories.

Nacht und Nebel (*Night and Fog*, 2011), a film by **Dani Gal** (b. 1975), examines the denial and suppression of memory as a radical way of dealing with key figures in what is arguably the darkest episode of the twentieth century. Gal staged a reenactment of a historic event on the basis of an interview with the Holocaust survivor Michael Goldmann, a former policeman and participant in the original secret mission. After an eight-month trial, an Israeli court had sentenced the high-ranking Nazi official Adolf Eichmann to death for crimes against humanity and war crimes, and on the night from May 31 to June 1, 1962, a group of policemen put out to sea from the port of Jaffa to scatter Eichmann’s ashes in international waters. The strictly secret operation was prompted by the fear that Eichmann’s grave might turn into a memorial site. Many of Gal’s works scrutinize the constructed quality of history, with a particular focus on the media in which it is recorded. He collects historic artifacts such as sound recordings and documentary materials and manipulates, supplements, and displays them to tease out their meaning for the present. *Record Archive* (2005–2015) may be regarded as the core as well as mainspring of his research activities: a steadily growing archive of now 246 LPs with audio recordings of historic events of the twentieth century. From the 1950s through the 1980s, such records of important presidential speeches, interviews with world leaders, debates over peace treaties or human rights, and radio broadcasts were a popular educational format for the distribution of knowledge about social and political history, serving purposes of propaganda as well as the consolidation and dissemination of national historiographies. The collection is an archive of monuments to the mediation of history that found their way into private living rooms and informed the collective memory of several generations.

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The installations and sculptures of **Fabrice Gygi** (b. 1965) usually hint at practical applications and concrete functions associated with the world of security systems and apparatuses of power. The ensemble *Local de vote* (2001) has an air of fragility and improvisation: the voting booth, wooden table, flagpole, ballot box, and other objects might read as components of a real-world mobile polling station. Yet this polling station is devoid of all content (text or images), as if it were deserted and closed or out of operation: democracy, it suggests, has been suspended—the image emerges of a society in which the freedom of expression has been rescinded. The makeshift construction of *Local de vote* captures the precarious condition of the democratic ideal today. Gygi created the work for an exhibition in New York in 2001—shortly after the presidential election pitting George W. Bush against Al Gore made a mockery of the rules of the democratic game: targeted voter suppression efforts and intimidation campaigns against entire demographic groups as well as demonstrable manipulation of the vote count undermined the election system.

Mathilde ter Heijne (b. 1969) applies the methods of ethnology to her study of cultural, social, and political systems in different societies. The ultimate object of her interest is the human being—especially in his relation to structures of power and violence. The audio installation *1, 2, 3 ... 10, wie niet weg is, is gezien* (2000) surveys the very different forms that the political struggle against oppression can take: from Gandhi's peaceful resistance to the violent revolution in Cuba. The installation consists of ten radio recorders installed on a pedestal; an unceasing confusion of voices (audio tracks of documentary and feature films) fills the room. Political activists incite their listeners to fight to the death or summon them to stand up for their shared goals. By speaking up in the public sphere, they confront the powers that be—for example, by calling prevailing social ideals and entrenched power structures in question and at least verbally knocking the current rulers off their pedestals.

Heavy Weight History (2013), a film by **Christian Jankowski** (b. 1968), is a meditation on how art today can address Poland's fraught history. The artist, who often works with art-world outsiders to realize his projects, asked members of the Polish national weightlifting team to lift monuments in Warsaw off their bases. The actions were recorded on camera; a well-known sports journalist offered live commentary, weaving in information on the sculptures' historic background and provenance, which lends the film the feel of a public service television broadcast. The men's efforts to hoist history quite literally off its foundations and carry its burden on their shoulders may be read as a humorous note on our struggle to come to terms with history. In some instances, their attempts fail; the statue of Ronald Reagan and the monument commemorating Willy Brandt's 1970 visit prove impossible to dislodge, a metaphor suggesting that some historical memories are too grave to be borne.

Many works by **Ragnar Kjartansson** (b. 1976) engage with aspects of memory in ways that blend melancholy with absurd comedy. *Denkmal (Monument)*, (2011) consists of three head-high marble steles over which cloths, also sculpted from marble, are draped. The fall of the fabric's folds imitates the draperies in works by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), one of the most successful artists of his time, who designed numerous monuments (including the so-called Lion of Lucerne). Each of the steles is inscribed with the words "Deine Augen" ("Your Eyes") as well as a year: 1989, 1994, and 1997. They would seem to symbolize the wistful remembrance of a beloved person and a cherished moment in the artist's distant personal history. Yet the ephemerality and subjectivity of such recollection contrasts sharply with the solidity of the memorial columns, which quote a specific culture of remembrance from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when people sought silent communion with the great minds of the era in gardens or parks.

Mesa y dos bancos (2013) by **Teresa Margolles** (b. 1963) commemorates the victims of the extreme violence that Mexico's raging drug war visits upon the citizens of Ciudad Juárez, a city on the border with the United States. The concrete table and pair of benches is a monument of timely simplicity highlighting the social injustices that plague the artist's native country, which last even beyond death: the bodies of unidentified victims of violence frequently end up in unmarked mass graves, as do those of individuals whose families cannot afford a proper burial. The—often minimal—traces of such dead bodies appear in Margolles's art as symptoms of the value system of a society that lives in a permanent state of emergency. In *Mesa y dos bancos*, these traces have been incorporated into the work: the furniture was made of a mixture of cement and soil on which the body of a murder victim found near the American border had lain.

Since the mid-1990s, **Henrik Olesen** (b. 1967) has analyzed the social constitution and construction of identity and history. By appropriating visual sources and shifting elements whose meaning seems evident out of context, Olesen investigates past as well as present attitudes to homosexuality and its criminalization. *some gay-lesbian artists and/or artists relevant to homo-*

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social culture born between c. 1300–1870 (2007) consists of tableaux that recall the Mnemosyne series compiled by the art historian Aby M. Warburg (1866–1929). Opposed to sentimental enthusiasm for art as much as purely formal aestheticism, Warburg sought to establish a rigorous scholarly study of pictures that would embed them in their social settings and contexts of production. Emulating—and in some ways defying—his intellectual forebear, Henrik Olesen sketches an alternative history of art that jettisons the widely accepted heterosexual norm, opening up unconventional new perspectives and making room for homosexual subcultures in the history of art and culture.

The work of **Thomas Schütte** (b. 1954) experiments with artistic approaches to the modernist heritage. The characteristic feature of his sculptures are exaggerated details and glimpses of irony that mock the monument genre and point up the absurdity of modernist sculpture. The figures in the three works *untitled* (1994–1995, from the *United Enemies* series)—they are all men—are the size of puppets. Their hideous and grotesque faces resulted from compression of the material out of which they were molded (polymer clay). Swaddled in fabric, their bodies are tautly lashed together. Turning their backs to each other and looking in different directions, they seem models of involuntary fellowship: the partners in these coalitions have grown sick of each other, or perhaps their alliance was an unholy one from the outset. Begun while Schütte was staying in Italy, the works were inspired by the *Mani Pulite*, a far-ranging judicial investigation held in the 1990s that uncovered numerous instances of corruption and abuse of office.

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Christine Borland
L'Homme Double, 1997
Clay, steel, wood, acrylic, documents
Dimensions variable



Marc Camille Chaimowicz
Shoe Waste?, 1971/2005
B/W photograph, hand developed silver gelatin
Edition: 2/5
5 parts: Dimensions variable



Dani Gal
Nacht und Nebel, 2011
Single channel video projection
(HD, color, sound)
22 min.



Dani Gal
The Record Archive, 2005-2015
246 vinyl records
Dimensions variable



Fabrice Gygi
Local de vote, 2001
Galvanized steel, wood, cover, Perspex
Dimensions variable



Mathilde ter Heijne
1, 2, 3, ...10, wie niet weg is, is gezien, 2000
10 radios, 10 CD players, 1 central control unit
Edition: 1 + 1 ap
Ca. 70 x 220 x 200 cm

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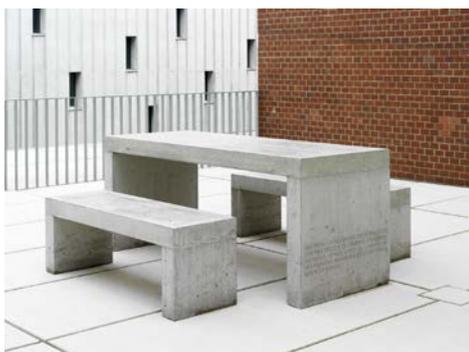
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Christian Jankowski
Heavy Weight History, 2013
Single-channel video on monitor (color, sound), 3 B/W gelatine silver print on baryte paper, tribune
Edition: 1/5 + 2 ap
25:46 min., Dimensions variable



Ragnar Kjartansson
Denkmal, 2011
Carrara marble
3 parts: each 180 x 45 x 45 cm



Teresa Margolles
Mesa y dos bancos, 2013
Made from a mixture of cement and material taken from the ground, on which there lay the body of a person murdered at the northern Mexican border.
Table: 85 x 80 x 200 cm,
benches: 50 x 45 x 140 cm each



Henrik Olesen
Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists Relevant to Homo-Social Culture Born between c. 1300–1870, 2007
2 collages (photographic paper on paper), wood, taxidermized chicken
Dimensions variable



Thomas Schütte
Untitled (3 sculptures from the series *United Enemies*), 1994–1995
Fimo, fabric, hemp cord, plastic adhesive tape, glass, wood, PVC
Each 191 x 26 x 26 cm

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