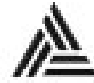

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A Space of Loss: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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Few published essays have explored the way in which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial actually communicates with visitors. This article explores the memorial as a "linking object," as conceived by psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan, and as a "space of absence," as defined by Richard Etlin, and shows how these two ways of understanding the memorial are interconnected. A particularly innovative aspect of the memorial is the way it engenders awareness of both surface (emphasized by the inscribed names) and space (experienced as "virtual space") resulting from the reflectivity of the granite, which gives it an apparent ("virtual") depth. The reflective surface brings one "into" the "space" of the wall and allows simultaneous perception of the names of the dead, the reflections of other visitors, and the reflection of oneself. The complex interactive process wherein the inexactness and ambiguity of the reflections catch the viewer, engender projective fantasy, and (because of the presence of the names) simultaneously structure it, fosters a proximity to and an identification with the dead, and the simultaneous experience of connection and separation.

THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL, ONE OF the most controversial architectural designs of the recent past, has become the most visited of all memorials in Washington, D.C. Its broad appeal raises significant questions and challenges current understandings of human interaction with architectural works. Although the memorial has been widely discussed in print, few publications have touched on precisely how this memorial actually engages the visitor. Why does it engender active response? How can its ability to touch us be understood? Equally important, will the memorial continue to touch future generations in the same way? Will the Vietnam Veterans Memorial mean anything after a century or more has passed and the Vietnam War has become a distant memory?

The history of the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been well recounted elsewhere.[1] This article focuses instead on the memorial as we find it today and explores ways in which the response it engenders may be understood. As a result, this article departs somewhat from traditional approaches to architectural analysis that isolate interpretation from response. Indeed, I argue that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is essentially incomplete without human participation; it cannot be fully understood without addressing the issues raised by human interaction.[2] In this regard, I will argue, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a powerful case of a "space of absence," defined by Richard Etlin as a void in which we have the simultaneous experience of both the absence and the presence of the dead.[3] Although this article is limited to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, some aspects of my analysis may be generalized in a preliminary way to address the specific character of the "space of absence" and some of the architectural issues that such a space may raise.

The success of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems quite remarkable given the controversy that surrounded its design and construction. Although just three and a half years elapsed between the April 27, 1979, formation of a group to support the creation of the memorial and the November 13, 1982, dedication ceremony for the completed structure, the design competition, the selection of the design, and its aftermath generated heated public debate.[4] From the date of its dedication, however, that debate has essentially ceased.[5] Since then, discussion has centered on what the Vietnam Veterans Memorial means or on how it works (Figure 1).

Surprisingly, the continuing discussion concerning the memorial has been carried out almost exclusively in nonarchitectural journals. Although a few articles have discussed and interpreted the controversy over the design as a reflection of unresolved differences over the Vietnam War, most have focused directly on activities and issues connected to the memorial itself. The level of popular response to this memorial, which seems so unlike conventional memorials, has clearly challenged expectations.[6] As a result, an extensive scholarly discourse has developed in a variety of academic journals. Among the issues discussed have been whether the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is appropriate as a monument, how it makes use of rhetorical devices, and whether it makes a political statement.[7] Articles have also discussed the character of our responses to the memorial, as well as the rituals that take place there and what role the memorial may be playing in the construction of a history of the Vietnam War.[8]

Beyond the academic discourse, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has also inspired a considerable popular literature. In addition to the accounts of its creation, several picture books and even children's books have been published about the memorial.[9] Articles and books have documented and discussed the objects people have left behind.[10] One of the arguments in the early debate over the memorial focused on its apparently high degree of abstraction and whether such a design could serve as an appropriate memorial. The level of popular response seems clearly to answer this objection. As Arthur Danto noted, though the memorial is nonfigurative, it is nonetheless deeply representational, an aspect that was missed by critics of the design, who had seen it only in formalist or minimalist terms.[11] In fact, recent analyses have emphasized the commemorative and textual character of the memorial, yet even in these discussions, exactly why this memorial evokes such a powerful response has not been fully explained.

Notably, many recent discussions have paid only limited attention to the figural sculptures that were added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a result of the controversy over its design.[12] My analysis

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follows this approach because I have found that interaction with these sculptures is largely peripheral to the fundamental experience of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. However, at the close of this article I briefly address some questions raised by these added elements.

1. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., Maya Ying Lin, designer (Cooper-Lecky Architects, architects of record); dedication, November 13, 1982. (Photo by National Park Police.)

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Commemoration

The phenomenon of death remains a mystery. As living beings, for whom knowledge of anything is experienced only through the prism of life itself, the end of life is indecipherable. Whatever may exist after death is fundamentally inaccessible to us. It is only within the known world, the world of the living, that we can address death.[13]

Our experience of death is one of sudden and complete loss.[14] For us, death is more than simply the absence of life—it is the absence of the whole person, of all of the myriad characteristics that went together to form the personality and to shape the extraordinary range of interactions that the deceased had with us over the course of his or her life.

Our reaction to the loss that results from death is one of disbelief and also of pain. That we cannot accept the reality of death (our disbelief) is not surprising given our inability to conceptualize it.[15] That we feel pain associated with loss is related not only to our inability to conceive of death, but also to our recognition that the person who died had a direct connection to the shape of our own inner life of feeling. To the degree that our inner life of feeling has been shaped by the other, the shape of that life of feeling will be challenged and the loss will be felt.[16]

One response to the experience of incomprehensible loss is to create something permanent in the belief that it will survive. In providing a permanent memorial (a monument) we seek to anchor our experience in space and time.[17] We wish to keep the dead truly alive in memory—alive as life is lived and felt, not just in action, but in human interaction. The difficulty is that memories fade with time. We seek to create objects of remembrance—a permanent public record in the form of monuments and memorials—that will serve as symbols of those who have gone before (or the events in which they participated) so that they may remain alive in the memory of the living.

The creation of permanent objects of remembrance draws on one of our most fundamental experiences as human beings. It has long been recognized that one of the important stages of personality development is marked by the recognition of object constancy. For the infant, the unseen object (or person) is not just not present, but is essentially experienced as nonexistent. The recognition of object constancy is a sign of intellectual and emotional growth.[18] The primal experience of loss connected with the disappearance of the other (initially the parent, usually the mother) is buried deep in human consciousness, and the feelings evoked by the loss of the other at death connect to these deeply buried feelings.

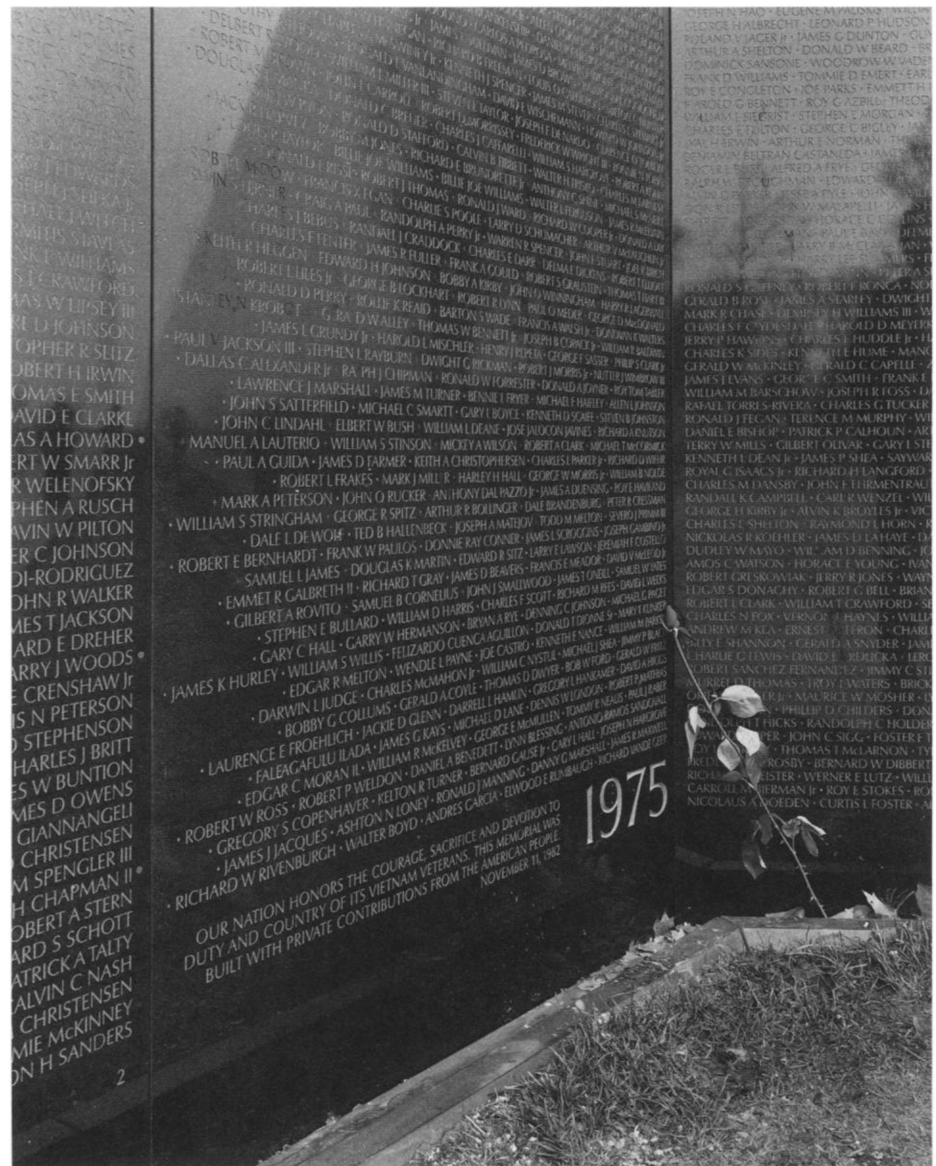
Symbolization is for each of us an essential component of the life of emotion; it

is because we can make the associations that constitute symbolization that symbols can, in turn, evoke emotions.[19] It is because we can associate the name of the deceased with his or her life and with his or her interaction with us that the name can serve to evoke our internal feelings connected with the deceased. Symbolization is an essential component of memory.[20] In particular, a symbolic site provides a place where a death can be mourned—that is, where we might recognize our loss, experience the resulting pain, and begin to heal.

In marking a death, the permanent marker we make can be considered an "intentional monument," as defined by Alois Riegl in the essay, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," published in 1903.[21] Written as a preface to preservation legislation for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Riegl's essay was an early attempt to identify the nature of aged structures (all of which he categorized as monuments) and to identify their roles in culture. Riegl's analytical structure differentiated among various kinds of historical monuments and provided a basis for consideration of valid approaches toward the preservation of each type.

Riegl's initial category was that of "intentional monuments." These, he wrote, were "erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations."[22] According to Riegl, the intentional monument has "intentional commemorative value," which he described as the attempt "to preserve a moment in the consciousness of later generations, and therefore to remain alive and present in perpetuity."[23]

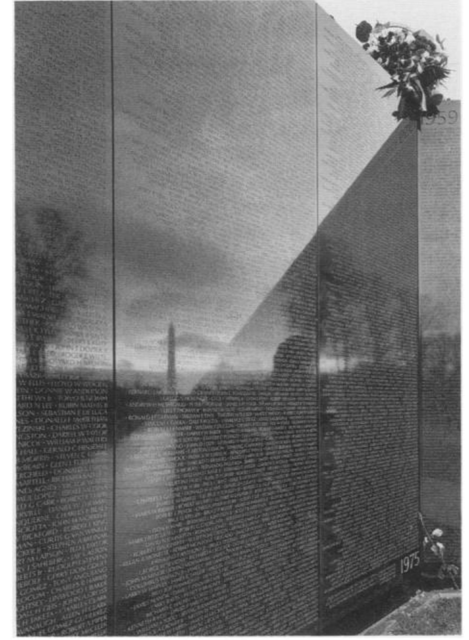
The brief for the design competition indicated that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was to take no position on the war but was to list the names of the 57,692 dead and missing.[24] As a result of the controversy over the winning design, two inscriptions were added at the apex of the monument. After the date *1959*, the first inscription reads, "IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE REMAINING MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THAT THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US." After the date *1975*, the second inscription reads, "OUR NATION HONORS THE COURAGE, SACRIFICE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY AND COUNTRY OF ITS VIETNAM VETERANS. THIS MEMORIAL WAS BUILT WITH PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, NOVEMBER 11, 1982." These inscriptions precisely describe the intentional commemorative purpose of the memorial as it was conceived (Figure 2).



2. One of the two inscriptions at the apex of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (Photo by Christopher Lark, Lark Ltd., circa 1982.)

Clearly, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has significance for those who fought in the war, for those who are related to people who fought in the war, and for those who lived through it. Indeed, the Vietnam War is still recent enough that personal remembrance must play a significant role in one's response. At least one source of the power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

3. View from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial toward the Lincoln Memorial. (Photo by Jennifer Ashabranner.)



4. Reflection of the Washington Monument in the surface of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (Photo by Christopher Lark, Lark Ltd.)

today derives from this direct association with those for whom the Vietnam War was one of the defining events of their lives. The memorial is compelling because it connects directly to personal loss and pain associated with the war. As described earlier, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an object of remembrance—a permanent marker that assures us that these individuals will be remembered even as time passes.

The fundamental issue underlying this connection is the role of symbolization as a part of the healing process.[25] The war in Vietnam divided American society, and those divisions remained even when the war came to an end. Given the mixed feelings of Americans about the war, and the pain these engendered, the most common response was, in effect, denial. Many found it difficult to talk about the war. Veterans returned home with little fanfare, and there was initially little recognition of their sacrifices; they were even reviled. The dead, when their bodies could be recovered, were buried quietly and mourned privately. The acceptance of even the facts of the war, whatever one believed about them, was missing. However, the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with the inscribed names of the dead and missing, seemed to change all this. Creating this public record of the names meant that they were inscribed in the "text of symbolic tradition." This symbolization meant that these individuals and their sacrifices would not be forgotten; no longer denied, they would become part of the nation's memory.[26] That they were inscribed in the setting of the Washington Mall in the nation's capital indicated that these deaths had not only been recognized, but in being recognized were also accepted, and the trauma of their deaths began to be integrated into our historical memory.[27]

Because the Washington Mall is the setting for many of the nation's most symbolically significant buildings and monuments, the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial already carried a greater "charge" than almost any other possible setting.[28] The specific site of the memorial, a two-acre section of the Constitution Gardens in the northwest corner of the Mall, was selected for its proximity to the Lincoln Memorial, which was seen as a symbol of national reconciliation following the Civil War. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial responds directly to this setting; its eastern arm points directly at the Washington Monument, and its western arm points directly at the Lincoln Memorial. These two alignments yielded the broad V-shaped form of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and, in a sense, allowed the incorporation of those other structures in the design. In turn, this context raises the significance of the record of the names on the memorial. This is not only a site for private grief; it is also a site for shared public mourning (Figures 3 and 4).[29]

By recording the names of the dead (and missing) in a significant public place, the Washington Mall, we confirmed that those deaths would not be forgotten. The

5. Names of the dead inscribed in the surface of the memorial. (Photo by the author.)

acceptance of these deaths by the community also allows the possibility of reconciliation to the losses they represent. Previously, the absence of such a record meant that acceptance could not occur, and the possibility of reconciliation was denied. However, when individuals like these do not find their place in the text of symbolic tradition, they return to haunt the living. Slavoj Zizek suggests that a favorite theme of horror films, the return of the "living dead," derives from this phenomenon. The living dead—those whose burials were improper—cannot find their places in the symbolic tradition and therefore return. The denial of the reality of [in]human acts can be connected to the inability to bury the dead properly. Zizek cites the gulag and the Holocaust as "exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of the victims will continue to chase us as 'living dead' until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory."[30] The war in Vietnam might have become a similar case; indeed, so it was until the completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982.

That the memorial is contemporary with living memory of the Vietnam War is a critical issue for the role the memorial has played and will continue to play for the immediate future. Less than two decades have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, and that conflict remains part of the collective consciousness of the nation. However, this must fade in time; in fifty or one hundred years, the Vietnam War may be a much more vague recollection as few will have direct personal connection to it. Will the Vietnam Veterans Memorial then become just another historical monument found in art and architectural history textbooks?[31]

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a "Linking Object"

The creation of the symbolic object is therefore one way to establish a permanent link with the dead. The object created serves as the link; such objects appear similar to those identified as "linking objects" by psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan (although Volkan might object to my broadening the term *linking object* in this way).[32] However, not just any object can play this role. The key aspect of the linking object is that it bears a connection both to the dead person and to ourselves; specifically, the linking object must be psychologically invested with aspects of the deceased and of those who mourn. Volkan writes, "A linking object is therefore something actually present in the environment that is psychologically contaminated by various aspects of both the dead person and the self of the person who mourns him."[33] Just as Riegl wrote of the distinction between intentional monuments and unintentional monuments, it is possible to conceive of the linking object either as an object intentionally created to serve as a link to the deceased—something we establish to fix permanently a site for the evocation of memory (that is, a monument like a grave marker)—or as an object that somehow shares associations with the dead person and with ourselves but that already exists. Notably, in contrast to an object that bears a strictly personal connection between the deceased and one who mourns and that therefore becomes a linking object although it was not specifically created as one, the monument is a shared creation (a public creation) that plays a role in group as well as individual mourning. The key element in creating this link is clearly the permanent inscription of the name of the deceased (Figure 5).[34]

The entry of the name of the deceased into the "text of symbolic tradition" is literally enacted in the inscription of the name into the surface of the monument—the grave marker. We create a permanent symbolic record of the dead person, and we enter this person into that record through the funeral rites.[35] The funeral rites also often include the recounting of events in the deceased person's life or his or her interaction with us. That these stories are told at this time is our way initially of confirming the symbolic association of the name of the dead, now marked permanently, with the events of that person's life. Although the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not the site of actual funeral rites, this phenomenon is evident nearly every day in the objects and narratives that those who knew the dead prepare and leave at the wall.[36] The facts of these narratives are themselves only part of

the complex communication that is taking place. Because the shape of the inner life of feeling is ineffable, it is through the stories that we associate with the life of the person who has died and the feeling that those stories recall for us and evoke for others that the symbolization serves as a means of ensuring that the dead person will continue to live (in the full sense of that term) within our memories—that is, within ourselves.[37] That the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is serving as a linking object could not be more evident.[38]

However, if linking objects connect through "psychological investment," why should a monument, even a grave marker, be able to serve? The key is in the nature of the name as recalling the individual and in the "intentionality" of our making the grave marker a site for commemoration. Other objects can serve as links because they were shared in some way by ourselves and the deceased; they serve as links, but they connect essentially to private moments of experience and to private grief. Through them alone there is no assurance that a person will continue to live in the life of the community. The monument is the public object that serves as the permanent marker. It does not depend on private memory, but serves as the permanent site of symbolization. The name recorded on the stone may recall different experiences for each of us, but in each of those recollections the person "continues to live."[39]

For first-time visitors, even those who have no direct personal relationship to anyone whose name is on the wall, the power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial usually comes as a surprise. One can come upon it almost without warning and then be led into its space. Because the path along the wall is paved only to a width of ten feet, one walks along the memorial, experiencing it sequentially and taking in the names only gradually. As the path descends, the number of names grows, however. For each visitor, there seems to be a point at which the immensity of more than fifty-eight thousand names becomes apparent. Suddenly, it seems that the distant abstraction of so many dead and missing has become very real. Here are more than fifty-eight thousand individual names—every one different, every one a real person who lived and died. Some visitors have probably heard about the peculiar power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from friends who have been there, yet no one seems prepared for the way in which the memorial subverts the kind of distant attention that visitors bring to familiar tourist sites.[40] At some point along our descent into the space, it is as if we are "caught" by the memorial—or perhaps we suddenly catch on to what the memorial is about.

It is tempting to call this moment "recognition," yet for almost all it is *not* a moment when we actually recognize the name of someone we know. The names have been described as "quirky, as names often are," and it may be this quirkiness that is the first thing that catches our attention as we walk along.[41] Indeed, it may be the uniqueness of each name that takes them all from seeming abstraction and makes them suddenly so very real. This moment of "recognition" is a moment when the individuality of the names becomes "real" to us, but the sense that they are real is the sense that these are the names of individual human beings who were born, lived, served, and then died or disappeared in a distant conflict. It is the simultaneity of the realization that there is not just a single name, but that there are so many of them. The experience of incomprehensibility of the immense number of names against which the individuality of each is suddenly perceived is difficult to describe.[42] After all of the abstract discussion in which we have engaged in our lives (in school and elsewhere) about the history of human conflict, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial suddenly brings to life the reality of the cost of human conflict. Indeed, the abstract symbolic complex within which the history of human conflict has been explained to us can be seen as getting in the way of this kind of understanding.[43] Yet the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems to have the power to penetrate through this symbolic complex and to communicate with us more directly, and this seems to be true even for those who have had little personal connection with the Vietnam War.

The organization of the names on the memorial is unusual. Before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, most monuments that listed the dead and missing from a war or battle presented the names within the hierarchy of military organization.[44] The services were usually separated, and often the names were grouped by the individual units within the military with which each person served. On the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the names are listed chronologically, without indications of military rank. There are no dates other than the two years. Yet a sense of days can be glimpsed from the alphabetical groupings of the names—each subtly indicating the losses each day. As we walk along the wall, the years each emerge, become dominant (they are larger than the names), and then recede. In this sense, our passage along the wall becomes simultaneously a passage through time.[45] Indeed, this is one of the peculiar elements of the design concept behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that helps us realize the immensity of the number of names. As we walk along the memorial, we pass through year after year of losses until we are faced with the enormity of the war's time frame as the dates *1959* and *1975* are found on the opposite faces at the apex. The full length of the memorial is 494 feet; the time it takes to traverse that length reinforces both the immensity of the number of

SMITH ROBERT GEORGE	PFC	AR	11 JUN 45	02 JAN 66	CLEVELAND	OH	4E	52
SMITH ROBERT HAROLD	SP4	AR	27 OCT 46	24 JAN 67	WARMINSTER	PA	14E	73
SMITH ROBERT JAMES	SSGT	AR	16 DEC 45	18 APR 68	ALBANY	NY	50E	41
SMITH ROBERT JEREMIAH	CPL	AR	16 MAY 47	29 SEP 67	BUFFALO	NY	27E	32
SMITH ROBERT JOE	SP4	AR	04 JUL 44	21 MAR 67	JACKSONVILLE	FL	17E	14
SMITH ROBERT JOHN	A1C	AF	15 OCT 42	25 JUN 65	SCARBORO	ME	2E	19
SMITH ROBERT JOSEPH	PFC	MC	04 AUG 48	26 AUG 68	COLUMBUS	GA	46W	34
SMITH ROBERT JR	PFC	AR	20 MAR 45	26 MAY 66	PHILADELPHIA	PA	7E	111
SMITH ROBERT L	SGT	AR	30 JUN 37	25 AUG 66	MILLINGTON	TN	10E	44
SMITH ROBERT LEE	SP4	AR	06 NOV 43	29 JAN 66	WELCH	WV	4E	115
SMITH ROBERT LEE	SSGT	AR	22 AUG 32	25 MAY 68	CHILLICOTHE	OH	67W	6
SMITH ROBERT LEE	LCPL	MC	09 JAN 46	31 MAY 68	MONROE	MI	62W	17
SMITH ROBERT LEE	PFC	MC	28 MAR 46	02 SEP 68	CINCINNATI	OH	45W	28
SMITH ROBERT LEE	PFC	AR	06 OCT 43	30 DEC 69	CHICAGO	IL	15W	111
SMITH ROBERT LEE JR	LCPL	MC	31 JUL 45	04 MAR 66	NEWPORT NEWS	VA	5E	110
SMITH ROBERT LEWIS	PFC	AR	05 APR 48	06 JUN 68	SMITHLAND	KY	59W	15
SMITH ROBERT LINDO	PFC	AR	22 JAN 40	17 FEB 66	SANFORD	NC	5E	43
SMITH ROBERT LOUIS	CPL	AR	27 MAY 47	08 MAR 67	ANGIER	NC	16E	42
SMITH ROBERT MICHAEL	SGT	AR	11 NOV 48	10 MAR 70	PEORIA	IL	13W	108

6. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, from *Directory of Names* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1985). The alphabetical listing of the names of the dead and missing in the directory makes clear the devaluation that would have occurred had the names been listed in this order on the wall. (Information includes name, rank, service, birth date, death date, home town, and panel and line number for to locating each name on the wall.)

names and the sense of passage through time. This may also be part of the enduring character of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. No matter what the future brings, the length of years and of days will not change. Thus the understanding of these losses as losses in real time is something that will transcend the present.

The significance of the organization of the names can be understood by considering other possible organizational plans. Organization by military service and by military units would place the names into an abstract system that might be understood as an intermediate level between the individual name and the totality of the fifty-eight thousand names. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible not to see the names in terms of the abstract military hierarchy. Instead of being seen as individuals, each would be seen as one example of a particular service or a particular unit. Were the names organized in a single alphabetical list, a similar devaluation would occur—each could be seen as merely marking a point in the abstract system of letters, and the "quirkiness" that catches our attention would be lost (Figure 6).[46]

What is it about the names that seems to reach us so directly? Why do the names link? Why is it necessary that we see the names individually, while at the same time we experience the immensity of the total number of names without an intermediate symbolic framework? Why is it that these proper names have the peculiar effect that they do? Could any other words have the same effect?

The answer lies partially in the nature of human language. Language allows us to communicate, but in the appropriation of things within language, it seems that something of the reality of the things themselves is lost. Ludwig Wittgenstein showed that language can be understood as having the form of a logical system and that the limitations of what can be said are established by the internal limits of its logical propositional structure. However, when language is explained (from within) as this kind of logical system, the connection between language and the world becomes more problematic.[47] The connection between language and the world must occur through naming—the connecting of words and things—but even naming requires a level of abstraction and a system of classification. However, proper names, though involving abstraction, do not involve any system of classification. Each proper name identifies a unique individual. Of all the kinds of words in language, it can be argued that proper names are the most directly connected to reality.[48]

Yet it can also be argued that because a proper name does not allow us to visualize the actual person, the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial should remain disconnected from us and from the world. However, because each of us bears an individual proper name, we understand what a proper name means in terms of identifying an individual. This understanding is immediate and personal, not abstract. Indeed, we can identify with the names on the wall because they are presented to us individually—not as part of a larger scheme.[49] As the

singularity of the individual names catches us, we recognize them as names of individuals. Precisely because they are organized in a way that cannot be understood in a hierarchical abstracted fashion, we directly confront the names, immediately experiencing each as representing someone who was once as alive as we are today.

In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer writes, "The first thing we instinctively strive to conceive is simply the experience of being alive."[50] Our experience of life is from within, but life is not lived in isolation, and the form of our feeling is shaped through human interaction. Indeed, we ourselves embody in the shape of our own emotional lives those with whom we have interacted.[51] In this sense, the deceased remains alive within us, accessible through the things that serve as linking objects. Still, how is it possible that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows us to experience a feeling of loss of the living presence of individuals whom we may never actually have known?

The Felt Presence of the Other

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is clearly an example of what has been termed "a space of absence." As discussed by Richard Etlin in *Symbolic Space,* a space of absence may be characterized as "a void whose overwhelming message is the absence of the dead person, no longer with us in life and yet somehow present within the aura of the monument."[52] Such a space of absence need not literally be a space, but can also be an object that has the ability to evoke this response. (The deceased need not actually be interred in this location.)

The space of absence can be considered as a powerful type of linking object. The linking object is not itself actually alive, yet through it we experience the presence of the dead person. This can occur because the linking object is a site for *projection:* That is, we *project* the life we find. Through a linking object, we are able to connect with our own internalized "living" representation of the person being recalled. The person being recalled is not found within the object; rather, the person remains alive in our own memories and the linking object provides a site whereby we may access those memories and the associated feelings so that the person does become alive again. That we experience these feelings as originating within the object is a fundamental aspect of the phenomenon of *projection*, which psychoanalysis has identified as "the unconscious act of ascribing to something outside oneself [usually another person] one's own ideas or impulses."[53]

Why do some objects have the capacity to engender projection? Although Etlin only catalogs examples of the (architectural) space of absence, we can understand such spaces better if we see them as spaces that can evoke (unconscious) human projection. Without our projection, the space of absence is essentially incomplete.[54] The aspect of incompleteness is critical. Indeed, objects that serve as linking objects cannot be "overdetermined"—by this I mean that they must leave "space" into which the projection can occur. A minimum of means may often be a way to approach such a design. If the space is too overtly incomplete, though, the process will fail because the projection must remain unconscious. If the choreography becomes too evident (once the viewer senses that he or she is being manipulated), then the viewer will become fully conscious of what is expected, and the unexpected cannot occur. That the inner life resists being choreographed is, in fact, what makes the space of absence so elusive.[55]

Etlin identifies the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as an example of a space of absence because we enter its space by descending into the ground.[56] The memorial is set into the ground; its top edge exactly aligns with the flat ground plane behind it. In front, the earth is scooped out to a maximum depth of ten feet at the apex, forming a shallow bowl. As a result, the memorial recedes from view. Indeed, first-time visitors can come upon it without expecting it. The other monuments on the Mall, in contrast, are reached by ascending sloped ground or significant steps; they can be seen from a distance, and from them there are views and vistas. The *space* of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is contained, and as we walk into its space, distant views and vistas are cut off. Only as we pass the apex and begin to rise out of the ground is the relationship to the rest of the Mall apparent; only then do we take in the other monuments: the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. The sequence is a deliberate one: We are removed from the Mall to a "space apart." The remarkableness of this phenomenon—that in the midst of the city we are led into a place in which all the distractions of daily life are seemingly removed—is hardly noticed, yet if we imagine a reconfigured monument in which the ground plane remains level in front and the wall is placed against a shallow mound of earth, we can see immediately that the loss of the contained space would be significant.[57] Such a reconfiguration would not create a space in which the memorial would be the single focus.[58]

It might be argued that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is primarily an empty space. However, this misses two essential aspects of the memorial: the presence of the names and the reflectivity of the polished black granite surface on which the names are inscribed. The choice of black as the color of the memorial was, of course, a deliberate one on the part of its designer. It was also among the most controversial aspects of the design before it was built.[59] The

7. Vietnam Veterans Memorial with reflections of visitors. (Photo Jennifer Ashabranner.)

color does differentiate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from other monuments on the Mall, but this differentiation is contained within the defined space of the memorial.[60] Its most significant aspect is not its color *per se*, but rather the heightened reflectivity that the dark color imparts to the surface (Figure 7).

The presence of the names has led some to view the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as similar to a national cemetery, but this misses the other ways in which the memorial touches us.[61] Here the reflectivity of the memorial plays a critical role. As we move along the memorial to the point where the wall rises above our heads, we see others reflected in the polished surface of the black granite. The effect is striking, and the high level of polish produces very clear reflections. Then, in facing the wall directly, we see ourselves reflected back in the polished surface. Due to the quality of the surface, direct reflections are somewhat more ephemeral. Through the reflective surface we first find others and then ourselves in the wall. The simultaneity of vision of the names of the dead and missing, first with images of unknown others and then with ourselves, could not be more direct in establishing an interpersonal connection and making the memorial a linking object. We understand, not abstractly but rather directly, the common human nature of those who are named and those who read the names.[62] The directness of proper names connects us; the reflective surface superimposes our images upon the names. Indeed, we not only see ourselves superimposed on the names, we also see ourselves gazing out from within the wall. Thus, the space apart in front of the wall connects to a space apart that is seen through the surface of the wall. In optical terms, this is a "virtual space" (Figure 8).[63]

The reflective character of the polished black granite is not simply a mirror;

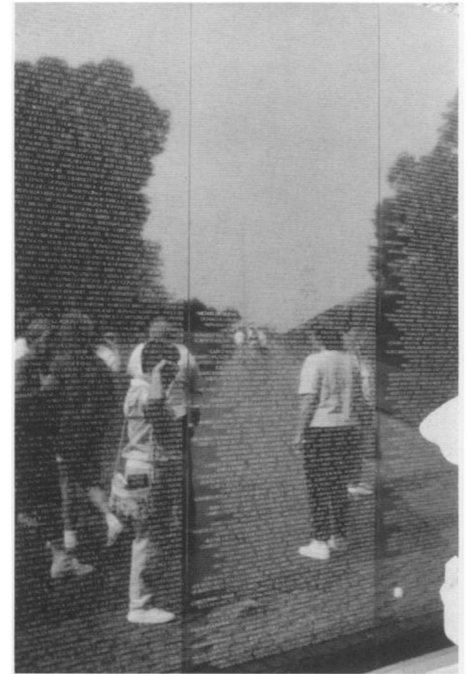
rather, it is closer in character to the glazed surface of a window. If the Vietnam Veterans Memorial were constructed of mirror glass, it would become too reflective and overpowering. The memorial would seem not to "take us in"; rather, its harsh reflectivity would be a kind of opacity. A mirror reflection seems exact; a window presents a much greater degree of ambiguity and therefore can become a site for (unconscious) projective fantasy.[64] We cannot help but imagine what we cannot see clearly. In this way, the experience of the memorial is different for every individual. It does not offer a fully prepared set of images; rather, it brings from each of us our own response.[65]

Precisely what seizes us as we walk along the memorial remains unclear. Is it that we first see the inexact reflections of others, then we are captured by the reality of the names (as reflected in their "quirkiness"), and then as we turn to face the wall directly, we see ourselves reflected? The interactive process is complex, yet we can imagine that the inexactness and ambiguity of the reflections allows us to see them as the reflections of those whose names are listed as well as (simultaneously) the reflections of those who look on. When we turn and see ourselves, therefore, this double reading catches us, and the identity of those whom we see *through* the surface is the same as the identity of those whose names we read. The way in which the wall is like a window opening onto an interior space allows us to *project* ourselves through it. However, unlike a window, the wall is not a neutral receptor. Instead, it is inscribed with the names of the dead. As we gaze upon the wall, the figure reflected back gazes upon us *through* the field of names. Thus, the wall engenders our (unconscious) projective fantasy, but simultaneously structures it.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial catches us (or we catch on to it) in a way that bypasses the familiar and forces us to see anew. At the moment of recognition, we pass from a conscious (rational, symbolic) way of understanding to a preconscious (presymbolic) way of understanding. What we feel is the simultaneous recognition of identity—of ourselves with those in the wall, of ourselves as in the wall but also separate from it, and therefore of the living and the dead. In an instant we return to a primary state of knowing—seeing ourselves reflected in the eyes of another, seeing ourselves within the other and the other within ourselves.[66] We experience both connection and separation—and, in that, we experience the connection of the living and the dead.[67]

This phenomenon is enhanced by the desire it engenders in us to touch the surface of the wall—to touch the names (Figure 9).[68] Even those who may not know anyone named on the wall are often drawn to touch the surface. The perception of apparent spatial depth engendered by the reflectivity can cause the names to seem to float in space. Touching the surface verifies their reality. Simultaneously, touch provides a second connection—a connection different from the visual. In touching the wall, the hand is reflected back; this almost seems to be a hand reaching forward from within the space of the wall. At the moment the fingers physically touch the surface, reflection yields the appearance of fingers touching fingers (as if on two sides of a surface). The spatiality of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—the relationship of physical space and virtual space, mediated by a surface of names—allows proximity to and identification with the dead, and an experience of the simultaneous reality of separation and connection, of living and dying.[69]

It is no wonder that we find it difficult to leave the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As we look into our own gaze, it draws us in and reaches within us. We know that



8. "Virtual space" within the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (Photo author.)

9. Touching the names on the wall. (Photo by Christopher Lark, Lark Ltd.)

10. Objects left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (Photo by the author.)

as we walk away, we will lose this connection and experience only separation. Thus, in addition to those who knew an individual named on the wall, even visitors who personally knew none of the named often end up making rubbings from the wall, as if to take part of it with them when they leave. Or they leave something behind—something of themselves. In both cases, these are attempts to preserve the connection we have achieved (Figure 10).

Conclusion

It is possible to understand both why the figural sculptures were regarded as essential by some veterans and why they became peripheral once the memorial was built. When the selected design was announced, some observers, including many veterans, saw the design as an abstract object, apparently impenetrable, with which they could not identify. Their fight for realistic figural sculptures was an attempt to create a part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that reflected their own image. Once the wall was complete, its character as a space of absence emerged, and the sculptures became peripheral. Although their realism may trigger memories for a few who visit, for most the sculptures themselves are impenetrable. In their completeness, they do not engender psychological investment on the part of the viewer; without such investment, they cannot serve as linking objects. These sculptures may provide information, but they rarely evoke emotion.

We choose to erect grave markers and monuments to commemorate the lives of the dead; we usually do not intend to build linking objects, although objects we do make clearly can serve us in this way. Indeed, the role played by linking objects does not require that they be objects intentionally created to serve this purpose (although they can be) or that they be objects that we personally shared with those remembered (again, they can be). Other objects can serve this role as well, as long as they have sufficient "space" to allow the psychological phenomenon of projection to take place.[70] It is this space and the essential incompleteness of the linking object that we feel most powerfully as a space of absence.

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Notes

1. The most complete brief account of the design competition and the subsequent controversy is Mary McLeod, "The Battle for the Monument: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," in Helene Lipstadt, ed., *The Experimental Tradition* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), pp. 115–37. A brief account is also found in Tod A. Marder, *The Critical Edge: Controversy in Recent American Architecture* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 188–202. Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), includes a discussion of the origins of the idea for the memorial and the history of the sponsoring organization, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, as well as the design competition and its aftermath.

The winner of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial competition was Maya Ying Lin, who was a senior in the architecture program at Yale when she entered the competition. She was not then a registered architect. For her design to proceed to construction, an agreement was reached with Cooper-Lecky Architects of Washington, D.C., who became the architects of record. Lin has always been recognized as the designer of the memorial.

2. The questions raised by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial cannot be addressed by a purely objective analysis of the structure independent of human response. Although it is the case that no work of architecture can be fully understood without considering human response, this article argues that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is essentially incomplete without human participation. Only if we consider the structure of human interaction with and response to this memorial can we begin to understand it. In this regard, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial can be seen as a particularly strong demonstration of James Ackerman's 1984 argument that the traditional separation of interpretation from response in art criticism should be challenged. Indeed, it is argued here that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial cannot be understood unless the issue of human response is addressed. See James Ackerman, "Interpretation, Response: Toward a Theory of Art Criticism," in *Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 37–47.

3. Richard A. Etlin, *Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and Its Legacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 172–98.

4. See McLeod, "Battle for the Monument"; Marder, *Critical Edge*, pp. 188–202; and Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation.*

5. Examples of interpretations of the design controversy are Elizabeth Hess, "Vietnam: Memorials of Misfortune," in Reese Williams, ed., *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War into Peace* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1987), pp. 261–74; and Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," *American Journal of Sociology* 97/2 (Sept. 1991): 376–420.

6. The differences between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and other memorials are emphasized in Arthur Danto, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Nation*, Aug. 31. 1985: 152–55; Grant F. Scott, "Meditations in Black: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Journal of American Culture* 13/3 (Fall 1990): 37–40; and Lora S. Carney, "Not Telling Us What to Think: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 8/3 (1993): 211–19.

7. The appropriateness of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a monument is debated in William Hubbard, "A Meaning for Monuments," *Public Interest* 74 (Winter 1984): 17–30; Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry* 12/4 (Summer 1986): 688–719; and Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr., "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77/3 (Aug. 1991): 263–88.

The presence or absence of rhetorical devices is discussed in Sonja K. Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34/3 (Summer 1986): 326–40; and Carney, "Not Telling Us What to Think."

Two very different interpretations of the political statement made by the memorial are Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Representations* 35 (Summer 1991): 118–42; and W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*," in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 36–37. However, D.S. Friedman challenges Mitchell's linkage of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in "Public Things in the Modern City: Belated Notes on *Tilted Arc* and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *JAE* 49/2 (Nov. 1995): 62–78.

8. The actions and rituals of visitors to the memorial are discussed in Peter Ehrenhaus, "Silence and Symbolic Expression," *Communication Monographs* 55/1 (Mar. 1988): 41–57; A. Cheree Carlson and John E. Hocking, "Strategies of Redemption at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 52/3 (Sept. 1988): 203–15; Caron Schwartz Ellis, "So Old Soldiers Don't Fade Away: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Journal of American Culture* 15/2 (Summer 1992): 25–28; and Daphne Berdahl, "Voices at the Wall: Discourses of Self, History and National Identity at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 6/2 (Fall–Winter 1994): 88–124.

The role the memorial may play in the construction of historical narratives of the war is addressed in Harry Haines, "'What Kind of War?': An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3/2 (Mar. 1986): 1–20; Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image"; and Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci, "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity."

9. Two popular accounts of the creation of the memorial are Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, and Brent K. Ashabranner, *Always to Remember: The Story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Putnam, 1989). Photographic picture books focusing on the memorial include Michael Katakis, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Crown, 1988); and Sal Lopes, *The Wall: Images and Offerings from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Collins, 1987). Eve Bunting, *The Wall* (New York: Clarion, c. 1990), is a children's book that tells the story of a boy visiting the memorial with his father and finding his grandfather's name on the wall.

10. Laura Palmer, *Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Random House, 1987), and *Offerings at the Wall: Artifacts from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection* (Atlanta: Turner, 1995) present objects and letters left at the memorial. A recent popular article about these objects is Don Moser, "Offerings at the Wall," *Smithsonian* 26/2 (May 1995): 54–59.

11. Danto, "Vietnam Veterans Memorial"; and Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image," pp. 120–22.

12. During the controversy over the abstract character of the design, the Secretary of the Interior,

the Commission on Fine Arts, and the National Capital Planning Commission approved (over the objections of Maya Ying Lin) a compromise that added a flagpole and sculptures of realistic figures to the wall so that the complete memorial is now actually an ensemble. At the insistence of the Commission on Fine Arts, these added elements were located adjacent to an existing grove of trees and can be considered outside the space defined by the wall and the excavated portion of the site. In general, in this article, the term *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* is used primarily to refer only to the wall and adjoining space (as Lin originally intended). A brief discussion of the figural sculptures is included at the end of this article. For a discussion of the history of the sculpture and flagpole addition, see Marder, *Critical Edge*, pp. 194–96; Hess, "Vietnam: Memorials of Misfortune," pp. 261–74; and Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 97–106, 115–16, 120–22, 128–34. For differing interpretations of their significance, see Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, "Commemorating a Difficult Past," pp. 396–400, 402–20; and Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci, "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity," 272–88. An example of a discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that completely ignores the sculpture is Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion."

13. This is not to deny that we can have beliefs about a continuing existence following death; however, our knowledge of life after death can only be based on faith, not on experience. Descriptions of existence following death must rely on metaphors that describe life after death in terms of life as it is experienced by the living.

14. Human reactions to loss, which involve both physical and psychological responses, have been studied and documented. Immediately upon a loss we experience "the panic of crisis grief," the stage at which we first move from denial toward acceptance of the loss. See Vamik D. Volkan and Elizabeth Zintl, *Life after Loss: The Lessons of Grief* (New York: Collier, 1993), pp. 11–24.

15. As Volkan and Zintl note, "Loss, even misplacing one's car keys, strikes at our illusion of control and predictability." However, death is much more challenging; it not only shatters these illusions, but it also causes us to face the most deeply rooted human need—the need for others. Volkan and Zintl, *Life after Loss*, pp. 14–15.

16. In the sense that the other lives on in us (in the shape of our own inner lives), the other never really dies. Volkan writes, "The representations of the dead live on in our memories and feeling states until we ourselves die." Vamik Volkan, *Linking Objects and Linking Phenomena: A Study of the Forms, Symptoms, Metapsychology, and Therapy of Complicated Mourning* (New York: International Universities Press, 1981), p. 34. Physical death removes the external reality of the other, and from that point our own internal representation in our own life of feeling is what survives; thus the loss is felt directly within ourselves as our own.

17. In this essay, I accept the definitions of *monument* and *memorial* offered by James Young: "I treat all memory-sites as memorials, the plastic objects within these sites as monuments. A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. A monument, on the other hand, is always a kind of memorial." James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4. Young's introduction summarizes much of the current debate on the place of memorials and monuments in contemporary culture.

18. Object constancy is a central concern in the evolution of the human psyche as it connects with the recognition of the self as different from the caregiver and the recognition of objects as separate from the self. These events are central in the infant's development of his or her individual identity and the recognition of the existence of a reality outside the self. However, the price of this development for each of us is the experience of separation and therefore of loss.

19. The connection of symbolization and the life of feelings is subtle and often not easy to describe. For almost all of us, the passage from the life of feeling (the life of the infant) to the life of shared symbolization is not something we can recall. However, in three paragraphs in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, the author provides an extraordinarily clear recollection of the day in 1887 on which her life was transformed from a series of experiences of inchoate feelings to a life of symbolization. The story of Helen's interaction with Anne Sullivan at the well house, and the realization that *w-a-t-e-r* (the word) spelled out on her hand meant water (the physical thing) running over her hand, cannot be clearer. From that point, Helen not only learned other words and their relationship to other things (thereby coming to have the ability to conceive of the object world), she also came to understand that she existed as a being within time, with a past and a future, and, equally important, she experienced real emotion—remorse over her previous destruction of a doll in a moment of frustration. The events at the well house offer an unique opportunity to witness the beginning of the shared life of symbols that is common to human existence; it also shows us the connection of the life of feeling, of emotion, with symbolization. Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 36.

20. Slavoj Zizek notes that "it is commonplace to state that symbolization as such equates to symbolic murder: when we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parentheses, its reality." In other words, symbolization always includes loss—the word is not the thing itself. However, at death it is the loss that is real; symbolization is the only means we have to create an object that may evoke the person lost to us. That which is "suspended, placed in parentheses," is all that remains for us. See Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 23.

21. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 20–25.

22. Ibid., p. 21.

23. Ibid., p. 38.

24. McLeod, "Battle for the Monument," p. 117. The competition brief gave 57,692 as the number of dead and missing to be named; since then the death total has increased, and additional names have been added so that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial now displays more than 58,100 names. Ibid., p. 133, n. 13. (There may be a few mistakes, and some individuals who are named on the wall may not have been lost in the Vietnam War. Although this raises an interesting question, it is not generally known and does not play a significant part in the experience of the memorial.)

25. See Carlson and Hocking, "Strategies of Redemption."

26. Some have argued that Vietnam veterans did not receive an equivalency of honor with soldiers in previous wars until an unidentified soldier was added to the Tomb of the Unknowns in 1984. See James Mayo, *War Memorials as Political Landscape* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 205; also see Peter Ehrenhaus, "Commemorating the Unwon War: On *Not* Remembering Vietnam," *Journal of Communication* 39/1 (Winter 1989): 96–107.

27. Zizek, *Looking Awry*, pp. 22–23.

28. Griswold argues that although the Mall was constructed over time and with a variety of intentions, it presents a symbolic space of surprising coherence. He characterizes the Mall as a "self-organizing system" in which the addition of any new object must be seen in relationship to those elements already present. See Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," pp. 689–704, esp. 692 and 715, n. 4.

29. In "Meaning for Monuments," Hubbard advanced the argument that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial provided a site only for moments of private grief. Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," chal-

lenged this position, arguing that Hubbard had seen the memorial as separate from its context but that its context (the Mall and especially its relationship to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument) gave it broader significance.

On the psychoanalytic issues raised by monuments as sites for shared public mourning, see note 32.

30. Zizek, "Looking Awry," p. 23.

31. Perhaps this question is most easily clarified by drawing a comparative example from the past. The Column of Trajan, erected about 106 to 113 A.D., offers a continuous spiral of reliefs depicting the Dacian Wars, one of the Emporer Trajan's successful military campaigns. The column is clearly different from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in that it glorifies Trajan's victories, but the issue here is its character as an intentional monument and its relative loss of significance with the extended passage of time. Trajan's column today is of interest primarily in architectural or art historical terms—in this sense it has become what Riegl calls an "unintentional monument." There is no possibility that anyone alive today can have any kind of emotional response to this monument as Trajan's contemporaries might have had. The events are simply too distant in time.

32. *Linking object* and *linking phenomenon* are terms invented by Volkan in connection with his clinical work and associated research on the psychology of pathological mourning. "Such objects provide a locus for externalized contact between aspects of the mourner's self-representation and aspects of the representation of the deceased. The mourner sees them [the linking objects or phenomena] as containing elements of himself and the one he has lost. . . . It is on this meeting ground that the established pathological mourner seeks to restore and then finally resolve the ambivalence that characterized his relationship with the deceased in his lifetime." Volkan, *Linking Objects and Linking Phenomena*, pp. 20–21. Volkan associates linking objects only with pathological mourning and differentiates linking objects from heirlooms and mementos. Heirlooms and mementos, according to Volkan, may nuture our identity and our connection to the deceased, but they lack the pathological element: "The difference between mementos and linking objects falls into that hard-to-define area between choice and compulsion. A linking object is psychologically hot as it revives for the mourner some conflict about the loss and what the loss took from him." He adds that linking objects are "generally not used" but are "jealously protected" by the mourner. Volkan and Zindt, *Life after Loss*, pp. 82–83.

However, Volkan has also used the term in a somewhat broader way. In *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*, Volkan referred to his "clinical experience with linking objects in their pathological forms," suggesting the possibility that linking objects may also appear in nonpathological forms. Subsequently, he specifically categorizes monuments and memorials as suitable targets of externalization and as linking objects that can play significant roles in group mourning. Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988): 160–72.

A complete discussion of issues associated with linking objects is beyond the scope of this article. However, at this point it seems most convenient to speak of linking objects in the broader sense, which includes both their pathological *and* their nonpathological forms.

33. Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*, p. 162.

34. In discussing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial with students, the following question proved useful: If we imagine that the memorial were to deteriorate over many centuries such that its surface was eroded and the more than 58,100 names of the dead and missing were washed away, what would be the result? Without the names, the eroded granite wall of the memorial would appear as little more than a rock outcropping. Even the recollection that the names of those killed in a little-remembered conflict had once been inscribed on the wall would not suffice as a substitute for the presence of the names themselves. Therefore, even though the Vietnam War might be remembered only distantly from history books, the names themselves are a key element in establishing the link necessary to evoke human response.

35. In this article, I use the term *funeral rites* broadly to include both the memorial service and the rite associated with the actual interment.

36. For examples, see Palmer, *Shrapnel in the Heart;* and *Offerings at the Wall.* For two different analyses of these objects, see Berdahl, "Voices at the Wall," pp. 98–105; and Carlson and Hocking, "Strategies of Redemption."

37. The transformation of private recollections of the deceased into the public record through symbolization is the transformation from impermanence to permanence. The relationship between the inexpressible private life of feeling and the shared public realm could not be presented more clearly. With the entry of the name of the dead into the text of symbolic tradition, our recollection of the deceased becomes part of the public realm that extends beyond ourselves in both time and space. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 50–58.

38. Some objects will be so tightly connected with one event in the life of the deceased that they may only serve as vehicles for the recollection of that event. Other objects, however, may have broader connections and may evoke a range of shared experiences and feelings. It should be evident, however, that objects that may have been extraordinarily meaningful to the deceased but that had little or no connection with anyone else will not easily serve to evoke response and thus are not likely to serve as linking objects.

39. Arendt's argument that the public realm is made by the shared points of view of individuals is echoed in this statement. The issue is not that we will all recall the deceased in the same way, but rather that each of us will have our recollections from our own position and that together these will constitute the "public" memory of the deceased. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 57.

40. For a brief discussion of the distancing of the tourist, see Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 46–63; see also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976). Peter Ehrenhaus indicates that some visitors to the wall never escape the role of tourist; see Ehrenhaus, "Silence and Symbolic Expression," pp. 52–53.

41. The "quirkiness" of the names was raised in Robert Campbell, "An Emotive Place Apart," *AIA Journal*, 72/5 (May 1983): 150–51.

42. The impact of the names has been addressed in a wide range of articles—for example, Scott, "Meditations in Black," pp. 38–39; Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image," pp. 126–29; and Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, "Commemorating a Difficult Past," pp. 400–402.

43. For a discussion of how the abstract symbolic complex can impede the experience of the real, see Percy, *Message in the Bottle*, pp. 46–63.

44. On broad issues of symbolism of a memorial, see Bernard Barber, "Place, Symbol, and Utilitarian Function in War Memorials," *Social Forces* 28/1 (Oct. 1949): 64–68; On the order of names on a memorial, see Haines, "What Kind of War?"; and V.L. Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 100. The organization of the names makes clear that in death we are all equal. On the controversy over this nonhierarchical organization, see McLeod, "Battle for the Monument," p. 123.

45. Danto suggests that this order does not work well, arguing that the shape of the memorial echoes the building up and winding down of American involvement and that a sequence that began at one end

and went to the other would be a better representation of the actual sequence of the war. See Danto, "Vietnam Veterans Memorial," pp. 153–54.

46. A good discussion of the loss of meaning that would result from an alphabetical listing is offered in Edward R. Tufte, *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990), pp. 42–44.

47. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1974). For a summary of the problem of the disconnection of language from the world, as presented by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, see Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), pp. 222–226.

48. When language is considered as an abstract system of propositions, its connection back to the world of things must be through names. The connection of the name (an abstraction) with the object remains difficult to comprehend, but it must be at the root of the relationship of language to the world. Still, even the phenomenon of naming objects involves abstraction. Clearly, when the child learns to connect the word *ball* with an actual ball, the learning of the name also implies the learning of an abstract classification system in which round objects of a certain type are grouped together and given a name. See, for example, Percy, *Message in the Bottle*, pp. 33–45.

However, a proper name is unique: We understand that an individual proper name connects to an individual human being. The kind of abstraction involved in a proper name is different from any other word. A proper name does not involve any kind of classification; each proper name identifies a unique individual. Of all of the kinds of words in language, it can be argued that proper names are the most concrete in their connections back to reality—back to the world. Without becoming involved in the details of the philosophical arguments on this point, this seems to me what is meant by the term *rigid designator* as used by Kripke. See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 48–53.

49. The absence of an overall structure challenges us to interpret the names individually. See especially Ehrenhaus, "Silence and Symbolic Expression," pp. 48–51; and Ellis, "So Old Soldiers Don't Fade Away," pp. 27–28.

50. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 147.

51. In psychoanalysis, the term *introjection* describes the incorporation of external events (objects) into the psyche and reacting to them as if they were internal. In psychoanalytic models of the emotional life, the internal emotional structure (that is, the "internal life of feeling" as that phrase is used in this article) is a result of the process of *introjection*; that is, our internal life of feeling is structured through our interaction with others. The development and articulation of our emotional structure begins in infancy with our very earliest interactions with our caregiver (usually the mother), through which we incorporate external felt experience into our internal lives of feeling (long before we have the capability of conscious thought, which would allow us to understand this process of introjection).

52. Etlin, *Symbolic Space*, p. 172. Etlin finds the roots of the space of absence in the "mental and spiritual outlook of the Enlightenment." His discussion is primarily typological; he describes and illustrates a series of types of formal-spatial organizations but does not venture to comment in detail on the effectiveness of each, nor does he explore the nature of the process by which such spaces engender human response.

53. This definition of *projection* is paraphrased from *Webster's New Universal Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, 2d ed. (New York: Publisher's Guild, 1970), p. 1439. The process of projection is the opposite of introjection, as discussed in note 51.

54. The incompleteness of the memorial has been noted by Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion"; Ehrenhaus, "Silence and Symbolic Expression," pp. 48–54; and Scott, "Meditations in Black," p. 39.

55. Although the sequence of our experience at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is choreographed—that is, as we walk along the wall we experience the names of the dead day by day as if passing through time—there is no obvious attempt to choreograph our inner response. The projection that does take place is not predetermined; the reflective surface of the wall of names accepts whatever we project into our own reflected image. This contrasts, for example, with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where the initially attempted identity card system tried to force a direct identification between each museum visitor and a Holocaust victim. For a discussion of this, see Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, "Understanding the Holocaust through the Holocaust Memorial Museum," *JAE* 48/4 (May 1995): 240–49.

56. Etlin, *Symbolic Space*, p. 172.

57. When we enter the Lincoln Memorial or the Jefferson Memorial we also have the experience of entering a "space apart," but in those cases this is as a result of entering an enclosed room. The effect is obvious, not subtle. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial the "apartness" of the space results only from the form of the landscape. The sense of "apartness" of the space that most experience is something of a surprise. As in note 55, the choreography is not specifically evident.

58. When we depart from the space of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we are directed toward the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial. In this way, it was Maya Lin's intention that there would be a relationship between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and nearby structures on the Mall. Griswold emphasizes this point as he sees the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as "incorporating" these other monuments; Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," pp. 712–13; others, however, have argued that the memorial does not "include" these other monuments, but only "points" to them; see Scott, "Meditations in Black," p. 38.

59. For the controversy over black granite, see McLeod, "Battle for the Monument," pp. 123–27; Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, pp. 80–89; and Hess, "Vietnam: Memorials of Misfortune," pp. 266–69, 272.

60. The black granite wall is contained within the defined space of the excavation for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; thus it should be clear that the blackness was never meant as a comment on any other monument, nor was it meant to be seen in opposition to the other monuments on the Mall.

61. Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," pp. 706–07, notes a resemblance to American cemeteries, but this varies widely. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is most similar, in this sense, to a military cemetery, such as Arlington, where all of the gravestones are identical. The memorial is not at all like a typical cemetery with the wide variety of gravestones, markers, and monuments that may serve to indicate wealth or status. However, the other characteristics of the memorial clearly differentiate it from any cemetery.

Scott, "Meditations in Black," p. 39, offers a different interpretation, suggesting that the need to search out individual names makes the memorial similar to a battlefield, where one would sort through the bodies of the dead.

62. The importance of the reflective surface of the wall can be better understood if one considers what the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would be like if it were white instead of black. It would still be powerful, but the reflections would be reduced or lost, and its effectiveness would clearly be diminished.

63. It has been suggested by Griswold that the V-shape of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial might be seen as an open book and that the two wall surfaces are adjoining pages. What is interesting about this interpretation of the memorial is the suggestion that one might imagine turning the pages and seeing surfaces covered with the names of other individuals who died in other wars. This does not seem to come across very strongly

at present, perhaps because its association for us has been directly with the Vietnam War. However, once considerable time passes and Vietnam recedes into the distant past, this "reading" may become stronger. In any case, this begins to suggest why the memorial may retain and even renew its power with every generation. For us, the intentionality of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial still takes precedence. For future generations, however, the identification with those named may be strongest on the basis of their common humanity—that those who are named are just like those who are reflected back. Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," p. 708.

However, most people with whom I have discussed this issue had not previously perceived the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as an open book. Further, this would seem to deny the spatial aspect that results from the reflectivity of the surface. If the surface is just a page to be turned, it would seem to lack depth, but the reflectivity of the surface clearly creates a "virtual space" and therefore seems to deny any nonspatial perception.

64. The theme of the window as the receptor of projective fantasy has been a focus of recent writings in psychology and related fields. See, for example, Zizek, *Looking Awry*, pp. 8–16, 90–91. (Lacan suggests that the mirror can be the site of fantasy. However, the window, because of its inexactness and ambiguity would seem better able to become a place for projective fantasy.)

65. Each individual's experience of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is therefore different—each person sees the memorial individually—yet all of these experiences are similar. Some have criticized the memorial because it engenders an intensely personal (some would argue private) experience. See, for example, Hubbard, "Meaning for Monuments," pp. 27–30. However, the commonality of this experience and its direction has also been seen as reaching beyond these limits, as in Griswold, "The Memorial and the Mall," pp. 695–717.

66. As explained by psychoanalysis, we are unconsciously called back to a preconscious mode of knowing, to the first moment when (as children) we saw ourselves reflected back in the eyes of our caregivers and knew we were each separate yet at the same time connected. Psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott noted the primal significance of this interaction in human experience; see D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1972), pp. 111–18.

67. Carney also notes that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has come to be seen as "a place where the living meet the dead"; see Carney, "Not Telling Us What to Think," p. 217.

68. Both Berdahl and Carney address our active engagement with the Wall through touch; see Berdahl, "Voices at the Wall," p. 89; and Carney, "Not Telling Us What to Think," p. 216.

69. Our closest connection with death might be considered to be through the direct contact with the deceased body. However, the emotion this provokes is usually one of horror—an emotion that leads to distancing, not connection. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows the experience of the connection of the living and the dead—a connection that allows an experience of death that might be characterized as release—death with dignity, not with horror.

70. For example, among the most moving exhibits at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are the collections of ordinary objects that were taken at the death camps from those about to die—objects like shoes, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, cutlery, scissors, and the like. These things are ordinary; indeed, they look just like similar objects that we all own and use every day. There seems to be little time or distance between these things and their owners and the similar things that we own and ourselves. Thus, these offer the opportunity for us to realize the similar humanity of those who were killed in the death camps and ourselves. They can become sites for projection (linking objects), and through them we can experience (project) a close connection to the feeling of the lives of those who died. Although we may not have known any of those killed in the death camps, we can "share" through these linking objects in a connection with these dead. Through the knowledge of what these represent (objects "harvested" from people about to be killed), we can begin to experience a partial sense of the fear they must have felt. See Ochsner, "Understanding the Holocaust."