

## **Project at the Central Library, Louvain, Belgium**

We cannot see how memory could settle within matter; but we do clearly understand how – according to the profound saying of a contemporary philosopher – materiality begets oblivion.

– Henri Bergson, *'Matter and Memory'*<sup>1</sup>

And I can't forget, I can't forget

I can't forget but I don't remember what ....

– The Pixies, covering Leonard Cohen

### **Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through 1914: The Central Library:**

On the night of August 25th to 26th 1914 much of the town of Louvain was burned to the ground by advancing German troops. Famously, the University Library was deliberately targeted. On the Fourth of July, 1928, a new library, "America's gift to Belgium" was dedicated as a memorial to the war to end all wars. On the night of the 16th to the 17th of May 1940, this building, too, was all but leveled by German artillery. Only the walls were left standing. It was not reopened until 1951. On January 1, 1970 after the linguistic division of the university the collection compiled in the intervening years was split when half its contents were transferred to the newly established university in Louvain-la-Neuve.

Even after its careful restoration in the last few years, the memorial symbolism of the library building seems to have been over-shadowed by the impact of the events briefly outlined above-- the destruction, reconstruction and division of structure and collection alike. This has left the possibilities for the site's symbolic significance surprisingly open. As it stands, it can be said to represent: the devastation and victory in World Wars One and/or Two; the continuity of a venerable institution of higher learning; its division as both triumph and tragedy; the concept of a centralized repository of knowledge; or even the obsolescence of such a concept.

While these as well as other interpretations are all possible, the overwhelming historicism of the building remains inescapable. The Neo-Renaissance style of the building does three things. First, it attempts to place the building within a historical tradition rooted in the height of Renaissance learning. Second, it is important to note that by 1928, such a Neo-Renaissance building almost qualified as a 'neo-neo-style.' As such it covers over the destructive period between the time it was built (1928) and the time at which such a style was current (1880 to 1900 -- at the latest 1913, the year that Carnegie's Peace Palace in the Hague was completed). Third, it supports the memorialization of the war often literally inscribed on its walls. This includes the engraved names of American donor institutions, 48 gold stars (1 for each U.S. state) on the clock tower and many icons of the War's destructive force, as well as, its victorious end. The new Central Library did not attempt to restore what had been there. It replaced it with what might but could never have been there. It invoked and constructed history in two directions, first backward to an era from which it claimed its legitimacy, and secondly, forward toward a new age in which war and its effects would be but repressed memories. Unfortunately, the horrors of this memory would re-emerge as a conscious and very present reality a mere twelve years later when war again devastated Louvain and its library.

Memorials are meant to locate 'collective memory' by representing that which is threatened by being forgotten to those for whom the events remembered are not necessarily personal – i.e. rememberable. They do not initiate memories but rather they stand in their place and as such they become icons that authorize the forgetting of individual trauma. A memorial acts as a metaphorical insertion of History into the life of the individual allowing for the reality of the original event to be replaced by its symbolic embodiment. A form of collective transference (*metapherein*: to transfer – the root of metaphor) seems to take place. In the same year that the first library was bombed Freud published *Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through* in which he claims that:

We soon realize that the transference is itself merely an instance of repetition, and that this repetition involves transference of the forgotten past ... onto all other areas of the patient's current situation .

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 1908, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, Zone, 1988, p. 177

<sup>2</sup> Pixies, *I can't forget* on *Trompe Le Monde*, Electra 1991, lyrics by Leonard Cohen, *I'm your man*, Sony, 1988

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, Repeating, Working-Through*, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. J. Reddick, 2003, p. 37.

Perhaps the impulse to (re)build, especially that which was never there, as a functional memorial – i.e. a memorial that carries on the work of a university as symbolized by its library – is not surprising.

In considering an artistic intervention at the Central Library which has physically and institutionally born witness to as much as it was meant to commemorate, locating contemporary meaning in a complex of past audiences, memories and narratives seems of little use. There are too many potential claimants to the title of who and what is represented. This would only continue the repetitive enterprise implicit in the memorial itself as a site where personal experience is superceded by a corpus of collective historical narratives which may or may not have a dynamic or critical resonance in the population whom the library serves.

Rather, the Central Library seems to present an opportunity for reflection on how multiplicities of experience are fused into political, social and historical constellations – a site of critique not of the memorial function, but of the way in which that function is constituted by and constitutive of audiences, individual, as well as, collective. Rather than re-inscribing history into the site, I would want to re-insert memory as an everyday experience of the site.

### ***The Other side of Memorial: Flashbulbs, Photographs, and Writing.***

In 1977 psychologists R. Brown and J. Kulik proposed an as of yet unstudied form of memory that they termed ‘Flashbulb Memory’ or ‘FBM’. FBM exists precisely at the intersection of autobiographical memory and the collective experience of specific historical events. The canonical example used in this first paper was the response to the question: ‘What do you remember about learning of the death of John F. Kennedy?’ As the photographic metaphor of its name implies, such memory was thought to carry a high degree of accuracy, as well as being generally less susceptible to forgetting (the result of a ‘print-now’ function that somehow short-circuits the normal filtering process of what is and what is not important in memory). Just as the supposed ‘indexicality’ of the photograph has been significantly complicated in the last twenty-plus years, the idea that FBM faithfully represents an imprint of the events at the time of exposure as a ‘message without a code’ has also been shown to be much too simplistic.<sup>4</sup>

Since its invention, photography has been intimately tied to both history and memory. Perhaps such analogies hold so much weight because memory or at least the one who does the remembering and photographs are seen to be present both in the past (the time remembered) and at the time of reception (of remembering). Both, too, are also susceptible to degradation. A key difference, therefore, between the memorial, which is the result of the metaphorical replacement of an event, and the photograph is the proximity of the photograph to the event itself, i.e. its indexicality. Each photograph claims (though by no means neutrally) to bear witness, much like the person who faithfully recounts an event from memory.

In the case of memory, we have the problem that we cannot see what the person remembers even if it is theorized through the use of photographic metaphors. We must rely on words or other non-indexical forms of representation. Rather than driving memory and photography further apart, in some way this brings them closer together. According to Alan Sekula, “the photograph as it stands alone presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the mysterious mix of electro-chemical impulses in the brain thought to produce memory only becomes meaningful when embedded in a network of meaning – a psyche – that we can only know through language. The closest we can get to memory is the language used by the person who remembers to report it, i.e., memory is always already textual.

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<sup>4</sup> The notion that like a footprint in wet sand the photo has a direct and necessary relation to its now absent referent.

<sup>5</sup> For information on FBM and research since its proposal in 1977 See: William F. Brewer, *The theoretical and empirical status of the flashbulb memory hypothesis*, in *Affect and accuracy in Recall: studies in “flashbulb memories”* ed. E. Winograd and U Niesser, the Cambridge U. Press, 1992.

And: Finkenauer, Luminet, Gisle, et al., *Flashbulb memories and the underlying mechanisms of their formation: Toward an emotional-integrative model. Memory and Cognition*, 1998, 26(3), p. 516-531.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Sekula, *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*, in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin, Macmillan, 1982, pg. 91.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to remember that we are already operating in the realm of metaphors. Metaphors which have held a grip on our discussion of not just memory but perception generally so much that in 1908 Henri Bergson already cited it as a primary obstacle to understanding the relationship between mind and matter:

“The whole difficulty of the problem that occupies us comes from the fact that we imagine perception to be a kind of photographic view of things, taken from a fixed point by that special apparatus which is called an organ of perception – a photograph which would then be developed in the brain-matter by some unknown chemical and psychical process of elaboration.”

H. Bergson *Matter and Memory*, p. 38

At this point I would like to summarize a few points: First, memorials place themselves at the intersection of collective and individual memory by providing metaphors through which the individual partakes in and is made part of History. Second, psychologically the theory of FBM claims to examine the same intersection from the other point of view – i.e. that of the individual rememberer in the collective context. Third, recourse to the photographic metaphor in FBM can be understood as a claim to photography's metonymic relationship to the past, its indexicality. Fourth, this claim demands rather than excludes participation in a discursive, often linguistic field, whether the object be photographic material or psychic phenomenon.

### ***A Proposal:***

#### *Site: The Library: The Main Reading Room: Lights: Bulbs...*

The train of thought above has led me from the history of the Central Library to memorials in general, from Flashbulb Memory, through photography to language. Now I must return to the site, the Central Library. I can no longer avoid it. If my project is to be the re-insertion of 'memory as an everyday experience of the site' I must define the site down to the surface on which such a project might occur. I will begin with the fact that the library is overflowing with text, from architectural inscriptions to the contents of the many volumes housed in its collection. There is more than enough to be read. The central site of reading – i.e. transforming the potential of all this writing into meaning – is the main reading room. This room is the social and symbolic core of the interaction between readers and texts. One of the most striking though easily over-looked parts of this space is the twenty hanging lamps each containing six exposed florescent tubes. Without the quantity of light produced by these lamps, the room would be of little use and the impact of the windows lit from within when seen from outside would disappear. These bulbs are the functional and the symbolic indication that the structure is in active use. I would like to write directly on these bulbs, bringing the experience of reading as close to what makes it possible while only allowing a quick reading (reading in a flash?) because of the back lit effect of staring at the illuminated surface of the bulb.

#### *Writing: Collection: Flashbulbs*

As a means of generating text I would like to distribute a survey (in Dutch, French, German, English and Spanish) to the users of the main reading room. The survey will briefly explain the general history of the building and outline the concept of "Flashbulb Memory." It will then ask the respondents to consider an instance that they feel represents such a memory in their lives, specifically asking them to respond to the six 'canonical categories' originally laid out by Brown and Kulik. These categories are:

1. Place - where were you?
2. Ongoing event - what were you doing?
3. Informant - who told you / how did you find out?
4. Affect in others – how did others respond/feel?
5. Own affect – how did you feel?
6. Aftermath – what did you/others do afterwards?

Obviously this survey will not be scientific, rather it will be designed to elicit and collect the language by which people report memory. The responses will form the corpus of the written and visual material used for the rest of the project.

#### *Installation: Memory Inscriptions: Temporary/Temporality:*

The installation will be very simple. For each of the twenty lamps in the Main Room a set of responses will be printed on the bulbs – one category per bulb. No mention of the event which precipitated the recollection will be made, rather the text will be a catalogue of the places, events etc. that were marked by the historical event and which are now called upon by its recollection. Because the bulbs are arranged around central cores no more than four bulbs of one lamp can be seen from a given viewpoint. It will be impossible to read an account of a single memory at one time. Taken as a whole the bulbs will offer multiple combinations of reported memories, but will never allow for a 'complete' reading. They will become a means of combining and recombining multiple specific reports of memories to form new texts, not so much through chance as through the reader/viewer's own ability to associate terms. As an instantiation of memory the installation must be temporary, it must be possible to recall that which they saw without being able to go back to check.

#### *Documentation: Memorial/Texts/Objects:*

Though the experience of the installation must be temporary, the resulting textual formations can be preserved. I would like to make a book that includes the texts produced, as well as documentation of their collection and display. Such a book could re-enter the logic of the library by being included the general

collection of the library. The bulbs having been removed can also be re-hung on a wall as sculptural/textual formations that no longer participate in the collective experience of the reading room, but become representations of it: memorials of sorts, reconciling the installation to forgotten memory by repeating it.

