Art, Affect, and Materiality in the Construction of Collected Counter-Narratives: Three Case Studies in Contemporary Art

Ailie Bowen Pankonien

University of Colorado at Boulder, ailiepankonien@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/arth_gradetds

Part of the Contemporary Art Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.colorado.edu/arth_gradetds/40

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Art and Art History at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art History Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Art, Affect, and Materiality in the Construction of Collected Counter-Narratives: Three Case Studies in Contemporary Art

by

Ailie Bowen Pankonien

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Art & Art History
2018
This thesis entitled:
Art, Affect, and Materiality in the Construction of Collected Counter-Narratives
written by Ailie Bowen Pankonien
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

Claire Farago, Ph.D (chair)

James M. Córdova, Ph.D

Hanna Rose Shell, Ph.D

Date ______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT:

As people are faced with imposed precarity in contemporary society, it is imperative that art be reclaimed as a tool for the assertion of counter-narratives and expressions of agency. In this thesis, I utilize theories of affect and materiality toward the analysis of three case studies in contemporary art to consider how they could contradict or counter the affective consequences of oppressive structures and the imposition of exclusivist narratives. First, I discuss the public art project Monument Lab for its interrogation of the role of monuments in contemporary society. As an ongoing, participatory project, Monument Lab affirms the coexistence of diverse experiences of American history, resisting retrospective oversimplification by which the durational effects of past events are obscured. In the second chapter, I analyze the immersive installation *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]* by South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape. In contrast to scholarship that posits the authoritative ability of artists and museums to direct viewers, I argue for a recognition of art experiences as a generative exchange informed by the diverse agencies of the artist, the audience, and the work itself. Finally, I examine the social media application Vine as an emergent medium for creative expression. Through this short-lived form of networked technology, young people of color cultivated a digital community for emotional uplift and the creation of an alternative archive of daily life in resistance to the affective pressure of larger-scale structural forces. Thus, I aim to demonstrate that art experiences are meaning-generating, reciprocal exchanges between diverse agencies, and thus a powerful and flexible medium for the assertion of counter-narratives and expressions of agency.
Acknowledgments:

This thesis project and the two years of study that culminated in it would not have been possible without the support of many people around me. I must extend my deepest appreciation to my advisor Claire Farago for her patient and attentive guidance throughout this process. The contributions of her expertise and art historical framework have been invaluable and working with her has been tremendously positive and constructive. Thank you for always being open to my ideas and for helping me to develop and make them stronger. I also owe my gratitude to James Córdova, who has improved my writing, given me a conceptual foundation that has enriched this project, and has pushed me to be a better scholar. I am also thankful for Hanna Rose Shell for always being open and helpful and for her valuable contributions to my thesis.

I am sincerely grateful all my professors at the University of Colorado, Boulder and to the Art and Art History department for their encouragement and for shifting and expanding my framework for interpreting the world – I am proud to have been part of this community and all I have learned during my two years here. I wish to give a special thanks to Catherine Cartwright and Jean Goldstein for their indispensable contributions that have enabled my success.

To the grad girls Emily Mullen, Valeria Serrano, Gladys Preciado, and Laura Thompson – thank you for your endless support and camaraderie. I always felt that we were in it together. I am especially thankful for Molly McGill for always reminding me to have fun and for making me laugh when I most needed it. I cannot imagine this experience without you. Thank you to Jaclyn Le for always inspiring me to do my best, and to Alex Penn and Jade Gutierrez for guiding me in my first year as a master’s student.
Thank you to my family, Bronwyn, Dean, John, and Michael, and to Steven Guerrero for your endless and vital support. The depth of my love and appreciation for you all is almost inexpressible.
# Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 1: Redefining Historical Narratives Through Monument Lab ................................................................. 13  

Chapter 2: Agentic Exchange in Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *Untitled (of occult instability)*  
*feelings* .................................................................................................................................................................................. 31  

Chapter 3: Vine as a Networked Alternative Archive ................................................................................................. 52  

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................................................... 75  

Figures ............................................................................................................................................................................... 84  

Chapter 1: Figures .................................................................................................................................................................. 84  

Chapter 2: Figures ............................................................................................................................................................... 96  

Chapter 3: Figures ............................................................................................................................................................... 105  

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................................................... 115
### List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Peter Eisenman, “Field of Stelae,” Berlin’s <em>Denkmal</em> (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, dedicated in 2005)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gutzon Borglum, Augustus Lukeman, and Walker Kirkland Hancock, Confederate Memorial Carving, dedicated in 1972</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Moses Ezekiel, Confederate Monument, dedicated in 1914</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Heyward Shepherd Monument dedicated in 1930</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Laurie Allen, <em>Adkins Circle</em> proposal, 2017</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interactive map of monuments and corresponding labs exhibited by Monument September – November 2017</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Interactive map of proposals submitted to Monument Lab by Philadelphians, September – November 2017</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tania Bruguera, <em>Monument to New Immigrants</em>, 2017</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>David Hartt, <em>for everyone a garden VIII</em>, 2017</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Jamel Shabazz, <em>Love is the Message</em>, 2017</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Andrea Mohin, <em>Memorial vigil in New York City, September 12, 2001</em>, 2001</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Stolpersteine</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Peter Eisenman, “Field of Stelae,” Berlin’s <em>Denkmal</em> (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, dedicated in 2005)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>The Battle of Germantown Memorial</em>, dedicated in 1903</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Karyn Olivier, <em>The Battle is Joined</em>, 2017</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sharon Hayes, <em>If they Should Ask</em>, 2017</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Map of Rittenhouse Square</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


22. R. Tait McKenzie and Paul Phillipe Cret, *Dr. J. William White Memorial*, 1922............94

23. Map of National Historical Park depicting *The President’s House* and The Liberty Bell Center .................................................................95

24. Kelly/Maiello Architects and Planners, *The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation*, dedicated in 2010 .................................................................95

25. Photograph of the inscription naming people who lived at the site memorialized in *The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation* ............96

26. Laurie Allen, *Connection* proposal, 2017 ...........................................................................96

27. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992 .........................................................................97


29. Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016 .........................98


33. Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016 .........................100

34. Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016 .........................100

35. Figure 2.9: Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016........101

36. Figure 2.10: Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016........101

37. Figure 2.11: Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*, 2016........102

38. Figure 2.12: Schalk Van Zuydam, *A statue of the British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town*, 2015 .................................................................102

viii
39. Installation view of \textit{killjoy@vincennes Paris 2016}, Dineo Seshee Bopape, \textit{Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]}, 2016 ........................................................................................................103

40. Ruins of the Tunisia Pavilion at the Bois de Vincennes, Paris ........................................103

41. Dineo Seshee Bopape, \textit{sa____ke lerole, (sa lerole ke)}, 2016 ...........................................104

42. Still from “Too Close,” NEXT ........................................................................................................105

43. Still from “Why you always lyin,” Nicholas Fraser, Vine video, posted in 2015 ....105

44. Still from “Why you always lyin,” Nicholas Fraser, Vine video, posted in 2015 ....106

45. Still from “Why you always lyin,” Nicholas Fraser, Vine video, posted in 2015 ....106

46. Still from “Por que estas mintiendo,” MexicanGueys, Vine video .............................. 107

47. Still from “Por que estas mintiendo,” MexicanGueys, Vine video .............................. 107

48. Still from “Por que estas mintiendo,” MexicanGueys, Vine video .............................. 108

49. Still from \#FERGUSON, Antonio French, posted in 2017 .................................................. 108

50. Still from \#FERGUSON, Antonio French, posted in 2017 .................................................. 109

51. Still from \#FERUGSON, Antonio French, posted in 2017 .................................................. 109

52. Still from \#FERUGSON, Antonio French, posted in 2017 .................................................. 110

53. Still from “Again, the police provoke protestors for no reason. \#BatonRouge,” DeRay McKesson, Vine video, posted in 2016 ......................................................................................... 110

54. Bob Adelman, \textit{Martin Luther King delivers the “I have a dream” speech from the podium}, 1963 ....................................................................................................................... 111

55. Lei Yixin, \textit{The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial}, dedicated in 2011 ......................... 111

56. Figure 3.15: Charles “Teenie” Harris, \textit{Men and young men playing game of horseshoes in alley next to chain-link fence}, c. 1938-1945 ................................................................. 112

57. Charles “Teenie” Harris, \textit{Bride throwing bouquet from porch to group of women standing in yard}, c. 1940-1955 ........................................................................................................ 112

58. Still from “When you thought the relationship was going good and then she hits you with this,” Jay Versace, Vine video, posted in 2014 ........................................................................................................ 113
59. Still from “When you thought the relationship was going good and then she hit you wit this,” Vine video, posted in 2014........................................................................................................113

60. Still from “MR POSTMAN,” LookInAmerah, Vine video, posted in 2014 ..............114
Introduction

In the wake of recent political and social events, the entanglement of the art market with that of a globalized economy, and the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism, it is imperative that the role of art in contemporary society be reconsidered and reasserted. In this thesis, I consider affect and its association with materiality to examine the ways that people use art or material culture to express their own counter-narratives and generate affective experiences resistant to those that may be imposed upon them. In the article “Kunstgriff: Art as Event, Not Commodity,” art historians Jae Emerling and Donald Preziosi argue that, because art has been commodified and institutionalized, it is the responsibility of art audiences to reclaim its politically and affectively resistant potential and capacity “to construct and express decentred collective experiences.”¹ In their call for the reclamation of “the danger that art continues to pose to hegemonic power,” Emerling and Preziosi turn to affect, asking: “what capacities and affects is art still capable of producing?”²

Theories of affect and its productive potential have grown into an expansive area of study in the last twenty years, a development labeled “the affective turn” by sociologist Patricia Clough.³ Although there is “no single generalizable theory of affect” and its application spans numerous disciplines, it is most commonly defined as a human or nonhuman “body’s capacity to

² Emerling and Preziosi.
affect and be affected.”⁴ In contemporary thought, affect is thus a “gradient” of strong or subtle forces or feelings that pass between agentic matter within environmental space, and this developed from an increased “focus on the body” in feminist theory and the “exploration of emotions” in queer theory.⁵ Two articles published in 1995 laid the foundations for the now-dominant directions in affective thought: Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Field: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” which is influenced by psychoanalysis and the twentieth-century psychology of Silvan Tomkins, and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect,” which utilizes Baruch Spinoza and Deleuzian analyses of his seventeenth-century philosophy.⁶

The inclusion of human or nonhuman bodily affectivity is fundamental to affect theories and is aligned with many contemporary theories of materiality that posit an integrated or affective interrelation of human and nonhuman agents in continual, networked exchange, similarly drawing on the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁷ Critical theorist Bill Brown’s landmark article “Thing Theory” (2001) marked a period of renewed interest in issues of materiality in the humanities, many of which can be attributed originally to indigenous ways of thinking that were suppressed by European colonization. Brown argues that “things” are affectively different from objects, which are static and defined by their usefulness because they are continually and reciprocally being formed in their relationships with humans and other

---


⁵ Clough and Halley, The Affective Turn, ix.


⁷ Gregg and Seigworth, The Affect Theory Reader.
things. He references Bruno Latour’s argument that modernity is reliant on a falsely constructed dichotomy of nature and culture that does not accurately reflect the “hybridizations” of lived society. Latour’s argument is echoed by political theorist Jane Bennett in her theory of “vibrant matter” that recognizes the “contributions of nonhuman actants.” The integrated world that many materiality theorists propose has political implications because, first, a dualistic construction of nature and culture supports a hierarchical superiority of humans who alone have the agency to act upon nature, enabling policies of colonialism and ecological destruction. Secondly, it validates a recognition of networked forces of power, or a “meshwork,” as anthropologist Tim Ingold has called it, that enable small actions to have large-scale effects, including those of things and the environment on the lives of humans. Jane Bennett, for example, draws upon Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “assemblages” to describe the causes of a city-wide electrical blackout, including infrastructure and energy use linked to American domestic and foreign policies, demonstrating a “distributed agency” that requires a broader scope for perceiving the complex, interlocking structures that cause events. Judith Butler, too, draws on the concept of assemblages in her examination of the embodied nature of political assembly, and argues for the productivity of conceptualizing assemblaged subjectivities in which individuals are always positioned within a network of other agencies, generating greater

---


12 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 38.
recognition for the “demographic distribution of precarity” as a scale on which we are all positioned, so that “resistance to precarity” must be demanded by all.\textsuperscript{13}

Theories of precarity, affect, and agentic matter are united by cultural studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich in the book \textit{Depression: A Public Feeling}, in which she argues for a conceptualization of depression as an affective consequence of everyday, embodied experiences of structural pressure.\textsuperscript{14} Both Butler and Cvetkovich address the ways that globalized neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility without institutional support, perpetuating a “process of precaritization” that obscures collectivity and mutual entanglement.\textsuperscript{15} Cvetkovich employs affect theories to describe depression as “the long-term effects of racism and colonialism” and the ways that “oppression…[seeps] into our daily lives,” as something that may be felt as “despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from just the way things are.”\textsuperscript{16} I am most influenced by Cvetkovich’s unique conceptualization of affect. Though she recognizes the dominant contributions of Deleuze and Spinoza to affect theories, particularly in their departure from the supremacy of psychoanalytic analyses of emotions, she has chosen a different approach. Affect theories influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze “[distinguish] between affect,” defined as a “precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings,” and emotions, which are the “cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or


\textsuperscript{15} Butler, \textit{Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly}, 15.

\textsuperscript{16} Cvetkovich, \textit{Depression}, 14.
joy.” In contrast, Cvetkovich chooses to use the keyword “feeling” as an intentionally general descriptor to encompass the embodied and unspecific ways that “affect, emotion, and feeling” may be experienced, categorized, and culturally constructed. This approach is also intended to welcome alternative or excluded testimonies and expressions of personal experiences.

Can affect generate resistance to structural oppression? Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, assert that the question of affect’s productivity, and the ways that a body could “come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect),” are fundamental to its application. Although attention paid to affect is not inherently “political, ethical, aesthetic, [or] pedagogic,” nor will it “yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than ‘now,’” most theorists of affect are united in their desire to identify the ways that the forces (such as feelings or agentic matter) by which bodies act and are acted upon could generate different ways of inhabiting the world.

This question is fundamental to Emerling and Preziosi’s “Kunstgriff,” in which they argue for the visionary power of art and the “danger [it] continues to pose to hegemonic power.” Art uncovers naturalized assumptions and ways of living, creates new ways of thinking, and generates different affective experiences, such as joy, that could increase “the body’s power of acting” in the world. Other art historians have also employed affect to discuss

---

17 Cvetkovich, 4.
18 Cvetkovich, 4.
20 Gregg and Seigworth, 9-10.
22 Emerling and Preziosi, 8.
art, including Jill Bennett, who argues that art could produce felt, embodied experiences leading to critical rethinking in her analysis of artistic expressions of trauma, an area of study that has developed alongside affect theories. In Susan Best’s discussion of a selection of contemporary artworks, she argues that the feelings they generate are fundamental to their effectivity, despite increasing rejection of affect in art discourse since the 1960s. In 2017, Adair Rounthwaite argued that the “embodied experiences” and feelings of participatory artworks are exchanged and passed amongst participants, and are thus a fundamental part of the art form because it is not typically organized around a static object. In each of these examples, the authors utilize affect as a means of thinking about the ways that art could create new relationships with and ways of conceptualizing the world, other people, and one’s positionality within a networked existence.

Cvetkovich, too, discusses affect in relation to art, naming creativity as a powerful tool for the resistance of political depression, because it is a “form of movement…that maneuvers the mind inside or around an impasse” and generates “different ways of being able to move, to solve problems, have ideas, be joyful about the present,” and affirm “one’s own ways of thinking and being.” Creativity is cited by others who identify its importance to communities who seek to resist the imposition of hegemonic narratives. The Black Lives Matter Global Network, “a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission it is to build local power” in resistance to structural racism, asserts the significance of art to their movement as a means through which to


claim self-presentation. Art is indispensable because it “redefines narratives,” creates joy, “imagines freedom and abolition,” “[influences] people,” and “heals.” Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, too, cites creativity as a fundamental tool for indigenous research and knowledge, arguing that it is “about transcending the basic survival mode” and “[enabling] people to rise above their own circumstances, to dream new visions,” “to hold onto new ones,” and to solve problems. Tuhiwai-Smith argues that creativity has been a fundamental form of indigenous survival and resistance under colonization, empowering communities to adapt and navigate within its control. This can be seen in much of the material culture produced in colonial Latin America, through which European colonists and indigenous peoples engaged in a complex process of reciprocal influence enabling the transformation of pre-Conquest cultural practices, the effects of which require a nuanced understanding of the varied mediums through which meaningful cultural perspectives were expressed.

In addition to creativity, Ann Cvetkovich argues that the experience and documentation of everyday life can be a powerful tool for the resistance of affective precarity. This focus is derived in part from the ways that affect has been employed in scholarship, in some instances generating greater recognition for the significance of personal experiences, memoirs, and the “cultural politics of everyday life.” Cvetkovich perceives in everyday life an “alternative approach to master narratives about global conditions that…frequently [operate] at such a high
level of abstraction that it fails to address the lived experience of [the] systemic transformations” of neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{31} This includes “accounts of sensory experiences,” such as in the potentially disruptive magic of ephemeral moments.\textsuperscript{32} I believe that this is a constructive lens through which to explore the cultural importance of art and productive potential of affect if one recognizes simultaneously the individual as assemblage, linked eternally to a dynamic network of distributed agencies, and the specific ways that precaritization is felt by people within their own localized experiences.

Cvetkovich’s focus on personal accounts of the everyday motivated her to turn to alternative mediums for the expression of feeling and critical thoughts, particularly in memoir. Similarly, I believe that understanding the potency of art in affective terms requires moving beyond and being more flexible about traditional definitions of art with a greater emphasis on how creativity is experienced by communities on their terms. Although much has been written about the power of art to change the way people think, I believe that regardless of an artist’s or institutions’ intentions, or the ways in which a work is controlled, the meaning of a work is generated through a reciprocal exchange between maker and audience and is capable of being subverted, something that is evidenced in the material culture of heterogeneous societies such as colonial Mexico. This is especially true when considering the networked affective and material agencies that continuously shape each other. Amelia Jones uses the word “encountering” to describe the open nature of art experience as an interrelated, reciprocal exchange between artist, audience, space, and the context in which the work is made and experienced, which “stays in

\textsuperscript{31} Cvetkovich, 3.

\textsuperscript{32} Cvetkovich, 4.
motion” throughout periods of display and archival access. Although art and artists “have become an industry” and the “moneyed classes and institutions” strive to “co-opt and neutralize it,” art has and continues to be a powerful means through which people can negotiate and express their identities, perspectives, and social power. It is essential to contemporary society for the visionary power of creativity, its role in the reclamation of localized narratives, and for the subjective experiences it engenders that may disrupt large-scale affective pressure.

In the following pages, I will examine three contemporary case studies of artistic expression produced or displayed in an art museum, in public space, and in digital social media, with a focus on their affective productivity. I will first discuss the public art project Monument Lab, which was initiated in Philadelphia in fall 2017, contemporaneous with the wide-spread removal of American Confederate monuments. My analysis is informed by James E. Young’s theorization of “counter-monuments” and “counter-memorials” resistant to hegemonic attempts to impose singular narratives upon historical events that are experienced in diverse and open-ended ways. I argue that Monument Lab, as an ongoing participatory project interrogating the role of monuments in contemporary society, affirms the coexistence of multiplicitous American historical narratives through collaborative exchange.

In the second chapter, I turn to the immersive installation Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings] (2016) exhibited at Palais de Tokyo by the South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape. The work “explores…the subjective question of affects by bringing together videos and


depictions of pieces focused on the body engulfed by emotion in personal and socio-political contexts.”36 Here, I explore how art could be employed to express artistic agency and challenge structural oppression. Yet, I argue that art experiences are a processual exchange of agencies between the audience and the artist. Thus, I apply a reparative interpretation that considers the ways that, despite the colonial and institutional history of museums, networked agency and affective resistance could still be expressed and experienced in this context.

Finally, I will discuss the collective documentation of everyday life in the digital space of the short-lived social media application Vine, through which young people of color asserted a communal counter-narrative of self-presentation and positive feelings in the wake of widespread, emotionally devastating police brutality in the United States. Although the medium is often recognized for a small group of high-profile white “Viners” who received the most financial support for their participation, this obscures the platform’s cultural significance as an accessible creative medium through which to construct an alternative visual archive of life. In my analysis, I draw on the use of snapshot photography as a form of art-making for black American communities. Through this medium people documented the lived experiences of imposed precarity, but also presented their agencies through the moments in between such oppression, simultaneously expressing individualized perspectives and localized forms of resistance and, through reflective creative exchange, created an affectively safe community for self-presentation.

I unite these case studies with a focus on the ways that art can be used to express counternarratives, generate resistant affects, and affirm the individual as an assemblage linked to the collectivity of an agentic meshwork. Methodologically, I hope to express the connections

between large-scale, collective narratives and their localized specificities. This approach reflects Ann Cvetkovich’s suggestion to acknowledge the lived experiences of structural oppression in everyday life, as well as activist and feminist scholar Angela Y. Davis’s call to formulate a “framework that allows us to think” about the “structural connections” between forms of oppression and resistance, in contrast to the “tendency to approach issues…within a narrow” scope.\(^{37}\) Compartmentalizing networked events obscures the interconnections between, for example, resistance to white supremacy and police brutality in the United States and colonialist apartheid structures in South Africa reflected in solidarity movements.

For these reasons, as well, I have chosen an interdisciplinary approach to this thesis, which is inherent in my use of affect theories that were developed outside of art history but have been used to enrich it. Methodologically, I believe that reading and thinking about the scholarship of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, feminist theorists, and others discursively with that of art historians will generate new ways of thinking about art and creative agency. Art is not made nor experienced in a vacuum and may be engaged with by diverse peoples in a variety of ways, engendering subtle shifts in conceptualizations of the world that may manifest to action. An interdisciplinary approach to art historical study could enable us to challenge or think around analyses of art that may be founded on entrenched assumptions, standing as an obstacle to more nuanced and flexible definitions of artistic agency. In this thesis, I examine cases in which people, not all of them formally trained, reclaim the power of art for self-expression and the assertion of counter-narratives. Further, I maintain that art experiences are meaning-generating, reciprocal exchanges between agencies, and thus a potentially powerful and flexible

medium for the assertion of counter-narratives. This is evidenced in the counter-monument project Monument Lab with which I will begin my discussion below.
Chapter 1: Redefining Historical Narratives Through Monument Lab

In August 2017 a white nationalist rally in Virginia sparked widespread calls for the removal of Confederate monuments across the United States, many of which were erected to affirm a white supremacist narrative of Southern American heritage in the Jim Crow era and in response to the civil rights movement. Some argue that this discussion is an opportunity to rethink a simplified historical narrative constructed to enforce white supremacy and to instead acknowledge the coexistence of pluralistic American experiences.38 Contemporaneous with the removal of Confederate statues initiated that fall, the “public art and history project” Monument Lab exhibited twenty monuments designed by international artists alongside collaborative “labs” intended to stimulate creative discussion and citizen engagement throughout ten historic Philadelphia city sites.39 This ongoing project aims to “understand the ways we live together with our histories, our ideas for uplift, and our urgencies,” and to “explore…multiple forms of historical knowledge.”40 The exhibited monuments addressed the underrepresentation of immigrants, refugees, women, and people of color in existing markers, as well as the erasure of indigenous people to whom the land of Philadelphia originally belonged, among other diverse experiences of American history.

In this paper, I will analyze Monument Lab according to the understanding that memorials and monuments formally establish a community’s evaluation of the meaning of


historical events. Drawing on James E. Young’s theorization of “counter-memorials” and “counter-monuments,” I will examine monuments proposed by artists and citizens associated with the project for the ways that they complicate and diversify spatial experiences of Philadelphia in conversation with existing structures. I will argue that the five-year process through which these monuments were chosen, exhibited, and received could be conceptualized as a form of counter-memorialization. As an ongoing, participatory project, Monument Lab recognizes the durational effects of complex and interlocking events, validating the coexistence of contradictions inherent in the lived experiences of contemporary society and the varying ways people are affected by living histories. Thus, I argue for the recognition of collaborative process as a more powerful form of counter-monumentalization than the creation of alternative structures. This approach better reflects the unfixed impact of historical events, which affect people differently according to a “demographic distribution of precarity” and the network of agencies through which their meaning is continually generated.41

Memorials and monuments often serve to materialize constructed narratives of past events and their meaning to collected identities. According to James E. Young, their form has evolved in conversation with the popular perception of international crises, and they always “reflect both [their] sociohistorical and…aesthetic context.”42 As globalization and weapon developments have amplified the devastation wrought from violent conflicts, memorials and monuments have come more frequently to express a critical rather than celebratory stance. This can be seen in the shift from “the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of the late nineteenth century celebrating nationalist ideals and triumphs” to the dramatically reconceptualized designs

---


42 Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 93.
that followed World War I and the Holocaust. Young argues that this is particularly true in Germany, where artists’ attempts to come to terms with the place of the Holocaust in their national identity have resulted in some of the most thoughtful approaches to memorialization.\textsuperscript{43} The Berlin Denkmal (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe), for example, was designed as an undulating, potentially disorienting “Field of Stelae” through which visitors walk, immersing them in the collected vastness of individual victims.\textsuperscript{44} (Figure 1.1) Although in the United States monuments and memorials have proven to be less consistently experimental, Maya Lin’s 1981 design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial unflinchingly addresses a widely-controversial American conflict, both drawing on earlier European forms and influencing German memorials that followed.\textsuperscript{45} (Figure 1.2) In the last decade, Americans have continued to interrogate the role of monuments and memorials in contemporary society, particularly in response to the number of Confederate symbols that have been erected throughout the country.

Attention to the hundreds of American monuments, memorials, and plaques honoring the Confederacy grew in 2015 following a shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina by a white supremacist who also photographed himself with the Confederate flag. After a month of protests, the symbol was removed from the state capitol, but the debate over the suitability of state-sponsored Confederate imagery continued. Two years later, in August 2017, a white nationalist rally was organized in Charlottesville, Virginia to oppose the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, suggesting to many that the symbolism had become increasingly dangerous as rallying points for white supremacist violence.

\textsuperscript{43} Young.

\textsuperscript{44} James Edward Young, \textit{The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between}, Public History in Historical Perspective (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

\textsuperscript{45} Young.
Although some of these monuments were erected immediately following the Civil War, most were commissioned “long after…during periods of white backlash against civil rights in the Reconstruction period or during the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement.” This includes, for example, the Confederate Memorial Carving depicting Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson in Georgia, which was designed in 1912 and completed in 1972, as well as an obelisk funded by the Southern heritage group United Daughters of the Confederacy that was installed in Arlington National Cemetery in 1912. (Figures 1.3-1.4) There are over seven hundred Confederate monuments throughout the United States, many in the South, but also including locations in Washington, California, New York, and Washington, D.C. They reflect a twentieth-century romanticized reconstruction of the Civil War as a “Lost Cause” to whom enslaved people were “faithful.” The United Daughters of the Confederacy have played an important role in this retelling, funding many of the monuments many Americans increasingly oppose. In 1905, to reclaim control of the historical narrative after a monument was proposed honoring an 1859 slave rebellion, the Daughters introduced a monument dedicated to Heyward Shepherd, an enslaved man who was killed in the conflict. (Figure 1.5) In the design, Shepherd was described as a “faithful slave” and the Daughters stated their intention to “counter the memory created by Northerners about the South and the institution of slavery.” Upon its completion in 1930, the monument was dedicated in a ceremony decorated with Confederate


47 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “What This Cruel War Was Over,” The Atlantic, June 22, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/what-this-cruel-war-was-over/396482/.

48 Paul A. Shackel, “Heyward Shepherd: The Faithful Slave Memorial,” Historical Archaeology 37 (2003), 139.
regalia and dominated by racist rhetoric.\textsuperscript{49} Despite the common defense that Confederate monuments honor “Southern heritage” in their formalization of a belatedly and falsely constructed narrative of the past, they assert a singularized history told from the perspective of an empowered minority. As Young argues, monuments and memorials have “long sought to provide a naturalizing locus for memory, in which a state’s triumphs and martyrs, its ideals and founding myths are cast as naturally true as the landscape.”\textsuperscript{50} Many who call for the removal of these Confederate symbols cite their affective impact in a monumental landscape that enforces white supremacy, speaking to the continuing role monuments play in constructing exclusionary narratives.

It is within this context that Monument Lab was created in Philadelphia, which has an extensive number of historic landmarks, including sculptures, monuments, and memorials. The project was originally conceived in 2012 and in 2015 grew into a larger collaborative project, as nationwide Americans increasingly challenged the country’s monumental narrative. In this “Discovery Phase,” citizens were commissioned to propose monuments at City Hall addressing the question “What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?”\textsuperscript{51} They were asked for the best location for their designs to express “what the city means to them…and how they are a part of [its] ongoing history and memory,” enabling community members to express their diverse historical knowledge.\textsuperscript{52} The goal, according to Monument Lab, was “not to choose the best proposal or only select one,” but “to critically organize and reflect on the

\textsuperscript{49} Shackel, 140-141.

\textsuperscript{50} Young, At Memory’s Edge, 94.

\textsuperscript{51} “About.”

collective knowledge produced through this creative research project.”  

Over four hundred proposals were submitted, then archived and made digitally accessible through OpenDataPhilly, a “collection of municipal and cultural datasets available for the public to use and interpret in order to improve civic life.”  

(Figure 1.6) Two years later, Monument Lab staged a city-wide exhibition of twenty temporary monument proposals designed by international artists and curated by a team led by historian Paul M. Farber and artist Ken Lum. They were exhibited from September to November 2017, immediately following the white supremacist rally that led to removals of Confederate monuments nationwide, actively providing citizens with the opportunity to participate in reshaping American historical narratives. The artist-designed monuments were installed in “ten sites in Philadelphia’s…public squares and neighborhood parks,” often located next to existing statues, and were accompanied by a lab “staffed by youth researchers, artists, and community members” in each site to cultivate collaborative engagement with the public.  

(Figure 1.7) In each location, people continued to be invited to submit their own proposals for monuments to address the histories that they consider meaningful and missing. As occurred with proposals received at City Hall in 2015, the designs were immediately scanned, transcribed, and entered into OpenDataPhilly as “civic data” and made viewable in an interactive digital map of the city.  

(Figure 1.8) They are now accessible through the website, in “the permanent collection at a local

---

53 “Discovery Phase Research.”


55 “Research.”

56 “Discovery Phase Research.”
library,” and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. According to Monument Lab’s curatorial team,

As we experience this moment of intensity and uncertainty around public monuments – especially those that symbolize the enduring legacies of racial injustice and social inequality – we are reminded that we must find new, critical ways to reflect on the monuments we have inherited and imagine future monuments we have yet to build.

Although the exhibition closed in November 2017, Monument Lab intends next to present the citizens’ proposals in a “final report to the city” in 2018, persistent in their desire to collectively rethink the role of monuments in both a localized and national way in contemporary society, and the narrative they present about our shared histories.

The monuments designed by citizens and artists express a firmly pluralistic narrative of American historical experiences and identity. The works exhibited throughout the city stand as testimonies to immigration, as in Tania Bruguera’s Monuments to New Immigrants, the sustaining importance of community gardening in David Hartt’s for everyone a garden VIII, and the contributions of African American veterans in Jamel Shabazz’s Love is the Message. (Figures 1.9-1.11) In the proposals submitted at the ten labs throughout the city, people ranging in age from three to seventy-six proposed gardens and spaces for emotional uplift and monuments dedicated to marginalized communities. These proposals and the designs temporally installed throughout the city can be described as what James E. Young has called “counter-monuments” or “counter-memorials:” “spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument,”

57 “Research.”
58 “About.”
59 “Research.”
often through the rejection of “traditional forms and reasons for public memorial art.” Young traces the development of the counter-memorial, as in the Berlin *Denkmal* or Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as emergent from a critical engagement with a suspicion of state-glorifying monumentalization in the twentieth century that cultivated a “deep distrust of monumental forms,” especially after the Holocaust.

Counter-monuments and counter-memorials often resist the “demagogical rigidity and certainty of history” espoused in many traditional landmarks, based on a sense that in formalizing historical events as their complexity recedes in public memory, they “reduce…historical understanding as much as they generate it.” Young argues that many counter-memorial artists believe that monuments and memorials “[supplant] a community’s memory-work with its own material form,” thus replacing or making unnecessary critical, open-ended discussion about the ever-evolving meaning of past occurrences. This has been the strategy of the twentieth-century installations of Confederate monuments that enforce a “Lost Cause” narrative obscuring the trauma of the Civil War and the ways it continues to affect people in the present. In an examination of the role of power in the production of “silences” in historical narratives, the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that historicity is shaped continually throughout time as subjectivities are expressed in “the making of sources,” “the making of archives,” “the making of narratives,” “and “at the moment of retrospective significance.”

60 Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 96.

61 Young, 96.

62 Young, 94.

63 Young, 94.

According to Trouillot, this can be seen in the simplification of the Conquest of the Americas to a single date, narrative of “Discovery,” and mythification of Columbus as a hero figure when revisited in a period of nineteenth-century nationalism. Thus, he argues that the “isolation of a single moment creates a historical ‘fact’” through which historical complexity “[loses] its processual character.”

It is this “processual character” that I hope to emphasize in Monument Lab, which remains an ongoing and still uncompleted project based on community discussion as a form of counter-monumentalization. This is reflective of James E. Young’s use of the phrase “stages of memory” to describe the memorialization of terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. Although an official memorial was designed and dedicated in 2011, Young argues that “for the victims’ families,” responders, and others directly affected, “there seemed to be almost no interval at all between the attacks and the city’s memory of them,” which is experienced “in the long durée as a continuous…skein of simultaneous rebuilding and remembering.” The dedication of the memorial was “just the latest, but not the last of many stages of memory at Ground Zero.” Spontaneous, immediate candlelight vigils throughout New York City, “mountainous piles of flowers and wreaths,” and “flyers of ‘missing’ loved ones” were personal forms of memorialization reflecting the various ways that people were and continue to be affected by this large-scale tragedy. (Figure 1.12) Thus, Young argues that memorialization

65 Trouillot.
66 Young, The Stages of Memory, 20.
67 Young.
68 Young, 28.
69 Young.
must always be “regarded as a process, a continuum of stages,” thereby recognizing its personal and communal preservation as living memory and generational trauma, and “[accommodating] every new generation’s reasons for coming to it” and their affective contributions. This is reflected in the intentions of many counter-memorial artists responding to the Holocaust, who resisted the imposition of a fixed meaning that could become distorted or seen as redemptive. In a reflection of the ways that historicity is continually shaped through the expression of diverse agencies as Trouillot discusses, counter-memorials emphasize “continual engagement with…ongoing meaning,” preserving rather than obscuring the complexity of historical events and “the ways the significance in all art evolves over time.”

Monument Lab, as a counter-monument project, emphasizes this processual character, drawing extensively from and encouraging dialogue between diverse members of the community and international artists, all of whom speak to the nature of living memory. The significance of past events may be materialized in monuments and spontaneous memorials, but it also imbues places with significance and persists, embodied, in subjective memories. Young, for example, describes the response of a friend who was physically injured in the September 11 terrorist attack on New York City to the dedication of the National Memorial. Though respectful, he had not visited it because he did not “need a memorial to remember what happened,” as it is a “trauma that” he lives with and “cannot forget.” Additionally, as anthropologist Keith Basso has argued, memories and historical knowledge are often linked substantially to place and the lived environment through which people move in their daily experiences. Places, unmarked by

70 Young, 28-30.

71 Young, At Memory’s Edge.

72 Young, The Stages of Memory.
memorials, serve as “durable symbols of distant events and indispensable aids for remembering and imagining them.” This occurs through a process Basso calls “place-making,” by which the landscape is imbued with social meaning and simultaneously shapes the identity and feelings of people who engage with it. The environment has affective influence on the ways that people remember and give meaning to the past. The relationship between space and memory was explored in another memorial to Holocaust victims. Since 2009, German artist Gunter Demnig has been installing brass commemorative Stolpersteine, which mean “stumbling blocks or stones,” throughout Germany and other countries in Europe. (Figure 1.13) Each block is inscribed with the name of one person who was a victim of the Holocaust and the building where they lived, and can be commissioned by citizens. The Stolpersteine are slightly raised to complicate movement through the city and thus subtly manifest the memory of collected individual victims in everyday space.

Monuments have historically used experiences of space, often pressuring “viewers into submission” through their immense size. In contrast, counter-monuments such as the Stolpersteine often explicitly reject this imposing spatial manipulation and historical rigidity. In the Vietnam War Memorial, for example, Maya Lin conceived of a negative space carved into the earth. Whereas traditional monuments may be “fixed and static,” Lin aimed for a “memorial…defined by our movement through its space, memory by means of perambulation”

---


74 Basso.


76 Young, *At Memory’s Edge.*
as an individual within shared, collective space. Rather than rigidity, she envisioned a “moving composition” activated by the presence of viewers who walk through it, physically engaging with the growing number of American deaths in the Vietnam War. Her refusal of an imposing traditional design has been developed further in German counter-memorials, as in the Berlin Denkmal’s “Field of Stelae” which visitors move through and inhabit. The various sizes of the Stelae are of human stature rather than imposing heights, collectively representing the number of individual victims, so that their deaths are “multiplied and not merely unified,” and the space is activated by the movement of visitors whose presence and experience contribute to its meaning.

Similarly, many of the monuments proposed by artists associated with Monument Lab challenge the spatial strategies of traditional memorials. In The Battle is Joined, for example, Karyn Olivier altered the presence of the twenty-foot tall Battle of Germantown Memorial that was dedicated in 1903 to memorialize a Revolutionary War battle in 1777. The original monument is a rectangular concrete stelae positioned on a platform and frames a bronze map of the battle site that identifies the troops’ positions. Olivier covered all sides of the monument with an acrylic mirror, completely obscuring it, and it reflects the surrounding trees and city landscape. Thus, The Battle is Joined also reflects people who view it, accentuating their individual and collected presence in the environment. Olivier has said that her intention was to “allow the sculpture to feel expansive, accessible, and less intimidating than its colossal stature and material weightiness currently permit,” thereby changing citizens’

---

77 Young, The Stages of Memory.
78 Young.
79 Young.
relationship with it and its influence on them.\textsuperscript{80} In photographs of the installation, the mirrored surface of the large monument seems to diffuse its otherwise imposing stature, and the undulating reflection of the surrounding trees amidst its silvery metallic surface imbues it with a sense of light and buoyancy. Furthermore, by visually reflecting the presence of viewers in relation to the work with mirrors, she hoped to encourage the sense that the monument is “living” and affected by their agencies, enabling people to “see and imagine our critical role in the ever-evolving American story,” thus bringing Philadelphians into a more palpable relationship with its presence and with the space around them.\textsuperscript{81}

In another monument designed for Monument Lab, Sharon Hayes addressed the absence of representations of women throughout Philadelphia, as only Joan of Arc and the Quaker Mary Dyer are monumentalized. In \textit{If They Should Ask}, Hayes installed a collection of nine concrete pillars “together in a singular assemblage” in Rittenhouse Square.\textsuperscript{82} (Figure 1.18) Each is a replication of another monument existent in the city reduced to half of their original size, and all are austere, grey, and traditional in their form, which is consistently that of an obelisk atop a square platform. The assembled pillars are intended to represent the number of women who have contributed to the history of the city by reframing the narrative the original statues are designed to tell. To create the work, Hayes collaborated with a “group of intergenerational, intersectional, and civically-engaged women” to create a list of women who have and continue to shape the city.\textsuperscript{83} Although the monument was removed at the end of the three-month exhibition,


\textsuperscript{81} “Karyn Olivier.”


\textsuperscript{83} “Sharon Hayes.”
the list is available online and is continuously updated. As a counter-monument, *If They Should Ask* deconstructs the imposing stature of traditional monuments and clusters them as collectivized individuals and, through the ongoing collection of women who have contributed to the city’s history, enables people to continue to shape its meaning.

Additionally, all the designs exhibited by Monument Lab engaged physically with the monumental landscape of Philadelphia, thereby complicating singularized notions of American historical narratives. Each of the twenty monuments designed by artists and their accompanying labs were installed in ten historic sites throughout Philadelphia. Sharon Hayes’ *If They Should Ask*, for example, was installed in Rittenhouse Square, which was named for the eighteenth-century American scientist and treasurer David Rittenhouse, alongside Alexander Rosenberg’s *The Built/Unbuilt Square*, which makes localized photographs of the past available through city viewfinders. (Figure 1.19-1.20) The monuments were also placed in conversation with preexisting markers, such as, in Rittenhouse Square, the nineteenth-century sculpture *Lion Crushing a Serpent* by Antoine Louis Barye and a memorial to the surgeon James William White. (Figures 1.21-1.22) Karyn Oliver’s *The Battle Is Joined* (Figure 1.17) was installed in Vernon Park, which was named for the Vernon House and established in 1892, near Jamel Shabazz’s *Love is the Message*, an ongoing, participatory work that “pays tribute to African American veterans and their families.”84 (Figure 1.11)

By physically placing new and preexisting monuments in conjunction with one another, Monument Lab complicated embodied experiences of a city populated with exclusivist representations of American historical narratives. A similar strategy, undertaken in the recent past, was a source of controversy. In 2010, the National Parks Service built the exhibit *The

---

President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation at National Historical Park, which presents a narrative of the foundation of the United States through sites like the Liberty Bell and a monument to George Washington. (Figure 1.23) The President’s House was, until recently, the only federally-funded site intended to recognize the American legacy of slavery but its complication of spatial experiences of the Park was an obstacle to its completion. It was built upon the foundation of the slaves’ quarters of the house in which George Washington and John Adams lived from 1790 to 1800 and complemented by looping biographical reenactments of the people who lived there. (Figure 1.24) Direct acknowledgement of their presence was resisted by park administrators such as superintendent Martha Aikens who claimed that the location of the memorial close to the Liberty Bell would create a “dissonance between the two features potentially causing confusion for the visitors.” After a 2002 Congressional amendment forced the Park Service to create the memorial exhibit, they continued to describe the site as the “servants’ quarters,” avoiding any direct recognition of the role of institutionalized slavery in the founding American narrative. It was not until 2004 that the Park Service agreed to do so in a plaque dedicating the site “to millions of men, women and children who lived, worked and died as enslaved people in the United States,” stating that “they should never again be forgotten.” (Figure 1.25) Monument Lab, in contrast, states their intention to monumentalize “underrepresented histories” that “often [exist] in tension with officially acknowledged


87 Wofford, “The Memorial Where Slavery Is Real.”
narratives” and to address the ways that in Philadelphia, as in the United States, “many [diverse] histories coexist, only a few of which are called out as statues, plaques, and markers.”

The coexistence of contradicting, interlocking experiences of American culture and history is undeniable, albeit obscured through the singularized perspective of many existing monuments and memorials. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich argues that consideration of the American landscape, experiences, and the question of “whose land are we on,” inevitably cultivates “tensions between indigenous and diasporic perspectives that can’t and shouldn’t be easily…resolved.” In contrast, it should be recognized that our “sense of place” is generated through and “marked by multiple histories,” which the twentieth-century installation of Confederate monuments aims to erase. Additionally, everyday experiences of racism and other forms of oppression engender a sense of “history that can be sensuous or felt because it takes place in the material specificity of a location,” as people’s freedom of movement and expression is limited or controlled according to their social precarity. Thus, I believe that an exclusivist monumentalized landscape can contribute to the affective impact of structural oppression.

For example, the seven hundred American Confederate monuments that have been built to reassert power during the Jim Crow period or in response to the civil rights movement enforce a structural racism that is lived as an everyday reality for communities who are underrepresented in such a medium. When asked about the controversy regarding the nationwide removal of

---

88 “About.”

89 Cvetkovich, *Depression*.

90 Cvetkovich.

91 Cvetkovich.
Confederate monuments, historian Gregory Downs responded that “some of the memorials are so painful that their historical value is minimal compared to the pain they cause” and “it is hard to argue that communities should bear the burden of such pain for the edification of others.”

Similarly, art historian Nikki A. Greene argues that “we must consider how [this] blatant visual imagery of white supremacy…shapes our understanding of how we move around in a city’s landscape,” referencing “their looming intimidation presence in our national physical landscape.”

In this contemporary climate, Monument Lab is collaborating with the community of Philadelphia to change relationships to space and to the monumentalized narrative of American history, to recognize the coexistence of diverse experiences and forms of knowledge, and to reshape our relationship to the meaning of historical events. As people discuss the role of monuments in American society, especially those honoring the Confederacy, Monument Lab suggests an answer. Although each of the works designed by artists and citizens involved in the project could be considered a counter-monument, the project’s collective emphasis on continual discussion and refusal to privilege a singular narrative is itself a form of counter-monumentalization. Many of the memorials proposed by citizens of Philadelphia, alongside those designed by artists, express a sense of futurity and ever-evolving relationships to the past. In the proposal for “Connection,” for example, a twenty-year old citizen designed a solar-fueled installation that “[connects]” people as they gather around it, so that “no matter where, our

__________________________

92 “Tear Down the Confederate Monuments—But What Next?”

93 “Tear Down the Confederate Monuments—But What Next?”
contribution to society effects [sic] everything and everyone, we are the influence." (Figure 1.26)

---

Chapter 2: Agentic Exchange in Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]*

In examining the role of art in contemporary society and its political and affective capacity to “construct and express decentred collective experiences,” I turn next from counter-monumentalization to the employment of museum space.\(^95\) In South Africa in March 2015, students at the University of Cape Town organized the Rhodes Must Fall movement, calling upon the institution to remove a 1934 bronze statue of British imperialist and former Cape Colony prime minister Cecil John Rhodes and to address institutionalized racism in the university. The following year, South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape exhibited the installation *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]* (2016) at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, France. The work took as its point of departure questions like that of Monument Lab in Philadelphia by considering why statues still exist commemorating colonialism in South Africa twenty years after the end of apartheid, and how they affect people in the present or could motivate them to resistance. In this chapter, I will analyze Bopape’s *Untitled* according to scholarship theorizing the pedagogical history of museums and the ways that art can generate critical thought. Although Bopape intends to provoke a sensorial awareness of the emotional consequences of structural oppression through the work, she also recognizes that audiences may have agency in its reception. By interacting with the work in physical space, viewers enrich it with their affective contributions, rendering its meaning processual. Thus, I argue for a greater recognition of the audience’s agency in art experiences, which I interpret not as fixed, but as durational, reciprocal exchanges between diverse agencies.

\(^{95}\) Emerling and Preziosi, “Kunstgriff,” 7.
A theme throughout contemporary art scholarship is questions regarding the agency of artists in politically or socially focused artworks, as well as their ability to affect and shape viewers, to challenge naturalized ways of thinking, and to motivate people to act. One of the most well-known of such arguments was presented in Palais de Tokyo cofounder Nicolas Bourriaud’s 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics.* Here, Bourriaud describes the rise of what he calls “relational art,” defined as participatory artworks that generate “convivial” encounters and “micro-[utopic]” exchanges between groups of people. His primary example is Rirkrit Tiranvanija’s 1992 exhibition *Untitled (Free),* in which he prepared and served Thai food for museum visitors, emphasizing the relationships formed between the people as the form of the work itself. (Figure 2.1) In 2004, art historian Claire Bishop challenged Bourriaud’s theory and particularly the homogeneity of the “convivial” interactions that Bourriaud champions. She argued that Tiranvanija’s exhibition catered to an audience of “art dealers and like-minded art lovers,” rather than to a more diverse group of people whose differences could cultivate new perspectives. Bishop advocates, instead, for antagonistic exchanges in controlled sites of interaction that would sustain rather than alleviate feelings of difference or discomfort, thereby creating moments of “rupture” based on conflict and debate. This is echoed throughout contemporary art scholarship that is attuned to the possibility that experiential or participatory artworks could generate a sense of shock that would impress upon viewers new way of thinking.

---


98 Bishop.

99 Bishop, 67.
and motivate them to political awareness or action. I recognize that art experiences can unsettle established mindsets and generate new ways of thinking, as it is a topic I am exploring in this thesis. However, this discourse is overreliant on the singular authority of the artist, through which the audience is homogenized and their potentially diverse perspectives ignored. Additionally, scholars have demonstrated that this framework for conceptualizing the role of the artist is founded on falsely constructed notions about art and the artist’s social, political, and economic independence from dominant society.

Here, I draw in part on art historian Grant H. Kester, who traces the intellectual genealogy by which Bourriaud and Bishop came to their arguments. He asserts that both draw on a conceptual tradition emphasizing artistic autonomy and detachment from society. According to this perspective, artistic critique is enabled by their separation because otherwise “art is constantly in danger of being subsumed to the condition of consumer culture” and “this distance…requires that the artist retain complete control over the form and structure of the work.” Kester argues that this position is reliant on the assumption that art viewers are too immersed in mass culture and cannot “be trusted” to think critically. Thus, Kester continues, control over even participatory works must remain in the hands of the artist, who creates and then presents closed, completed projects or experiences that can be activated by audiences, who are ultimately restrained by the artist’s expectations. This viewpoint is central to conceptualizations of avant-garde art that Kester critiques as, “now occupying the margins of society…it exists at a critical remove, allowing the audience the distance necessary to reveal the


101 Kester, 32.

102 Kester, 33.
flaws and limitations of modern life and consciousness and to reveal those constraints to the viewer.”

Yet, as Julian Stallabrass demonstrates in Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art, the separation of contemporary art from society is a façade. Despite expectations of its criticality linked to its perceived “freedom” from mass culture, which “[allows] artists, like heroes…to endow work and life with their own meanings,” contemporary art is, in many ways, more deeply imbricated in the forces of imperialism and global capitalism than this discourse recognizes. The privileging of artistic autonomy and of the artist’s ability to critique society by controlling or “activating” art audiences raises questions about the agency of the people who are being addressed and seems reliant on assumptions of their homogenous anonymity and inability to contribute meaningfully to the experience itself. In contrast to theorizations of the artist’s critical separation from society, Jae Emerling and Donald Preziosi argue that artists “have become an industry,” placing the onus on the audience to reclaim its political and affective potential for creative discursive expression, as discussed in my introduction.

Additionally, the disproportionate empowering of the artist over the audience does not seem ideologically far removed from the employment of museums to enforce nationalist and colonialisit policies in the nineteenth century onward. As scholars have demonstrated, museums have been structurally founded on the manipulation and education of visitors in the gallery space. They developed alongside the transition from sovereign to governmental power in Europe and

103 Kester, 22.


105 Stallabrass, 3.

North America, the growth of disciplines like art history, anthropology, and biology, and teleological conceptualizations of time used to justify imperialism and homogenous nationalism.\textsuperscript{107} Within this schema, museums developed what sociologist Tony Bennett calls the “exhibitionary complex,” by which privileged populations of imperial nations were granted knowledge through engagement with the material culture of colonized peoples, which was displayed metonymically as fixed in time.\textsuperscript{108} Thus, museum viewers could “[see] themselves from the side of power,” as both the subjects and the objects of knowledge” and, “knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, [interiorized] its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and…self-regulation.”\textsuperscript{109} This was reliant on people’s participation in the public museum space, which motivated emphasis on wide accessibility. Additionally, Annie E. Coombes demonstrates in her discussion of England’s 1902 Education Act that developing discourse regarding the educative potential of museums in the early twentieth century revolved around “equal access” to citizens regardless of class to “elevate” their behavior, ethics, and intellect with the express aim of “furthering the objectives of the Empire.”\textsuperscript{110}

In opposition to conceptualizations of artists and museums as sovereignly educative or persuasive, I argue for a greater recognition of the audience’s agency and affective contributions,


\textsuperscript{108} Bennett, 59-88.

\textsuperscript{109} Bennett, 101.

envisioning art experiences less as fixed in meaning, but, rather, as durational, reciprocal exchanges between diverse agencies. In this I draw, in part, on Amelia Jones’s rejection of “rupture” as a descriptor for art experiences in favor of changeable “encounters.” While Jones does support Bishop’s criticism of Bourriaud’s emphasis on conviviality, she advocates for a more interrelational, reciprocal engagement between the artist, the audience, and the artwork, allowing for a recognition of the ways that the space itself and the context in which it is shown could affect its impact or interpretation. She describes this as an “encountering mode” that “stays in motion throughout successive presentations and displays of the work…throughout time for contemporaneous as well as subsequent viewers.” This emphasis on duration, which is favored also by Kester, enables the recognition of continued interpretations as works are archived and revisited throughout time. Such an approach acknowledges anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s assertion that historical narratives are dynamic, shaped continually throughout time as subjectivities are expressed through “the making of sources,” “archives,” “narratives,” and “at the moment of retrospective significance,” as discussed in my first chapter.

This processual reading of art can be applied to the immersive installations created by Dineo Seshee Bopape. In her work, Bopape aims to cultivate an experience that challenges the audience to think critically about historical and contemporary events. Yet, she also emphasizes the significance of context to interpretations of her installations, which makes space for their meaning to change according to time, place, and the unique contributions of people who engage with it. Bopape was born in 1981 in Polokwane, South Africa and spent the first ten years of her


112 Jones, 17.

life restricted by the policies of apartheid, which informs much of her work. She is particularly concerned with the continuing impact of the “architecture of apartheid” on the lives of indigenous South Africans who are, though a majority population, “still largely landless in [their] own home” due to settler colonialism, which has limited their land ownership to only twenty to thirty percent of the country.\textsuperscript{114} She often works in digital video, combining the medium with earthen sculptures in “intricate assemblage installations” that explore the material and emotional significance of land and experiences of place.\textsuperscript{115} For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my focus to the immersive exhibition \textit{Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]} (2016) at Palais de Tokyo. (Figure 2.2) The title is used interchangeably to refer to an exhibition of disparate multi-media objects, as well as a complex but singular experiential work that “explores the…subjective question of affects” through components “focused on the body engulfed by emotion in personal and in socio-political contexts.”\textsuperscript{116} It includes sculptures and three digital video screens installed in a light-filled space in conversation with pieces created by the artists Lachell Workman and Jabu Arnell.

\textit{Untitled} was installed in a basement-like gallery space with concrete floors and could be entered through a wide hallway that opened onto the large room, which was saturated with a rich red-orange light that colored the white walls. Upon entering, people would first walk past a video positioned on the left wall at approximate eye level, depicting musician and activist Nina


\textsuperscript{116} “Installation by Dineo Seshee Bopape on View at Palais de Tokyo.”
Simone’s performance of the song “Feelings” at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival. (Figure 2.4) Bopape identifies this performance as a starting point for her research for the installation.117 In the video, Simone sits in a black dress at a black piano in front of an illuminated panel background with the same red-orange color as the light filling the exhibition space. (Figure 2.4) While playing the piano, she sings, “tear drops rolling down my face / trying to forget my feelings of love” and then stops as if overwhelmed and says to herself, “God damn.” She then turns to the audience to say, “what a shame to have to write a song like that…. I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that!” (Figure 2.5) After pausing, she returns to the song, performing it passionately and facing the camera as she sings, “I wish I never lived this long / I hope this feeling never comes again.” (Figure 2.6) As she nears the end, Simone invokes the audience to sing along softly with her and then improvises, defiantly changing the lyrics to “you’ll always stay here in my heart, no matter what the words may say… / no matter what they compose or do / no matter what the drugs may do or songs may do or people may do or machines will do to you / I will always have my feelings” and “I know that is all there is at the base.” She thus reclaims the intensity and power of her emotions in contrast to the original lyrics, which repeat “feelings, for all my life I’ll feel it / I wish I’ve never met you girl; you’ll never come again.” The performance is impactful, and Bopape describes her reaction to seeing it: “I was so dumb, almost shocked…. She was so honest.”118 She states that the video


118 Forster.
“[reflects]…a state where one is saturated with feelings,” something Bopape materialized in the rich light of the installation space.\textsuperscript{119}

To the right of this video is a collection of buckets and vessels, as well as Jabu Arnell’s \textit{Discoball #9} (2016), a large, irregularly circular sculpture, hung from the ceiling and “composed of duct tape and packing tape encircling unadorned cardboard and foam.”\textsuperscript{120} (Figure 2.7) At the center of the room, a “burst of rubble,” of earthen cinder blocks, tumbles from a stage-like space, appearing as if to emerge from or to obscure a narrow slit of light where the back wall meets the ceiling.\textsuperscript{121} (Figure 2.8) The space was covered by a large, circular disc that was supported by one concrete pillar – the other had broken and fallen and lay alongside the bricks. Each of the cinder block bricks had two to six holes, which is a theme throughout Bopape’s oeuvre and can perhaps also be identified in the emptiness of the clustered vessels. According to the artist, holes reference gaps in “memory, time, and body” and “ideas about presences,” “absences,” “occupation,” and “displacement,” such as in the colonization of South Africa and the persistence of apartheid structures beyond its formal termination.\textsuperscript{122}

In front of the rubble, Bopape installed another bucket propped by one of the six-holed cinder blocks placed vertically on the floor. (Figure 2.9) Water dripped slowly and deliberately into this and all other vessels in the room and the sound of the water hitting the bucket was amplified by a microphone so it would permeate the space and was “manipulated to make [the

\textsuperscript{119} Forster.


\textsuperscript{121} Forster, “L’artiste sud-africaine Dineo Seshee Bopape.”

Along the opposite wall, she also installed two digital video screens placed face-up on the floor and held aloft by more bricks, displaying the film *killjoy@vincennes Paris, 2016*, to which I will return below. (Figure 2.10) To their right, opposite the video of Nina Simone, Bopape installed American artist Lachell Workman’s *Justice for _____*, which is a white t-shirt mounted on the wall, onto which a projector displayed a white placard with the title of the work in thick, black handwritten script. (Figure 2.11) The last component of the installation is a digital video recording in which Bopape reenacts an interview with Winnie Mandela discussing “the use of violence in the fight against the apartheid state.”

Collectively, each element was united in the gallery to create a multi-sensory, immersive experience intended to evoke an emotional reaction. Visitors were submerged in a space warm with red light and filled with the sounds of water dripping and steadily filling the buckets, enriched by Nina Simone’s impassioned rendition of “Feelings,” perhaps recreating the affective pressure of continued experiences of structural oppression in quotidian space. In this, Bopape draws both from her experiences of apartheid as a “structuring part of [the] everyday,” as a “banal thing” that manifested in “daily violence” and constant tension, as well as her frustration in the present that its vestiges are widely ignored. This unrelenting pressure seems to have motivated the Rhodes Must Fall movement, as well. It was organized in March 2015 after a student, who walked past the Cecil John Rhodes statue every day, became overwhelmed by its

---


125 Forster, “L’artiste sud-africaine Dineo Seshee Bopape.”
presence and the colonial legacy it represents and threw feces at it.\textsuperscript{126} (Figure 2.12) His actions were internationally condemned, but also incited collective rejection of the statue and the formation of the resistance movement. University of Cape Town graduate student and Rhodes Must Fall co-leader Kgotsi Chikane expressed that participants intend to challenge the university to acknowledge the statue as a “symbol of the institutionalization of racism.”\textsuperscript{127} The sculpture memorializes an ardent supporter of African colonization, who described white people as “the finest race of the world,” with whom it would be improved “the more of the world we inhabit.”\textsuperscript{128} Chikane asserts that daily acceptance of the statue’s presence speaks to the insidiousness and naturalization of racism at the university, which is reflected in its Eurocentric curriculum and the absence of black South African professors.\textsuperscript{129}

Bopape was propelled to create \textit{Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]} after following the movement and was particularly interested in its formation following the impassioned moment when the first student, wanting “the statue [to] feel ashamed the same way he feels ashamed,” became overwhelmed by its presence and defiantly rejected it.\textsuperscript{130} The phrase “of occult instability” in the installation’s title references the work of anticolonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who studied the psychological impact of imperialism on both colonizer and colonized


\textsuperscript{127} Boroughs.


\textsuperscript{129} Boroughs, “Why South African Students Say The Statue Of Rhodes Must Fall.”

\textsuperscript{130} Boroughs.
In case studies undertaken during the Algerian War of Independence against French occupation, Fanon identified in both French and Algerian people symptoms such as depression, anxiety, restlessness, and apathy which he traced to the violence of colonization and resistance. Similarly, Cvetkovich has theorized more loosely that “depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression,” could be traced to individualized experiences of political oppression or trauma in daily life, describing it as a “manifestation of forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction.” This is not unlike the notion of “slow death,” which affect theorist Lauren Berlant defines as “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence.” I am interested in considering how this could make people feel and could be expressed or resisted through art. In "Untitled," Bopape examines the decisive moment the banality of affective oppression is no longer acceptable and becomes, instead, the spark that lights the fire of collective movement. She has described her interest in “that moment of passion that sets everything around it alight. That saturation of pain, of no longer being able to endure it…when a ‘no’ reverberates” and “you refuse to comply.” This pivotal, emotional inundation resonates throughout "Untitled." In the video of Nina Simone, she begins to sing and then, overwhelmed by emotions the song has provoked,

131 Frantz Fanon, _The Wretched of the Earth_ (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
132 Cvetkovich, _Depression_.
stops to exclaim, “I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that!” Water dripping into buckets throughout the room is an audible, micro aggressive assault on the space, and yet was also manipulated to evoke the sound of a drum, a “call to action.” Slowly but deliberately, the water will fill the buckets and they will overflow. Rubble bursts from the center of the room, inspired by the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes sculptures and by Bopape’s sense that political structures may not always be as impermeable as they seem: “Sometimes, we touch [things] a little and they crumble.”

Like many of the artists discussed in theorizations of art’s productive power, Bopape has said that she often “hopes to ‘tickle’ something in the viewer, to plant a seed of memory, a tomorrow, a kind of inexpressible metaphysical encounter” that might inspire them to critical thought or action. In Untitled, it seems that she aimed to inspire, for some, an awareness of the emotional pressure induced by structural oppression, and perhaps, for all, the sense that moments of resistance can be seized. Yet, she also seems to recognize that each person present in the space contributes their own positionality and experiences and that, thus, the work cannot impress upon everyone the same experience. In autobiographical information, Bopape always situates herself temporally and spatially. For example, she writes,

If she were Ghanaian, her name would be Akosua/Akos for short. In the year of her birth, the Brixton riots took place; two people were injured when a bomb exploded in a Durban shopping centre. Bobby Sands died, MTV is launched, the Boeing 767 makes its first air flight, Umkhonto we Sizwe performs numerous underground assault operations against the apartheid state. There was an earthquake in China that killed maybe 50 people. Hosni Mubarak was elected president of Egypt, there was a coup d’etat in Ghana. Princess Diana of Britain married Charles. Bob Marley dies. Apartheid South Africa invaded Angola. AIDS

135 Nkosi, “Dineo Seshee Bopape.”

136 Forster, “L’artiste sud-africaine Dineo Seshee Bopape.”

is identified/created/named. Salman Rushdie releases *Midnight’s Children*. In the region of her birth: Her paternal grandmother died. Julius Malema is born. Millions of people cried. Millions of people laughed! The world’s population was apparently at around 4,529 billion.\(^{138}\)

These simultaneous and intersecting events, which vary in their direct relationship to her personal history, situate Bopape in a complex network of individual and collective agencies and memory. When I first read it, I was reminded of Adrienne Rich’s feminist text “Notes Toward a Politics of Location.”\(^{139}\) Writing in 1984, Rich argued against universalisms in feminism and activism and for a recognition of location and how that has constructs perspectives and assumptions. Within these unique particularities reside “differences among places, cultures, conditions,” and “movements” that complicate and contextualize widely variant experiences of the world.\(^{140}\) To apply this situating approach to *Untitled*, Nina Simone’s performance of “Feelings” was recorded in Switzerland at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival one month after the Soweto uprising began in South Africa, in which students organized in protest of the forced implementation of Afrikaans in schools and were fired upon by the police.\(^{141}\)

The affective consequences of such differences in positionality are expressed in the video *killjoy@vincennes Paris, 2016*, which was installed in the *Untitled* exhibition opposite the pile of rubble. It was recorded at Vincennes garden in Paris at the site of the 1907 colonial exhibition

---


\(^{140}\) Rich.

The video depicts the park in the present, with “pavilions of the colonial exhibition overrun by a swell of plant life” and monuments commemorating colonial French veterans. Here, indigenous people from locations occupied by French colonization were relocated to live in mock villages for the enjoyment of European visitors. The “zoo” presented these people as oversimplified and objectified representations of their cultures to assert “the place of each population in the world, while simultaneously establishing the supremacy of the West” and advocating for imperialist policies. Buildings that were constructed for the exposition have since been abandoned and left to rot, appearing to many as ruins, but Bopape describes her experience among these architectural relics as powerfully affective, palpably conjuring this horrific past in the present. In contrast, she felt that other, non-African people present appeared not to be affected by the space in the same way as they “[carried] on with their normal lives,” gathering for picnics, drawing lessons, and group exercises. This speaks to the ways that the past affects people differently in the present and


143 “UNTITLED (OF OCCULT INSTABILITY) [FEELINGS] · SAM Art Projects.”


145 “Interview Dineo Seshee Bopape - UNTITLED (OF OCCULT INSTABILITY) [FEELINGS].”

146 “Interview Dineo Seshee Bopape - UNTITLED (OF OCCULT INSTABILITY) [FEELINGS].”
challenges visions of homogenous group identities that could then be addressed or influenced by an artist with the exact same results.

An additional avenue through which to consider this difference is the body, conceptualized as individual and simultaneously situated within a network of large-scale contexts and external agencies. Rich invokes people to “begin with the material” and to “locate oneself in [one’s] body” in rejection of “abstraction” and universalisms. Bopape, too, is interested in the body, particularly after a visit to an herbal doctor who informed her that the physical ailments for which she sought treatment were linked to emotional stress. This led her to become “fascinated [with] how the body carries” memories that could manifest physically and are perhaps derived from embodied collective experiences. Emphasis on the body resists universalism by recognizing individuals as assemblages formed through the specificity of their own embodied experiences and by the impression of the shared social environment through which they move in everyday life. This is discussed fascinatingly by feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz, who uses a metaphor of the Mobius strip, with body on one side and culture and experience on the other, to describe subjectivity as constructed through the continual integrated exchange of environment, culture, history and nature.

The body is thus an important lens through which to analyze immersive artworks such as *Untitled*, which submerge people in ephemeral, site-specific experiences that are dependent entirely upon their context. Here, again, it is necessary to consider how different subjectivities, as

---


well as physical or emotional relationships with and proximity to other people present in the space, could influence the reception of the work. For example, in an interview with Bopape for ARTnews about sa__ke lerole, (sa lerole ke__) (2016), a sculptural installation of soil, gold leaf, sage, and other organic materials, Angela Brown described seeing the work “on a snowy day, so it gave [her] the feeling of having entered a different zone – like a desert or beach surrounded by snow.”150 (Figure 2.15) Although the artist could construct a space and influence visitors through it, its resonance would differ depending upon the locational complexity that each person contributes, and each experience is thus unique and personal. To Brown, Bopape responded, “That sounds wonderful. I wish to see it like that too,” and requested photographs of its installation in this setting so she could see it framed in this way.151 In Untitled, relational experiences of its assemblaged components are further complicated by the inclusion of two other artists’ works. Alongside her sculptures and videos, she installed sculptures by Caribbean artist Jabu Arnell and African-American artist Lachell Workman – something she became interested in doing after Arnell used her voice in one of his pieces. This new working process prompted her to consider her sculptures in conversation with theirs and inspired her appropriation of videos of Nina Simone and Winnie Mandela, through which they accumulated new associations. In many ways, Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings] is a generative exchange between the agency of things, place, and people.

Dineo Seshee Bopape expresses her own agency through the creation and display of her work, but also seems to recognize how people, location, and context contribute to its ever-

150 Brown, “Soil, Dust, Life.”

151 Brown.
evolving form, especially in successive displays. As an artist who experiments with site-specificity, Bopape can be considered in relation to a lineage of such practices that became especially popular in the 1960s and 1970s as a rejection of the institutionalization and commercialization of art and of artist autonomy. Renewed interest in art from this period has led to the re-presentation of many artworks originally conceived as “unrepeatable.” Curator Miwon Kwon has argued that this renders the “specificity of the site in terms of time and space…irrelevant,” relocating authority once again to the artist. As an example, she cites Mary Jane Jacob’s site-specific exhibition Places With a Past (1991) in Charleston, South Carolina which was formulated as a “dialogue between art and the socio-historical dimensions of place.” Kwon argues that, although the intention of the project was to address the affective influence that places have on people and on public art, the result glorified “the singularity and authenticity” of the artist, who “endows places with a ‘unique’ distinction,” ultimately promoting the site as a tourist destination. What seems to be missing throughout her discussion, however, is how people living in Charleston and viewing the works displayed throughout the city for the period of the exhibition might have contributed to or changed their intended meanings, perhaps depending on widely variant relationships with historical events, as is discussed in my first chapter. Such limiting orientation toward the place of the artist and the institution overlooks the possibility that experiences of art could be conversational, as their interpretation is affected by the conditions under which they are encountered. In light of the colonialist history of museums,


153 Kwon, 38.

154 Kwon, 53.

155 Kwon, 53.
to which nationalist pedagogy was central, and in recognition of the ways that the agencies expressed through Monument Lab powerfully challenged singularized historical narratives, I reject Kwon’s analysis of *Places with a Past*. By focusing her attention so exclusively on the place of the artist in the exhibition, she fails to recognize the potentially powerful contributions that viewers, with diverse and likely ongoing relationships to the city and to memories of the past, could have brought to the work itself.

Bopape opposes this limited analysis by considering her work “to be always in progress, matter to be reformed in response to different geographies and contexts.”156 For this reason, they have been called “site-responsive art installations.”157 Although, when creating new installations, she always considers the space in which they will be exhibited, as well as the land on which it sits and the socio-political context in which people will view them, she does re-locate them for different exhibitions. This can be seen in *sa___ke lero, (sa lero ke__)*, which was created for the Sao Paulo Biennial but was redisplayed in New York, Montreal, Ukraine, and Venice. In each instance, she used earth from the new location to construct it and considered how that altered the work, as “the soil” and “the space is different,” as are viewers who may have different “[relationships] to land and soil” and to Land art.158 She cites *The New York Earth Room* (1977), an “interior earth sculpture” by the artist Walter de Maria, as a possible reference point for interpretations of the piece, in addition to Mayan temples and indigenous relationships to

156 MacGilp, “Dineo Seshee Bopape.”

157 Whitley, “Today and Yesterday, Forever.”

158 Brown, “Soil, Dust, Life.”
materiality, as examples of the diverse cultural knowledge people may bring to their experiences of *sa___ke lerole*.\textsuperscript{159}

In *Untitled (of occult instability) [feelings]* Dineo Seshee Bopape expresses her own ideas about context, agency, and political resistance, drawing from her unique experiences and positionality, as she outlines in her biography. The work unfolds in a complex multi-sensory space that recreates a sense of “despair and anxiety” that may “[throb] along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from *just the way things are,*” but simultaneously aims to convey the tenuousness of this emotional state, to find the breaking point that leads to resistance.\textsuperscript{160} She also seems to recognize that interpretations of her work will always be framed additionally by a network of agencies – of people, place, and time. Affect has been described as a force or feeling that passes between agentic matter and is theorized as something that could “shift (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect).”\textsuperscript{161} In *Untitled*, Bopape cultivated an affective space for the transmission of feelings of tension, of overwhelming emotion, and of resistance, which thus moved between the materials and people in the space, perhaps transforming feelings into action. Yet considering it in this way also enables recognition of the transmission of affective contributions of people and materials in a multiplicitous exchange. Thus, the work employs affect to resist singular meaning, which is augmented by the presence of artworks by two other artists. In my final chapter, I will discuss the use of creative artistic and self-expression for the multilateral transmission of affect, potentially motivating people to act, in the short-lived digital platform Vine. The application was used primarily by young people of color to share information

\textsuperscript{159} Brown.

\textsuperscript{160} Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 14.

\textsuperscript{161} Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2.
about police brutality in the United States, which strengthened organized resistance, to reclaim and transform singularized social narratives about themselves, and to spread feelings of positivity to counter experiences of oppression felt in daily life.
Chapter 3: Vine as a Networked Alternative Archive

In both Monument Lab and the artwork of Dineo Seshee Bopape, fixed narratives are resisted through a durational affective exchange between a meshwork of creators, viewers, memory, place, and material in avenues for artistic expression that are validated within art historical study. In this final chapter, I continue to examine the expression of agency through art and its use in resistance to the affective consequences of structural oppression. In contemporary society, new avenues for encountering art and for creative expression are emerging. In their unique accessibility in comparison to more traditional art settings, digital mediums like social media further empower and diversify opportunities for the assertion of counter-narratives. Thus, I turn next to the digital media content exchanged through the social media platform Vine. From 2013 to the end of 2016, the application was used primarily by young people of color to generate an alternative visual archive of daily life that resisted anxiety caused by police brutality in the United States, documented organized resistance against it, and affirmed their diverse complexity. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff describes “the summer of 2014 to the inauguration of Donald Trump as president in 2017” as a “moment in which questions of appearance, race, law, justice, police, and the people were newly mobilized.”162 It is during this period of increased attention toward systemic injustice that Vine became a powerful alternative digital medium for networked creative expression and the cultivation of positive and resistant affects.

“Networked technology” like Vine is participatory by design, and its content is thus shaped continually by the expression of the diverse agencies of its users, who are often

simultaneously decontextualized from and informed by their physical locations, linking them in both localized and collective contexts. In an examination of the dominant modes of output for contemporary art, art historian Terry Smith argues that artists are increasingly turning to social media to challenge existing structures imposed by national governments, corporations, advertising, and other influential forces, and to explore “how [we might] live better” in the present. When recognized as an artistic medium, networked technology like Vine, reliant as it is on accessibility, co-present participation, and exchange, challenges exclusionary art historical assumptions that celebrate the authority of singular artists and notions of proper avenues for artistic output. This occurs in concert with ever-expanding notions of civil rights and social agency that enable more people to express their own visions of the future. It is thus an expression of the dynamism with which people respond to the continual change of society and the external forces that shape it.

Networked technology has become central to the dissemination of information about current events and an accessible space in which to explore their varying lived consequences. This is enabled in part by the immediacy of digital technology, which makes it particularly useful for addressing current events as they unfold in ways that can be more challenging in traditional art contexts. Both Smith and curators Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King, and Mami Kataoka examine the “intersections of contemporary art and networked technology,” finding in artistic expression an interest in “intimate micro-narratives” to question the forces that structure everyday life.

163 Mirzoeff, 29.
Thematically, then, artistic expression through digital media is often marked by a rejection of “grand, symbolic statements in favor of specific, small-scale, and modest” documentations of life that “seek to arrest the immediate” and “changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today.” This is similar to Ann Cvetkovich’s suggestion that we pay attention to the specificities of everyday life and how it is framed by large-scale contexts, in rejection of “master narratives” that obscure lived consequences and small, but important forms of resistance.

The destabilized nature of digital social media renders it inherently “affective in character,” as its form is reliant on the “emotions, minds, and bodies” of its participants and the relationships they form with each other through their interactions. Similarly, art historian Adair Rounthwaite argues that the form of participatory art is the “affective materiality generated” and exchanged unpredictably by the audience. I argue that creative expression through networked technology can be interpreted similarly, as content is shared among users and continually accumulates greater depth of meaning through a Mobius strip of audience and artistic agencies. Additionally, if affect is defined as the “forces or feelings that pass between agentic matter in environmental space,” and is potentially productive in that it could transform into action, I interpret social media as an emergent digital space for this to occur. Mirzoeff argues that, in the twenty-first century, political assembly has been augmented by social media platforms that connect people “in a set of interactive and intersensory relays, which create a

166 Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*

167 Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 3.

168 Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*


copresence between physical and digital spaces.”172 Thus, connections made in digital space can be transformed into physical organization and action. For example, the hashtag “BlackLivesMatter,” to which I will return below, was created in 2013 and aggregates all content related to the movement. It is used most effectively in Vine and Twitter and has increased awareness of social justice assemblies, thus enabling wider physical organization in resistance to oppression. Transnational solidarity has also been empowered through networked technology, demonstrated in the relationship established between Black Lives Matter and resistance to the occupation of Palestine. After people in occupied Palestine noticed that police were using similar “tools of counterinsurgency developed and tested on Palestinians” to suppress protests in Ferguson, Missouri many Palestinians “sent…messages of support” and shared “practical advice” to protestors on how to protect themselves.173 The affective relationships created through digital media have enabled networked, physical action and solidarity movements.

The affective unification of users is evident in the social media platform Vine, which became the most popular digital application for video sharing after its creation in 2013 until it was closed in January 2017. Simultaneous to its rise in popularity, the activist platform The Black Lives Matter Global Network was organized by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in 2013.174 The Network opposes “violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” and is described as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for

173 Mirzoeff, 46.
demise.” In “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” the poet Claudia Rankine writes,

There is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed simply for being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with guns, no living while black.

This reality is evidenced in the murders of unarmed black eighteen-year-old Michael Brown and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice by police. It is indisputable, as well, in the deaths of Philando Castile, who was shot in front of his four-year-old daughter following a traffic stop and Sandra Bland, who was arrested after being stopped for failing to signal a turn on an empty road and died in custody. In each of these cases, officers either were not charged or were acquitted in court. Mirzoeff argues that in American public space, “to be white is simply to be allowed to act,” whereas racialized people are “subjected to an extensive code of regulated appearance.”

Such enforced control can be seen in New York City’s stop-and-frisk policy, which authorizes officers to detain people for as little as “furtive [movements]” that they have described as “changing direction” and “walking in a certain way.” The policy has facilitated the authoritative expression of racist biases, resulting in proportionally higher arrests of black and

---


178 Mirzoeff, 111.
Latino people who between 2004 and 2012 “constituted 52 percent and 31 percent of those stopped respectively, while making up 23 percent and 29 percent of [the] city population.”  

The “daily strain” that Rankine describes, which is imposed upon communities of color in everyday space, is also explored in Dineo Seshee Bopape’s *Untitled (of occult instability)* [feelings] and is opposed through durational collective collaboration in the Monument Lab project. Similarly, Vine users resisted the affective impact of large-scale structural oppression through the ongoing, collective creative expression of their individualized agencies in digital, visual media form. Although the application is most widely-known for the work produced by a small group of high-profile white users who received the most funding, most of its users identified as people of color.  

From 2013 until the end of 2016, this community of Vine creators recorded and shared short, intimate, and often humorous videos that simultaneously addressed their social and political contexts and countered such narratives through the documented specificities of their daily lives. When assembled, Vine video coalesced into an alternative visual archive of life that challenged the surveillance and criminalization of racialized communities, simultaneously uniting diverse people of color in networked solidarity.  

Recognition of Vine’s significance as a contemporary vernacular medium for creative expression requires flexibility in analyzing the ways that people form communities and assert their agency through visual culture when faced with imposed precarity, by which dominant modes of expression may be restricted or universalized. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau examines the ways that people “commonly assumed to be passive and guided by

179 Mirzoeff, 111.

established rules” subvert disciplining orders through the use of the resources to which they have access.\(^ {181}\) As an example, he references the resistance of indigenous peoples to the imposition of Spanish colonial rule through the creative and flexible use of new artistic forms to assert or communicate their perspectives. These practices can be contextualized within a lineage of creative expression as a form of resistance and cultural transformation by communities facing imposed precarity. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith cites creativity as a decolonizing form of research that counters the colonialist extraction of knowledge and material culture from indigenous communities.\(^ {182}\) Similarly, Black Lives Matter claims the centrality of art and creativity to their movement for its ability to reframe or challenge imposed narratives, shifts that could generate visionary action.\(^ {183}\)

Thus, I believe it is important to be attuned to the myriad ways that communities express themselves creatively and artistically in non-traditional contexts. Although many scholars have argued as such, I am personally influenced by art historian Carolyn Dean’s powerful rejection of rigid definitions of art through which the cultural significance of diverse forms of material culture could be obscured.\(^ {184}\) Recognition of the varying and often subversive ways that people in colonial Latin America expressed their cultural knowledge and identities divergent from that of the dominant order has led many scholars to challenge Eurocentric definitions of art and to contextualize the significance of visual culture on the terms of the people who made and used


\(^{182}\) Smith, \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies}.

\(^{183}\) “About.”

Similarly, many of the people who lamented the loss of Vine after its closure described it as an artistic medium. Recognized as such by people who used it, it seems unproductive to reject it according to limitations imposed by art history, especially considering ways that people are adapting to the artistic possibilities enabled by the emergence of networked technology.

This perspective is also important for the analysis of black artistic production in the United States, which is one of many complex lenses through which I believe Vine can be contextualized and discussed. African American studies scholar Celeste-Marie Bernier argues that historically, black artists are often united by “experimentation with form and content in search for an alternative visual language” through which to counter imposed narratives. Additionally, for many, “art continues to act as a site of subversion and resistance as [people] develop new strategies to counter popular stereotyping within mainstream white 


While some artists participate in dominant structures for artistic production, many others “turn their [backs] on the traditional gallery space” to experiment with “Internet sites, street installations, and performances that are not controlled by white patronage and funding.” For the four years that it existed, Vine was transformed into a digital artistic space wherein young creatives, the majority of whom identified as black (followed by Latino) collectively and visually asserted their complexity and autonomy in opposition to the affective pressure of daily micro- and macro-aggressions.

Vine enabled people to easily create and share six-second videos that were often united thematically by the documentation of ordinary moments of humor, whether positive, observational, or subversive. To record the videos, users held a finger on the screen of their smartphone, and recording would stop if the finger was lifted. This could be done as many times as desired within the cumulative time limit, producing choppily joined narratives that then looped when viewed in the application. Vine’s mechanics enabled people to experiment with practical effects and resulted in a diverse catalog of videos that included short snippets of musical performances, clips of mainstream entertainment and politics with user commentary, and personal testimonies. Developers envisioned the platform as “a way to help capture casual moments in their lives and share them with their friends,” but the resulting breadth of content and the development of a unique, shared form of humor can be attributed to its users. Co-founder Dom Hoffman has described his surprise at the unexpected community that began to take shape in the earliest days of the application’s originally limited release, stating that “even

---

188 Bernier, 5.
189 Bernier.
with that small group we began to see [experimentation] early on” and “almost immediately it became clear that Vine’s culture was going to shift toward creativity.” Thus, although Vine was created as a controlled digital space with expectations for its use, its young videographers quickly took control of it, cultivating a unique visual lexicon by which seconds-long clips of existing Vines were combined with new videos to continually generate deeper contexts. This practice was amplified by the application’s initial insularity, as it was accessible only by smartphone until 2014, leading to greater popularity among younger people.

Vine creators often responded to or parodied popular original videos in short-term, site-wide trends that were only fully understandable with knowledge of the lineage to which each referred. One of the most popular examples is the video “why you lying” by Nicholas Fraser, which originated from a casual moment of creative experimentation. While listening to the 1997 song “Too Close” by R&B group Next, Fraser impulsively subverted the lyrics from “baby, when we’re grinding / I get so excited” to “why the fuck you lying? / why you always lying?” and envisioned a scenario to which the new song would be applicable. He developed an idea for the Vine based on the original song’s music video, in which the members of Next perform surrounded by dancers in a variety of elaborately-lit rooms. (Figure 3.1) In the Vine, Fraser dances in his backyard to his new rendition, which was added in a recorded voiceover, while wearing an unbuttoned shirt and loose pants in imitation of the group’s 1990s fashion. In the first sequence, two seconds long, Fraser dances with one foot absurdly propped on a toilet leftover

191 Newton.


from a bathroom renovation. (Figure 3.2) The frame then changes to show him briefly crouched and gesticulating as the song continues, in imitation of the group’s choreography. (Figure 3.3) In the video’s last seconds, Fraser stands with his back to the house and faces the camera as he makes what seems to be a knowing expression. (Figure 3.4) The Vine was subtitled “when she say she got a cute friend for you” and, in it, he seems to challenge an undepicted subject of suspicion. The video’s mundane setting, in combination with its imitation of the popular music video and intentional deviation from the song’s original lyrics, contributes to its humor.

Fraser’s video became enormously popular within the Vine community, who then appropriated and recontextualized its visual content in their own works. Most people isolated the last seconds in which Fraser looks at the camera knowingly, attaching it disjointedly to a wide variety of contexts, and thereby adding increasing depth to its contextualized meaning. In one example, one member of the creative Internet duo MexicanGueys, who make short humorous videos about their experiences of Mexican American culture, replicated the original Vine but sang Fraser’s lyrics in Spanish. The video begins with an isolated clip of Donald Trump saying, “Latinos love Trump” while campaigning during the 2016 presidential election. (Figure 3.5) This sequence was then followed by a shot of the video’s subject singing the words “por que estas mintiendo / siempre estas mintiendo” as he imitates each frame of “why you lying,” first crouched and gesticulating as Fraser does in the first portion of his video, and then standing with his back to a house wall as he faces the camera and makes a similar discerning expression. (Figures 3.6-3.7) In this new Vine, the user thus references the humor of Fraser’s original video and simultaneously recontextualizes its intent to challenge Trump’s numerous racist statements about Latino people and damaging immigration policies. Taken out of context, Vine videos like these could seem incomprehensible, reliant as they were on viewers’ assumed knowledge of the original videos.
and the community’s referential practices, which was amplified by their length. At only six seconds long, Vines were too short to provide context for their jokes and, unlike other social media platforms, opportunities for textual communication were limited, requiring users to converse solely through densely combined visuals and audio. This freed users, who were primarily young people of color, from the need to make their content accessible to white audiences, as is often the case in mainstream media and an expectation that “restricts non-white creatives to measuring their work against a rubric of ‘universality.’”  

Vine thus became an affectively safe digital space for the exchange of creative and often self-referential videos. The feeling of solidarity cultivated in the community encouraged its use as a medium through which to address racism and other forms of structural oppression that are perhaps more difficult to discuss in dominant avenues of expression. For example, Vine was instrumental to the organization of Black Lives Matter and assembly in protest to police brutality from 2014 to the end of 2016. For two weeks in the summer of 2014, citizens of Ferguson, Missouri marched in protest after the murder of Michael Brown by a white police officer. As people gathered immediately following the shooting, former St. Louis alderman Antonio French witnessed the growing assembly and began to record it through Vine due to its quick accessibility. French documented the city’s response in a series of Vine videos that he later compiled and released in the 48-minute documentary #FERGUSON. One of his earliest videos

---


depicts people gathering behind police tape opposite a line of officers and the body of Michael Brown, who was left on the pavement for almost four hours. (Figure 3.8) Linked together in the documentary, the Vines portray the organization of nonviolent protest in the face of increasing militarization as people shared the news and, in the following days, marched shouting “hands up, don’t shoot,” as well as police attempts to suppress their resistance with dogs and the deployment of tear gas. (Figure 3.9-3.11) The application was used again by activist and Black Lives Matter organizer DeRay McKesson to record protests following the murder of Alton Sterling by police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.197 (Figure 3.12) Both McKesson and French have described the centrality of Vine to the documentation and dissemination of evidence of police brutality and nationwide resistance, which “helped the story to spread and garner the attention of the national media.”198

Collectively, all Vines were viewable through the application in a “feed,” a digital compilation of the videos that presented them in vertical succession. From 2014 to the end of 2016, as people engaged in collective resistance to violently enforced daily restrictions of movement, Vine videographers generated an alternative archive of contemporaneous events and experiences. Thus, when the digital space was accessed, viewers could scroll through scenes of political protest juxtaposed consecutively with humorous videos documenting collective experiences and subversive jokes about quotidian micro-aggressions. The feed engendered a complex viewing experience in which densely referential comedy was contextualized within larger-scale political events. Additionally, each video looped infinitely, immediately restarting

197 Simon, “Activists Mourn the Loss of Vine App They Say Shined a Spotlight on Ferguson - CNN.”

after six seconds, making each video highly changeable when accessed. Vines that were comedic in their unpredictability in a first viewing could evoke more complexly layered interpretations as the jokes were understood better or resonated differently a second or third time. Furthermore, as seconds of videos were appropriated and recombined in application to different scenarios, their original meaning was destabilized. The videos thus presented a multitude of quick-moving, condensed audio-visual narratives that drew on a deep web of communal, user-generated contexts. Vine, as a creative, self-organized, and affective community within the space of networked technology, united people in a meshwork of continuously generated expressions of agency through unfixed meaning.

The complex coexistence of diverse, self-constructed audiovisual narratives resists oversimplified representations of communities of color in dominant American media. Visual culture and media studies scholar Nicole R. Fleetwood argues that black people in the United States have historically been represented through “iconicity,” by which “singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences,” obscuring the “complexities of black lived experiences and discourses of race.”¹⁹⁹ This is the case for many of the most well-known photographic documentations of the twentieth century civil rights movement, to which Black Lives Matter is linked in a continuum of “long histories of resistance” to oppression.²⁰⁰ Iconicity is particularly evident in the elevation of Martin Luther King, Jr. to sole representative of the movement, formalized in photographs of his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, through which the movement’s duration and King’s more critical political stances have been erased. In one of the

---


most well-known images of the event, taken by American photographer Bob Adelman, King is shown delivering the speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. (Figure 3.13) He stands at a podium with his arms outstretched toward an undepicted audience, flanked by a police officer and a gathering of mostly faceless people. The figural composition is framed by the massive columns of the Memorial. Susan Sontag cites this imagery as an example of the ways that collective memory is often formalized through popular photographs as “a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened.” Photographs that come to represent long-term past occurrences “encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger” the retrospective significance of interpretations and “feelings” through their “[commemoration of]…Important Historical Events.” In their iconicity, photographs of King delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech have become a deceptively simplified material pinpoint for collective memory about processual black resistance.

Such a reduction is particularly important in consideration of the ways that civil rights photographs such as Adelman’s were often framed and disseminated through dominant venues to appeal to white audiences, as art historian Martin A. Berger demonstrates in Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography. Consistently throughout the civil rights movement, white publications promoted images that were oriented toward assuaging white anxieties about race and resistance, often by depicting black subjects as victims with “limited

---


202 Sontag and Lebowitz, 85-86.

power,” which Berger argues restricted the scope “of reform from the start.”

Berger locates photographs of King delivering his speech at the March on Washington within a category of subject matter that portrayed black leaders and was popular with white viewers. Despite criticism from some black Americans present at the March that King’s words were too vaguely hopeful and “failed to articulate a concrete program for change,” it has come to represent the movement in a universalized historical narrative bolstered by the appeal of a “depiction of a patient King who would wait for social change brought about by well-meaning whites.”

This same imagery was later monumentalized in a thirty-foot granite statue erected on the National Mall in 2011 depicting King standing solemnly with his arms crossed. (Figure 3.14) He is rendered as though emerging from the solid block of material, imbuing the statue with a sense of weightiness and imposing permanence. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial is dedicated to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and inscribed with quotes from his “speeches, sermons, and writings.”

It asserts King as a singular figure to which the complexity of the civil rights movement can be solely attributed, diffusing its collectively revolutionary nature. American political activist and feminist scholar Angela Y. Davis argues that this simplified narrative can potentially be employed to dissuade people from mobilizing, as it obscures the importance of collectivity and perpetuates a myth that resistance is reliant on the leadership of a powerful, often male individual.

Despite the use of photography during the civil rights movement to cultivate oversimplified, dominant narratives, bell hooks argues that photography has historically been an

204 Berger, ix.

205 Berger, 31.


207 Davis, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle.
important form of creative expression and self-presentation for black communities. According to hooks, photography is “essential to any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art-making” and a powerful way to assert multiplicity. She argues that photography’s accessibility and potential richness as a creative medium enabled black people to reclaim control over the production of images of themselves, through which they composed an alternative visual archive of lived experiences. She emphasizes the centrality of “snapshot” photography in particular as an enjoyable and popular form of expression for black communities, and the multitude of apparently unmediated images produced through it were then displayed in private residences or in “black-owned and -operated gallery spaces” that were unrestricted by the expectations of white viewers. In contrast to universally-recognized photographs of monumental historical moments like King’s speech at the March on Washington, intimate snapshots of daily life asserted multiplicity in their sheer number and diversity of content. This was amplified by the ease with which they could be produced. Snapshot photography of black life thus challenged the circulation of dichotomously negative representations or oversimplified iconic imagery and, thus, as hooks writes, “announced our complexity” and “diversity of body, being, and expression.”

The traits of these snapshots – material and thematic abundance, the appearance of unmediated spontaneity, and resistance to universalism – are central to the work of American photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris, who assembled an “alternative visual index of black lived

---


209 hooks, 57.

210 hooks.

211 hooks.
experience” throughout his oeuvre. Harris was active in Pittsburgh from 1935 to 1975, photographing people for the Pittsburgh Courier, which was “one of the nation’s most influential black newspapers.” He produced thousands of multifaceted, often intimate images attuned to the “specificity of black life,” eighty thousand of which have since been archived by the Carnegie Museum of Art. Harris’ photographs are widely diverse in their subject matter and depict people candidly engaged in both social activism and leisure activities. For example, in one image taken between 1938 and 1945, a multiracial group of men and boys are shown playing a game of horseshoes in an alleyway behind a wooden house. (Figure 3.15) In the center of the image, a boy is caught throwing a horseshoe, and the gazes of the group are all focused on its trajectory. The composition is cropped so that a chain link fence to the right of the figures blurs as it disappears into the bottom right-hand corner. The framing of the photograph, in combination with the boy’s stilled movement, conjures an apparent spontaneity, which is replicated in many of Harris’ photographs. In *Bride throwing a bouquet from porch to group of women standing in yard* (c. 1940 – 1955), Harris documented a wedding party with a similarly naturalistic approach. (Figure 3.16) In the image, a group of people gather densely at the bottom half of the frame, embraced by a lush cluster of wooden houses, trees, and flowering bushes. The bride stands in the bottom left surrounded by children in formal wear and is shown throwing her bouquet high into the air toward a group of women who raise their hands to catch it with their backs to the camera and flowers in their hair. Both photographs, like much of Harris’ archive, document slices of collectivity and, often, joviality, found in everyday life in opposition to an


overarching narrative oppression and resistance, and their seeming spontaneity imbues them with a sense of normalcy. Harris’ photographs, like bell hooks’ family snapshots, resist the diffusion of context and collectivity expressed through singularized iconic photographs, constructing a multifaceted visual collection of black life unhampered by a white gaze. Vine could also be considered within this lineage of image-making, as, through it, young black users generated an alternative archive of their specific experiences in a digital pocket of networked space within the larger-scale context of police brutality, violently-enforced limitations of movement in daily life, and resistance to it.

Yet, Vine is often dismissed for its users’ uniquely wacky sense of humor and the output of what is often perceived as visual nonsense by viewers outside its affective community. This overlooks its significance as a safe, shared space for self-presentation and the circulation of creative audiovisual works that challenge oversimplified or oppressive narratives. When discussing her relationship with the Vine community, *The New York Times* associate editor Jasmine Hughes argued that it generated powerful personal connections in digital space.215 She describes the “kinship [she] felt” with black Viners, citing, for example, videographer Jay Versace’s intimate scenes of observational humor filmed in his bedroom.216 In one such example, Versace recorded himself parodying the vocals of Kiely Williams, a former member of the pop group 3LW, in the song “No More (Baby I’ma Do Right)” that was released in 2000. In the Vine, Versace performs the roles of two halves of a romantic couple. In the first second-long frame, Versace appears confused as the song begins to play over the video. (Figure 3.17) It then

---


216 Hughes.
switches to a closely-cropped shot of Versace impersonating a girl, which is indicated in an intentionally crude way by a bunched towel worn as hair, a motif that is consistent throughout his videos. (Figure 3.18) As this character, he lip-syncs along to the lyrics “I’m getting a lil’ tired of your broken promises, promises” with an exaggerated lisp in imitation of Williams. Subtitled “when you thought the relationship was going good then she hit you wit this,” the video is comedic simultaneously for its cultural reference, its bizarre and seemingly spontaneous simplicity, and in its depiction of a relatable relationship conflict, similar to Fraser’s video. Hughes writes that he is “making fun of the way we – black people, the main audience who bought the 3LW records and memorized their songs and dances – all made fun of the song when we first heard it. Versace is sharing an inside joke.”217 The video’s complexity relies on cultural knowledge held by many of the people who comprised the Vine community. Thus, Hughes writes, “Vine [became] a home for young black people, who [dominated] the service and established its language early,” making it a “place for people to see you.”218

The frequent use of humor in Vine videos, for which the medium is often dismissed, could potentially be linked to the historical importance of insider humor for black communities, as well, utilized to challenge “racial stereotypes while simultaneously revealing their prevalence in American society” and as a less painful way to address and subvert them.219 Vine humor was often oriented toward moments of banality as a generative source of positivity, not unlike that of hooks’ photographs or Harris’ alternative visual archive and could be particularly meaningful when contextualized against everyday experiences of structural oppression. Journalist Bridget

217 Hughes.

218 Hughes.

Todd, for example, cites a Vine published in 2014 for its uplifting effect, in which a group of teenagers laughingly sing the 1961 Marvelettes song “Mr. Postman” to their letter carrier.220 (Figure 3.19) She writes that the video documents “an idyllic slice of black life, where it’s okay for kids to just goof around and be kids,” and particularly powerful for its contemporaneity with the murders of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin.221 The video presents a micro-narrative of self-determination within the context of large-scale structural oppression.

Additionally, although most of Vine’s demographic population identified as black, it was also popular among other young people of color who interacted with and contributed to the contextual depth of the same videos. For example, it was common for users to create humorous videos documenting or recreating scenes specific to their diverse families. This can be seen in Vines created by SamTakesOff, who “lovingly [caricatured]” his “experiences…growing up with African parents,” in Luis Miguel’s accounts of his Mexican-American family, and in Jasmeet Singh’s videos that parodied both his Sikh family and the ways that white people misunderstand them. Community-wide trends like these were bolstered by the diversity of Vine’s digital space, which was largely uncontrolled by white viewers, uniting users in solidarity against homogenization and racism, as well as by its formal characteristics, which enabled continual exchange and appropriation of original content. Steven Guerrero, a Mexican-American graduate student and former Vine user, describes the medium as unified by the expression of “social, economic, and cultural experiences not commonly seen…in predominantly white parts of the Internet” and mainstream media, generating a sense of “non-white relatability” that felt

---


221 Todd.
affirming. Thus, through the participatory exchange of audiovisual content, Vine encouraged a diverse alliance of agencies in opposition to imposed, often singularized narratives. Such networked affective exchange is vital to organized resistance, which, as Judith Butler argues, is reliant on interdependency and the recognition that “rights” must be “[seen] as collective” because “the condition of precarity is differentially distributed and…resistance to precarity has to be based on the demand that lives should be treated equally and that they should be equally livable.”

Vine was closed in January 2017 as Donald Trump was inaugurated as president, marking the end of a period of renewed interest in systemic injustice that Mirzoeff argues was initiated in 2014. Despite the influence of a prolific and creative community of people of color, managers of Vine consistently chose to promote a smaller group of white users who attained the most notoreity outside the digital community. As other, more financially viable video sharing platforms were created in imitation of Vine, these users began to leave, leading to announcements in October 2016 that the application was unprofitable and would be closed, causing numerous online publications to mourn its loss as an artistic medium for young people of color during an emotionally challenging time. Yet, during its lifespan, Vine united people throughout the United States through the exchange of positive or resistant feelings found in daily life in opposition to the imposed restrictions faced by many racialized people. It was thus a space

222 Steven Guerrero in discussion with the author, April 20, 2018.


226 Peterson.
of durational resistance engendered by networked creative exchange, through which people cultivated an alternative archive of their complex agencies.
Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I discussed relationships between diverse human and material agencies in everyday space, and how they could contradict or counter the affective consequences of oppressive structures. Others have examined the relation between art and affect, including art historians Amelia Jones, Susan Best, Jae Emerling, and Donald Preziosi, as well as art theorist Jill Bennett, and I hope to contribute to this scholarship a consideration of how art might be employed in resistance to imposed precarity. My study is informed by theories of materiality that enable analysis of human or nonhuman actants as engaged in a network of continual exchange. As discussed in my introduction, contemporary theories of materiality, sometimes described as “new materiality,” are often perceived as a challenge to notions of human superiority that are dangerous when viewed alongside a “scale” of political precarity, and as a legitimization of ways of knowing that have been suppressed by European colonization. Yet, in positioning this discourse as “new,” scholars risk obscuring “intellectual traditions in which the liveliness of matter is grasped as ordinary” as well as its continued presence in European art historical discourse.227

For example, art historian David Morgan discusses the development of German art theories of affective art experiences, described as “enchantment,” as a spiritual means through which to reclaim control over the chaos of human existence.228 In this framework, art experiences are perceived as spiritual, with art a replacement for religion and the artist a figure in


possession of “divine inspiration.”\textsuperscript{229} Scholars of medieval and early modern art history have argued that the rise of naturalism in Europe shifted conceptualizations of art, previously perceived as spiritually significant in its very materiality, toward an increased emphasis on the artists’ authority through knowledge of materials, aligning them with God. Prior to these developments, the devotional significance of images was widely conceived to be derived from their very materiality and contexts under which they were encountered including, for example, their staging, display, and site-specific elicitations of wonder.\textsuperscript{230} However, scholars diverge in their interpretations of the continuation of these relationships to materiality. In his landmark publication \textit{Likeness and Presence}, Hans Belting argues that an “era of images,” in which materials were understood to have agency, gave way to an “era of art,” an argument that has subsequently been criticized as overly teleological and dualistic.\textsuperscript{231} In contrast, art historians such as Steven Stowell and Megan Holmes, and historian Caroline Bynum Walker, through close attention to continued engagement with materials, have demonstrated that European conceptualizations of agentic matter may have persisted in ways more “fluid, varied, and contingent.”\textsuperscript{232} These contributions reframe the foundation upon which contemporary theories of

\textsuperscript{229} Morgan, 317.


“new materiality,” often positioned as a deconstruction of a life and matter binary, are constructed. Furthermore, such a genealogy of relationships to agentic matter in art is not cross-culturally applicable, as has been demonstrated in colonial and pre-Conquest Latin American art historical study, which challenge Eurocentric frameworks for conceptualization the dynamism of things. This is demonstrated, for example, by Jeanette Favrot Peterson, who challenges Walter Benjamin’s argument that mechanical reproduction removes the authentic power of original works, by considering it in another cultural context. By examining the continuing treatment of copies of the original image of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe as sacred, she argues that their reproduction did not diminish its power but preserved it and was central to its continuing popularity.233

While contemporary theories of materiality may be productive, as I have explored throughout this thesis, their potential cannot be unveiled until their assumptions are challenged. This seems to require an interdisciplinary, durational approach to study that considers diverse understandings of materiality, potentially deconstructing a foundation of universalized or oversimplified presumptions. Similarly, Bruno Latour, whose work has been fundamental to many contemporary theories of materiality, argues that “modern” thought is premised on the separation of disciplines and systems of knowledge, but this does not accurately reflect the ways that forces often intermingle. Rather, he argues for recognition of the ways that information is “hybridized,” or networked.234 I have chosen an interdisciplinary approach, drawn, in part, from his insights, in hopes that interpretation across lines of study could unveil interconnections


234 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern.
between large- and small-scale forces, simultaneously drawing from theories of materiality that expand notions of agency and networked exchange. The consequences of imposed precarity are experienced in varying but concrete ways that, in lived experiences, are not restricted to the confines of one discipline. Thus, it is important to think between and across such limitations, particularly for the purposes of this thesis, which is focused on identifying subtle ways that people assert their agency through art in resistance to oppression.

In this thesis, I examined three case studies in different avenues for artistic expression: monuments and memorials, museum installations, and digital networked technology, which is becoming increasingly important as a medium for creative expression. In the first chapter, I considered the participatory counter-monument project Monument Lab in Philadelphia. Through this project, Philadelphians actively engaged with and questioned the role of monuments in their city and the historical narratives they expressed, contemporaneous with a nationwide reexamination of the presence and purpose of Confederate monuments built throughout the country to formally assert a homogenized, retrospectively-constructed exclusionist narrative of American history. In contrast to these monuments’ privileging of a singular, white supremacist narrative of past events, Monument Lab validated diverse, sometimes contradictory experiences of American history and continuing relationships to it. Thus, I argued that in its processual nature, Monument Lab, as an ongoing, interactive project, is a powerful form of counter-monumentalization that encourages continual engagement with history and resists narrative oversimplification through which diverse experiences are obscured.

Next, I analyzed heterogeneous expressions of agency in museum space and the use of art to evoke the affective consequences of structural oppression and, perhaps, to motivate organized resistance. Through an analysis of the immersive, site-responsive installation Untitled (of occult
instability [feelings] by the South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape, I argued for recognition of art experiences as a generative exchange between the artist and the audience. Through sensory manipulation in the gallery space, Bopape sought to recreate the affective pressure of daily life structured by oppressive forces and to explore the productive potential of feelings. Bopape’s approach was particularly inspired by the resistance movement Rhodes Must Fall, which, like Monument Lab, interrogates the purpose and effects of monuments in contemporary society. In my analysis of Untitled, I drew on contemporary art scholarship that emphasizes the agency of artists in relation to their audiences, and the power of art in generating moments of “rupture” that lead to critical thought. However, I argued that in Untitled, Bopape also recognized that encounters with the work would be affected by viewers’ diverse positionalities within a network of contexts.

Finally, in my third chapter, I analyzed the social media application Vine within the context of newly emergent forms of contemporary art disseminated through networked technology and contextualized within historical forms of counter-narrative artistic expression in the United States. Through Vine, young people of color cultivated a safe digital community in which to create and share videos that addressed police brutality, Black Lives Matter, and organized resistance, transforming it into a medium for creative expression and emotional uplift. Through the continual exchange of affective visual content, users generated an alternative visual archive of daily life in resistance to larger-scale structural forces. The formation of an emotional community was enabled by the formal characteristics of videos and users’ development of self-referential practices through which meaning was continually de- and re-contextualized, thereby demonstrating and asserting videographers’ complex agencies.
In developing this topic, I was particularly influenced by cultural studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich’s reframing of depression as an emotional consequence of oppression experienced individually and collectively in the specificity of daily life. Cvetkovich defines affect differently than most theorists, combining, rather than dividing “precognitive sensory experiences and relations to surroundings” and emotions. Her definition led me to consider how oppressive structures could be enforced through spatial experiences of visual and material culture in daily life, and, thus, how art could be employed toward the assertion of counter-narratives and the resistant reclamation of feelings. For example, white supremacist narratives are asserted through Confederate monuments in the United States, potentially amplifying lived experiences of imposed precarity enforced through restrictions of movement that can be life-threatening. Through Monument Lab, citizens challenge the racist ideologies that are reinforced through Confederate monuments. In Untitled (of occult instability), Dineo Seshee Bopape recreated the emotional pressure of everyday oppression, probing the productivity of affect, and how it could potentially lead to action. Finally, in Vine, young people organized digitally through the exchange of affective safety and humor and assembled a visual archive of life unhampered by oppressive forces and their emotional consequences.

Cvetkovich argues for analysis that is sensitive to both collective contexts and their individual effects, and for the specific, lived consequences of oppressive structures that are otherwise abstracted in their scope. Thus, methodologically, I have attempted to analyze cases of affective resistance through art in contemporary society that are simultaneously informed by the specificities of their sociohistorical contexts and by a web of transnational connections. My approach is further informed by Angela Y. Davis’ discussion of the connections between

---

resistance movements.\textsuperscript{236} This is reflected in solidarity movements that unite people of color in the United States challenging racist structures with that of people in South Africa against the persistent architecture of apartheid and Palestinian people under Israeli occupation, which is seen in the similarities between forms of resistance throughout. Thus, as she writes, “freedom is a constant struggle,” incomplete without the networked elimination of imposed precarity for all people.\textsuperscript{237}

Furthermore, the entangling of sensory experiences of environmental space and of individual and collective feelings encourages an analysis informed by theories of materiality in which human or nonhuman agencies are continually engaged in a network of continual exchange. This perspective enables more nuanced understandings of the subtle and diverse ways that people could maneuver within and subvert dominating structures. In the book \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things}, political theorist Jane Bennett considers the “small agency” of worms, arguing that they “participate in heterogenous assemblages in which agency has no single locus, no mastermind, but is distributed across a swarm of various and variegated vibrant materialities.”\textsuperscript{238} No matter how small, the “accumulated effects” of their actions could have large-scale consequences.\textsuperscript{239} I perceive in this a way of conceptualizing the world as marked by “distributed agency,” through which complex happenings could be generated through small-scale actions.\textsuperscript{240} If we are all connected in a meshwork, then even the smallest forms of

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{236} Davis, \textit{Freedom Is a Constant Struggle}.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Davis.
\item \textsuperscript{238} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}.
\item \textsuperscript{239} Bennett.
\item \textsuperscript{240} Bennett.
\end{itemize}
resistance could be powerful, as one tugs on the strings connecting them to collected agencies and their actions ripple with subtle effects. Thus, even shifts in the framing of artistic expression and agency could broaden and diversify understandings of the ways that imposed narratives could be subverted or resisted.

I developed the idea for this thesis as the United States underwent a significant and sometimes frightening administrative transition, which led me to question the place of art in contemporary society. Yet, what has always drawn me to art history is the role it has played for many societies as a means through which to navigate and express social power and localized perspectives. Thus, I analyze contemporary art through this historical lens to reassert its continuing importance as an avenue through which people can express their agencies in complex, subtle, and nuanced ways. Additionally, I maintain that agency can be found under many circumstances where it may seem buried if our attention is directed toward it. I chose to pursue three case studies in this thesis to focus my methodology, and particularly due to my determination to consider specific, localized situations within the context of larger-scale events.

Each case study examined in this thesis was rich in content and context and, moving forward, could be further expanded. The intersections of precarity in each could be teased apart, as I focused largely on race throughout but believe that in a larger project my research would benefit from more nuanced attention paid to oppression experienced according to, for example, gender and sexuality. In the future, I hope also to apply the framework developed throughout this thesis to more artworks or art settings, thereby pushing the boundaries of their application in cases perhaps less explicitly suited to the use of affect, materiality, or audience participation. One such example is The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Alabama, which memorializes thousands of people who have been lynched throughout American
history. Like Confederate monuments and the diverse experiences memorialized through Monument Lab, The Legacy Museum affects people in different ways, dependent upon their varying personal connections to the people honored and the legacy remembered, but perhaps also unites them in collected tragedy. As visitors move through the memorial, the stele naming victims of lynching rise, eventually looming overhead visitors in the museum. Its space, laden with history and the feelings of people collected within it, affects and is affected by their presence. The power of the museum lies not only in its visceral recognition of violence inflicted upon black people in the United States, but also in its unification, in a continuum, of the structures and effects of slavery, racial violence, and mass incarceration. Thus, the museum is not only a place to remember the past but to recognize its continuing effects and the persistent structures that sustain them, collecting people in affective space and encouraging continued engagement with it. As people continue to face precarity, as structures persist, and histories endure, they will also continue to express their agency through art and art experiences. Whether in newly built memorials and monuments, or challenges to those that exist, in museums, or in nontraditional, emergent mediums, art and creative expression will continue to be a powerful means for the assertion and exchange of agency.
Figure 1.1: Peter Eisenman, “Field of Stelae,” Berlin’s Denkmal (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe), dedicated in 2005, in The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial, Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between, by James E. Young (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 9.

Figure 1.2: Maya Lin, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, in The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial, Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between, by James E. Young (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 5.

Figure 1.5: Heyward Shepherd Monument, dedicated in 1930, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.


Figure 1.15. Peter Eisenman, “Field of Stelae,” Berlin’s Denkmal (Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe), dedicated in 2005, in *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial, Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between*, by James E. Young (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 1.


Figure 1.25: Photograph of the inscription naming people who lived at the site memorialized in *The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation* in Philadelphia. National Park Service. Accessed April 28, 2018. [https://www.nps.gov/articles/independenceoneyjudge.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/independenceoneyjudge.htm).


Figure 2.5: kinofhim, “nina simone • ‘stars/feelings’ (montreux jazz festival 1976),” filmed July 3, 1976, Vimeo video, 23 minutes, 38 seconds, posted January 2018, https://vimeo.com/248729765.

Figure 2.6: kinofhim, “nine simone • ‘stars/feelings’ (montreux jazz festival 1976),” filmed July 3, 1976, Vimeo video, 23 minutes, 38 seconds, posted January 2018, https://vimeo.com/248729765.


Chapter 3: Figures


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG5MfbXhnu4
Figure 3.5: MexicanGueys, “Por que estas mintiendo,” Vine video, six seconds. Original Vine video unavailable.

Figure 3.6. MexicanGueys, “Por que estas mintiendo,” Vine video, six seconds. Original Vine video unavailable.
Figure 3.7: MexicanGueys, “Por que estas mintiendo,” Vine video, six seconds. Original Vine video unavailable.

Figure 3.9: French, Antonio. #FERGUSON, YouTube video, forty-eight minutes, four seconds, published August 3, 2017. Accessed April 29, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOJoIulcQno.


Figure 3.17: Versace, Jay. “When you thought the relationship was going good and then she hit you wit this,” Vine video, six seconds, posted November 2, 2014. Vine. Accessed April 29, 2018. http://vine.co/v/OOw5XYqp7tn.

Figure 3.18: Versace, Jay. “When you thought the relationship was going good then she hit you wit this,” Vine video, six seconds, posted November 2, 2014. Vine. Accessed April 29, 2018. http://vine.co/v/OOw5XYqp7tn.
Bibliography


Grosz, E. A. Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Theories of Representation and


https://washington.org/visit-dc/martin-luther-king-jr-memorial.


