The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum *charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.*
Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Köz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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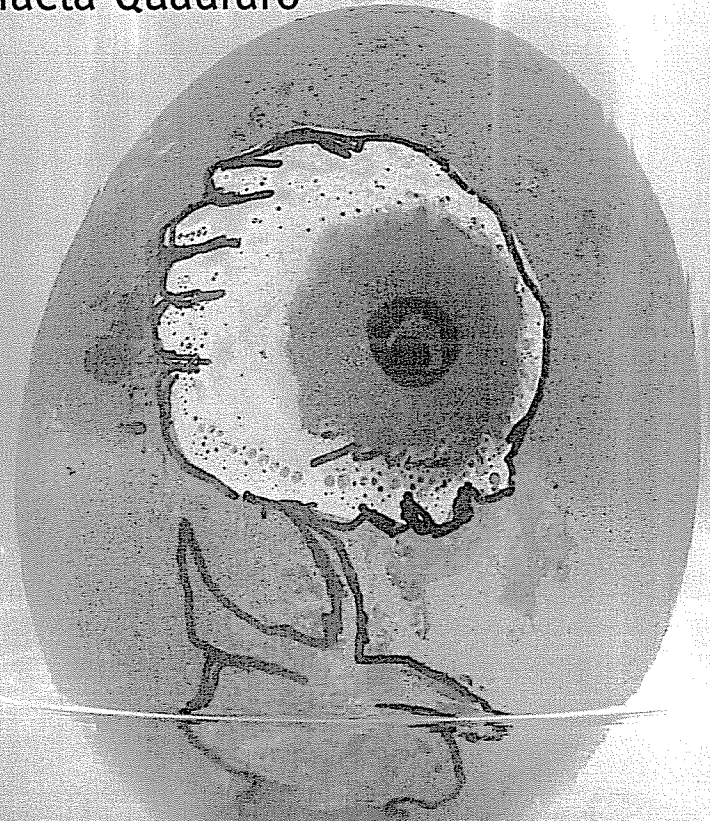Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro

ASHGATE

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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how 'bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation' (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary 'expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety' (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of 'progress' and the racist ideology of 'white supremacy' imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 8

Museo Diffuso: Performing Memory in Public Spaces

Viviana Gravano

This chapter investigates the relationship between some practices of contemporary art and what has been called 'difficult heritage'. It is divided into two parts: in the first, I define what I mean by *difficult heritage*; in the second, I cite some significant examples of memorials, museums, and artistic practices.

The term 'difficult heritage' comes from an important essay by Sharon Macdonald. With this expression she identifies places that conserve the memory of a traumatic event whose transformation into spaces of collective memory is particularly arduous. In her own words:

> 'difficult heritage' – that is, a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity. 'Difficult heritage' may also be troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures. (Macdonald 2008, 1)

Three fundamental terms emerge from this text: memory, the present and identity. Macdonald speaks of places that lead to possible conflicts within the community that inhabits them. The memory these places carry with them has a powerful relationship with the re-reading that they can operate in the present. The first question is: How do certain places become bearers of images of the past that 'concerns' us today in the sense of the term used by Georges Didi-Huberman: 'what we see has a value and a life inasmuch as it is connected to us. The division between what we see and what concerns us is therefore ineluctable' (Didi-Huberman 1992, 9; my translation).

When memory appears in the form of a place or an image, it can have a value not just as a simple 'object' to be observed, but also as a subject that looks back at us. In the latter case, it consigns us to an ethical position and makes us feel part of a place, an inhabitant rather than a passer-by, an actor and not just a spectator. The sites of difficult heritage imply a negotiated relation with those who watch, involving us even when we negate them or wish to forget them. They resemble the *damnatio memoriae* the Romans inflicted upon those who, having betrayed Rome, were forced into oblivion. The physical erasure of the figure of the traitor from

public representation in sculpture and painting produced an absence that actually maintained the eternal memorial of that betrayal. The 'apparent' erasure generates the constant confirmation of that which was, and even more so, of that which is. I propose to associate this quality of erased places with the Benjaminian concept of *das Jetzt* ('the now'). This has nothing to do with the temporality of the image, but with its pertinence to all the possible todays.

Macdonald draws our attention to how the recognition of certain places of memory evokes the re-reading of national narratives, and impacts on the construction, or deconstruction, of the foundational myths of that narration. The presence of a concrete visualisation of a traumatic past through images, places and practices aids recognition of the possible re-emergence of this past in contemporary tales of identity. In the spoken language, certain expressions, deriving from definitions formulated in the past, come to be actualised in the present. In this sense, certain forms of current representations are the offspring of the erasure and repression of images of the past. The constant concealment of the place and symbols of power, of sites of oppression and violence, produces a void of visual images that, following the principal of *damnatio memoriae*, generates a mythologised and highly imaginative permanence. The *rescissio actorum*, or the actual destruction of the work, produces a punishment that guarantees eternal presence for a total absence. The erasure of difficult memories implies the impossibility of a collective re-elaboration. It creates a myth of absence, leaving space for the transformation of the figure of the 'erased' into a victim of history.

Processes of Collective Removal in Italy

I would like to cite a recent and significant example of this process in Italy. Bolzano, a city in Alto Adige with a very strong separatist tradition, is composed of two linguistic communities, one German and one Italian. There are also other minorities such as Ladino, and this leads to constant conflicts. The city was mostly constructed in the fascist period, and many of its public buildings date from that period. In piazza Tribunale, a fascist building features an enormous bas-relief with Benito Mussolini on a horse. The sculpture was realised in 1939 by the sculptor Hans Piffrader, but only placed on the building in 1956, many years after the fall of the regime. In 2011, an international call was announced for a work of art that would 'disempower' the fascist sculpture. The desire for such an intervention began with a strong local debate regarding the necessity of activating a process of 'disempowerment' of the urbanised, architectural and artistic inheritance of fascism in Bolzano.

The term 'disempowerment' seems very problematic, because it presupposes that the images in themselves are bearers of an evocative force, of a signifying power: the memory not of an abuse, but of power and potency. Over five hundred applicants responded to the call. The five winners received prize money, but the local institutions, in accordance with the Berlusconi government in power at

that time, did not give the go-ahead for any of the selected works. After bitter debates, it was decided to cover the bas-relief with a large frosted pane of grey glass. A perfect monument 'in hiding' in reality exalted the force of that hidden and therefore 'unimaginable' image. Erasure exalts the absence, transforms the executioner into victim of the *damnatio memoriae*, and intentionally excludes the possibility of a public, shared re-elaboration. In Bolzano, the projects proposed by artists and architects would have initiated a process of negotiation with an image that confronts the past of the city and Italy and poses questions linked to the new images of the neo-fascist right, constructed thanks to the repression of the memory of the Mussolini era.

The Power of a Difficult Heritage

Now I would like to raise a second question regarding the political value of the definition of *difficult heritage*. According to what criteria can a given place can be ascribed to the difficult heritage, and who has the authority for deciding? Does a difference exist between those places recognised unanimously as difficult heritage, thanks to the worldwide 'notoriety' of the trauma they have given rise to, and those places that have profoundly determined the narratives of identity at the local level, but have not gained an international standing? Can the location of a conflict, of a dictatorship, or of a traumatic event be considered as difficult heritage even if it has not received unanimous worldwide condemnation or not been an object of study?

I believe that this is a fundamental question in understanding whether the definition of difficult heritage can be seen as a form of discrimination in mainstream academic research. Macdonald discusses the difficulty of considering the places of slavery in the United States, in common with many places marked by European colonialism, as difficult heritage on the part of those countries that welcome research on the subject. Research, and consequent actions, linked to the memory of Nazism or the regimes in the ex-Eastern European bloc, receive an immediate position in this context, with a uniformity of readings determined by those who wield academic power: universities in Europe and the United States. With this, I do not wish to negate the extreme importance of the contributions on memory concerning the Nazi period and the dictatorships of Eastern Europe. The question is: does the selection of places, and the subsequent choice of actions to be promoted there, denote a form of political power used to decide *a priori* those sites that necessitate 'recollection'?

We also need to pose a question regarding the resources and channels of research that are fundamentally concentrated in Europe and the United States, or in the countries that are politically closely associated with them. I can give an example in this respect. Brazil, under the presidencies of both Lula de Silva and Dilma Roussef, and Argentina, with Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner as president, both appointed State Commissions to prosecute crimes committed during the

brutal military dictatorships. This initiated a process of recognition and critical reactivation of the places of detention and torture and the palaces of dictatorial power. Immediately after the fall of the dictatorships, the governments, under the influence of the United States, rapidly erased or re-converted these places so as to suppress all memories of their past. It is surely problematic that while research on these centres on the United States – the country that financed the advent of these dictatorships and has taken a very clear and forthright approach to the heritage of Nazism – it has been much more ambiguous about the difficult heritage in countries of Central and South America.

This example poses an essential question: in indicating an area of difficult heritage, one is also implicitly indicating a question of identity linked to whoever belongs to that area, but how can this link between personal identity and local history be made explicit? The position of the researcher, artist or activist who has taken on the operation of recollection is essential to the narration of identity. By saying this, I do not mean that only those who live in a given place can tackle the complex questions linked to difficult heritage. I believe that the variables in the negotiations between territory, memory and community require consideration of the identity of the personal and academic narrative of the researcher.

I say this because in elaborating this chapter, I know that I am not only a scholar of new genre public art based in Italy. I know that I am a woman from Southern Europe, born in 1961, with a history of political militancy in the Italian Communist Party, linked to the story of my uncle, a socialist who was deported to Auschwitz, and have witnessed as a young intellectual the horrible war in Yugoslavia, the invasions of Iran and Iraq, and many other catastrophes. Thus my definition of difficult heritage begins in Nazi Germany, and passes boldly through fascist Italy, colonial Europe and imperialist America. Like any scholar who deals with these themes, I must begin from a critical and vigilant analysis of the origins of my research.

I would like here to recall Walter Benjamin, who in 1939, speaking of epic theatre, cited Brecht with regard to the role of the actor: 'The actor must show the event, and he must show himself: naturally he shows the event by showing himself and he shows himself by showing the event' (Benjamin 2003, 11). The calling into question and constant deconstruction of academic power remains essential in not superimposing our research requirements to the demands of the community with and for which we work.

Now I would like to address the question of places as living testimonies of the topographies of memory. I would like to begin from the concept of *museo diffuso*, rendered variously in English as 'open-air museum' or 'diffused museum', or again 'dispersed museum', or finally 'disseminated museum'. The expression actually emerged in Italian museum literature, and in origin did not refer to difficult heritage. The dispersed museum designates the myriad of common goods diffused throughout the territory that a policy of recuperation and valorisation tends to treat as a unit. The dispersed museum is intended to transform a territory of everyday transit into an open-air museum itinerary.

The initial definition of the *museo diffuso* was by the architect Fredi Drugman in a seminar given at Milan Polytechnic in 1980, published in the Italian magazine *Hinterland* (Drugman 1982, 21). Since then, the scholar has often returned to the need to see the museum as a place of society: the dispersed museum implies a close link between alterity and familiarity, the usual and the extraordinary, the everyday and the unique. Thus the dispersed museum comes to be seen as an open form which proposes a deep relation between territory, community of inhabitants and visitor.

The two binomials proposed by Drugman – treated dialectically, not as dichotomies – seem appropriate when speaking of difficult heritage. There exists a sense of familiarity towards certain places, but also a strong sense of estrangement with respect to its previous use. Quite often these sites are on the daily routes of inhabitants of the community or standard tourist routes, but the emergence of a repressed memory can reveal what is exceptional. The everyday nature of the place becomes a unique experience because it challenges all our identity narrations. The place as interruption of flux of habit, as interval in the usual perception, evokes Paul Klee's vision of the angel of history described by Walter Benjamin: 'His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread …. His face is turned toward the past' (Benjamin 2006, 392). The unexpected 'survival' of the past manifests itself in the guise of shock (Benjamin 2006, 320), of interruption, of 'interval' in the sense Benjamin attributes to Baudelaire in the modern metropolis. The anti-monumental artistic practices must search for a modality that impedes the re-absorption of that place in the past and renews the shock in an epic way. Still speaking of the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin writes:

> Like the pictures in a film, epic theatre moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the single, well-defined situations of the play collide. The songs, the captions, the lifeless conventions set off one situation from another. This brings about intervals which, if anything, impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are reserved for the spectator's critical reaction – to the actions of the players and to the way in which they are represented. (Benjamin 1969, 153)

In my view, the role of the sites of difficult heritage involves the perception of these places as territories of shock that interrupt a pacific, conflict-free vision of the space in which we live. But it can also offer each one of us the opportunity to articulate a critical vision with respect to their representation. In Benjamin, the concept of the *cutting* pushes the audience towards a vision that asks for its continuous, personal and cultural reassembly of historical 'facts'. The testimony of places does not appear like a sacralised conservation that easily leads to a dangerous fetishisation, but presents itself as an 'interval'. Each break in the urban fabric of today can become an interval, forcing critical replacement between actions produced accidentally and those that can be hosted voluntarily. Twentieth-century European culture tends to use the monument and the memorial as commemorative

places, producing not a shock, but a mimesis of the landscape, becoming not a space, but a place. As the sociologist Michel de Certeau writes:

> At the outset, I shall make a distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) that delimits a field. A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location .... A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A *place* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersection of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalise it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflicting programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. In contradistinction of the place, it has thus none of the univocity of a 'proper'. (de Certeau 1984, 117)

The monument as a 'place' conserves an integrity that identifies it with a past event that it has hosted and condemns as impossible the action in the present. The space exists only as it is practised in action. The monumentalisation, the practices of textual reconstitution of the sites of the great tragedies, make them invisible since their mere nomination transforms them into places. The celebration of memory that must be kept alive actually crystallises the event recalled in one fixed image, localised and therefore unimaginable in the present.

In the book *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, featuring photographs taken by a *Sonderkommand* inside the extermination camp at Auschwitz, Georges Didi-Huberman proposes the question of the possibility and impossibility of representing the horror of the camps:

> In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves. We must attempt to imagine the hell that Auschwitz was in the summer of 1944. Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. We are obliged to that oppressive imaginable. It is a response that we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience. So let us not invoke the unimaginable. How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them simply by looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works

of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility. Thus, images in spite of all: in spite of the hell of Auschwitz, in spite of the risks taken. In return, we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. Images in spite of all: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities. (Didi-Huberman 2012, 3)

A little further on, the author says: 'to remember one must imagine' (Didi-Huberman 2012, 30). I would prefer to see the phrase translated from the French with the verb 'recollect' instead of 'remember' in order to better emphasise the difference between memory and remembrance, where one word refers to the preservation of memory and the other implies an active re-emergence of this memory.

I always found the French scholar's appeal to abandon ethical terms such as 'unimaginable' or 'unspeakable' when referring to the tragedy of the Nazi death camps illuminating. The impossible representation does not just pass through the destruction or concealment of difficult heritage, but paradoxically, often passes through the monuments to its memory, understood as the petrifaction of memory, like a dead language rather than a spoken language. This brings to mind some photos taken by American photographer Margaret Bourke White on entering the Buchenwald concentration camp, immediately after the arrival of the Allies. Some pictures from the series 'German civilians are forced by American troops to bear witness to Nazi atrocities at Buchenwald concentration camp, mere miles from their own homes, April 1945', which she produced for the magazine *Life*, were never published. In these photographs, the true subject was not the mountain of corpses or the people reduced to skin and bones, but the eyes of the German citizens that were 'forced' to see what meaning the camps had. Those images carry a level of obscenity, so much so that *Life* published the shocking images of mountains of corpses piled up like 'objects', but not those in which the protagonist is the gaze of someone who does not want to look. The omission from *Life* established a criterion of unwatchability. The horror of the published images constructs such an impact that we are all from that moment not allowed to look because what you see is literally 'unbearable'.

The erasure of the images of those who are 'forced' to look would have set a dangerous precedent, a kind of invitation to watch, a real possibility, a tangible watching/seeing that those images would no longer have relegated to the sphere of the 'unwatchable'. In a series of unpublished photographs, Bourke White omits even the object of the gaze and shows only the contrite and even 'disgusted' faces, looking at something horrible elsewhere. That group of viewers, of bystanders, is the potential European audience, who could identify with them, who could be 'forced' to watch. They are the live witnesses, but they are not survivors. The inability to identify with the survivor authorises the ability to say, 'Only those who have lived it could never understand,' and so this absolves everyone else from having to understand. The German citizens standing in front of the horror perpetrated right on their front doorstep could

be us, we might have been the same witnesses. To erase that kind of witness is equivalent to still being able to say that everything that has happened will always be 'unimaginable'.

Returning, then, to the question of the testimonial value of 'places', I would like to conclude by saying that in Italy, the celebrative monumentalisation of many places of difficult heritage, and contrary to the literal erasure of the true space of the criminal action of fascism and Nazi fascism, has produced a sort of imagination gap. Today, much of right-wing culture, and not only that of the far right and pro-Nazis, re-proposes an iconography linked to the fascist period that is gaining ground in de-figuring the period. The lack of a real geographical and topographical reworking of fascism in Italy has turned that time into a sort of ghost without place, which is countered by a celebratory rhetoric that relegates many events to the designation of 'civil war'. Suffice it to say that of the three detention and torture centres of the Nazi fascist period in Rome, the Pensione Jaccarino, the Pensione Oceano Pacifico and the Pensione on Via Tasso, only the latter has a Museum of Liberation. The Pensione Jaccarino has returned to its normal activities as a hotel, and the Pensione Oceano Pacifico is home to the headquarters of Radio Radicale. Both are commemorated only with a marble plaque that dryly records that on this spot the infamous group of Nazi fascist torturers called the Banda Koch once operated.

The Italian colonial past has had a similar fate, represented as a sort of comic defeat, a failed attempt from the start. This stereotyped representation of the picaresque Italian who approaches the colonial enterprise in an almost burlesque manner, has in Italy prevented the circulation of the numerous archival images showing the violence and killings perpetrated in the colonies from the Unification of Italy to the fascist period. The result is the current strongly racist iconography that permeates popular communication, from advertising to the cinema, denoting a total lack of reworking of colonial iconography. Such repression produces the belief that the colonial era does not 'concern' the Italian culture of today.

Berlin: Difficult Heritage Tourism

I would now like to mention some examples of best practices through interventions closer to the spirit of the new-genre public art working within a vision that have produced approaches that are site-specific-oriented and, in my view, very interesting.

Berlin is home to a *dispersed museum* in the city concerning the memory of the Nazi period and the wall. After German reunification in 1990, Germany had to deal with the thorny issue of the memory connected to the Nazis, but also the resulting division after the Second World War into the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Crossing Berlin, the capital of the reunified nation, we find many places of German difficult heritage that are turning into spaces of remembrance. I will not dwell here on all the initiatives, many are already well

known, but I will focus on three examples that suggest three approaches that I consider interesting.

A red brick line on the ground marks the old path of the Berlin Wall that was built in August 1961 and demolished in November 1989. Walking in the city now, it is easy to step on and cross over this stretch without noticing. In two places in the city, the presence of the wall returns in an obvious way: Bernauer Strasse, where the Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer has been built (the Berlin Wall Memorial), and Checkpoint Charlie, with its museum, where the apparatus of the border of the period of the wall was left. I would like to start by distinguishing these two initiatives, proposing how museum practices can produce two very different approaches with respect to the same difficult heritage. Discussion has already begun around *difficult heritage tourism*, the current tendency to make some areas that are difficult for the memory of the local community into places organised for a kind of tourism that tends to become mass tourism.

In his book *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting a German History in the Urban Landscape* (1997), Brian Ladd clearly reconstructs the market that was built around pieces of the Berlin Wall after its fall, fundamentally related to non-German collecting. The wall, after its almost complete material destruction, fell into the fetishisation trap of which I spoke earlier. In Berlin, the Berlin Wall Memorial and Checkpoint Charlie Museum have seen two very different reactions to this urgent matter. The Berlin Wall Memorial is defined on the official website as *Gedenkstätte*, the exact German equivalent of the English term 'memorial'. The term derives from the Latin term for memorial, *memorialis*, essentially indicating a book, and therefore a written statement that will leave a trace – but it also means a historian. The word alludes to the need to conserve memory, but fundamentally, the ability to transmit it.

The diffused construction of the Berlin Wall Memorial works with the possibility of recollecting the wall, in a site-specific way, leading the visitor along a physical path that consolidates the relationship between space, memory and viewer. The audio, video and textual columns along the path of the wall at Bernauer Strasse seem to be a contemporary version of the techniques of recollection from Giulio Camillo Delminio's ancient *Theatre of Memory* in the sixteenth century: a series of aedicules that housed the *tableau vivant* of each record to be transmitted and preserved. Each information point of the Berlin Wall Memorial materialises an aspect of past life with the wall standing, in a sequence of daily life that is topographical rather than chronological.

The memorial avoids monumentalisation and fetishisation. All elements of the display used were fragments of the hidden structure that nurtured it and kept it alive, and are shown still buried, surrounded by a fence and explained in detailed plaques. This form of archaeological excavation permits a locating of these 'objects' in the past, but at the same time makes them present as traces. The exposing of what did not appear as evident invites a desacralisation of the paradoxical tendency to turn the wall into 'urban furnishing' in order to preserve a fragment as cult object. At the memorial on Bernuer Strasse, the path of the

Figure 8.1   '**A bike attached to one of the poles of the Berlin Wall Memorial',
Bernauer Strassse, Berlin 2012'. Photograph by Viviana
Gravano, 2012**

wall is marked by a long sequence of rust-coloured pipes driven into the ground,
which do not block the sight of the wall and clearly outline the path of that part
of the wall.

On my last visit to Berlin, I took a picture of a bike attached to one of these
poles (Figure 8.1), and I think this parked bike is more eloquent than any words I
might offer. The memorial, on the one hand, activates reflection, forcing a critical
intervention, and on the other, recreates a familiarity with the place, reconstructs
a presence that is not monumental and therefore unapproachable and untouchable.

The intervention at Checkpoint Charlie seems to be something entirely
different. In front of the museum of the same name, the first in Berlin to document
the history of the wall, on the old border crossing point between East and West
Berlin, a sentry surveillance point with sandbags was erected. A young actor,
dressed as a member of the American or Russian military, allows tourists to take
his picture. A little farther on, across the street, the remnants of the wall, graffitied
by famous street artists, make it easy to overlook the political significance of
the remaining wall as it is transformed into a fetishised and commercial object.
Checkpoint Charlie is, in my view, the perfect representation of erasure by
evidence. Beyond the removal implemented through the concealment of traces,

there is another form of removal that is just as dangerous: that which happens
through a pop sacralisation of difficult heritage places, under the false pretence of
popular dissemination. It diffuses any conflict of identity in the narratives of the
present, and promotes the aesthetic mythologising of the past in a nostalgic key.
The trace does not appear as a theatre of memory, but only as a performance of a
pacified present that formalises places to make them workable on the surface. It is
no coincidence that Checkpoint Charlie has failed to foster any relationship with
the inhabitants of that portion of the city: it has become a sort of Berlin Wall theme
park in the middle of the city, for the benefit of tourists.

I would like to cite another example, present in Berlin but also spread
throughout Europe: the *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones or blocks) of the German
artist Gunter Demnig. These stones, now deposited in their thousands in all of
the countries that had citizens deported to the Nazi death camps, are small brass
blocks of 10×10 cm, with a simple engraving of the name, date of birth, date of
deportation, and when known, the date of death for each victim of Nazi-fascism.
Each stone is set in the pavement in front of what was once their residence at the
time of their deportation. Each stone costs 120 euros and can be funded by private
or public institutions, but also by an individual citizen.

The stones cause the mild perceptual shock I mentioned above. They are brief,
sharp breaks in our flow, they are simple interventions, small but heavy in the
course of our daily journey. They are objects that show an unexpected corporeality
in their present rendering of who disappeared.

In the recent press conference held for the installation of new stones in Rome
at the Casa della Memoria ('Memory House'), Mr Veneziani, in telling the story
of the people to whom the stones he financed were being dedicated, told us that
in the branch of his family which was deported, all his relatives were killed, from
the youngest grandchild to the grandparents, and left no trace behind at all in life.
He explained how his cousin was sold to Nazi fascist Italians by his neighbour for
5,000 lira, and hence deported. The stones become an uncomfortable presence,
similar to the looks omitted from the photographs of Margaret Bourke White –
because they are on the sidewalk in front of our houses, because they are inserted
into a road we walk down every day, because they are the trace not only of
extermination, but of indifference.

Their widespread diffusion not only functions as a collective recollection, but
invites an assumption of responsibility for the individual. The laying of stones
triggers a strong debate, which in some countries has led to their disfigurement
and attempts to remove them. At the time of installation, the community that
receives them performs a ceremony, to which all those who knew the remembered
people are invited. Public institutions and individuals are invited to participate
economically and organisationally in the installation of the stones. It is not by
chance that in the extermination camps the bodies were burned in ovens, that the
militaries of Central and South America threw bodies into the sea, that there are
desaparecidos, the victims of dictatorships, but also the name for many prisoners
in US prisons. The erasure of the body prevents the incorporation of the victim

within those who remain. How can you identify with those who no longer exist, not because they died, but because they are missing? The stumbling stones restore a physical, tangible experience to those who never returned from the death camps by giving them a body that hurts us, touches us every time we place a foot near one of those stones.

Conclusion

I would like to close my remarks by citing two works by contemporary artists who, in two different contexts of difficult heritage, have raised critical issues of great urgency. The first work is the *Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History* by Ian Alan Paul, an artist and theorist based in the California Bay area.[1] The museum is actually a website that shows an imaginary museum installed at the well-known US prison at Guantanamo Bay, the setting of episodes of torture and violations of human rights, after its hypothetical closure by order of President Barack Obama. On the homepage of the museum website you can read the welcome message from the Director: 'The Guantanamo Bay Museum of Art and History, located at the former site of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba, is an institution dedicated to remembering the U.S. prison which was active between 2002 and 2012 before it was permanently decommissioned and closed.'

The museum houses an Exhibition Hall and a Research Centre dedicated to all the victims of the detention centre: the *Tipton Three Exhibition Centre*, dedicated to the collective name of the British citizens from Tipton, England who were held in the extrajudicial detention in Guantanamo, and *Jumah al-Dossari Centre for Critical Studies*, dedicated to the citizen of Bahrain tortured in Guantanamo. On entering the website, visitors find instructions to arrange their visit, to become supporters of the museum, and even to apply to be artists-in-residence.

The work of Ian Alan Paul suggests a theme that I raised at the beginning of this chapter: Who decides what constitutes *difficult heritage*, and according to what criteria? When Guantanamo is truly abandoned, if ever, will it be a place that will become a field of research for difficult heritage, since it is a place where all human rights were suspended? We ask ourselves the question: Shy was such a prison installed at Guantanamo, in that paradoxical bay on the island of Cuba still owned by the United States? We might respond by saying that precisely a place that imposes a traumatic presence, a continual interruption of the democratic flow of the United States, was placed outside the framework of possible random passers-by or US citizens. The location's problems of trace and memory are bound to affect everyone, even in those countries that have drawn the boundaries and criteria of difficult heritage. I would ask again whether a place like Guantanamo can be transformed virtually, even before its 'end', into a *difficult heritage*?

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1   See the museum's website: www.guantanamobaymuseum.org (accessed 6 November 2013).

At the beginning, I said that difficult heritage deals with those places that produce conflicts in the construction of identity narratives of today, and Guantanamo is one of these. Deterritorialising Guantanamo by turning it into a virtual site which recollects what still takes place within its walls can be a new frontier of artistic intervention in difficult heritage, can become a master key, a battering ram even, to open those doors not into the past, but into our own present.

One of the works in the *Guantanamo Bay Museum* is by an Italian-American artist based in San Francisco, Fiamma Montezemolo. Her work reproduces the now famous orange jumpsuits of the Guantanamo prisoners along with part of the book *If This is a Man* by the Jewish-Italian writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi. Through headphones, you can hear the sounds of the revolving door along one of the passages of the US–Mexico border. The artist explains her work on her website:

> In this piece, an imaginary prisoner/migrant – with an unidentified nationality – leaves only a trace of the intolerable of his experience. The trace is made of a note/poem and a sound. The poem is by Primo Levi, written after surviving the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. The sound has been collected in the border between Mexico and the USA where there are metallic doors that abruptly divide the Americas in two. The image of the poem, written on the now infamous orange prisoner uniform, along with the sound, establishes an analogy between the attempt to forcedly create boundaries, categories and aliens on the basis of violence.[2]

The proximity between the memory of the Nazi death camps, perceived through the words of Primo Levi, the prisoners subjected to torture at Guantanamo, through the use of jumpsuits, and the thousands of migrant victims, dead or disappeared at the US–Mexico border through the use of sound, combines, in a dazzling 'today', the traces of a possible definition of *difficult heritage* that, extending beyond academic boundaries, arrives at being true fieldwork.

I believe that this work by Fiamma Montezemolo is the perfect closure to my paper, as it sought to problematise the concept of difficult heritage by inviting a consideration of the possibilities emerging from *site-specific-oriented* research, and the role of the players as necessary components in true remembrance.

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2   Source: http://www.guantanamobaymuseum.org/?url=montezemolowork (accessed 6 November 2013).

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