



GRACE *of* INTENTION:

PHOTOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURE & THE MONUMENT

OCTOBER 15–DECEMBER 23

MoCP
Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik #13, (Korenica)*, 2007

Participating Artists

Geert Goiris
Iman Issa

Florian Joye
Nadav Kander

Jan Kempenaers
Basim Magdy

Nicolas Moulin
Ana Vaz

Born out of the human impulse to memorialize, monuments champion collective aspirations and serve to cement narratives about our past. Some monuments are magnificent, celebrated gestures made in the form of impressive buildings or imposing sculptures; others are unobtrusive, situated in the most unassuming locations. Yet most monuments are conceived with a sense of exalted purpose. In his afterword to Lee Friedlander's *The American Monument* (1976), Leslie George Katz describes this commonality: "A grace of intention shines through the oftentimes awkward alliance of efforts that produced them. They are redeemed by the confidence they express in the worth of the act memorialized."¹



Nadav Kander, *Priozersk XIV (I Was Told She Held an Oar)*, Kazakhstan, 2011

Indeed, monuments as sculptures or grand buildings are deliberate expressions, often overdetermined and declarative. Like photographs, they embody the idea of lasting evidence, usually created to memorialize an event, a person, an era, or an ideology. Monuments are not always purpose-built, however. Buildings can become unintentional monuments due to events that occur within or around them, or perhaps in their very expression. Even appropriated structures can have an eminent presence when deemed commemorative. The church of Les Invalides in Paris, for example, only became a monument to Napoleon after his remains were put there; it had an earlier life as a hospital church for Louis XIV's soldiers. In the United States, perhaps in an effort to connect our young country to antiquity, even natural phenomena are designated National Monuments, such as the shaft of rock called "The Devil's Tower" in Wyoming.²

With a primary aim of communicating with the masses, monuments leverage interpretability; yet like photographs, the messages they deliver aren't always stable. As regimes rise and fall and borders move, or as time simply marches on, the power of a monument's symbolism can ebb and flow, even transform. This transition can also occur gradually, as weather and environmental factors slowly turn built structures into ruins, completely changing the way they appear and the ways we experience them. Monuments and photographs can also obscure traumatic realities by applying sanitized, more palatable narratives to our human foibles. Whether through organic or deliberate means, the intention to commemorate is often complicated and ultimately rendered futile.

Acutely aware of the potential for monuments to be misinterpreted, moralizing, or trite, many artists and architects have considered alternatives to traditional commemorative forms. In the 1960s Claes Oldenburg created a series of "Proposals for Monuments and Buildings"—drawings of fantastic, subversive structures that disrupt the built environment and sometimes memorialize repellent events like war. One famous example, *Proposed Monument for the Intersection of Canal Street and Broadway, NYC: Block of Concrete with the Names of War Heroes* (1965), stops a busy intersection with a giant concrete box that Oldenburg intended as "a wound in the city."³ Oldenburg and his wife Coosje van Bruggen also created enormous sculptures in the 1970s such as *Clothespin* (1976), which famously endowed banal objects with monumental presence, but one void of solemnity. In 1995, architect Rem Koolhaas and designer Bruce Mau published their book *S, M, L, XL*, in which they presented the idea of the "Automonument," a large built structure that becomes a monument by virtue of its sheer volume, even when devoid of a planned articulation of memorializing intention. According to Koolhaas: "Beyond a certain critical mass each structure becomes a monument, or at least raises that expectation through its size alone, even if the sum or the nature of the individual activities it accommodates does not deserve a monumental expression. . . . This monument of the twentieth century is the *Automonument*, and its purest manifestation is the Skyscraper."⁴ Our contemporary idea of what constitutes a commemorative form thus goes far beyond iconography and nostalgia.

Although seemingly fixed and concrete, both architecture and photography are lithesome disciplines, their creation and interpretation



Geert Goiris, *Ecologists Place*, 2006

hinging on the elusive effects of light, time, and space. When the two disciplines meet, most often as photographs of built structures, the artistic intention of the architect can be either enhanced or obscured. In a photograph the context of a building is often eliminated, returning the image of the building nearer to its idealized, drawn form. Other times, as the ideal of the architectural concept collides with the reality of the building or monument, the images can appear discordant, even derogatory. And nowadays, photographic renderings of planned structures very accurately forecast their appearance in the landscape, making it possible for the building itself to jeopardize the original

ideal image.

The fundamental human impulse to interpret and understand is in play here. A built monument may reflect the ideal that motivated its design, but it rarely achieves the complete transformation of a particular endeavor into a concrete form. Rather, there is a space between the ideal and its eventual materiality that allows for disconnection from or reaffirmation of the original intention. Photographs are similarly shifty. Both architecture and photography provide a means for aiding memory, whether idealized or more factual, personal or collective, and are therefore strongly tied to the human urge to honor the past. This cohesion of the two disciplines lays bare their strong connection to the monument.

Grace of Intention explores the many links between architecture and photography through the phenomenon of the monument—in both its ideological and tangible expressions. The eight international artists whose works are on view all investigate themes of permanence and impermanence, memorial and commemoration, and the human propensity to mark power and characterize history with built structures. Some address actual monuments; some look at architecture and how its meaning and symbolism can shift over time. Others push the idea of the futuristic monument. All of the artists represented here reveal our human tendency to memorialize, commemorate, and seek community.

The work of **Geert Goiris** (Belgian, b. 1971) imparts a sense of mystery by juxtaposing significant built structures with ordinary ones, landscapes with still lifes, and recognizable locations with unfamiliar ones. Goiris travels the world, seeking out unusual, remote places and interpreting them in enigmatic images that reflect discovery, unease, and melancholy. Although Goiris doesn't refer directly to the idea of the monument, he suggests it at many points, primarily by capturing images that expose the effects of the passage of time on built structures, or sometimes on things as ephemeral or seemingly insignificant as a pile of snow. In this act, he reveals that all built structures can evoke memory—some understood more collectively and others more individually.

In his pictures of iconic, modernist structures, Goiris celebrates the aspirational and often eccentric intentions of the designers and political systems that erected them, most of which are now defunct. His image of Restaurant Vesara in Palanga, Lithuania, for example—built to entertain high-ranking party members during Communist rule—depicts the building swathed in ethereal light, giving it the appearance of a ghostly shell not unlike the government under which it was built. And in his gloomy rendering of the radical globe-shaped, spaceship-like “Bolwoning” houses designed by Dutch architect Dries Kreijkamp, he conveys the wistful uncanniness of a radical vision now eclipsed. Goiris contrasts these images with others that are less forthcoming about their place and time but emphasize the transformative power of photography. In the image *Black Box* (2000) for example, a beach scene at night resembles a lunar landscape. He explains: “I share a sensitivity with the romantic tradition—where sensual experiences and the merging of body and environment come into play. My images are not documentary—they do not claim to show things as they are, but more as

they seem.”⁵

Like Goiris, **Nadav Kander** (South African, b. 1961) has traveled across the globe, only he focuses on environmental degradation, places of mass development and devastation, and recording, in his words, the “aesthetics of destruction.”⁶ A master at making the bleak sublime, Kander produces photographs that are riveting in their beauty and stillness, and speak to the role of ruins in the landscape. His images also suggest a certain precariousness—things are falling, seem shoddily built, or demonstrate a disregard for ecology. Kander applies formal order and elegance to these sites of chaos and ruin, creating compelling and complicated images of the built landscape.

Scholar Ana Carden-Coyne has written extensively about classical monuments and their role as an antidote to the trauma of war. “Circumventing the horrors of the recent past, the body was reinvented through architectural forms. These memorials enacted a form of rehabilitation in the corporeal sense, providing a vision of wholeness and restoration that displaced the body violated by war,” she writes.⁷ Kander’s photograph *Priozersk XIV (I Was Told She Held an Oar)*, Kazakhstan (2011), which features a statue of a slender woman, missing an arm and a leg and isolated at the edge of a sea, was made in a Cold War-era secret military test site for

atomic weapons. Head bowed and redolent, the statue provides a sort of alternative memorial—one in which the nuclear activities of the mid-twentieth century and their impact on the human body are directly implicated.

Kander has also photographed extensively along the Yangtze River in China, depicting huge infrastructure, massive developments, and abandoned villages that have been left behind in the wake of modernization. Many of the sites he visited have come to symbolize the economic might of contemporary China, including two photographs of buildings and infrastructure in this exhibition. One image, made in 2003, depicts the “Monument to Progress and Prosperity,” a massive half-built structure in Fengjie, Chongqing Municipality, that was erected as a tribute to immigrants to the Yangtze River. Often ridiculed as being excessive, ugly, and wasteful, the structure was eventually torn down in 2009. In his film *Still Life* (2006), the Chinese experimental filmmaker Jia Zhangke had the monument take off like a rocket ship, in order to poke fun at the government’s absurd tendency to develop on a mammoth scale. Kander also underscores the often ludicrousness of government actions and power. He selectively edits the view in his photograph so the monument appears to exist in a bleak landscape, and, by placing a human body in the foreground, he stresses the monument’s



Nadav Kander, *Fengjie III (Monument to Progress and Prosperity)*, Chongqing Municipality, 2007



Nadav Kander, *Qinghai Province II (Fallen Bridge)*, 2007

astonishing scale.

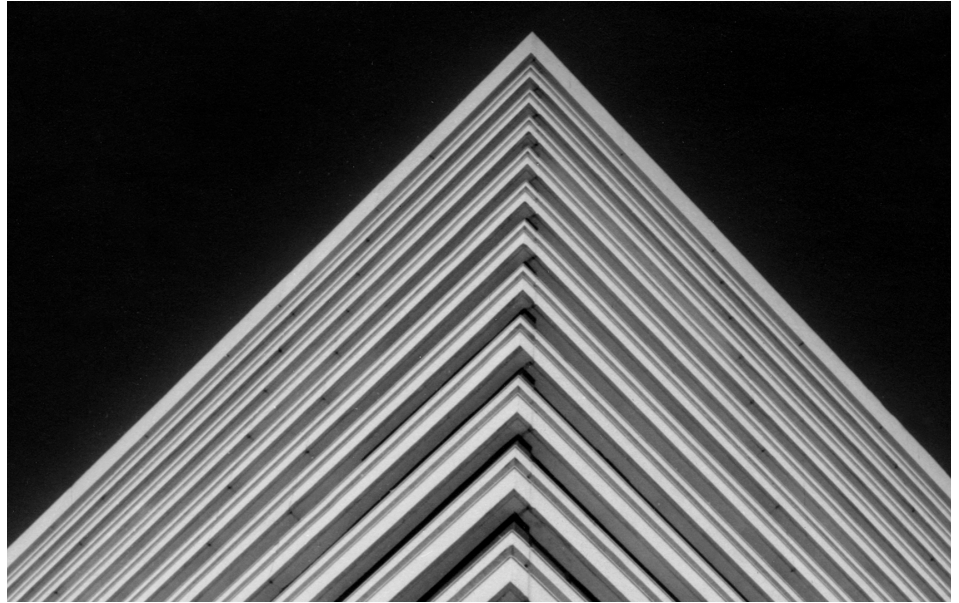
Jan Kempenaers (Belgian, b. 1968) photographs monuments throughout the former Yugoslavia, mostly Croatia, which were built in the 1960s and '70s when that country was a socialist republic. Originally meant to be reminders of a glorious past and extoll the virtues of a socialist future, many of these monuments went derelict during the war and the dissolution of the republic in the early 1990s; a few were preserved for tourists. Some of the monuments are figurative, in the tradition of socialist-realist sculpture, but many are abstract concrete and steel forms. Shooting them each frontally, with no special effects to enhance feelings of either grandeur or disrepair, Kempenaers resists

the temptation to portray the relics cynically, but he also refuses to make them pretty. The landscape in which they exist is not important to Kempenaers, and he provides no geographical or historical information. Instead, he simply records the monuments' mysterious and heavy forms and material. The landscape and its history thus become secondary, undermining our desire to know what these structures symbolize or mean. We are left to our own imaginations; each structure simply reflects its status as a *thing that reminds*.

Like Kempenaers, **Ana Vaz** (Brazilian, b. 1986) takes the history of mid-twentieth-century architecture as her starting point. Her video *Entre Temps* (2012) positions a modern housing estate in France as a site of charged meaning and shifting significance. A young girl walks through the development at both the beginning and end of the video, suggesting that everything in between is part of a thought or dream, including quiet, long shots of architectural details that are disrupted by a series of more brutal black-and-white stills of a building being raised by explosives. Vaz uses a poetic, ambiguous text in the voiceover narration that hints at the individuality of experience of place ("Cities are really like dreams, made of desires and fears"), failed intentions, and also at the impossibility of extracting uniform symbolism or meaning from a built environment: "I would like to give you meaning, that's it/But you are not a utopia/You are the present/You give me nothing but silence. . . Forms are loaded with memories. It is difficult to place meaning into things. Sometimes it is only a premonition."⁸

Ambiguity and fluidity of meaning are further explored in the work of **Iman Issa** (Egyptian, b. 1979), who conjures monuments that do not exist. Issa's project *Material* (2010–12) takes a memorial or a political conflict as its starting point, and using objects, videos, photographs, and text, creates abstract, maquette-like proposals for new monuments—ones that strip meaning and sentiment from the experience of viewing structures made to memorialize an event. In an era when we might be prone to hyper-memorialize, Issa reminds us of how unexceptional the experience of a monument can be, and how often meaning depends on local knowledge. In this way her work postulates that public monuments are ineffective, their messages diluted over time, and their symbolism so simple and reduced that they are emptied of meaning. Ultimately, she questions the ability of language and symbolism to summarize collective experience, as she emphasizes the unstable nature of both history and memory.

The tension between collective and individual memory also drives the work of **Basim Magdy** (Egyptian, b. 1977), whose project *Every Subtle Gesture* (2012–ongoing) pairs disparate images from his personal archive with ambiguous texts that often summon authoritative historical declarations. A picture of a simple garden shed, for example, is juxtaposed with text, meticulously embossed on the photo matte, stating, "It all took its toll on society." Or a picture of a toppled basketball net appears beside the words "Everybody saw the unavoidable end in the tiniest details." Inspired partly by the recent revolution in Egypt and the utopianism he witnessed eventually morphing into a "tangled web of confusion," Magdy describes *Every Subtle Gesture* as a reflection of collective disappointment, as



Ana Vaz, Still from *Entre Temps*, 2012



Florian Joye, *Bawadi*, 2006

he constructs a “loose narrative based on a group of people who keep trying to succeed but continually fail.”⁹

The artist **Nicolas Moulin** (French, b.1970) also investigates failed idealism. In his video *Interlichtengespentereinzuladendarandenken* (2010), he creates an eerie black-and-white animated cityscape full of sober, brutalist structures through which the viewer moves. Made from elements of buildings designed by celebrated contemporary architects and extracted from Google Earth, Moulin reduces the built forms back to two-dimensional graphic ideas. Partly inspired by Koolhaas and Mau’s definition of the *Automonument*, Moulin’s animation ambles through what he describes as an “anti-city,”

an absurd, impersonal, and graphic urban environment. In this somber, yet futuristic video, Moulin underscores our perpetual desire for buildings to be significant and monumental as he hints at the darker aspects of rampant development.

The work of **Florian Joye** (Swiss, b. 1979) also reacts to unrestrained development and touches on the idea of the future or “auto” monument. Joye’s photographs record signage and advertisements for planned developments in the Middle East, often created as assemblages of imagery of iconic buildings. Mostly shot at close range, Joye focuses more on the iconography of capitalism than the sweeping views of mushrooming cities that have become typical of the region. Other images depict recent state-of-the-art architecture juxtaposed with older infrastructure such as the Burj Khalifa skyscraper in Dubai set in the background of a field of power line towers. In this work Joye effectively hints at our need to hyper-memorialize and to build structures that, while poised to be iconic, ultimately compete for attention more than they signify or remind.

As human beings we create, record, and build for a variety of reasons and to a multiplicity of ends. Often when we add flourish to a practical form, or record for posterity, we are acting on an impulse to commemorate—to stake a claim, record history, make an enduring mark. And sometimes these commemorations are used to varnish history or obscure trauma. We are perhaps at our most enlightened when intellect and emotion meet in creative endeavors such as the ones in this exhibition—all made with a grace of intention that cannot be suppressed. —**Karen Irvine, Curator and Associate Director**

1. Leslie George Katz, “The American Monument,” in Lee Friedlander, *Lee Friedlander: American Monument* (New York: Eakins Press Foundation, 1976).
2. E. J. Johnson, “Do You Know a Monument to Modesty or Mirth?” in *Remove Not the Ancient Landmark: Public Monuments and Moral Values*, ed. Donald Martin Reynolds (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1996), pp. 13–15.
3. Claes Oldenburg, interview with Paul Carroll in *Proposals for Monuments and Buildings: 1965–69* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), p. 25.
4. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL: OMA*, 2nd edition (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), pp. xxvii and xxxii.
5. Geert Goiris, on erraticphenomena.com, Sunday, May 23, 2010.
6. Nadav Kander, quoted in Sean O’Hagan, “Nadav Kander: Dust Review—Haunting and Painterly,” Sunday, September 14, 2014, theguardian.com.
7. Ana Carden-Coyne, “Gendering Death and Renewal: Classical Monuments of the First World War,” *Humanities Research* 10, no. 2 (2003), http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/MMTS_5_Carden-Coyne.pdf.
8. Ana Vaz, *Entre Temps*, 2012, HD video, running time 11:06.
9. Basim Magdy, as told to Stephanie Bailey, *Artforum*, September 4, 2013, <http://artforum.com/words/id=42880>.