

GRACE *of* INTENTION:

PHOTOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURE & THE MONUMENT

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MoCP
Museum of
Contemporary Photography

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Viewer's Guide



Jan Kempenaers
Spomenik #13 (Korenica), 2007

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *Grace of Intention* and contains information about the works on view and questions for looking and discussion.

You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. A PDF with images that can be projected for classroom use can also be found there. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here. mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php.

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Introduction

Driven by the human impulse to memorialize, monuments champion collective aspirations, providing a sense of continuum in their attempts to cement certain narratives about our past. Some monuments are magnificent, celebrated gestures made in the form of impressive buildings or imposing sculptures; others are anonymous and unobtrusive, situated in the most unassuming locations. Most are conceived with a sense of exalted purpose. Indeed, monuments as sculptures or grand buildings are often declarative, deliberate expressions. Yet they don't have to be purpose-built. Buildings can become unintentional monuments due to events that occur within and around them, or perhaps in their very expression. Like photographs, they are considered the embodiment of lasting evidence, usually created to memorialize an event, a person, an era, or an ideology.

With a primary aim of communicating with the masses, monuments leverage interpretability; yet 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 can also obscure traumatic realities by applying sanitized, more palatable narratives to our human foibles. Photographs are similarly shifty. Whether through organic or deliberate means, the intention to commemorate is often complicated and ultimately rendered futile.

Grace of Intention explores the many links between architecture and photography through the phenomenon of the monument—in both its ideological and tangible expressions. Although seemingly fixed and straightforward, architecture and photography are lithesome disciplines, their creation hinging on the effects of light, space and time, and their interpretation on personal experience and context. Both architecture and photography are adept at aiding memory, whether idealized or more factual, personal or collective, and are therefore strongly tied to the human urge to memorialize. The eight international artists whose



Florian Joye
Kryptonit, 2006

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 commemorate—to stake a claim, record history, make an enduring mark.

Karen Irvine
Curator

Geert Goiris

Belgian, b. 1971



Geert Goiris
Ecologists Place, 2006

Belgian photographer Geert Goiris travels the world, seeking out unusual, remote places and interpreting them in enigmatic images that reflect discovery, unease, and melancholy. Despite the remarkably detailed image quality afforded by his large-format film camera, his images don't overwhelm us with definitive information. Instead they are intentionally unpinned from a specific era or time period, giving the feeling that we could be simultaneously looking at the past and the future. The absence of specific information provides an opening for us to narrate the images, an opportunity that highlights the agility of photography as a means to provide or withhold information—and an echo of the shifts in meaning endured by many monuments over time.

Nadav Kander

South African, b. 1961



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

Nadav Kander has traveled across the globe focusing on environmental degradation, places of mass development, and recording, in his words, the “aesthetics of destruction.” A master at making the bleak appear sublime, Kander produces photographs that are riveting in their beauty and stillness, and speak to the role of ruins in the landscape. In this exhibition, Kander displays works from two projects—one documents a Cold War-era secret military test site for atomic weapons in Kazakhstan, the other is an exploration of development along the Yangtze River in China. One image depicts the “Monument to Progress and Prosperity,” a massive half-built structure in Fengjie, Chongqing Municipality, China, 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 many of his photographs, Kander applies formal order to sites of transformation, precariousness, and destruction, creating compelling and complicated images of the absurdities of a built landscape conceived and created out of a lust for power.

Jan Kempenaers

Belgian, b. 1968

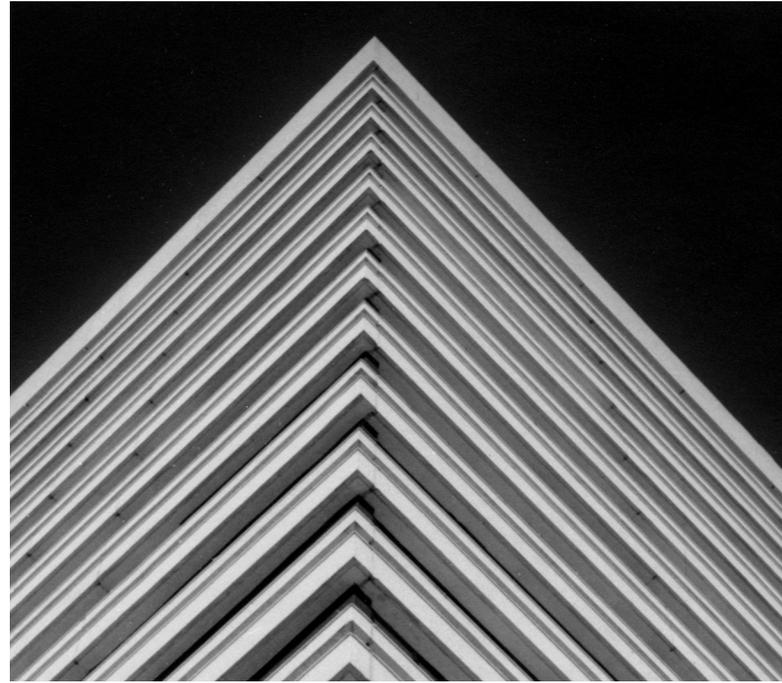


Jan Kempenaers
Spomenik #3 (Kosmaj), 2006

In his project, *Spomenik*, which means “monument” in Serbo-Croatian, Jan Kempenaers photographs structures throughout the former Yugoslavia built under the command of Joseph Tito in the 1960s and '70s when it 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 or were destroyed during the war and the dissolution of the republic in the early 1990s. Most of the structures, made in the heavy brutalist style that was popular at the time, favor abstract form over figurative representation as a way of promoting cultural “togetherness” over individual accomplishment. Kempenaers approaches each structure frontally, and makes no attempt to enhance impressions of either grandeur or disrepair. Instead, he simply records the monuments’ cryptic forms and raw material. The landscape and its history thus become secondary, undermining our desire to know what these structures symbolize or mean.

Ana Vaz

Brazilian, b. 1986

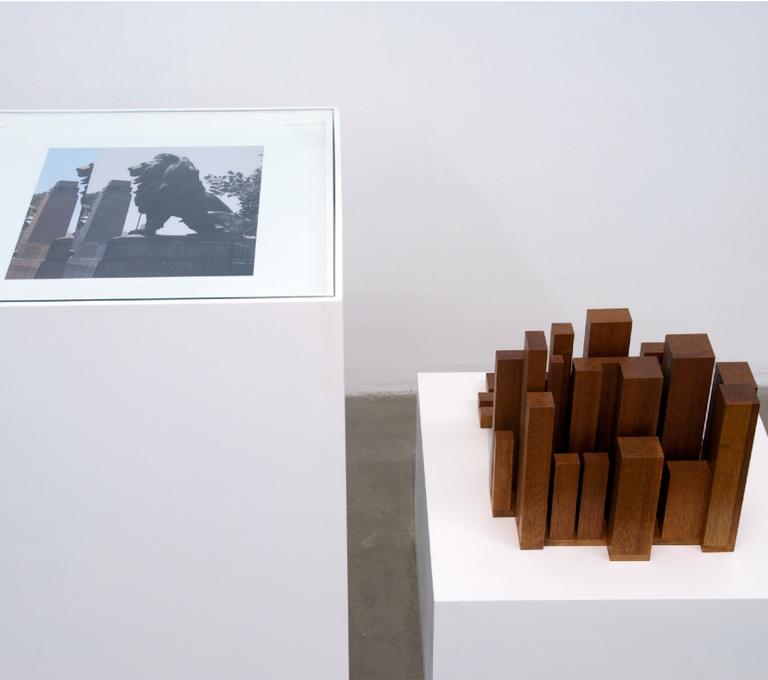


Ana Vaz
still from *Entre Temps*, 2012

Ana Vaz’s film *Entre Temps* positions a modern housing estate in France as a site of charged meaning and shifting significance. A young girl walks through the mid-twentieth-century development at both the beginning and end of the film, 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. Exploring the individuality of the experience of place, Vaz uses a poetic, ambiguous text in the voiceover narration that hints at failed intentions and the impossibility of extracting uniform meaning from a built environment.

Iman Issa

Egyptian, b. 1979



Iman Issa

Material for a sculpture commemorating a singer whose singing became a source of unity of disparate and often opposing forces, 2011

Ambiguity and fluidity of meaning are explored in Iman Issa's project *Material*, which presents maquette-like proposals for monuments that do not exist. Issa's proposals for monuments are puzzling and inexplicit, offering a counterpoint to the usual directness of meaning and sentiment that infuses most structures made to memorialize an event. 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, Issa questions the ability of language and symbolism to summarize collective experience, as she emphasizes the unstable nature of both history and memory.

Basim Magdy

Egyptian, b. 1977



NO MORE FEAR MY FRIENDS

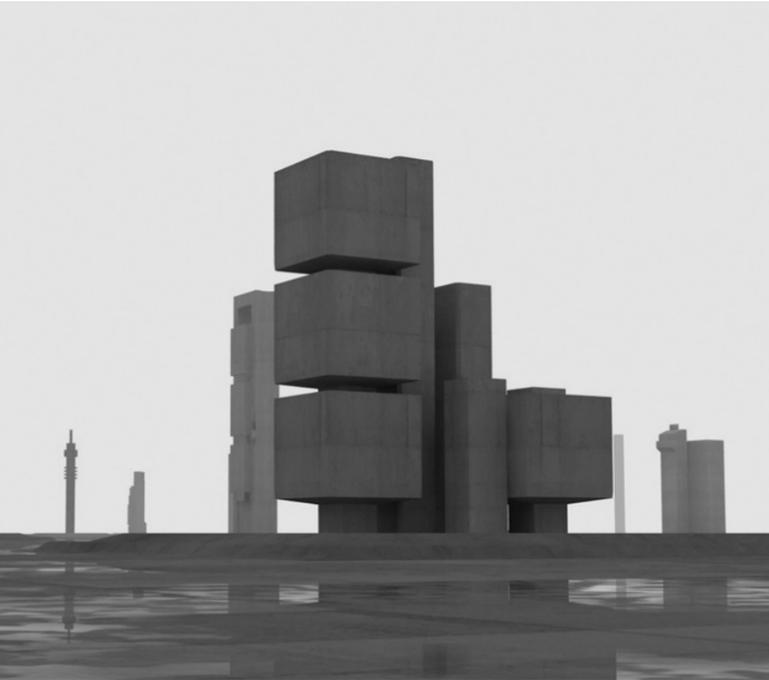
Basim Magdy

From the series *Every Subtle Gesture*
2012 – ongoing

Basim Magdy's series *Every Subtle Gesture* explores the tension between collective and individual memory by pairing disparate images from his personal archive with ambiguous texts that often summon authoritative historical declarations. 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 he constructs a "loose narrative based on a group of people who keep trying to succeed but continually fail."

Nicolas Moulin

French, b.1970



Nicolas Moulin

Still from *Interlichtengespentereinzuladendarandenken*, 2010

Nicolas Moulin's *Interlichtengespentereinzuladendarandenken* video investigates failed idealism by creating an eerie black-and-white animated cityscape full of sober, brutalist structures made from elements of buildings designed by celebrated contemporary architects and extracted from Google Earth. Partly inspired by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau's definition of the *Automonument*—the idea that a building automatically becomes a monument by virtue of its sheer size and volume—Moulin's animation ambles through what he describes as an “anti-city,” an impersonal and absurd futuristic urban environment. As he underscores our perpetual desire for buildings to be significant, Moulin hints at the darker aspects of rampant development.

Florian Joye

Swiss, b. 1979



Florian Joye

Bawadi, 2006

The work of Florian Joye reacts to unrestrained development and touches on the idea of the auto-monument. Joye's photographs record newly-built structures and advertisements for planned developments in the Middle East whose imagery is created using images of iconic buildings. His works ask, “What might our future monuments be?” against the backdrop of famous existing monuments brought together in a fantastical fusion that skews their original intention. Much as previous cultures took on the architectures of conquered nations, structures of the future may attempt to connect with past monuments to assure a lasting civilization. Mostly shot at close range, Joye's images focus more on the iconography of capitalism than the sweeping views of mushrooming cities that have become typical of the region. In this work Joye effectively hints at our need to hyper-memorialize and to build structures that, while poised to be iconic, seem to compete for attention more than they signify or remind.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is a monument? What kinds of structures would you call monuments? For what reasons do we create monuments?
2. Artist Nadav Kander has photographed various structures. Choose one and describe what you see. Is it a monument? Why do you think so?
3. In her essay for this exhibition, curator Karen Irvine states, “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.” Which is Kander photographing? Why do you think he made this choice?
4. Nadav Kander travels the globe, focusing on environmental degradation and places of mass development and devastation, recording the aesthetics of destruction. Kander’s photograph *Priozersk XIV (I Was Told She Held an Oar), Kazakhstan* (2011) was created in a secret military test site for atomic weapons. Judging from the title and the place where the photograph was taken, what might this statue represent now, that it did not originally? Does knowing that this image was created on a nuclear test site change its effect? What does the photograph suggest about the impact of these tests on the landscape, and our health? What else might it suggest?
5. How does scale influence the perception of architecture?
6. Throughout this exhibition, you will encounter various types of monuments and even buildings that contain ideologies and meanings beyond their useful function. Although monuments and buildings are rigid structures designed to withstand the effects of time, the intended messages they convey are shaped by history, context, and the specific knowledge and experiences of individual viewers. How did your impressions of the monuments depicted in this exhibition differ from the original creators’ intentions? There is often a gap between the intended meaning of a monument and viewers’ interpretations of it. Did you find this to be the case?
7. Artist Iman Issa does not photograph actual monuments, but rather proposes monuments that do not exist. Read the titles of her works on view. Do those titles describe monuments similar to any you have seen in real life? Why do you think Issa chose the titles she did? Is Issa making a critique? What is it?
8. What might Iman Issa’s sparse sculptures suggest about our experience of monuments, generally? Moreover, how does Issa’s text affect our experience of the sculpture? If the sculptures are meant to symbolize a person or event, what does their sparseness say about our ability to summarize collective experience?
9. Pick a photograph of an actual monument in the exhibition (those appearing in the work of Nadav Kander, Basim Magdy, or Jan Kempenaers). What do you think it commemorates? Who do you think it’s for? Do you think the monument appears the same in real life as it does in the photograph?
10. There are texts within Basim Magdy’s works that allude to political ideology. Can you identify examples within this work that are generic political narratives, not specific to any particular government or state? What might the artist be saying about the ways in which monuments are used by governments?
11. Geert Goiris’s work deals with the idea of the monument in an indirect way. What are some examples of the ways in which he alludes to the idea of the monument within his work?

12. What is the significance of the passage of time in Geert Goiris's work? What about the significance of photography? Something as insignificant as a pile of snow, for example, suggests the passage of time (i.e., the snow will eventually melt away) —how might this relate to the idea of the monument?
13. How does a photograph, much like a monument, serve to memorialize something? How are Geert Goiris's photographs of the specific locations of crumbling modernist structures different from the other images of architecture in this exhibition? Why do you think he includes these images? How do the formal choices he makes in these pictures affect the way in which we think about these types of architecture? How do pictures shift the meaning or feeling of a solid structure (for example, through the artist's use of light, time, or space)?
14. Jan Kempenaers photographs former Yugoslavian monuments in a serial manner, conveying neither feelings of grandeur nor despair. Kempenaers' photographs include no historical or geographical information about the monuments he depicts. Why might he make this choice? What does it do to our experience of the photographs?
15. Without reading the labels next to Jan Kempenaers's photographs, what can you infer about location and place from the images themselves?
16. Political monuments are intended to be visual expressions of governmental power and control. Have you encountered other monuments that express political ideologies? How is the symbolism in these works similar to or different from political monuments with which you are personally familiar? To what degree is this symbolism universal, reappearing in the monuments erected by governments with clashing ideologies?
17. Photographs, like monuments, rely on viewers to interpret their symbolism. Does Jan Kempenaers enhance or diminish the power of the monuments he photographs? Why do you think so?
18. Using Jan Kempenaers work, describe some of the things that have changed about these sculptures that were once symbolic of an ideology? Are there any monuments that you can think of that have unintentionally shifted their messages? Can you think of examples of monuments that are neither buildings nor sculpture?
19. What do architecture and photography have in common? What concerns do architects and photographers share? What is photography's relationship to monuments? When the disciplines of architecture and photography meet, what are some of the things that happen? For the artist creating the photograph? For the architect? The context of a building?
20. Florian Joye's photographs record signage and advertisements for planned developments in the Middle East. Joye touches on the idea of the "auto" monument, meaning a building becomes a monument by virtue of its sheer size and volume. While looking at Joye's photographs, consider whether it is possible to build massive structures without them automatically becoming a monument. What might our future monuments look like? Joye's photographs also record signage, which utilizes imagery of famous monuments. Why might these signs use this type of imagery?