

The Dialectic of Vision and the Suggestive Power of Objects

A Cultural Studies Approach to Peter Eisenman's Field of Stelae

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Abstract

Cultural studies is here understood as an approach that places emphasis on a close contemplation of its object of investigation in a specific context in order to understand its meaning as part of a larger cultural system. In this paper, I will try to identify the value of such an approach for a discussion of built form. The memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin serves as my example and I will draw on a variety of sources to present an engagement with it, namely my observation in the field, my own photographic material, as well as a discussion of theory behind minimal art that will lead to a more philosophical investigation. The aim is to show the discursive openness of architectural form, provided that an investigation starts from the object itself, as opposed to a preconfigured way of looking at it that conceptualises and embeds a structure for perception and association before paying any attention to its materiality. I thus argue in favour of an approach that embraces an experiential encounter with that object not only methodologically, but also representationally in its own documentation.

Introduction

What can we gain from the built form? Its materiality? Its objecthood? Looking closely at architecture and the city, I argue that we have before us huge pools of cultural knowledge that need to be uncovered and investigated. As much as an abstracted research perspective and related writing succeeds in showing the implications within wider networks and the relations between structures in contexts beyond the local, it has its limitations and often excludes the discovery and scrutiny of the actual fabric and material. I will thus approximate and zoom in on the material to engage in a close contemplation. This here means an empirical encounter with the object of investigation, with the experience of this encounter being clearly communicated as part of the research findings, and with the researcher being aware

of his or her position. Above all, it means entering a discursive exchange with the object. The aim then is to extract and understand an argument from the object's materiality through the observer's engagement with it. In the present paper, I will try to exemplify this approach by recording and discussing my own engagement with a built form.



Fig 1

The memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin serves as my example and I will draw on a variety of sources to present an engagement with it, namely my observation in the field, visual and textual reflection and a discussion of theory behind minimal art that will lead to a more philosophical enquiry. The aim is to show the discursive openness of architectural form, provided that an investigation starts from the object itself. This direction runs countercurrent to a preconfigured way of looking at it that conceptualizes and embeds a structure for perception and association before paying any attention to its materiality as an object of experience.

The field of stelae has been selected not for its commemorative and political implications, but for its literal openness and easy accessibility for the walking observer, as well as for its seemingly simple form, which I will explore in the following.

Is 'concrete always con'crete?

In line with my chosen approach, this paper begins where its argument was born – in Berlin. It was early afternoon when I visited the field of stelae, and the sun – hindered by clouds frequently blocking out its rays – was working towards removing the traces of rain that I had been watching with much dismay in the morning. However, I was quickly transfixed by the rain's transformation of the concrete stelae into slick, smooth surfaces when suddenly; my hearing directed my attention to a place I wasn't yet able to see. What was audible was the sound of lively engagement which reached my position clearly. Somewhere, people seemed to be playing hide and seek, or, as it turned out, a somewhat modified version of this children's favourite. I followed the voices that – I'm tempted to say – 'illustrated' rhythmic acts of disappearance and discovery, that is, the group's members' separation and reunion amongst the grey concrete. This in turn heightened my own visual perception in a way that made me somewhat anxiously anticipate the encounter of one of them around one of the field's many corners.

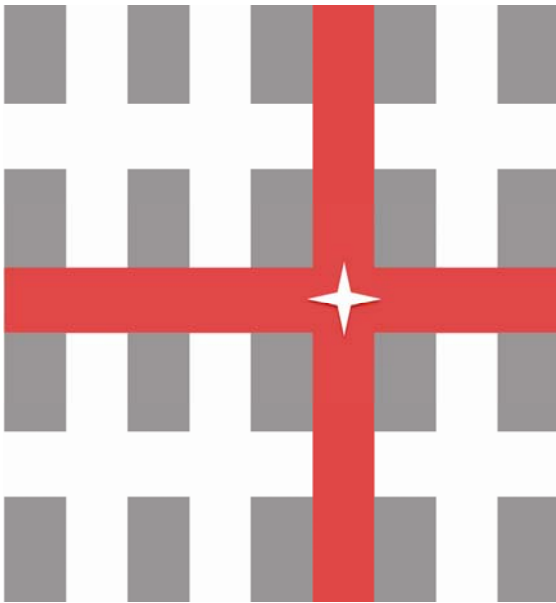


Fig 2

The structure's openness and easy penetrability for the gaze along its axes seems to facilitate surveillance, with the intersections of aisles cutting through the concrete in four ground-level directions. However, what at first seems like a seat of ocular power turns out to be a true 'hot spot'. With four distinct lines of sight (ignoring the view to the sky), I can keep visual control of only one of them at any given time. The undulating floor of the field calls up maritime associations – the people quickly crossing through my line of vision appear like fish or dolphins jumping out of the water, just to disappear as quickly as they surfaced. With sounds and voices being muffled by the surrounding concrete, somebody's presence

that was heard a second ago vanishes quickly. The combination of the knowledge of the other person's proximity and the visual inaccessibility of even the closest hiding places, accounts for much quick looking around corners. The appeal of the situation and of this variation of hide and seek is its momentariness, having only a second to be looking in the right direction, and – for me – having only a second to hit the camera release.



Fig 3

After a moment of auditory pursuit, combined with physical immobility, I captured one member of the hide and seek group just before he disappeared again into the sea that the field had by now become. I later approached this group of American university students, asking them whether the surrounding structure entices them to play hide and seek. 'Yes' was the reluctant and self-conscious, yet unanimous reply. Asked how it does so, they told me that 'it is like a maze.'

In the official booklet that forms a companion to the memorial, Joachim Schlör states that it

*is not an impenetrable chaos, nor an oppressive labyrinth. Its structure is not monumental but transparent. Nowhere inside it do you lose your bearings vis-à-vis the outside, even when you are deep inside the field of stones [...]. It is not a monument that attempts to overwhelm the viewer or impose claustrophobic fears on him.*¹



Fig 4

It might be adequate to say that the field of stelae is not claustrophobic in a traditional sense, and certainly a way out will always be visible in at least two of the four basic directions, no matter where I am. In fact, on the edge of the field, where the stelae are significantly lower, I am given a true overview that also conveys the comfort of easy navigability and transparency. This might apply to the grid-like basic structure, but it is all the more disconcerting if I think about where the limitations of such transparency are once I am deeper inside the field.



Fig 5

Standing with my toes aligned with the edges of two stelae, about to enter the intersecting aisle before me, I might be able to see ahead, outside the field, but how do I see the field itself from the inside, when I look away from the main axis, say to the left? I at best see individual stelae, the parts of the field that paradoxically block my vision of 'it' as a whole. The overview I have from the field's shallow edge is lost entirely as soon as the stelae outgrow me.

Here, some of the theory behind minimalist art (a label often contested by its main contributors) seems a promising tool for the discussion of the spatial interaction with the memorial. The stelae in Eisenman's field undeniably bear a resemblance to some of the works produced in the 1960s and 70s by artists such as Tony Smith, Donald Judd, or Robert Morris.² The latter, in fact, addresses directly the question of the size of sculpture in relation to the human body (in his seminal essay *Notes on Sculpture*), saying that

[i]t is necessary literally to keep one's distance from large objects in order to take the whole of any one view into one's field of vision. The smaller the object the closer one approaches it and, therefore, it has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer. It is this necessary greater distance of the object in space from our bodies, in order that it be seen at all, that structures the non-personal or public mode.³

Here lies Morris' basic distinction between public and intimate objects, that is, those that are larger, and those that are smaller than the human body. Ideal objects for the sculptor Morris are what he calls 'unitary' forms.⁴ They are simple and '[t]heir parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation.'⁵ This means that they can only relate to other objects as a whole, that there are no relationships between their own parts, that there are in fact no parts in them at all. To say it with Donald Judd: 'In the new work the shape, image, colour and surface are single and not partial and scattered. There aren't any neutral or moderate areas or parts, any connections or transitional areas.'⁶ This is the ideal case of contemplating the large, 'public' object from an appropriate distance. However, I still stand at the threshold on the edge of two stelae, probing into the limitations of my field of vision. Turning left, I have lost visual contact with the outside world, but the 'single' or unitary objects in my field of vision, too, escape me as much as they escape the camera viewfinder. If I now move forward approximately four inches into the intersecting aisle, and look left again, my field of vision changes dramatically.

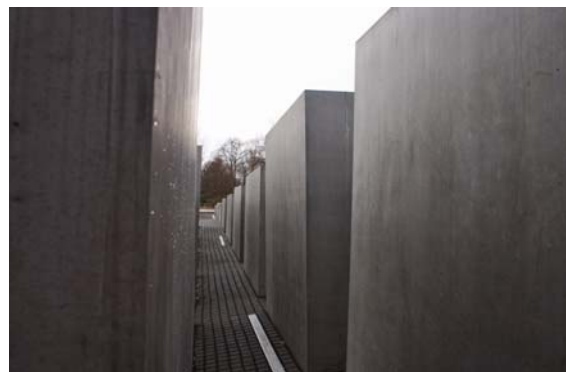


Fig 6

Here, I re-establish a connection with the outside, but as for the stelae, I still do not get a clear view on any one of them. Employing Robert Morris' terminology, I am facing 'public' objects as they are larger than my body. However, their placement forces me into dealing with them as if they were intimate objects. In fact, it forces me into subjecting them to 'detailed' scrutiny,

because I literally cannot get away from them without losing the visual connection.

For Morris, the term 'detail' 'should be understood to refer to all factors in a work that pull it toward intimacy by allowing specific elements to separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work.'⁷



Fig 7

It is the spatial proximity between the stelae, their own inter-relationships that transform them into intimate objects for the observer. Paradoxically, it is this accumulation of public objects that ultimately renders them intimate for the observer. In this image, we don't just see two planes married in a perfect corner, but we see inside that corner, and underneath the now disjointed planes. Ideally, there never even existed a relationship between them, in coherence with Morris' conception of 'unitary form', but here it is turned inside out, made visible, and the planes are thus established as separate parts of or within the object. The stela literally breaks open, enabling us to glimpse at and imagine its inside, thus creating not only a relationship between its outer parts, but also between its outside and inside. In this engagement with the detail, the mechanism as Morris describes it starts to work: '[...] the public, external quality of the object [is reduced], and the viewer [is eliminated] to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.'⁸

This means that the object is no longer single and unitary. It is no longer exposed to an external gaze, but the relationship between the observer and the observed is reconfigured in a way that makes it increasingly difficult to disentangle. The observer is no longer in any position to simply 'see' the object, or look at it as something disconnected from himself, but the discovery of relationships within the work pulls him into an actual engagement with that relationship.

With this collapse of the external object, we seem to have come to the end of any possibility of singleness or unitary form, at least in those deeper parts of the field of stelae. However, this judgment comes from a position that has very conveniently and rather unquestioningly accepted such possibility in the first place, in line with Donald Judd's and Robert Morris' views on sculpture. So let us think again, this time with the help of French philosopher and historian of art Georges Didi-Huberman. Insightfully, he describes minimalist sculpture as '[...] le rêve visuel de la chose même'⁹ [the visual dream of the thing itself].¹⁰ The implication here is that these objects cannot be thought without a dream-like quality attached to them, which makes impossible their existence as objects entirely external and disconnected from the consciousness of the observer. In his book *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (What we see looks back at us), Didi-Huberman discusses objects of minimal art and uses them as tools to uncover a dialectic of vision with much wider implications than just minimalist sculpture. Oscillating in the viewer's gaze between their perception as *le plus simple objet à voir* (the simplest thing to see) and the *évident* (void) believed to exist on the inside, he argues that these objects are not as evident as it might seem; or as was expressed in Frank Stella's famous formula 'what you see is what you see'¹¹. It is the dialectic of vision that lies between Stella's doubly assertive or tautological description and the belief (*croyance*) that what we see looks back at us. The minimalists' convictions of singleness and unitary form can easily be seen as a tautological exercise, underlining what appears to be visually evident. Didi-Huberman describes their ideal objects as

des objets réduits à la seule formalité de leur forme, à la seule visibilité de leur configuration visible,

offerte sans mystère, entre ligne et plan, surface et volume'¹²

[objects reduced to the pure formality of their form, to the pure visibility of their shape, which is

presented without any mystery between line and plane, surface and volume.

It is exactly this mystery, the absence of which is necessitated by Stella's 'what you see is what you see', that confronts us in this picture (fig. 7). In the detail of the cracked corner we see that surface and volume are not mere terms that become obsolete in the minimalist perfection of a unitary form. Rather, they are subjected to territorial negotiation that is here made visible. More importantly, when the surface of an object is the passive recipient of an observer's gaze that makes him tautologically confirm that 'what you see is what you see', what then would be the role of the inside? The inside draws its power from its inaccessibility and from its enigmatic character. We often look at a volume from the outside, asking ourselves what might be on the inside. Even the simple question of whether a volume is solid or hollow introduces imagination into the previous tautological equation, and thereby discards it entirely. We are then, following Didi-Huberman, confronted with a division between what we see (*ce que nous voyons*) and what looks back at us (*ce qui nous regarde*). The former is the exercise of the man of tautology (*l'homme de la tautologie*), the latter that of the man of belief (*l'homme de la croyance*). However, the two are not just two different perspectives that can be taken on and be dropped again, two different identities an observer can choose. The dilemma lies in that they are dialectically intertwined. We don't 'see what we see', OR imagine 'what looks back at us', but it is the dialectic of vision that looks back at us from what we see. It disturbs the visual in a way that makes any decision between tautology and belief impossible, that in fact renders the idea of such a decision obsolete.¹³ This conception serves to elucidate the experience of the field of stelae. The visibility of its individual parts is never untouched by the *othering* power of an assumed void within them. For Didi-Huberman, the prime example of an object that destabilises and disturbs our vision in this dialectic sense is the grave.¹⁴

What we see in the grave is the evidence of a volume, and what looks back at us is the void inside it, which we all know exists. Ignoring the inside means ignoring and denying the existence of the dead body, which – ultimately – is the future of our own body. That is the tautological position. The position of belief, on the other hand, denies the evidence of the volume as much as the presence of death in its void: 'C'est l'être-là et c'est la tombe comme lieu qui sont ici déniés pour ce qu'ils sont vraiment, matériellement.'¹⁵



Fig 8

[It is the existence and the grave as a location that are denied here, because of their actuality and materiality]. That is, the material of the grave becomes a symbol that merely references an elsewhere, where the unscathed and sound body is alive.¹⁶ The field of stelae, however, is no graveyard. Peter Eisenman himself underlines this distinction in the opening lines of his own commentary on the memorial's design. It is worth quoting it at length:

Architecture is about monuments and graves, said the Viennese architect Adolf Loos at the turn of the 20th century. By this he meant that an individual human life could be commemorated by a stone, a slab, a cross, a star. The simplicity of this idea ended with the Holocaust and Hiroshima and the mechanisms of mass death. Today, an individual can no longer be certain to die an individual death, and architecture can no longer remember life as it once did. The markers that were formerly symbols of individual life and death must be changed, and this has a profound effect on the idea of memory and the monument. The enormity and horror of the Holocaust are such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate. The memory of the Holocaust can never be one of nostalgia.¹⁷

There is more to the stelae than specific objects and solid volumes. Yet it is only from the proposition of simplicity, of losing all aura and latency, that they begin to articulate their concept of remembrance of the unspeakable, the incomprehensible, that is on the inside, and that we cannot look at, but that in fact looks back at us from what we see. This friction between the evident outside and the uncanny inside reaches embodiment in the observer, resulting in an unsettlingly diffuse feeling that, following German phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels, is a clear sign of *strangeness* [*Fremdheit*]:

Die Fremdheit der Dinge äußert sich darin, dass wir im Zustand der Beunruhigung nicht sagen können, wodurch wir beunruhigt werden, so wie wir laut Heidegger in der Angst nicht angeben können, wovor wir uns ängstigen [...].¹⁸

[The strangeness of things manifests itself in our inability to, in a state of disturbance, say what disturbs us, like we are, according to Heidegger, unable to say what we are afraid of in a state of fear (...)].

More importantly, that which disturbs or frightens, should not be seen as a stable object we choose to confront:

Was unseren Blick beunruhigt, ist nicht etwas, das wir nach Belieben sehen können, sondern etwas, das uns zu sehen gibt.¹⁹

[What disturbs our gaze is nothing that we can see at will, but something that causes us to see].

Here, our gaze is responding to what makes us see, to what grips our attention, and it doesn't have to be a physical object, say somebody's brightly coloured raincoat on a murky day.



It could in fact be the imagined gaze of the other in a game of hide and seek. We subject ourselves to it and respond with our own careful looking and movement, which continually reconfigures our engagement with the surrounding objects. At every corner, in every 'hot spot', we ask again: 'what will I see, what will see me?'

Concluding remarks

Considering that I am walking through the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe that has a very explicit social agenda, let me finish by addressing another important question: How can an observation of a game of hide and seek and a discussion of some of the theory behind minimal art be useful for understanding this particular structure? And how could such an approach not be seen as a misinterpretation or violation of that social agenda of remembrance? I called this a cultural studies approach, and by that I mean an approach that engages in a close contemplation of its object of investigation – theoretically, as well as actually or physically, in order to frame and understand the possible meanings or relevance of that object in a specific context. This approach de-emphasises the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge, strengthens a fluid and multi-modal investigation, including the direct engagement

with the object and the representation of that engagement as part of the resulting research output. Thus, the aim here is not to fix parameters and establish canonical testing procedures for research or architectural discussions, but rather to engage different discourses without necessarily subscribing to any one of them. Moreover, the objective is to experience the object not as a thing to be explained but as an entity that nurtures discourse in its own right. In this sense, even the observation of a playful engagement with a structure commemorating the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, yields information on mechanisms of making sense of the built form, as politically contestable as such behaviour in this space might be. In the present context, a comparison to works of art is more obvious, considering that most – if not all – memorials are also works of sculpture. Both types of engagement could, of course, be extended into or complemented by others.

I have tried to show that close contemplation and experiential engagement with the built form give access to different ways of sense-making than those of purely theoretical procedures. However, the former certainly do not replace the latter. On the contrary, these ways have to work together in an attempt to enrich understanding and to exploit the intersections between the two. One can lead to the other, and the researcher's position in relation to them should not be obscured but highlighted. This requires any architectural discussion to place and test its own production in specific cultural contexts, and to start an investigation from its objects in order to uncover their true suggestive power.

Notes

- 1 Joachim Schlör, *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas. Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe* (Berlin, München, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2005), p. 38.
- 2 Considering minimalist sculptor Richard Serra's involvement in the initial design of the monument, this resemblance is not surprising. Serra withdrew from the project when revisions became necessary, feeling that his artwork would be compromised (s. Günter Schlusche, 'A memorial is built,' in *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2005), p. 22-23. For a concise account of the complex decision-making process underlying the coming-into-existence of the monument, see James E. Young's chapter 'Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem – and Mine,' in James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 184-223.
- 3 Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture,' in Gregory Battcock (ed), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 231.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 228.
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 226.
- 6 Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), p. 187.
- 7 Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture,' p. 232.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233.
- 9 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), p. 33.
- 10 This translation and all those following are my own.
- 11 Georges Didi-Huberman, p. 32.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 31.
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 49.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 17.
- 15 *Ibid.* p. 21.
- 16 *Ibid.* p.21.
- 17 Peter Eisenman, 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,' in *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2005), p. 10.
- 18 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sinnesschwellen: Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 3*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 126.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

