

“Public Spaces of Memory: contested visualisations of absence in Cairo”

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Extended Abstract

A city like Cairo has been historically a site for dreams of modernization, which entails - as most modernizing projects do- valuing life and making it possible. In a Foucauldian sense, this entails a biopolitical ambition of controlling and governing the city, anchoring it and bringing its identity and the designated memory of its historicity to light. At the heart of this ambition of making the city livable, however, there are complex processes of negotiating the presence and visualization of death within it.

This presentation stems from the question of who dies for the nation? And how will they remain present in the city? How is visualization of the same mode of absence -that is martyrdom- incorporated very differently by different practices that seek in their own way to inscribe this visualization of absence in the city.

Guided by these questions, my presentation draws on theoretical resource from both Edward Casey's conception of public memory and their relationship to space¹, as well recent scholarship that is interested in the importance of absence in the present². juxtaposes unlikely cases of different practices of visualizing absence in public spaces. In these cases the figure of the martyr, and the will to visually commemorate it, is central, as well as the role played by the imagery of death, sacrifice, justice, victory and defeat.

The first is the example of *Commemoration in Concrete*. That is in reference to the story and process of constructing a monument for the Unknown Soldier in post-independence Cairo. The most common practice that weaves absence into a political narrative of the nation, and to visualize it in urban space, is through memorials. Among them nothing goes far in bringing absence into presence as the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A couple of decades ago Benedict Anderson³ opened his book by establishing the link between the practice of building Tombs and cenotaphs of unknown soldiers and the imagination of the Nation. The Unknown Soldier is uncontested; he is unknown in the sense of his individuality belongs to the nation. His own narrative and life is irrelevant since his death gives life to the nation. His anonymity is central to self-identity of the

¹ Edward S. Casey, 'Public Memory in Place and Time', in *Public Memory*, ed. by Kendall Phillips (University of Alabama Press, 2004).

² L. Meier, L. Frers and E. Sigvardsdotter, 'The Importance of Absence in the Present: Practices of Remembrance and the Contestation of Absences', *Cultural Geographies*, 20 (2013), 423–30.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p.9.

nation. His fatality is scripted into the continuity and immortality of the nation⁴, anchoring the nation's past and future, trauma and victory. In this paper I analyze one of my PhD research case studies of the monument- its competition, visualization, choice of mode of representation and/or abstraction, as well as the choice of its location. Moreover I follow its eventual fate as the site of the head of the state's assassination, and his place of burial. Only after the assassination of the President, does the tomb have an occupant; the aim of this occupancy is to again script it to the visualization of the nation and overcoming the trauma of a symbolic televised assassination.

The second case has a different temporal frame. Since 2011 the question of the memory of the revolution has been a heated issue. Absences and death quickly took on the understanding of 'martyrdom', which also indicates 'witnessing'⁵, yet despite all the efforts of narrating and archiving the revolution, absence retains its ambivalence and disruptive effects. Urban voids or visualizations of absence like the graffiti and murals dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution, remain voids as a demand for justice rather than representative street art, as the rising interest in 'revolutionary graffiti' tend to frame it. In this case I depend on a team-project conducted last year, during which I got the chance to be part of an interview of a neighborhood based group of young people who documented those who were victims of violence in the summer of 2013⁶. The face of the martyr is initially depicted on a main street where everyone can see it but then it gets borrowed and depicted closer to his home. I am using their particular case to harness their ambivalent position of absence within the broader narrative of the revolution. The neighborhood's few graffiti art practitioners are not the –now- well known names of Alexandria and downtown, and they are not artists by profession. This is not only an artistic expression. It is also and foremost an act of commemoration, of visualizing absence in space and of preserving and narrating a story of death (even in its incoherences and inaccuracies) to overcome a traumatic event.

⁴ Anderson, p.11.

⁵ Laura Gribbon, 'The Commodification of Egypt's Revolutionary Martyrs: Interpretive Frames, Mediated Narratives and Imagined Solidarity', in *Arab Revolutions and Beyond: Change and Persistence, Proceedings of the International Conference, Tunis, 12-13 November 2013* (Tunis, 2014), pp. 101–9

⁶ *The Weeks of Killing: State Violence, Communal Fighting, and Sectarian Attacks in the summer of 2013* (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), June 2014) <http://eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/weeks_of_killing_en.pdf>.

Because the meaning of absence of those who have been witnessing the revolution is ambivalent and lacks finality, commemoration of the martyrs of the revolution becomes a highly volatile and contested matter. On one hand it could signal a readiness to come to terms with loss when it is too early, on the other it could be an appropriation of public space to make absence visual in city space. This volatility is discussed in the paper within the context of state's inability to memorialize the martyrs for example in Tahrir Square.

Acts of commemoration indicate a sense of closure, finality or completeness, which has been problematic in the four years of the revolution. Besides closure, commemoration and mourning are problematic when older forms of heroism become empty or detached, at the same time when people need to make sense of and ascribe meaning to death⁷. I have preferred to look at public space as spaces of public memory, where visualizing absence feeds into practices of mourning, symbolism, commemoration and political narratives of identity. By contrasting two examples of two distinctive practices and bringing them together further questions that pertains the understanding and relationship of death, martyrhood, nation, and patriotism and the state are brought to fore.

⁷ Laura Wittman, *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2011).