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Bertens, L.M.F.

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‘Doing’ memory: performativity and cultural memory in Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*

Laura M.F. Bertens

Leiden University Center for the Arts in Society, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Remembrance of the Holocaust is fraught with difficulty and as survivors pass away, our understanding moves from communicative to cultural memory. In exploring ways to successfully engage audiences, artists take up the notion of the monument and extend its boundaries. An example is Cardiff and Bures Miller’s *Alter Bahnhof video walk* (2012), which invites its participants to critically consider the notion of monumentalisation, the nature of photographic media and the interplay between performativity and performance. This essay discusses the relationship between photographic media, memory and art, illustrating this through an analysis of the video walk.

KEYWORDS



Performativity; photographic media; cultural memory; monument; Janet Cardiff; George Bures Miller

No matter how fractured by media, by geography, and by subject position representations of the Holocaust are, ultimately it all comes down to this core: unimaginable, unspeakable, and unrepresentable horror. Post-Holocaust generations can only approach that core by mimetic approximation, a mnemonic strategy which recognizes the event in its otherness and beyond identification or therapeutic empathy, but which physically innervates some of the horror and the pain in a slow and persistent labor of remembrance.

Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight memories*, p. 259.

For over half a century people have sought ways to commemorate and remember the Holocaust, both on a personal, individual level and on collective and national levels. All over the world, monuments and ceremonies help remind people of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, finding cultural expressions for a collective memory of this event is an ongoing and difficult pursuit, as Huyssen points out. It is particularly true at this moment in time, as survivors of the war pass away and commemoration is taken over by generations who have no direct experience of the events. This is the moment – in Jan Assmann’s terms – in which communicative memory gradually crosses over into cultural memory, the moment in which direct eyewitness accounts are fully replaced by recordings and cultural artefacts.¹

How can we align our personal memories with collective, cultural memories, especially of events that we have not lived through? How can cultural heritage help construct

CONTACT Laura M.F. Bertens  l.m.f.bertens@hum.leidenuniv.nl  Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, Johan Huizinga building, Doelensteeg 16, room 1.18A, Leiden 2311 VL, The Netherlands

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postmemory² in meaningful ways, both in terms of historical and emotional understanding? Attempts at representation and commemoration have come in diverse forms, in different fields and different media. Through ceremonies, literature, art, monuments, films and museum displays – listing merely the obvious – the horrors of the Nazi regime have been displayed. These media each have their own idiosyncratic qualities, allowing audiences to explore and experience representations of the past in different ways.

In everyday life, monuments hold a prominent position when it comes to the construction of cultural memory, as a category of artefacts focused entirely on remembrance. Nonetheless, the usefulness and function of monuments in processes of collective remembrance is not quite straightforward. In fact, the monument may actively hinder the process of remembrance; in constructing monuments as ‘containers’ for memory, the danger arises of deferring the task of remembering to the inanimate object, entrusted with the memory. As James Young puts it: ‘once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.’³ Pierre Nora makes a similar point in discussing his notion of the *lieux de mémoire*, when he asserts that ‘delegating to the *lieu de mémoire* the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin.’⁴ And in his influential essay ‘Monuments’, Robert Musil remarks cynically that monuments ‘... are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth.’⁵

As ‘placeholders’ for memory, monuments thus run the risk of becoming invisible, of being taken up into the landscape and overlooked. Active engagement, for instance through ritual and ceremony, is needed to incite the process of remembrance, especially in audiences without personal memories of the commemorated events. Without ritual, institutionalized or otherwise, these monuments tend to remain static and at a remove from us, absorbed by their surroundings. The truth of this struck me when on an evening walk I counted the monuments in the neighborhood I have lived in for sixteen years and found several I had never noticed, even in my own street. Regardless of their size and shape, these static elements of the urban landscape blend in with the architecture and infrastructure. An elegant study, conducted by Harriet Senie and her students, examined the audience awareness of, and response to, public artwork and comes to a similar conclusion, noting that ‘[m]ost public art slips into the urbanscape without a ripple, often ignored by its immediate audience or used according to their everyday needs.’⁶

In exploring ways to successfully engage audiences, artists have taken up the notion of the monument and have extended its boundaries. In 2012 an artwork of this kind was shown at DOCUMENTA 13, the 13th of an influential series of art exhibitions held every 5 years in Kassel, Germany. The artwork, the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (2012) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, was not intended to be looked at passively, but to be actively participated in. During the exhibition, the video walk was available in the train station of Kassel, one of the venues of the exhibition. Visitors were provided with an iPod with earphones and led around the train station, following a recording shot by the artists in that same location, (as shown in [Figure 1](#)). From here on I shall therefore refer to these visitors mainly as participants, since it is participation in the work which perpetuated its existence: audience participation in the work turned it into a monument.

While walking through the station and following the video, participants were provided instructions through the voice-over by Janet Cardiff. These were accompanied by commentary on memories, both of a personal and a broader, cultural nature. The relevance



Figure 1. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (2012). Still from video, taken from the artists' website, as seen by a participant in the train station. The participant tries to align the image on the screen with the surroundings. [image taken from the artists' website, <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/bahnhof.html>]

of the location in the transport of Jewish inhabitants from Kassel is of particular importance in the work, as is the subject of memory and commemoration. Although the exhibition is long over, the work can still be experienced: every first Sunday of the month the Stadtmuseum Kassel allows visitors to rent an iPod and 'perform' the walk.⁷ As such, the work continues to exist as a monument, available to those who make an effort to engage with it.

Despite its focus on commemoration, the artwork cannot be readily classified as a monument in the traditional sense of the word. The video commemorates what has happened in this station, but at the same time explores the ambiguous and capricious ways in which memory and commemoration are shaped through photographic media and monuments. A novel approach is used to engage the visitor in the process of commemoration, moving beyond the passive contemplation of the traditional monument. In inviting the audience to critically consider the notion of memory, the work can be described as *performative*, in Judith Butler's use of the term originally coined by J.L. Austin (and further discussed below).⁸

It is this performativity, grounded in a critical reflection on the function of photographic media, which will be the focus of this analysis. The idea that we 'store recordings' of real world events in our minds and can recall and replay these at will, is examined closely and broken down. In complicating this intuitive understanding of (personal and group) memory, the artwork makes its audience question the validity of memory and ponder the ways in which it becomes constructed. As we will see below, this results in a performative audience interaction, in which memory (personal and cultural) is both constructed and questioned. Of the following four sections, the first two address theoretical concerns – about the nature of lens-based media and the concept of performativity, respectively. The last two discuss the video walk, first providing a close reading of the work in the third section, followed by a discussion of three of the major themes of the work in the fourth and final section.

A picture is worth a thousand words

Part of the allure of photography and its perceived similarity to memory is its suggestion of intimacy, of a direct relation between the viewer and the represented scene. Roland Barthes describes this in his *Camera lucida* (1980), when talking about a photograph of Napoleon's younger brother and realizing that he is 'looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.'⁹ The impact of photographs is directly related to the certainty of what Barthes calls *ça-à-été*, 'That-has-been'.¹⁰ Whatever you may say of a scene represented in an analogue photograph, however severely it may have been manipulated or staged, it *has been there*. As Barthes describes it, '[t]he photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.'¹¹ The light reflecting off the subject has been preserved by the photograph and reaches us 'like the delayed rays of a star.'¹²

This is the beauty and the danger of photography. It suggests a deep intimacy, an illusion of direct contact between the viewer and the photographed scene or person. It does so by hiding the distinction between what is represented and the medium itself. Roland Barthes describes this in his *Camera Lucida*, observing that '[w]hatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.'¹³ Whereas it is hard to consider a painted portrait without noticing the style and skill of the painter, the photograph is much more easily overlooked as a medium. Of course, some photographs will make us notice their remarkable composition or admirable technique,¹⁴ but most vernacular photography will speak to us directly, without foregrounding the presence of the medium. Looking at the family photo album makes us say 'this *is* my mother', rather than 'this is a *photograph* of my mother.'

The force of the '*ça-à-été*', in particular in photographs of Holocaust victims, makes the medium so powerful in museum displays aimed at constructing cultural memories. Photographs play a central role in for instance the *Judisches Museum* or the information center under the *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*, both in Berlin. These images draw the viewer in and seem to establish a deep connection to the past. The underlying reality, however, is that a true connection is almost impossible, that there is a lack of narrative and a need for explanation. Yet, the feeling of closeness between the viewer and the photographed seems to imply a true individual understanding of a cultural memory – much like hand-written notes and letters, also used ubiquitously in museums and heritage sites.

As such, the photograph has become regarded as an essential medium for preserving and passing on personal and cultural memory, relying heavily on the idea that 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' Although these original connotations belong to the realm of analogue photography, they linger in our experience of most lens-based media, including digital photography and video. Part of the fascination of lens-based media is the way in which they are felt to resemble our own memories. The eye is commonly described as a camera and, in an extension of this metaphor, our memories become photographic recordings, stored and revisited in our minds. This common metaphor of memories as photographs, in turn, imbues actual photographs with a sense of memory; our memories feel photographic to us and our photographs become a database of external memories. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag is distrustful of the role photography plays in both our individual and our shared memories. In discussing the relationship between memory and photography she writes:

All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.¹⁵

The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering.¹⁶

This troublesome relationship can be understood as a consequence of the tendency to see the photograph as presentation, rather than representation, as discussed above. The invisibility of the medium seems to render the photographs seamlessly continuous with our internal visual memory. Breaking the automatic connection between photography and memory, for instance in artworks like the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, allows us to rethink the nature of our memory, the way in which we construct it, both individually and collectively. It helps us understand this as a performative process, in which memory is continually produced, rather than fixed in infallible and eternal ‘recordings’ and passed on. This holds true for personal and family memory as well as for cultural and post-memory.

In deconstructing the powerful link between photographic or lens-based media and memory there is no need, however, to dismiss the power of photography altogether. Photography is a double-edged sword. The illusion of truthfulness attached to these media, as well as the way we often use it as a metaphor for our understanding of memory, make it powerful yet potentially dangerous. Nonetheless, the emotional force of the medium seems ideal in aiding the construction of cultural memory and postmemory. So how can the idiosyncratic nature of photographic media be used while ‘warning the viewer’ against this false sense of understanding?

This is where art can play a role. Art creates a space in which the medium of photography can be used in constructing cultural memory, but can at the same time be critically exposed as dangerous. The double-edged nature of the medium becomes explicit, but the aura remains. This exposure can be used to show the role of the viewer in actively constructing, rather than passively receiving, (cultural) memory. The next sections will build on this discussion of the idiosyncrasies of photographic media and extend this to address the performativity of memory, followed by a close look at the ways in which these themes come together in Cardiff and Bures Miller’s *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*.

Performance and/or performativity

J.L. Austin first introduced the concept of performativity in his William James lecture series from 1955, published in the book *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. The concept initially belonged to the philosophy of language, and has since then made its way into literature studies, critical theory and gender studies – elaborated on by scholars like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Judith Butler.¹⁷ Recently, the importance of performativity, as well as its convoluted relationship with performance, has been recognized within the field of cultural memory studies, where it helps develop an understanding of memory as a dynamic and ongoing process of construction.¹⁸ As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney point out in their volume on mediation, remediation and cultural memory: ‘remembering’ is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative

rather than reproductive. It is as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories.¹⁹

The notion of 'acting out' might suggest a similarity between performance and performativity, but it is important to note that the two differ significantly and not every performance is performative. When Judith Butler used the concept of performativity to discuss the nature of gender in *Gender Trouble* (1990), her theory was misunderstood by many readers to mean that gender was a performance, a role one played, which could be altered at will.²⁰ In later texts the author responded to this misunderstanding and clarified the notion of performativity. While performance suggests an active step out of reality and into a role which can later be discarded, one can in fact never step out of one's gender or 'get off stage.' Furthermore, gender is not an expression of an internal truth but rather a phenomenon that becomes created, for and by everyone, through repeating acts of gender unconsciously copied from one's cultural surroundings. As such there is no original gender that one can take on or imitate, rather the notion of gender becomes created in the process of 'doing' it.²¹

When applied to memory and remembrance this take on performativity provides a framework for understanding the construction of memories. Like gender, memory has no fixed original which can be copied and passed on. For like gender, the construction of memory is not about the recreation of a historical truth, but is rather an answer to needs and desires in the present.²² As such there is no objectively correct memory; each individual constructs memories, both personal and collective ones, by taking up elements of expressions of memories seen elsewhere and in turn expressing these. Even our own individual memories are not stable and every recounting of a memory in fact recreates and alters it slightly, fitting a new context and purpose. On a cultural scale the performativity of memory means that each representation of a memory (in for instance film, literature, museums, oral history etc.) forms part of a dynamic and ongoing construction of that very memory.

In Butler's explanation of these concepts, performativity and performance become separated and a confusion of the two is undesirable. However, more recently Mieke Bal has argued that they cannot and do not need to be as neatly separated and in fact quite often blend together around the margins. She addresses the 'need to mess up the two concepts'²³ and uses the concept of memory to do so. In encountering an artwork, a viewer becomes a performer due to her own experiences and memories which she introduces in her reading of the work. The work becomes performed by her, within this private experiential context: 'The viewer 'plays' the part scripted by the work, to the extent that he or she 'acts', responding to the perlocutionary address of the work, in the present of viewing.'²⁴ The viewer's performance is a unique construction of the work and as such can be said to be performative.

The idea of acting out a relationship to past events and thereby actively constructing memory, rather than passing it on, is essential to the artwork by Cardiff and Bures Miller. As we will see, the use of photographic media – video and photography – and the gentle confusion between the active recording and passive viewing help deconstruct the process of remembrance. Furthermore, the complex interplay between performance and performativity plays a pivotal role in the work.

Bringing together the elements of memorialization, photography and performativity, the analysis of the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* explores the way in which art uses both the special status assigned to photography and the notion of performativity in forging an approach of commemorating and monumentalizing the Holocaust. The work allows its audience to not only commemorate a represented event, but at the same time become aware of this very process of commemoration and the performative construction of memory. As such, it can throw doubt on the possibility of a static and universal nature of shared memories, suggested by many traditional monuments.

Retracing footsteps

The artwork by the artist duo Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller is site-specific, meant to be experienced in the main train station, which nowadays functions both as a train station and a cultural space. Below I will first of all provide a close reading of the artwork, taking the reader through the video, as we move along the train station from one scene to the next. This will be followed, in the next section, by a broader discussion of some of the themes of the work, in particular the process of remembering, photography as metaphor for memory and the site specificity of the work.

In a small office in the train station, the visitor is provided with an iPod and earphones. Armed with these, each participant is alone with the voice of the artist, experiencing the work. Art is of course often experienced in a personal way, even when surrounded by other visitors, as for instance in the space of the museum. This is particularly true for this video walk; although other participants can be seen to walk around with iPods and headphones, as I am walking around, the voice of the artist still creates a profoundly intimate relationship between me and the work. The tension between the personal and the collective experience is further discussed in the next section. In the analysis that follows, I will guide the reader along through the video walk and will describe this in terms of our experiences, but it is important to remember that any visitor of the work would have experienced it strictly on their own.

Even before starting the walk, the title – *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* – tells us we are dealing with a historical perspective on the site: while the station is nowadays called the *Hauptbahnhof*, the work refers to this as the old train station. When embarking on the tour, it quickly becomes clear that this layering of historical narratives is an important theme in the work. There are references to the role this train station played in the deportation of Jewish citizens; the artist guides her listeners to the platform from which trains would leave to take people to camps, attention is paid to the monument in the main hall which commemorates this and references to suitcases bring to mind the forced deportation that took place here. Woven through these references of collective memory and history are fragments of personal stories and experiences; the artist talks about a friend's grandfather who was deported to Auschwitz, recounts dreams and tells us about memories, both recent (from the day before) and older, vaguer ones. Much of the work is devoted to reflecting upon the notion of memory and the ways in which we experience it, both collectively and personally. While the work never explicitly states that its main concern is the Holocaust, the references to the history of the space create a context for the artist's reflections upon the concept of memory. The participant is

therefore constantly aware of the link to Holocaust remembrance and connects the artist's personal thoughts on memory to questions of cultural memory about this event.

The tour starts outside the office, where the screen is initially still dark and we hear a female voice, the artist's, say: 'Turn the camera on; press the video button.' The screen comes on and shows a shot of the hall in the train station, from the very position where the participant is standing. Right from the first moment, the artwork blurs the boundary between producer and performer, between camera operator and participant; is Cardiff telling herself to turn on the camera recording? Or is she telling us to start recording? Or maybe the video button refers to the playback function of the iPod and we are told to play back the artist's recording? Although it is clear that we are not expected to do anything other than listen and follow, the performing role of the participant is nonetheless immediately ambiguous. Who is performing here and who is receiving? As I will argue below, this ambiguity is tightly linked to our perception of the 'act' of remembering.

The voice goes on to tell us: 'I'm sitting here right now with you, in the train station in Kassel.' This untruth is obvious – the artist is clearly not sitting here with us – but does not detract from the strong feeling of immediate connection; the headphones shield the participant from external sounds and in this intimate situation the artist seems to speak solely to the participant. This is intensified by the use of binaural audio, a technique of recording sounds which mimics the way the human ear hears them.²⁵ The participant is invited to suspend disbelief and let herself be immersed in the reality of the video, but is also constantly reminded of the illusory nature of the video. As Cardiff continues she explains: 'This video will be an experiment. We're like those prisoners stuck in Plato's cave; we watch the flickering shadows on the screen.' The participant is well aware that the images on the iPod screen are merely the afterglow of earlier events and are now forever out of reach. The obvious deception of the video is closely related to the treacherous aura of photographic media.

Next, the participant is instructed to get up and follow the images on the screen: 'Try to align your movements with mine, move your screen up to the left as I do. ... Let's get up ... Try to follow the image. Now stop and watch.' On the screen we see musicians walking through the station, met by a young ballet dancer who is being filmed by a camera crew. The scene is interrupted by a barking dog and we hear the director say 'Cut, cut', a subtle reminder that most video and film we see is carefully rehearsed and consists of multiple takes; undoubtedly, the artists' video walk is no exception. As we walk on, the theme of memory is first addressed when the artist tells us that '[m]emories are like a different form of travel. It's like filling a suitcase that we pull behind us and we open and close when we need to.' At that moment, we turn a corner and pass an old man showing someone photographs and evidently recalling war times, explaining how bombs were falling everywhere, buildings were on fire and there were dead bodies in the street. At three minutes into the video the themes of photography, memory and World War II remembrance have been introduced and connected.

The element of memorialization is added to this when we pass a monument to commemorate the Jewish people shipped to the camps from this train station. The artist, Horst Hoheisel, had school children research and write stories about the deported people and these stories were wrapped around stones and placed in plastic boxes inside a larger plastic container. On top of these filled boxes, called *Denk-Stein-Sammlung* by the artist, an opened copy of the book *Namen und Schicksale der Juden Kassels 1933–*

1945 (1986) can be seen. This archival work lists the fate of all Jews in Kassel in the period 1933–1945 and includes photographs of many of these Jewish inhabitants. Behind the plexiglass, the book is out of reach both for the participant and the recording artist. However, at this point the video cuts to a shot of another version of this book, being leafed through by the hand of (presumably) the artist. Although the artist has come closer to the content of the book and therefore supposedly to the memory of these Jewish victims, the participant, one degree further removed from the book's content, still cannot even make out the names of those who were deported from this station.

The inclusion of Hoheisel's monument in this video is interesting in the context of audience participation. In his analysis of countermonuments, Bill Niven introduces the concept of the combimemorial, as a stage of commemoration superseding the countermonument, and he presents Hoheisel's monument as an example of this category.²⁶ Although countermonuments significantly changed the (aesthetic) form of commemoration, they often maintain binary divisions between victims and perpetrator and do not always succeed in engaging the audience. As Niven sees it, combimemorials incorporate elements of the archive and the exhibition and come about by an active participation between artist and audience. While the countermonument is made to engage the audience, the combimemorial is made *by* engaging the audience. Hoheisel's monument has been created as much by the school children as by the artist. In this respect, it is related to the video walk, which can be said not to exist without active participants. The video can thus be described as a combimemorial as well.

Following this close look at the monument the participant is led to platform 13, from which the trains departed for the camps, as the artist tells us. Upon arriving there we look over a balustrade at the trains below where a woman passes. 'That's me in the white coat down there' the artist tells us, once again breaking the illusion of the medium; she recalls how, that night in the hotel room, she watched a German film: 'The images of trains and soldiers kept me company as I fell asleep.' Even without knowing the film or the context, the idea of soldiers and trains instantly reminds the participant of imagery of World War II and the Holocaust, emphasizing the force that certain tropes – trains, suitcases, German soldiers, stacks of clothing – have in constructing a cultural memory of this war.

The walk continues along the platforms as the artist wonders: 'What do other people do with memories they don't want? Do they just close the suitcase? Sometimes I imagine rolling bad memories into a ball, like a snowball, and throwing them away. It's only in the middle of the night they come back.' The idea of memories as objects, to be stored away, preserved and retrieved at will, continues throughout the artwork. Memory becomes both a helpful tool, allowing us to store and keep events from the past (much like photographs and videos), as well as a burden, forever haunting us and sneaking up on us when we least expect them to. And what holds true on the personal level, also extends to the cultural realm; when the artist tells us about her grandfather, who had Alzheimer's and lived in the past – 'like being trapped in a shadow world' – she explains: 'Germany's like that for me, full of ghosts and history; layer upon layer as I walk down the street.' There is no escaping cultural memory.

Returning to the main building, the artist tells us to sit down in the waiting room, because 'this camera's so heavy I need a break.' Here the idea is invoked again of memory as burden, in this case of never being able to stop 'filming' and storing events in our minds. As we are sitting in the waiting room, the artist recounts a nightmare she

had the night before. In the video the waiting room disappears and instead we see underground tunnels, recalling images of air raid shelters or military bunkers. Lying in the dark the artist was 'worried that dreams and memories are part of the same world and in some way they can meet up in the future and become real.' Memories are by no means passive reconstructions of past events, but are active, potentially threatening, constructions of present reality. Remembering is, as Erll and Rigney point out, a performative engagement with the past, from a particular moment in the present – a construction rather than a reconstruction.²⁷

In the underground tunnels that accompany the artist's dream, a woman in red passes us, while counting out loudly in German. Throughout the video this woman keeps reappearing; we see her right at the start of the video, later on in the main building (before we arrive in the waiting room), where she seems to have fallen and is lying on the floor, unconscious and surrounded by people and police. Finally, we encounter her while sitting here in the waiting room. This is how memory works and fools us. Elements from remembered events pop up in other memories, where they do not belong, and enter our dreams. Did the woman appear in the artist's dream first and made her way into the recordings of the train station? Or did the artist see her here in the train station, while recording the video, and has later incorporated her in her dreams? Of course, neither is true. As the artist explains while we sit with her in the waiting room, memories and dreams become woven together and come to shape our future as well as our past.

We go on, through the main building, until the battery light of the camera starts flashing and the artist tells us to sit down while she changes the batteries – another subtle reminder of the trickery of video. Upon resuming our walk, several people in front of us start dropping their suitcases and picking them up again, recalling the image of memories being stored in suitcases, which we drag along and think we can open and close at will, but which might fail us unexpectedly. In the context of Holocaust remembrance, the suitcase is a well-chosen and grim metaphor. It is a frequently recurring object in museums and monuments, often referring to the experience and trauma of forced migration.²⁸ In his article on the relevance of suitcases in the representation of migration and displacement, Joachim Schlör describes the suitcase as 'a shell, an envelope, a cover that contains things but also meaning: traces of its own and of its owner's movements and history are inscribed on as well as in it.'²⁹ The suitcases of Holocaust victims, transported to camps, are painful signs of the hope and ignorance of their owners. A carefully selected set of objects is efficiently packed and deemed necessary and sufficient for our travels, much like memories, actively stored to preserve the important events of our past. But the future might deviate from our expectations and render our luggage useless. In the video walk, these suitcases serve a double purpose, as a frequently recurring trope of Holocaust remembrance, but also as a metaphor for the workings of memory in general.

As the people we are passing pick up their suitcases and walk on, we continue up some stairs and enter a cinema that is part of this train station. As we're standing there a man approaches and complains to the artist about having been filmed a few minutes before. The artist rewinds the video, again breaking the illusion of direct contact with the viewer and reminding us of the way we 'play back' our memories, only to find out the man has not been caught in the recording. So much of what happens all around us is

never stored, either in photographic recordings or in our memories; in fact, memory is more about forgetting than it is about remembering, or as Astrid Erll puts it: 'memories are small islands in a sea of forgetting.'³⁰

On our way back to the main hall we go down a staircase, where the artist turns the camera off and the screen goes black. We continue to hear her voice as she recounts a memory of an intimate moment with a man in a staircase, concluding that '[n]o matter how much we love somebody, no matter how hard we hold on to them, we'll always be completely separate from them.' This touches on the problematic nature of sharing memories, through communicative but especially through cultural memory; how can we ever fully understand the emotional experience of another human being? How can we represent other people's memories and make them available to us? Although the video walk takes us to the very place where people before us experienced the horrors of deportation and makes us retrace their steps, we are forever removed from them. Even the artist, walking through this space less than a year before and speaking to us directly, is forever out of reach. I will get come back to this notion of out-of-reachness below.

We exit the staircase and return to the main hall, where the artist directs us to a big open space in the station, next to the main entrance. Two people come up and start an intimate modern dance, pulling each other close and pushing each other away again. The dance continues for a while and the artist ends the video walk by reminding us again of Plato's cave and all the complexities of representing other people's realities: 'When one of the watchers from the story of Plato's cave came onto the bright sunshine it was painful for his eyes to see, but he also couldn't understand this new world of three-dimensional figures. I wish that we could cross our separate worlds somehow and see what each of us sees. As usual, words can't explain it.'

Photographic media, site specificity and audience participation

In the step-by-step analysis of the artwork a few themes keep coming back. The relationship between photographic media and memory – in particular concerning the metaphorical use of photographic media and the performativity of memory – has already been addressed throughout the analysis. Here I will discuss three other themes which merit a closer look: the role of the photographic medium, the specificity of the site and the participation by the audience. Together, these themes highlight the performative nature of memory and remembrance, the way in which memory is constructed by 'doing it', rather than *reconstructed* and passively passed on. The video makes its audience aware of the discrepancy between the way in which we often perceive memory as statically preserved and the more accurate experience of constantly constructing memories, individual as well as shared, cultural ones.

Let us start by looking at the nature of the media. The artwork refers to photographic media and their aura in several ways. The close alignment between the screen and its surrounding reality allows the participant to become immersed in the fiction of the video. At the same time, however, the work keeps reminding the participant of the illusory nature of the medium. On the one hand, the almost seamless continuity between screen-view and outer reality seems to amplify the invisibility, in Barthes' use of the word,³¹ of this photographic medium. On the other hand, the overt references to video recordings and photographs as well as the 'tricks' being played on the participant (the artist for instance

pointing to herself in the video), keep the participant attentive to the treacherous nature of the medium.

This process of simultaneous seeing through and looking at the medium can be described in terms of hypermediacy and immediacy, concepts introduced by Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter in their influential book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). While immediacy aims at the invisibility of the medium, dictating that 'the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented',³² hypermediacy signifies a mode in which the mediating presence of the medium is fully acknowledged, and the attention of the audience is in fact actively drawn towards the medium itself and away from the presented content. In an earlier article on the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, I used these terms to clarify the ambivalent experience of the participant.³³ I argued that the video walk used a blend of immediacy and hypermediacy, resulting in an uncanny experience in which the participant is constantly allowed to forget the medium and be 'fooled' by its representation, only to be roughly pulled back out of the illusion and explicitly shown the deceitful nature of the medium.

Clever interventions by the artists remind the participant of the mediation taking place. When, for instance, the battery light flashes and the screen goes dark, the unsuspecting participant instantly switches from being immersed in the video to being aware of the technology of the medium and will assume that the battery of that particular iPod has run out. Within a few seconds, however, the artist's voice comes back on and tells us the battery, presumably of her video recorder, needs to be changed, after which the video walk continues. The participant is fooled; while a state of immediacy (being immersed in the video) changed to hypermediacy (being aware of the iPod) the black screen in fact turns out to be part of the representation and the participant has unknowingly been drawn even further into the video itself.

This tension between the immediacy and the hypermediacy of the work creates a context within which the phenomenon of memory and the ways in which we try and represent it become unhinged. The complexity of the video raises questions about the nature of the photographs we see in the video, those shown by the old man as well as those used in the monument by Hoheisel. How are we to trust these photographic media when it comes to capturing and relaying memories? The constant back and forth between total surrender to and resistance against the medium, on the part of the participant, allows him/her to be drawn in by the aura of the photographic medium, but at the same time warns the participant against the dangers of this aura. The photographs in the video walk retain an aura of authenticity and solemnity (especially when shown by an eyewitness or as part of an official monument), but at the same time their authority as placeholders for memory is undermined.

A second important theme running throughout the work is its site specificity. Although the work is as close as it can get to the space it aims to represent, it creates a strong sense of 'out-of-reach-ness'. The photographs of the bombings, the names and stories of the Jewish victims, even the artist herself, despite the sense of intimacy, all remain just out of reach. The participant is invited to come close, to recreate the exact steps of the original walk, but the closer she comes the more it becomes obvious that the original cannot be recreated. While this uncanny feeling is interesting in itself, in the context of this historical building it takes on additional significance. The walk through the station cannot but resemble the

walk the Jewish inhabitants of Kassel took when they were led to the trains here to be deported. In retracing the steps of the artist, the participant is simultaneously retracing the steps of the Holocaust victims commemorated by Hoheisel's monument. The difficulty of aligning our experience with that of the artist, who walked here only a few years ago, highlights the extreme difficulty of aligning ourselves with these victims, walking through a still different train station over half a century ago, under unimaginable circumstances. Any illusion of being able to access and reproduce the memories of these individuals is shattered.

The site specificity of the artwork – designed for this particular train station – is crucial. At first glance, the site might seem a *lieu de mémoire*, an enclosed space seemingly containing and sustaining the memory of the victims who passed through here; the artists use this station almost like a memory palace, leaving traces of stories throughout the space, for the participant to recollect.³⁴ But further engagement with the work complicates the notion of the *lieu de mémoire* and instead foregrounds the performative importance of the site. The station does not *contain* memories, to be passed on, but instead becomes a site for the *construction* of memories. In her study on performance and performativity at heritage sites, Gaynor Bagnall emphasizes the importance of place in the process of remembrance: '(...) the ability to reminisce is engendered by the *embodiment* of consumption. It is the physicality of the experience, the capacity of the sites to engage and stimulate a whole range of physical and sensory experiences, and the way the sites engage visitors on an emotional level that is important.'³⁵ In the video work the train station is presented as both a site of original horrors (referring to the deportation from platform 13) and a site for commemorating these horrors (discussing the monument by Hoheisel). Apart from these two references the walk does not actively discuss the space of the station, but the strong cultural connotations train stations have within the context of Holocaust commemoration stays with the participant all throughout the video walk and frames everything the artist says.

Lastly, the notion of performativity plays a crucial role in the work. The video walk reminds us that memory is the result of a dynamic process and needs to be constructed with every instance of remembrance by the person doing the remembering. Despite the voice-over telling us that memory is 'like filling a suitcase that we pull behind us and we open and close when we need to,' the truth is that memory, individual or shared, cannot be quite as easily preserved or passed on. In fact, every instance of remembering is an instance of constructing. Moreover, every newly constructed memory is designed around the needs and desires of the person creating it rather than those of the person who experienced the original event. It is here that the notion of performativity can help us understand the process of remembrance, especially when brought together with the practice of performance, as in the video walk.

The artwork is evidently a performance on the part of the audience. Without active participation, the work does not exist. Every participant creates a new performance, which is both similar to every earlier performance of the work but at the same time unique in its details and emotional effects. As such, a group of individual, but related memories are created by the people partaking in the work, commemorating a group of individuals who lived through the original events. All of these newly created memories are similar in certain ways, but quite distinct in others. Each participant is like Borges' Pierre Menard, recreating *Don Quixote*; every video walk is identical, because it is directed by the permanently fixed recording, but equally every new participant 'writes' the artwork anew.

It is this aspect of the work that relates it to the notion of Niven's combimemorial, as mentioned above.³⁶ It also firmly puts it in the category of the *performative monument*, as discussed by Mechtild Widrich.³⁷ According to her 'the contemporary monument does not 'tell' political facts, but engages audiences in forming new ones.'³⁸ As the performance is neither true nor false, but instead changes the reality of the performer, it is closely aligned with Austin's explanation of performativity. This performative nature comes about through the participation of the audience; Widrich explains that '[w]hat is crucial to the performative monument (...) cannot be impermanence as such, but the temporal interaction with an audience that itself is no eternal public, but a succession of interacting subjects.'³⁹

The video walk illustrates the blending of performance and performativity effectively in its reflection on the process of remembrance. The 'forced' creation of memory through the scripted performance of the artwork brings out the performative nature of memory in general. As Butler explains, on the stage a performance is safe, since it is clearly distinct from reality (the transvestite on stage does not threaten us). In the street, however, the performance is no longer theatrical, but becomes real and performative (hence the perceived threat when that same transvestite sits next to us on the bus).⁴⁰ It is this distinction that makes the video walk so interesting, since these realms start overlapping and bleeding into each other. The participants in the video walk are caught between theatrical performance and the real; while there is a script and the participant clearly plays a role, nonetheless this is real and the emotions and experiences are not scripted, an observation close to Mieke Bal's argument, discussed above.⁴¹ This is not a performance, set up to please or entertain others, this is a performance set up to change the participant's reality. And in the process, it becomes painfully clear that there is no way to correctly perform the 'original' memory.

The 'experiment' of the video walk will leave many of the participants with an uncanny sensation of being stuck between reality and performance. Combined with the constant theme of Holocaust remembrance, this makes the participant, consciously or unconsciously, question the balance between performance and reality in the preservation of memories from Holocaust victims. How much of this is or can truly be passed on and how much is constructed anew with every commemoration? In this work the artists have created a complex interplay between the fickle photographic media, the relation between performance and performativity and the enigmatic process of remembrance.

Art can help nuance and bring to light the process of cultural remembrance, for it can do two things at once: help construct a cultural memory of an event and at the same time, on another level, comment on the performative process of constructing such memories, the dangers in using photographic media and the impossibility of truly understanding someone else's memories. The video walk can be said to function as a monument which demands constant attention and physical engagement from the participant, never allowing us to let it become an invisible 'container' of memory. It provides a hopeful response to Huyssen's words, quoted at the start of this essay, which called into question the ability of Post-Holocaust generations to successfully represent and commemorate the Holocaust. Although commemorating the Holocaust will always be – in Huyssen's words – 'a slow and persistent labor of remembrance,'⁴² a new generation of artworks like the *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* provide novel and powerful ways to do so.

Notes

1. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 56.
2. This is a term coined by Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), referring to the way later generations create ‘memories’ of the (often traumatic) collective and personal experiences of people who lived before – experiences they did not live through themselves and only know from cultural expressions.
3. Young, *Texture of Memory*, 5.
4. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 13.
5. Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, 64.
6. Senie, “Reframing Public Art,” 185.
7. The first six minutes of the work can also be viewed on the artists’ website: www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/alterbahnhof_video.html.
8. Austin, *How to Do Things*.
9. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 80.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 81.
13. *Ibid.*, 6.
14. Michael Fried sets out an elaborate and elegant argument on the relationship between art photography and painting in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008).
15. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 86.
16. *Ibid.*, 89.
17. Culler, “Philosophy and Literature,” 509–13.
18. Plate and Smelik, *Performing Memory in Art*, 17.
19. Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation*, 2.
20. Culler, “Philosophy and Literature,” 513; Miller, “The Performative as Performance,” 222.
21. Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 523–6.
22. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 8.
23. Bal, “Performance and Performativity,” 177.
24. Bal, “Memory Acts,” 103.
25. Ross “Movement that Matters Historically,” 222.
26. Niven, “From Countermonument to Combimemorial,” 77.
27. See note 19.
28. The city of Leiden, where I work, has for instance placed five stone suitcases throughout its centre in 2010; together they constitute the artwork and monument *Bagage* (luggage) by Ram Katzir, commemorating the deportation of Jewish citizens.
29. Schlör, “Means of Transport and Storage,” 78.
30. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 9
31. See note 13.
32. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 6.
33. Bertens, “Playing and Dying.”
34. The importance of the site in the Alter Bahnhof video walk is discussed more extensively, from a different perspective by Ross, “Movement that Matters Historically.”
35. Bagnall, “Performance and Performativity,” 93.
36. See note 27.
37. Widrich, *Performative Monuments*.
38. *Ibid.*, 9.
39. *Ibid.*, 6.
40. Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 527.
41. See note 24.
42. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 259.

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Notes on contributor

Laura Bertens After completing BA and MA programs in Classics, Biology and Art History, Laura Bertens obtained a PhD in Bioinformatics in 2012 at Leiden University, The Netherlands. She is currently assistant professor – lecturing on Cultural Studies, Art History and Cultural Memory Studies – for the Leiden University programs Art History, International Studies and Leiden University College. Her research interests lie in the fields of Cultural Memory Studies, contemporary art and Posthumanism.

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