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Monumentalism as a Rhetoric of Impact

Abstract: This essay discusses the new monumental quality of contemporary exhibition projects and works of art – paintings, sculptures, and installations. I aim to demonstrate that large scale works of art have always had strong impacts on the onlooker; they have the potential to create strong effects such as shock and sublime amazement and are connected to a rhetoric of power, to a strong emotional and bodily effect. Earlier monumental formats and large-scale compositions confronted the spectator; in contrast, the new contemporary monumental works of art answer to the growing need of impact as a critical criterion for art and try to overpower the onlooker completely. Participation is a dominating strategy of contemporary art. It becomes both the material and the legitimization of the monumental. The individual perceives him- or herself as a member of a collective experience. Together, they co-produce the experience and the impact they are offered to consume. To trigger interaction between members of the public crowd and hence to produce communal experience and collective communication – that is what contemporary monumental works of art intent to achieve.

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Introduction

The Tate Modern, which opened its doors in May 2000, may be described as a special type of museum for contemporary art. The transformation of the former Bankside Power Station of London by the Swiss Architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron has become an archetype for the transferral of the monumental quality of the industrial building into the concept of a space adequate for contemporary art. Current art practices seize the space which used to house the generators that provided the energy for a capital. After the machines were taken out, the big turbine hall of the Tate Modern was preserved as an empty space – welcoming the visitors into a kind of cathedral from which they were invited into subdivided, smaller spaces of both the collection and the various exhibition galleries. The turbine hall is a semi-public space – you already enter it even before having bought a ticket. In the enormous space, which is 35 meters high and 152 meters long, even big crowds seem to vanish. It is the setting for super-

latives: Since its opening, more than 30 million visitors have come to see the biggest installations in contemporary art.¹

With the so-called Unilever Series, the Tate started to use this space for monographic installations. To date, thirteen artists have produced commissioned work, their efforts being supported by a new and equally monumental dimension of sponsorship through the company that gave name to the series. Artists such as Olafur Eliasson (2003/2004), Carsten Höller (2006/2007), Ai Wei-Wei (2011/2011), or Anish Kapoor (2002/2003) have proved their ambition to react towards the offered space with new dimensions of artistic practice of spatial interventions. The Tate Modern is by no means an isolated case. Awe-inspiring scale appears to have become a major factor in the marketing of institutions in the contemporary scene. In 2003, the Dia Art Foundation opened its galleries for the permanent collection, in Beacon, upstate New York, where it occupies a former factory as well. Its scale is a matter of pride: With a space of 3,000,000 square feet, the Foundation is able to house even the large-scale sculptures of Richard Serra. The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts, serves as a further example, as it provides one of the largest exhibitions spaces for contemporary art worldwide. In 2007, the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel pushed the potentials of this institution too far: His monumental exhibition project, *Training Ground for Democracy*, was never finished and ended in a long legal dispute between artist and institution.

Significantly, there is not only a strong inclination toward old and inoperative industrial structures but also a strong reference to the history of exhibitions. Since 2007, the Grand Palais in Paris, initially built for the Universal Exhibition of 1900, seems to have become the ideal place for a new series of monographic shows, advertised under the telling label “Monumenta”. There seems to be a tendency detectable that one could describe as a return to or even as a revival of the monumental, which we link to the aesthetic language of 19th-century memorials, the monumental canvases of academic painting, the grandes machines, or, worse, which we associate with the brutality of dictatorship. Exhibition spaces for contemporary art are competing with each other in terms of megalomania; XXL has become a signal for both success and status. Hence, monumental installations have become an obligation for artists, exhibitions and collections alike.²

1 “History of Tate”. www.tate.org.uk. 2013. Tate Modern, acc. 22 March 2013 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/who-we-are/history-of-tate>>.

2 Cf. the coffee-table book *Oversize: Mega Art & Installations* (Hong Kong: Victionary, 2013). Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL: Small, Medium, Large, Extra Large* (New York: The Monacelli P, 1995); cf. also the exhibition at the Grimaldi Forum Monaco, “XXL”, *Extra Large*. The exhibition ran from 13 July to 9 September 2012.

With regard to artistic language, we might also think of developments that we witness in a single discipline, as for example in photography. Here, the monumental format is linked to a new status of the medium outside of its established institutional context, the Department of Photography. The works of Andreas Gursky for instance have advanced as the synonym for a mimetic gesture that aims to capture nothing less than the world.³ His gigantic six-picture “Ocean” series (2009–2010), wherein satellite images of our planet have been digitally manipulated, seem to be the climax of this temptation of “cosmic grandness”.⁴ While I do not dismiss the basic premise that the monumental always has ambitions toward an extra layer of meaning and relevance, one should not forget that at the same time we witness a return of the “blow up” technique, well known from pop art and later adopted by artists like Jeff Koons or Florentijn Hofman in their treatment of everyday objects. With regard to the subversive power of the monumental, the Swiss artist Urs Fischer comes to



Fig. 1: Andreas Gursky, *Ocean II, Ocean V, Ocean I*, 2010, Installation view, Galerie Sprüth Magers Berlin, © Andreas Gursky / ProLitteris 2013, Courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin London, Photo: Jens Ziehe

³ Geoffrey Batchen, “Does Size Matter?”, *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 72.4 (2003): 250–255. The author refers to discussions such as Alix Ohlin, “Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime”, *Art Journal* 61.4 (Winter 2002): 22–35.

⁴ *Andreas Gursky*, ed. Louise Neri, 2 vols. (Beverly Hills: Gagosian, 2010). Accompanying texts by Norman Bryson (Vol. 1: 16–42) & Werner Spies (Vol. 2: 13–19).

mind, who works with the clash of pathos and ridicule, the lofty power of the “grand” when it is combined with elements of “trash”.⁵ Thus, new monumentalism appropriates, as a second tradition, strategies of pop art, and in doing so empties out and deconstructs the pathos of the grand gesture.

Impact

Whether it is due to the implications of pathos or to the connotations of superficiality, the story of scale is tightly linked to the idea of impact, with the potential to create a strong effect on the perceiving subject. Scale is one of the oldest tools to achieve reactions that are described both with shock and amazement. The monumental artwork goes beyond the dimensions of human proportion. It is connected to the rhetoric of power. The vocabulary used to describe the emotional, or even bodily effect, includes expressions such as being overwhelmed, uproar, and astonishment. The individual subject has to define a position against something that is bigger than his or her own mental and physical capacity. This more conventional situation of being confronted with something is replaced in the current monumental installations by the act of entering, becoming completely immersed, and thus losing consciousness of the self that needs distance to be constructed.

In the modern period, particularly the “New American Painting”,⁶ the generation of the Abstract Expressionists picked up on the notion of the sublime in order to describe the desired impact of their large-scale compositions. The little magazine *The Tiger’s Eye* devoted an entire volume to the questions “What Is Sublime in Art?”, “What is there in the old concept of sublimity to hold us in awe today?”⁷ Kurt Seligmann, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, the art historian David Sylvester, and the poet Nicolas Calas contributed statements or essays that have since become canonical for the discourse of

5 Cf. Urs Fischer, *Helmar Lerski* (self-published artist’s book, 2008). Cf. the exhibition *Urs Fischer*, MOCA, Los Angeles, 04.21.13–08.19.13.

6 *The New American Painting* was the title of one of MoMA’s circulating exhibitions that toured through several European countries in 1958–1959. Dorothy Miller & Alfred Barr, *The New American Painting (MoMA International Program) Exhibition Shown in 8 European Countries* (New York: Doubleday, 1958–1959).

7 Editorial, *The Tiger’s Eye* 1.6 (1948): 57. For the status of *The Tiger’s Eye*, cf. Ann Eden Gibson, “Abstract Expressionism’s Evasion of Language”, *Art Journal* 47.3 (1988): 208–214; Ann Eden Gibson, “Retracing Original Intentions: Barnett Newman and *Tiger’s Eye*”, *Art International* 5 (1988): 14–23; *Das Erhabene. Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Grössenwahn*, ed. Christine Pries (Weinheim: VCH, 1989).

aesthetic experience. The reinterpretation of the aesthetic category of the sublime aimed at a description of direct impact, beyond any narration, that would force the beholder into existential self-questioning.⁸ Historiography took the question of scale as a reference point to establish the vision of a specifically American experience of space and to stipulate the new dominance of American art.

The following generations of American artists, who were well trained both in art history and philosophy continued this discourse, critically looking at how America defined itself. Both performance artist Allan Kaprow, who studied with Meyer Shapiro, and the sculptor Robert Morris commented heavily on the use of scale by artists like Jackson Pollock. Kaprow offered analytical descriptions of the effect achieved: “Then scale. Pollock’s choice of enormous canvases served many purposes ... Pollock’s choice of great sizes resulted in our being confronted, assaulted, sucked in”.⁹ Robert Morris went even further and questioned most explicitly the temptation of the monumental for an American art. He saw a problem in the way that Pollock became something of an “allegorical sign of American power”.¹⁰ For Morris, there was no doubt that an aesthetic category such as the sublime would be instrumentalised for a rhetoric of power and the demand for submission – he even referred to the monumental in the 20th century as “obscene”.¹¹

8 Peter J. Schneemann, *Von der Apologie zur Theoriebildung. Die Geschichtsschreibung des Abstrakten Expressionismus* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003).

9 Allan Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock”, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 1–9, at 6. Cf. also Amelia Jones, *Body Art. Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) 57.

10 Robert Morris, “The Labyrinth and the Urinal”, *Critical Inquiry* 36.1 (Autumn 2009): 76–99, at 86. Cf. Robert Morris, “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious”, *Have I Reasons*, ed. Nena Tsouti-Schillinger (London: Duke UP, 2008) 171–185, at 174. In the same volume, see also Robert Morris, “Size Matters”, 121–137, at 128–129. “Any history of the monumental would document a long list of triumphal works in the service of military victories ... Objects of large physical scale have always impressed. This was the intention. Power, high status, and the sacred demanded sublime expressions in order to elicit submission. Look up and be aware of your feeble smallness in the face of the greater authority and glory represented by the monumental artefact” (Morris 2009, 76–77). For Morris’ criticism, cf. the brilliant analysis by Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, *Thematics in the Art of Robert Morris* (PhD Thesis University of Sussex November 2010) 170.

11 See Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Concrete Utopias or Printing to Make Public”, *Robert Morris. Estampes et Multiples. 1952–1998* (Genève: Cabinet des Estampes du Musée d’Art et d’Histoire, 1999) 159–166, at 161; W. J. T. Mitchell, “Wall Labels: Word, Image, and Object in the Work of Robert Morris”, *The Mind/Body Problem* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1994) 62–79, at 62 (catalogue of an exhibition held from January until April 1994 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York).

In contemporary art, the discussion of scale and the monumental can be linked, quite pragmatically, to a growing need for impact, which becomes a critical criterion for art. For some time now, criticism and art history have tried to re-evaluate the emotional effect of a work of art on the audience.¹² Since the late 1960s, one can identify the artistic strategy to appeal to the beholder, his and her emotions, perception and body with the maximum of direct impact, as a physical encounter. Art history tries to re-evaluate the emotional response, the viewer's "tears".¹³ As such, feeling is, once again, put in opposition to the intellectual reading and interpretation of a work of art. The grand format likes to react to the conception of an artwork as resisting commodity and decoration. However, at the same time, it faces the possibility of fulfilling these very temptations – mass culture, bad taste and kitsch – in an affirmative way. Hence, the play with the gigantic is under constant suspicion; it might simply refer to nothing else than that art is competing with spectacle and sensation. In these terms, the new monumentalism adheres to a rhetoric that Hal Foster introduced when discussing the problem of "immersion", which installation art offers to the beholder.¹⁴ In his analyses of works by James Turrell and Bill Viola, Foster describes a loss of self-reflexive moments in the beholder's experience.

The vocabulary of scale addresses the ambivalence between the self-consciousness of the perceiving subject and the power of a work of art to impose its very own existence upon the audience. These artistic strategies include experiments with the expansion of time. Various artists and even curators explore the effect of creating a tension between the limited amount of time invested by the audience and the time demanded by the very structure of the work. Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), for instance, uses the technique of sampling. The artist's composition of clock-scenes cut out of popular Hollywood movies is meant to be projected in such a way that all excerpts match with the real time of the audience. Moreover, the collage is to be viewed in a full 24-hour cycle.

¹² Cf. *Affekte. Analysen ästhetisch-medialer Prozesse*, ed. Antje Krause-Wahl (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006).

¹³ Oskar Bätschmann, "Der Künstler als Erfahrungsgestalter", *Ästhetische Erfahrung Heute*, ed. Jürgen Stöhr (Köln: DuMont, 1996) 249–281; James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴ Hal Foster, "Polemics, Postmodernism, Immersion, Militarized Space", *Journal of Visual Culture* 3.3 (2004): 320–335, at 329: "With Serra you're made reflexive in your immersion; you're not virtually obliterated by the experience. With the world of Turrell, Viola, et al., you are: you're somehow lost in relation to your body, and you stumble not only into the work but through it as well. It's an effect, beyond distraction, of disorientation, of being lost in space, and one has to wonder about its ideological effects – that is, beyond its sheer aestheticism, which is what attracts people, for again it gives the rush of media intensity with the surplus value of art".

The time in the film, communicated by clocks and watches shown in the film-snippets, passes in the exact same way as does the time of the audience. The institutions are obligated to stay open for the entire run of the film, and many visitors actually do stay for several hours.

The scenography of a long period can be used to establish an atmosphere of real-time, of intensity and urgency. For a recent example, one can resort to Marina Abramović's performance "The Artist is Present", again realised in 2011, which lasted three months. During the entire time-span, the artist sat on a chair in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art, from the opening of the museum to its closing.¹⁵ The extreme duration of the performance – its format of 600 hours may remind us of performance art's early interest to find and probe the limits of experience – attracted most of the attention in the embattled discourse regarding this theatrical piece. With regard to the shared interest in these strategies by artists and curators alike, one might also include the new employment of the term 'marathon' by the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in the discussion of a new monumentalism. Since around 2006, the star curator conducted a series of interviews that lasted 24 hours.¹⁶ Subsequently, he extended this concept and curated an "Experiment Marathon", a "Manifesto Marathon" in 2008¹⁷ and a "Poetry Marathon" in 2009 and, finally, besides further such events, the "Marathon Marathon".¹⁸

Themes

What is the relation between the epic, the grand subject matter, the tragic and the horrific, and the concept of monumentalism? Following one of several genealogical lines, the monumental as format and as scenario, as a utopia of strong impact referring to agendas of both memory and identity, of commemoration and message and with a missionary gesture even touches on ethical dimensions of art.¹⁹ The monumental is not only an aesthetic category but also a political

15 Chrissie Iles, "Marina Abramović and the Public: A Theater of Exchange", *Marina Abramović. The Artist is Present. Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York 2010* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2010) 40–43.

16 *Serpentine Gallery 24-hour Interview Marathon*, ed. Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist & Julia Peyton-Jones (London: Trolley, 2007).

17 *Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon*, curated by Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist & Nicola Lees, ed. Nicola Lees. Designed by Zak Kyes, Zak Group (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009).

18 *The Marathon Marathon*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist & Nadja Argyropoulou (The Acropolis Museum, Athens, 31 October 2010).

one. Especially in the field of the memorial, the ideological dimension, the ethical implications of monumentalism have been discussed in depth.²⁰ Is it adequate to conceptualise a monument for the commemoration of the horrors of the Holocaust by working with monumental structures which might be misunderstood as a reference to the NS-dictatorship's obsession with the monumental?²¹ Post-war art agreed widely on the rhetoric of anti-monumentalism: Artists such as Jochen Gerz preferred the idea of the monument that would disappear or become almost invisible, which he described as counter-monuments.²²

Anselm Kiefer, whose work is exemplary for the revival of the genre of history painting in the 1970s and 1980s serves as an interesting case study. Kiefer does not simply link the question of the format with memory. By referring to literature, he equally works with the traditional genre-rules of history painting. In his large paintings that operate with the aesthetics of materials like cloth and plaster, which are integrated in the canvas-surface, he ties art again to Germany's past and national narratives. Due to his provocative confrontation with history, Kiefer's work has witnessed an especially interesting reception.²³ In 2007, he was the first to be exhibited in the Grand Palais with monumental structures that related to narratives of history.²⁴ Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann belong to Kiefer's favoured literary sources for these epic history paintings shown in Paris. Under the title "Falling Stars", Kiefer aimed with monumental structures at a cosmological reference. He did not fail to point out the

19 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995).

20 *Monumentalism: History, National Identity and Contemporary Art/Monumentalisme: Geschiedenis, Nationale Identiteit en Hedendaagse Kunst*, ed. Jelle Bouwhuis & Stedelijk Museum (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2010).

21 *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal (Hanover: Dartmouth College P, 1999); cf. especially Andreas Huyssen, "Monumental Seduction", *New German Critique* 69 (1996): 181–200.

22 Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The Harburg Monument against Fascism* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1994). Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2007) 151–153. Ute Heimrod, *Der Denkmalstreit – das Denkmal? Die Debatte um das "Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas". Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Philo, 1999).

23 Sven Beckstette, *Das Historienbild im 20. Jahrhundert. Künstlerische Strategien zur Darstellung von Geschichte in der Malerei nach dem Ende der klassischen Bildgattungen*, (Diss. Freie Universität Berlin, 2008) Chapter 12. Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth", *October* 48 (1989): 25–45. *Face à l'Histoire, 1933–199. L'artiste Moderne devant l'Événement Historique*, ed. Jean-Paul Ameline & Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris: Flammarion, 1996).

24 *Anselm Kiefer – Sternenfall, Chute d'étoiles*, ed. Paul Adrenne & Pierre Assouline (Paris: Editions du Regard, 2007).

reference to the glass roof of the ephemeral exhibition structure. Beside the presentation of paintings, Kiefer reacted to the vast space with the construction of concrete architectural elements: As for the Royal Academy exhibition of the same year, several ‘towers’ were relocated from the artist’s property in the south of France, offering a rhetorical framework for his new paintings.



Fig. 2: Anselm Kiefer, Towers at the Royal Academy, London, 2007 © Anselm Kiefer

Kiefer is a representative of a rather traditional use of the vocabulary of monumentalism. I would claim that more recent strategies start to combine the seriousness of subject matter with the language of pop. Hence, one could say that both the social and the political have turned into an aesthetic surface. Whether this leads to a kind of neutralization of a scale’s impact remains still unresolved. However, with regard to the *mise-en-scène* of the political and the social, the surface, therefore the superficial appearance, is the main focus. This argument has originally been presented in the context of photography. Norman Bryson used Andreas Gursky’s monumental photography as an example to express critical thoughts about the mechanisms at work between format and subject matter – he argued that the aesthetic language might turn the social issues of an image of the world into monumental ornaments.²⁵ When the global Biennales address political themes, when they announce the ambition to contribute

²⁵ Norman Bryson, “The Family Firm. Andreas Gursky and German Photography”, *Art/Text* 67 (November 1999 – January 2000): 76–81, at 76. Ohlin 2002.

to the challenges of today, thereby reminding us of war and the loss of identity, religion and global narratives, they put a visual language on display that combines both shock and beauty.

Thus, the discourse on monumentalism comes full circle: The major subject matter, the quintessential narrative, corresponds to an aesthetic of the monumental; the reaction and the impact on the beholder is equally as massive. A coffee-table book like “Art & Agenda” does not only make use of a colourful visual language, it equally tells of the respective work’s impact in almost every entry – its climax as ultimate affirmation is, of course, the scandal.²⁶ The thematically organised chapters of the book are telling: “The Commercial Aspect”, “The Human Element”, “Sanctuary”, “Think Global Act Local”, “History Repeating”. Is there a link between the obsession with urgency and a publishing culture that explores the vocabulary of the mass magazine?

When we follow the idea of the monumental aesthetic as a contradiction of the analytical, which contributes to its instant appeal as rejection of criticism, we realise that the originally narrow use of the monumental in the tradition of genre classification tends to expand increasingly into the non-articulate: the general and the atmosphere.²⁷ Looking at the reactions toward the light and space installations by James Turrell, which were even included in recent Bienales, we find an aesthetic of the gigantic linked to a non-specific impression of a fundamental topic, a higher value, a reference system that hovers between the spiritual and the metaphysical.²⁸ The space and light impressions arranged by Turrell as well as Bill Viola’s video installations are often fittingly described by the term “contemporary sublime”.²⁹

In a cross-cultural context, it is interesting to see in which way this open language of experience implies the potential of a universal language. The artist Anish Kapoor found his ideal space at the Turbine Hall of the Tate, at the Grand Palais, with his own contribution to the Monumenta-series in 2011, in public spaces like the Olympic Park in London but also in churches.³⁰ For the *Frauen-*

²⁶ Robert Klanten & Pedro Alonzo, *Art & Agenda. Political Art and Activism* (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 2011).

²⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Ist Kunst widerständig?* (Berlin: Merve, 2008).

²⁸ Marcia Muelder Eaton, Rev. of *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, by Neal Benezra & Olga Viso. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59.1 (2001): 108–110.

²⁹ Cf. for example the essays found on the website of the Tate Modern: e.g. Julian Bell, “Contemporary Art and the Sublime”. www.tate.org.uk. 2013. Tate Modern, acc. 10 April 2013 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/what-is-the-sublime-r1109449>>.

³⁰ *Leviathan – Anish Kapoor – Grand Palais, Paris – Monumenta 2011*, ed. Henri Bovet (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2011). *The Unilever Series: 2000–2012* (London: Tate, 2012).

kirche in Dresden, he designed an altar, and at the Venice Biennale of 2011, he installed a column of smoke in the crossing of Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore with the title *Ascension*. His works are highly accessible, as they offer a strong physical experience with a reference system that effortlessly links the stereotypes of an artist born in India with western mythologies and Christian motifs. In a polemic way, one could say that the new monumentalism, due to its complete openness to symbolic associations and spiritual experiences, turns out to work with undefined voids, using visual effects of the atmospheric. It is not merely by chance that Turrell's or Kapoor's giant colour-spaces with their arresting effects show an astonishing parallel to the most recent work by Christo at the *Gasometer* in Oberhausen. The artist himself compares the effect of his "Big Air Package", which is 90 meters high, with a cathedral. These voids, provided and modified by the artists, are filled with visitors. In the case of Turrell, the concept of the experience of the sublime still applies – in most of his installations the number of visitors is limited. We are addressed as individuals who start to reflect our act of perception. In the new vast installations within blockbuster exhibitions, however, the individual body is replaced by a decisively collective moment.

The Mass and the Individual

Whereas the aesthetics of the sublime described the situation of the individual who is confronted with an impression of both danger and grandeur, the current notion of the monumental has experienced an interesting shift. Whether Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*,³¹ or Kapoor's *Leviathan*, the public crowd has become an integral element of the language of the new monumentalism. In many ways, this shift brings together the aspects discussed in this essay. The reactions of a large number of people, of the mass media as well as of the actual crowd in front or on top of an art installation have emerged as indicators for an artwork's impact. In other words, impact is measured by the sheer number of people that are attracted. Monumental works appeal to the visitors, and in turn the audience constitutes the status of the monumental. The role of the crowd goes even further in terms of the conceptualisation and practice of participation as a dominating strategy of contemporary art. It becomes both the material and the legitimisation of the monumental. The individual perceives him- or herself as a member of a collective experience. Together, they co-produce the experience

³¹ Olafur Eliasson. *The weather project*, ed. Olafur Eliasson, Susan May & Tate Modern (*The Unilever Series*, London: Tate Publishing, 2003).



Fig. 3: Olafur Eliasson, *The weather project*, 2003, Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding, 26.7 × 155.4 m, Installation in Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, Photo: Studio Olafur Eliasson, Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery New York © Olafur Eliasson 2003

and the impact they are offered to consume. Various scholars have wondered whether one could draw a connection to the strategies of “crowdsourcing”.³² There are quite a number of directions into which this discussion could develop. I think that it would be too easy to interpret the temptation of the grand and its impact as simple consequences of the economic pressure by institutions to fulfil certain benchmarks.³³ Certainly, one might see a quality of the event, the leisure industry, in the turn from intimate, private contemplation to the mechanisms of a public crowd that is engaged in interactions.³⁴ The question is whether the idea of the instant appeal carries the vision of a democratic place of art at the centre of society, or whether the individual is merely instrumentalised as material.

This use of the crowd, however, is not simply an issue on the level of economics of the culture industry. There are works that refer to the mass in a way that is much more explicitly linked to political agendas.³⁵ When in 2007 Ai Wei-

³² Sarah Browne, “Crowd Theory Lite. ‘The Crowd’ in Participatory Art and Pop Economics”, *Circa* 126 (2008): 33–39; Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002; Cambridge: Basic Books, 2007).

³³ *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

³⁴ Agnes Husslein-Arco & Museum der Moderne Salzburg, *Les Grands Spectacles: 120 Jahre Kunst und Massenkultur/120 Years of Art and Mass Culture* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005).

³⁵ Katy Siegel, “All Together Now, Crowd Scenes in Contemporary Art”, *Artforum* 43.5 (2005): 166–171.

Wei invited 1000 Chinese to Kassel as part of his documenta project “Fairytale”, he created a monumental statement by means of a “crowd”. The participants paid for their participation by offering their portrait to Ai WeiWei, which he used in his “media distribution” and the marketing of his work. The critical discourse agreed on the project’s power to comment on the status of the individual, on communication and transcultural exchange.³⁶ When society finds a reference point of collective identification in the tradition of the monument as place and gesture, of ritual and exercise of collective memory, of power und intimidation, the new participatory conception of the crowd points towards a collective game.³⁷

In the popular discourse on relational aesthetics, moments of communication claim to “overcome” monumentality. The quality at stake might be defined as collective experience and communication. Possible perspectives differentiate



Fig. 4: Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale*, 2007, Participants waiting prior to their departure from Kassel, 1001 Chinese visitors, Project for Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, Courtesy of the artist; Leister Foundation, Switzerland; Erlenmeyer Stiftung, Switzerland and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne

³⁶ Cf. the excellent commentary by Raphael Gyax, “Extra Fairy Tale!”, *Ai WeiWei Fairytale: A Reader*, ed. Lionel Bovier & Salome Schnetz (Zürich: Ringier 2012) 52–59.

³⁷ Browne 2008. Cf. also the project by Urs Fischer at *The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA* in Los Angeles with 1500 volunteers, who contributed to the immense “collaborative” clay installation.

into being part of the group or looking at the collective as an image that comments on social issues.³⁸ With regard to the question of new monumentalism, it seems to be a surprising conclusion that we may look for the “re-translation” of communal experiences into images. The language of monumentalism is re-applied in the visual documentation of impact: The aesthetic language and the employed media strategies go hand in hand.³⁹ The popular status of the scenography in the photographs by Spencer Tunick might elucidate this point.⁴⁰ Since the middle of the 1990s, the American photographer calls together a growing number of volunteers, now into their thousands, for body-installations he considers site-specific – in Mexico City for instance, 18,000 people participated. Together, these naked bodies establish a monumental medium, a mass that occupies landscapes and public spaces. Tunick receives great attention from the mass-magazines and daily papers. The parallels to the problem of monumentalism are evident: there is the commercial aspect, since many projects were commissions, links to political activism, to his work for Greenpeace and finally, the disturbing way in which these projects seem to be missing any critical dimension, any level of reflection. Evidently, one could discuss Tunick’s pictures with regard to collective obedience, which is strangely contradicted by the testimonials of participants who are completely enthusiastic. Mia Fineman has pointed out the disturbing parallels to a photographic style that was established in the context of such patriotic projects as the “Human Liberty Bell” by Arthur S. Mole and John D. Thomas at the end of World War I, where thousands of soldiers were arranged in patriotic motives.⁴¹ However, the eminent status of the image of the crowd is supported by more complex cases. In picturing the crowd, several elements are heightened. The strong aestheticization by means of conformity of the collected portraits coincides with the quality of the memory.

The afore-mentioned performance by Marina Abramović found its actual monumentality in the documentary series of portraits that list all the partici-

38 Elisabeth Fritz, *Real Life – Real People. Mediale Experimente mit ‘echten Menschen’ in der zeitgenössischen Kunst zwischen Authentizität, Partizipation und Spektakel* (Diss. Universität Graz, 2012); Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”, *Artforum* 44.6 (2006): 178–183, at 179. See also Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

39 Wolfgang Brückle, “Kollektivdarstellung in der Gegenwartskunst. Mitwirkung, Teilhabe, Gemeinschaft”, *Bilder und Gemeinschaften. Studien zur Konvergenz von Politik und Ästhetik in Kunst, Literatur und Theorie*, ed. Beate Fricke, Markus Klammer & Stefan Neuner (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2011) 403–439.

40 Dany Louise, “Spencer Tunick”, *Art Monthly* 294 (2006): 22–23.

41 Mia Fineman, “Naked Ambition. Why doesn’t Spencer Tunick get any Respect”, *Slate Magazine* 16 January 2008.



Fig. 5: Portraits in the presence of Marina Abramović, Photograph by Marco Anelli © 2010 from “The Artist is Present”, MoMA, New York Day 62 – 16/5/2010

pants for each day, distributed by social media.⁴² An interesting parallel becomes evident. Since 2004, the French street artist and photographer JR is globally active with a large-scale participatory project that encourages the activity of photographic portraiture, and the display of one’s own image in monumental series at public spaces.⁴³ The black and white portrait-posters allow individuals and communities to “become visible”. The artist claims that more than 100,000 people have participated so far. His installations with photo booths and plotters have reached institutions like the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The presence on the internet belongs to the crucial aspects of his projects.

In my essay, I have argued that monumentalism indeed belongs to the very strong traditions of an aesthetic language that is constantly re-discussed and re-evaluated in the context of the interrelation between art and society. The shifts that occur in this tradition focus on the quality of impact that relates to issues of a consumer society, instead of notions related to the absolute as eternal quality. When we talk about a new monumentalism, we can state that the older concept based on confrontation has shifted to models of participation. The old parameters of an aesthetic of monumentalism are utilised for modes of presentation, media translations, as an outcome of dynamic processes. Thus, the new monumentalism can be described as a format for the scenography of the collective that does not necessarily cover political issues or share common ideologies. Instead, the question of effect and impact is taken as evidence in its own right.

⁴² Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist is Present’. Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence”, *The Drama Review* 55.1 (2011): 16–45.

⁴³ JR, *Inside Out, The People’s Art Project*, 2011-present, “The World’s Largest Participatory Art Project”, acc. 24 May 2013 <<http://www.insideoutproject.net>> & <<http://www.jr-art.net/>>.