PAPER SOFTENS THE STONE

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A Prelude to the Suitcase System

„There's No Place Like Home"
Westfälischer Kunstverein
Benjamin Tiven
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Tehran, Iran, 1971

The Shah has commissioned a young architect named Hossein Amanat to construct a massive public monument as part of the celebrations for the 2,500 year anniversary of the Persian Empire. Built in some 36 months, the Shahyad Tower, or "King's Tower", is a colossal form, combining an arch, gateway, fortified tower, and obelisk, all woven together under a complex decorative scheme of historic Persian pattern designs. The basement level houses a museum of regional archaeological artifacts, and the plaza grounds are meticulously landscaped with geometric patterns that reflect the structure itself. The spectacular opening event, in October of 1971, included a large gathering of world leaders. The Shahyad monument was instantly recognized as a notable contribution to global architecture. In the decades since, it has become a national icon — a visual metonym for modern Tehran.

In 1978, the Shahyad monument was the backdrop to the protests that fanned the Islamic Revolution. Soon after taking power, the Khomeini regime re-named it the Azadi, or "Freedom", Tower — a remarkable inversion of its original intent. What had signified a continuous monarchy was transformed into a monument to the abstract notion *freedom* — a concept, in fact, not in common currency under Khomeini's government. Thirty years later, this very same structure grounded the visual language of the Green Movement's wave of opposition protests against the Ayatollah's political system. As it had in 1979, the monument's sprawling plaza became the meeting ground and public face of the resistance.

How does the same structure support such widely disparate political aims? Is the Tower's conic geometry intrinsically ideologically flexible? Is all abstract symbolism? Why wasn't this monument, the work of a recently deposed monarch, simply destroyed in 1980? Does it simply resonate, on some formal level, in the heart of even the most hardline fundamentalist?

New York City, United States, 2011

Massive beams of light are cast up at the sky.
What does this *mean*?
We might presume it to be the defiance of nature that technology allows man; or maybe a cry of victory, anguish, or rage; or perhaps some unknown replacement for language. But how could we be certain? In Nuremberg, in 1937, a similar temporary light projection was first used as a visual decoy: what it really projected was the mise-en-scene of an aggressive, bluffing military. In New York, for a few weeks each year since 2002, this same projection of light has been claimed to be a solemn, placid memorial: an annual signal of absence, memory, and public mourning.

In September of 2011, the artist and cinema set designer Julian LaVerdiere, one of the two artists who first proposed the Tribute in Light memorial to the September 11th attacks, was interviewed in the magazine *Art and America* about the now world-famous public project. He recalled thinking of them, upon seeing his first satellite images of the beams, as:

> "...some baffling Morse code which sends out an annual message of dashes, dots, and emptiness. What these signs mean is up to the recipient, but at the most basic level it is a shout or cry or attempt to simply reach out and say: we are here... It's so different in person than in reproduction. I've seen so many pictures that misappropriated it or used it for propaganda, whether as tourist art sold in Central Park or Times Square, or profiteering efforts like Franklin Mint coins. I once saw it on the side of buck knives. It got co-opted by the patriotic Right, which used it as a sign of solidarity of the war effort, which is revolting. I was also shocked to see it used as a backdrop image for the GOP and Democratic conventions in 2004. Seeing it in print makes me feel like I was part of something that became dirty. But when I see it in person it does bring back those early days.

What do you think the difference is?

That's a question for Walter Benjamin."

Indeed. We doubt, in fact, that Walter Benjamin would have found this spectacular monument's co-opting by the right-wing all that surprising. (It is, after all, visible from space.) But LaVerdiere is correct to take note of the field of kitsch that spiralled off of his work: if those mugs and key chains and commemorative coins can indeed also be agents of memory and mourning, then the Tribute in Light *image* — a reproduction of a spectre of a spectre — has trumped Benjamin's categorical terms. Instead of a vessel through which meaning is mechanically dispersed, these images are identical sieves through which some neutralized meaning continues to slip.

Of course, numismatists already knew that the Tribute in Light commemorative coin was a double redundancy: not only a memory-marker of a memory-marker, but that all coins themselves are already travelling monuments. Carried in the pocket of every citizen, they constantly remind us of the touch of the government, whether purchasing either land or chewing gum.

To connect a coin's value to the backing of a political regime, a government strikes it with a set of graphic symbols — often ones as universal and abstract as the exchange possibilities embedded in the coin itself. One of the most common is the eagle, which has been prominent in heraldic symbolism since at least as far back as its appearance on the war standards of Imperial Rome. Numerous governments, of widely varying political dispositions and across enormous spans of time, have been equally served by the eagle's majestic wings and fierce talons: the Spanish and Byzantine empires, France under Napoleon, Egypt under Nasser, and the Polish and Romanians to this day. In Germany, the eagle has appeared on every official coat of arms or federal insignia, along with numerous provincial emblems,

since at least the 11th century, an inheritance from the Holy Roman Empire. Since 1945, this specific eagle has been called the *Bundesadler* instead of the *Reichsadler*. In the United States, the eagle was adopted only eight years after Independence, and it has remained a central symbolic figure, featured on the official seals of the President, the Congress, and the nation itself, along with numerous denominations of the currency.

From the late eighteenth century until the years following the Second World War, when American money was tied to actual quantities of gold, an *Eagle* was also the name for a base unit of measure. An eagle coin was always stamped with the bird itself, and was worth ten dollars. Seen here is its elder sibling: a $20 coin, the so-called Double Eagle, from 1933. Initially, in 1905, when Augustus St. Gaudens had begun his redesign of American currency, he left "In God We Trust" off this coin at the direction of president Roosevelt, who had felt that it was inappropriate to put the name of God on money. "...It seems to me eminently unwise to cheapen such a motto by use on coins, just as it would be to cheapen it by use on postage stamps or in advertisements," Roosevelt wrote. But a 1908 act of Congress mandated this motto on almost all coins and bills, amid an era of fervent national religious sentiment. It could be argued that this was ultimately the truest American gesture: when the president balked that the Earthly uses of money would debase the name of God, the legislature countered by elevating currency to the status of the divine.

What is it that the federal eagle symbolizes? What explains its persistence as a cipher for the law, beyond simply tradition or habit? The eagle signposts a regime's mandate to rule, insisting that it derives directly from Nature. It reminds the citizen that there is no higher authority to which they could appeal. Whether abstracted, modern, classical, or depicted in a realist style, the Eagle reminds us of the scale differentials of power. It is the crown that only the institution of government itself can wear.


TRIBUTE IN LIGHT


UNITED·STATES·OF·AMERICA
TWENTY·DOLLARS
IN·GOD·WE·TRUST


Reichs
mark
2
DEUTSCHES REICH 1939


BUNDESREPUBLIK DEUTSCHLAND
2002
100 EURO

Berlin, Germany, 1949

The architect Albert Speer was still a recent arrival to the Spandau prison complex when the red granite panels that covered his most famous public commission — the new Nazi Reichkanzlei — were being salvaged and repurposed by the Soviets to construct a monument to their war dead from the Berlin liberation battles of 1945.

The massive Soviet War Memorial sits in a wooded section of Treptower park, in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin. Built around a wide, open plaza of landscaped grass, the monument consists of two massive anchors: a statue of a Soviet soldier, some twelve meters tall, at one end; and two enormous entry gates to the whole plaza at the other. A series of white stone sarcophagi, carved with friezes of scenes from the war, ring the perimeter of the lawn between them. It is these two heavy, triangular structures marking the gateway that are covered in the red stone from Speer's Chancellery building. They are prominently chiseled with the hammer and sickle. What does it mean that these fascist materials found their afterlife as a symbol for the victory of Soviet Communism? Can these particular sheets of granite truly have outrun their vexed political legacy? And now that the Soviet government for which they were conscripted has itself also dissolved, for whom does the monument speak? And with what voice?

Nairobi, Kenya, 1988

The Nyayo, or "Footsteps", Monument opens in Nairobi's Uhuru Park, with much fanfare and public speeches by president Daniel Arap Moi. His party, the Kenya-Africa National Union, is the only openly allowed political affiliation in Kenya. To commemorate — ostensibly — his seamless continuation of Jomo Kenyatta's cultural policies, Moi commissioned this megalithic monument at the most prominent corner of the city's main downtown greenway. It is, in essence, a testament to single-party rule.

The monument combines a highly abstract physical form with individual pictorial representations. It is a crystalline solid, faceted like a gem, almost star-shaped in plan, set within a pool of water with symmetrical fountain jets. In each of its four indented sides sits a sculpted, circular medallion, seemingly in bronze, depicting various KANU accomplishments in a pictographic, almost Social Realist style. In one, telephone wires and radios show the widened reach of infrastructure; wheat and fish in another show enhanced industrial agriculture; a third shows a rendering of the ideal, modern Kenyan family. The fourth medallion depicts a peacock, the proud KANU icon. On the peak of the whole structure, Moi's massive hand, holding his signature cane, emerges in a clenched fist from a sculpted model of Mt. Kenya. It has been said for years that if you're politically with him, then his hand is conquering the mountain; if you're politically opposed, the mountain is swallowing his hand. Others have even claimed to see, when in profile view, the configuration M-O-I emerge from the perceptual overlap of the structure's idiosyncratic geometry. However visually understood, the structure's unique combination of confounding abstraction with a pictorial directness has given it a rare level of communicative clarity: it is almost unable to signify anything *but* the political boasts of its author.

Of course, this is also precisely how the structure has ceased to remain valuable. Today, with multi-party politics the national norm, the monument has become a kind of architectural white noise: most people casually ignore it, or fail to recognize it as significant. It proclaims a permanent state of victory for a now absent victor, and one whom many would like to forget. It is legible now as only a large, abstract mass, and it openly decays in the sun: its neon bulbs are cracked and dark, its pools and fountains are empty, and its granite skin is slowly falling away.

A monument speaks to the people. It is, almost by definition, all surface. Its architectural use value is simply to manifest itself as a particular shape. Only so long as the field of civic and political discourse can activate that shape, will a monument retain viability and resonance as a social form.

All monumental structures proclaim a specific future, or insist on a highly selective past. But, there remains an unresolvable tension between the tense of a monument's claims and the tense of its material existence. Memory is an unfolding set of propositions and understandings, and memory has always moved too fast for architecture. Ideology and form operate at disjunctive paces.

For centuries, many of the massive, durable structures erected across the world have outlasted the governments, territories, or political projects that commissioned and produced them. Bereft of their specific fields, these forms lose their speech, and become mute, illegible matter. Ciphers without their original codes, they burden our present with an out-of-joint past.

What if the tragedies of war and trauma, the euphoria of victory, or the rites surrounding the sacred were events and processes that tied countries or people together into a ongoing social bind — the same way that commerce does? Like a business contract, any monument to such an event would have to be equally legible to all parties, subject to continued negotiation and reassessment, and would need to evolve along with the historical understanding of the event's actors and waves of significance. Could we imagine a political monument or memorial that could grow with this kind of public memory? One that would be a continuous production of the people for whom it is to speak? Can we prepare a monument to survive its own eventual obsolescence?