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Emma Bond

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Between Memory and Matter: Italy and the Transnational Dimensions of Public Art

Emma Bond*

University of St Andrews

ABSTRACT

This article identifies a set of precarious, temporary, and travelling forms of commemoration that have been expressed in recent public artworks connected to Italy, and proposes them as case studies that together can enhance our understanding of how transnational memory is formed and functions across borders. These complex processes of memory-making are illustrated through a comparative analysis of Wes Anderson's *Bar Luce* (2015), Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013), and Muna Mussie's *Oblivio* (2021). The selected works, which together add transnational nuance to James E. Young's concept of the 'counter-monument', enshrine the creativity which can reside in acts of forgetting and misremembering, in experiencing things second-hand or at a distance, and in re-materialising memory through tropes of ephemerality, portability, and dislocation.

KEYWORDS

Public art; Italy; transnational; memory; counter-monuments

Introduction

This article interrogates how public art (broadly defined as art that takes place outside traditional museum or gallery settings and has some public function, visibility, or interest¹) can contribute to new formations of cultural memory and, more specifically, how these formative acts of memory-making might function in a transnational manner. As De Cesari and Rigney have shown, engaging a transnational optic 'allows memory to be visualised differently: not as a horizontal spread or as points or regions on a map, but as a dynamic operating at multiple, interlocking scales and involving conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations'.² Building on this idea of cultural memory as a multi-scalar, dynamic operation, I explore how public artworks become akin to travelling concepts that can articulate new or altered facets of national identity across borders. When they move, notions of cultural memory seem to twist and morph in relation to their new location, producing new forms of belonging and identification in turn. These new ideas and concepts can become embedded in contemporary formations of cultural memory thanks to a postmodern 'weakening of historicity', which ultimately leads to a modification of the past itself.³ In this way, 'the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether', and new understandings of issues are produced through false memory work.

CONTACT Emma Bond  emma.bond@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk  @efbond  St Hugh's College, St Margaret's Road, Oxford, OX2 6LE, UK

*Currently at the University of Oxford

¹Public art is art outside of museums and galleries and must fit within at least one of the following categories: 1) in a place accessible or visible to the public: in public 2) concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: public interest 3) maintained for or used by the community or individuals: public place 4) paid for by the public: publicly funded'. Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis, *The Practice of Public Art* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 15.

²Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, eds., *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 6.

³Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 6, 18.

Cultural commonplaces can also be more readily accepted once outside their national frame of reference.⁴ Equally, hyper-local histories can be revisited and exhumed through contemporary artworks that force us to look anew at ‘lieux de mémoire’ from critical perspectives.⁵ I illustrate these complex movements of memory-making through examining some recent artistic practices of commemoration that are connected but not confined to Italy, focusing my analysis on Wes Anderson’s *Bar Luce*, 2015; Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*, 2013; and Muna Mussie’s *Oblivio*, 2021. Analysing these works as part of a comparative framework will show how each work sheds light on the others in order to answer a more complex question about the contemporary status and function of memorial art practices in a transnationalised Italian cultural space.

The ways in which these works blur and stretch the conceptual boundaries of what might constitute Italy and Italian culture allow them to feed into and further inform a direction of study that has been termed the ‘transnational turn’ in Italian Studies.⁶ Intellectual work in this fast-growing field often emphasises the continuously constructed nature of the Italian national space and, as a consequence, of its cultural imaginary. Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò have recently shown how ‘the idea of modern Italy has taken shape through a set of powerful stories’, stories that are deliberately formed and re-formed in order to ‘will the undetermined and the fragmented into existence as a meaningful whole’.⁷ A transnational conception of Italy does not, therefore, restrict its analysis to the geographic space of the country or indeed to those who live there, but pays much closer attention to the way Italy functions as a ‘cognitive and affective object in the minds of both Italians and non-Italians, a sign that takes shape via its relentless global circulation’.⁸ This idea of Italy as a sign that we can read simultaneously on a local, national, and global scale, and one that circulates and changes endlessly depending on one’s own positionality and perspective, raises additional questions for the kind of memorial work that monuments and public artworks traditionally seek to achieve. If, as Erika Doss states, ‘memorials are ideal teaching tools in terms of considering how, and why, cultural memory is created, and how it shapes local and national identity’,⁹ then what can these works, selected because of their oblique relationship to Italian national identity, tell us about how transnational modes of memory are formed through responses to public art?

One way in which the present article will attempt to answer this question is by paying particular attention to the materiality of the artworks discussed, since they all engage with, and even privilege (to some degree) non-material notions of ephemerality, precarity, and oblivion within their design. In this sense, they adhere to Tim Ingold’s consideration of the double nature of materiality: in that it denotes both ‘the physicality of matter’ and its associated ‘forms of social appropriation’.¹⁰ I will suggest that the artworks under examination add transnational nuance to James E. Young’s commanding analysis of German ‘counter-monuments’ designed in the 1980s and 1990s to commemorate victims of the Holocaust.¹¹ Counter-monuments contest and refute the permanence of traditional vehicles of commemoration, such as statues and other monuments built to last, through their temporary status or their material evocation of absence. Given that some of the artworks

⁴Stephanie Malia Hom’s powerful concept of ‘destination Italy’ reinforces this point, in which the cultural understanding of ‘Italy’ as a model of idealised leisure and beauty: ‘goes mobile, and becomes a floating signifier of itself in the de-territorialised geographies of touristic space’. *The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the Impossible State of Destination Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 17.

⁵See Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 7–24.

⁶See Emma Bond, ‘Towards a Trans-National Turn in Italian Studies?’, *Italian Studies*, 69.3 (2014), 415–24; Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, eds., *Transnational Italian Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Charles Burdett, Nick Havelly and Loredana Polezzi ‘The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies’, *Italian Studies*, 75.2 (2020), 223–36; and Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò, ‘Blog: Why a Transnational Approach to Italian Studies?’, *H-Italian Diaspora*, 2021. See also the book series ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’, ed. by Emma Bond and Derek Duncan for Liverpool University Press, which launched in 2016.

⁷Bassi and Riccò.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Erika Doss, ‘Remembering 9/11: Memorials and Cultural Memory’, *OAH Magazine of History*, 25.3 (2011), 27–30 (p. 27).

¹⁰Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 28.

¹¹See James E. Young, ‘The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today’, *Critical Inquiry* 18.2 (Winter 1992), 267–96.

I discuss no longer exist in material form, I will locate their enduring memory-work within their relationship with public audiences, and with the localised places in which they were designed to be exhibited. As Kapralski has stated, we are living in a contemporary moment where memory has become spatialised, since ‘space is privileged over time as the main frame by which we orient ourselves in our lifeworlds’.¹² This spatialisation occurs through the ‘non-linear work of remembrance’, and through the ways in which feelings are evoked by spaces.¹³ Within the thread of contemporary public art that I identify here, Italy becomes akin to a ‘memoryscape’, a memorial landscape composed of both material and symbolic forms; one that is ‘constituted in and through the imagination of those who refer to it’.¹⁴ In categorising these three artworks as signalling the presence of an Italian memoryscape that anyone can contribute to through their memorial or affective engagement with sites and histories, regardless of national identity or even geographical location, I aim to offer new insight into how transnational memory conduits work through the medium of public art.

Part 1. From Bar Haiti to Bar Luce: The Transnationalisation of an Italian Symbol

In the autumn of 2021, I was lucky enough to spend two months in Pavia with my family. We often walked up and down the length of Corso Cavour, one of Pavia’s main shopping streets. Our daughter’s favourite ice-cream shop was there, and after a quick stop for a scoop or two of stracciatella, she loved going into Zara to ride up the escalator and play hide-and-seek among the racks of clothing. Opposite Zara is a café. We only went in a few times, but it caught my eye every single day, often multiple times. It was called Bar Haiti, and this first section will take us on a conceptual journey from its location on Pavia’s Corso Cavour to Wes Anderson’s 2015 designed *Bar Luce*, thirty kilometres or so to the north, in the post-industrial Porta Romana area of Milan (Figure 1).

Bar Haiti was founded in 1948 and – as is evident in this photo (Figure 1) – it is proud of its long-standing history. I was intrigued by the date that it opened and by the name chosen for the café. Why open a bar called Haiti in the sleepy university town of Pavia in 1948? I kept thinking about it, considering the question posed by Diana Garvin in her recent article on the Italian coffee triangle: ‘what (was) coffee doing for people *culturally* at this particular historical moment?’¹⁵ Then one weekend we went on a day trip to the nearby town of Vigevano, and the questions intensified. On the main square, again we found a historic café called Bar Haiti. What did Haiti as a cultural signifier mean for the café patrons and owners of Lombardia? It can’t have stood in for the coffee itself, since Haiti had stopped being a major exporter of coffee back in the 19th century. Whereas in 1788, San Domingo had supplied half the world’s coffee, the uprisings of the formerly enslaved inhabitants between 1791–1801 that culminated in the country’s independence in 1804 decimated exports and it never again regained its global dominance.¹⁶ In fact, as far as the Italian market was concerned, Brazil was the biggest exporter of coffee throughout the first half of the 20th century. Garvin explains how Italian labour (through the emigration of the *colonos*) fuelled the massive Brazilian coffee industry at the end of the 19th century. Agricultural methods enacted by Italians with success in South America were then supposed to kick-start coffee production as a global export in the East African colonies of Eritrea and Somalia, as well as in occupied Ethiopia. Yet coffee production in the Italian East Africa never really took off, and Italian coffee continued to arrive from Brazil, even when Fascist propaganda and advertising had made public awareness of East African coffee commonplace.

¹²Stawomir Kapralski, ‘(Mis)representations of the Jewish Past in Poland’s Memoryscapes: Nationalism, Religion, and Political Economies of Commemoration’, in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. by Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton and Monica Eileen Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 179–92 (p. 179).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Diana Garvin, ‘The Italian Coffee Triangle: From Brazilian Colonos to Ethiopian Colonialists’, *Modern Italy*, 26.3 (2021), 291–312 (p. 310, emphasis added).

¹⁶See Mark Pedergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How it Transformed our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 18.



Figure 1. Exterior detail of Bar Haiti (2021). Photo by the author.

But this still doesn't answer my underpinning question: why Haiti? Garvin talks of a process of 'cultural blurring' that becomes increasingly evident in café decoration in particular.¹⁷ Zoning in on imagery of the 'seminatrice' that is still present today in cafes such as Tazza d'Oro in Rome, she explains how much of this branding actually took place after the fact: post-war and therefore also post-Fascism. So, did Haiti appeal precisely because it bucked the trend of this post-colonial wish fulfilment exercise? Does the café's name reveal a preference for its lack of fascist links (unlike Brazil, whose persistent trading with Italy stood in sole defiance of the League of Nations sanctions in 1935–36)? Was there a particular Lombard sympathy for its revolutionary history? Or was it simply, as Garvin suggested to me in an email, part of that transnational Italian 'mental mixing, when the imagery blends the geography of true coffee origin (predominantly still Brazil, even into the late 1940s) with a broader tropical imaginary that expanded to include the Caribbean and East Africa?' (Figure 2)¹⁸

¹⁷Garvin, p. 297.

¹⁸Personal email correspondence with the author, 30 November 2021.



Figure 2. 'Pavia – Corso Cavour – Bar Haiti – interno', Guglielmo Chiolini, 1950. Copyright Musei Civici di Pavia, Fondo Guglielmo Chiolini.

In the same email, Garvin also pointed out to me the presence of another famous historic 'Caribbean' café in Milan, Bar Jamaica in Brera, which used to be a regular haunt of Mussolini between its opening in 1911 and his ascent to office in 1922. There is an intriguing story of why it changed its name to Bar Jamaica on its website.¹⁹ Apparently, the name was coined by Giulio Confalonieri, who wanted to conjure the tropical warmth of the Caribbean island in contrast to the cold, grey mornings typical in Milan. He was inspired by the name of an Alfred Hitchcock film of 1939, *Jamaica Inn* (*La taverna della Giamaica*), which arrived in Italian cinemas after the war. But of course, that film isn't set or screened on Jamaica, but takes place in Cornwall. And whilst Cornwall is also known for its picturesque coasts and histories of piracy, there is little that one would describe as warm or tropical about it. Is this another act of cultural blurring? I came across a final manifestation of this when leaving the premises of MUDEC, Milan's new Museo delle Culture, near the Navigli, some weeks later. On the opposite side of the street to the museum, across a busy roundabout, I spotted a Café Sudan. Like the Bar Haitis of Pavia and Vigevano, this bar looked like a 'typical' Italian café. And indeed, on the company's website, I find that the Sudan brand of coffee has been produced in Italy since 1959. Blended from a selection of beans grown in Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, India, and Java, the company nonetheless promises 'un espresso Made in Italy unico e inconfondibile'.²⁰ That which appears to be Caribbean is actually British, and Italian coffee is actually a transnational mix. What can this tell us about how cultural identity is understood, commemorated, and transformed as it crosses borders?

As Bassi and Riccò comment, 'notions of Italy and Italian originate simultaneously from outside and inside Italian national borders', so that even the most 'Italian' of signifiers can take on different, multiple meanings 'depending on where we stand as we gaze at it'.²¹ The bar, for example, is

¹⁹See <http://www.jamaicabar.it/storia/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

²⁰See <http://www.sudancaffè.com/chi-siamo/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

²¹Bassi and Riccò.

a classic, recognisable fixture in every Italian city, town, and village. It is culturally specific, ruled by its own norms that often confound foreigners: not only the complex relational web you might intuit between the regular patrons and the barista, but also more mundane questions: where to buy the receipt that will allow you to order coffee? why can't you take your coffee from the counter and sit down at one of the many empty tables? Often at the centre of community life, the Italian bar functions as an archive of everyday encounters and experiences and as such, it is important that its recognisable structure and form provide a reassuringly stable backdrop to social proceedings. In 2014, Prada announced that it was to open a vast multi-form cultural space and art gallery complex in Milan the following year.²² And, thanks to the company's longstanding artistic collaboration with the Texan film director Wes Anderson, when it came to designing a bar for the new space, the job went to him. Famous for his distinctive cinema aesthetic which uses carefully constructed fictional worlds to evoke lost or faded pasts through complex operations of imaginative nostalgia, his *Bar Luce* is classic Anderson. Yet in his own words:

The approach I used to design this bar is exactly the opposite I usually use for the set design of my movies. [...] While I think it would make a pretty good movie set, I think it would be an even better place to write a movie. I tried to make it a bar I would want to spend my own non-fictional afternoons in.²³

What Anderson ultimately came up with was a pastel dream of a bar, a symbol. *Bar Luce* is not just a symbol of a bar, though, it is also sold as a symbol of Milan.²⁴ But not the everyday Milan, the spaces north of Loreto or around Isola, but central Milan, the fairy towers of the Duomo, the shining shop windows of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II and the Fashion District. It reflects what Milan looks like and even signifies to tourist visitors in visual and cultural terms. Reminiscent of the nostalgic aesthetic which characterises Anderson's films, the colour scheme and furnishings of the bar evoke the design palette of the 1950s and 1960s. Anderson has stated that part of his inspirations in the design were two neorealist films set in Milan in that period (Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano*, 1951, and Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, 1960) – although these references are more to the modernist interiors and the jazz score of *Rocco* than to the poverty and working-class struggles both films depict. This is fused with a more American 1950s rock-n-roll aesthetic, which is evident in the decorative candies stacked up in tall jars, and the pinball machines that contain self-referential markers to Steve Zissou and to Anderson's short film *Castello Cavalcanti* (2013) (Figure 3).

Bar Luce is, in effect, most akin to a film set, or a theatre stage: a prime example of Hom's 'simulated environments' of 'destination Italy', which 'temporarily stage the illusion of authenticity and lend a metaphorical glimpse into a time and place seemingly undisturbed by postmodernity'.²⁵ A piece of art that much like Anderson's films, as Whitney Crothers Dilley says, 'uses inventive interplay with existing and fictional literary works to conjure the ambience of a faded past [...] and the evanescent world of various "vanished pasts"'.²⁶ Is it (as it states on the Prada website) a recreation of a typical Milanese bar? Not to my mind. At most, it is a ludic recollection of the most luxurious bars of Montnapoleone: in fact, it closely resembles the colour scheme and design of the famously upmarket Marchesi 1824 café, which incidentally is also now owned by the Prada group. In this respect, it probably would seem 'typical' to a large swathe of international visitors to the Fondazione, if they'd

²²The Fondazione Prada is housed in the old 1910 distillery owned by the Società italiana Spiriti, who made the famous brandy Cavallino Rosso.

²³See <https://www.fondazioneprada.org/barluce-en/?lang=en> [accessed 19 July 2022].

²⁴As such, *Bar Luce* is reminiscent of Jameson's analysis of Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica, and the use the architect makes of contemporary wrapping in order to 'intervene' into the look and design of the original 1920s house. 'It is a present reality that has been transformed into a simulacrum [...] – an allusion to a present out of real history which might as well be a past removed from real history'. *Postmodernism*, p. 118.

²⁵Hom, p. 19.

²⁶Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Wes Anderson: Bringing Nostalgia to Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 104.



Figure 3. Interior detail of Bar Luce (2015). Photo by the author.

been to Milan's most famous boutique area, or to the centrally placed Galleria, the day before. As a piece of public art that sells an idea of cultural life in Milan to the world, what is its message? Is it a more accurate cultural concept of the Italian bar than that of the Bars Haiti, Sudan and Jamaica? Or do they all conjure a fantastical world, just in different ways? Margaret Rhodes writes about Anderson's set design more generally as follows:

The Grand Budapest Hotel isn't set in Hungary; it takes place in the state of Zubrowka, a quirky facsimile of 1960's Eastern Europe that Anderson and his team built from vintage artifacts and custom cardboard props.²⁷

On our short trip from Bar Haiti to *Bar Luce*, we have seen how travelling cultural concepts can emerge from constructions, ideas, and sometimes even from preconceptions that have little connection to reality. Concepts readily stand in for places in the transnational imaginary of public art, becoming their own 'ordered cosmos' or 'timeless narrative worlds'.²⁸ And it matters perhaps less where they *are* than where they *evoke*. The next link I want to make is a transatlantic one, and will take us to the Bronx, in New York, and to another Bar. This time, the bar in question is no longer there, so I will have to imagine it and reconstruct it through the remaining photos and documentation. Luckily, there are plenty of both of those to examine, and this 'mediated' experience of the work after the event was part of the artist's initial design. This bar is the Bar Gramsci in the Forest

²⁷Margaret Rhodes, 'Kitschy Bar Designed by Wes Anderson is Kitschy as Hell', *Wired Magazine*, 5 July 2015.

²⁸Dilley, p. 1; Kim Wilkins, 'Assembled Worlds: Intertextuality and Sincerity in the Films of Wes Anderson', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 60.2 (Summer 2018), 151–73 (p. 152).

Houses project in South Bronx, and was part of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's 2013 work *Gramsci Monument*.

Part 2. Gramsci Monument

'I try to make a new kind of monument. A precarious monument. A monument for a limited time'.²⁹

The *Gramsci Monument* was the fourth in a series of monuments that Hirschhorn has built to celebrate philosophers that he loves: Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille, and Antonio Gramsci.³⁰ This series of monuments follows on from earlier work that interrogated forms of commemoration and memorialisation through the construction of precarious, temporary structures such as kiosks and altars. The altars, built between 1998–1999, paid tribute to what Hirschhorn terms lost or marginalised artists and writers such as Piet Mondrian, Otto Freundlich, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Raymond Carver. He then went on to produce eight kiosks in the lobby of the brain research and molecular-biology research department in the University of Zurich between 1999–2002. The altars took inspiration from the spontaneous memorials that often sprout on the sites of accidents or celebrations, and Hirschhorn's are usually characterised by the same use of content: hand-drawn signs or cards, teddy bears, flowers, candles, and so on.³¹ On average, the altars would last about two weeks: part of Hirschhorn's design was to place them in 'difficult' situations (such as outside, in the street, with no sign that they were 'art') so that they would have to defend their own autonomy as works.

The four monuments developed this work on a larger, incremental scale. The monument to Spinoza was the first, and was established in the red-light district of Amsterdam in 1999, where Hirschhorn had entered into an agreement with the owner of a sex shop to share electricity to light the monument free of charge. Although he enjoyed his interactions with the shop-owner and with passers-by, the monument was not predicated on any participation from the local community. When Hirschhorn was invited to take part in *La Beauté* in Avignon (Avignon Festival of Beauty) in 2000, he decided to make the most of the funding available to create a second, larger-scale monument to Deleuze. He decided to take the monument outside the city walls and locate it in *Cité Champfleury*, a public housing space far from the rest of the festival, what he has called a 'non-artistic space'. He himself has stated that the *Deleuze Monument* was a failure: he underestimated the time and money that would be required for the maintenance and surveillance of the monument, and when the VHS players were stolen, a decision was made to disassemble the artwork two months ahead of schedule. His own absence during the exhibition had also been an issue for the success of the piece: a lesson he learned from *Deleuze Monument* and applied to the creation of the *Bataille Monument*, in Kassel the following year. In the *Friedrich-Wölher Siedlung*, Hirschhorn worked closely with the mainly immigrant Turkish population of the housing development to support the later work closely for whole three months of Documenta 11.

The *Gramsci Monument*, built over ten years later, was an even bigger event, that involved long-term and meticulous forward planning. With funding from the Dia Art Foundation and support from the New York City Housing Authority, Hirschhorn spent two years in a fieldwork study ahead of time, visiting forty-six public housing sites. He entered into conversations with seven housing projects, before eventually deciding to build the *Gramsci Monument* in Forest Houses, in the South

²⁹Thomas Hirschhorn, 'Statement: Monuments' (2003). Web. <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/statement-monuments/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

³⁰Hirschhorn often aligns this affective charge with the concept of 'fandom'. Fandom for him is a condition in which 'I give something, I uncover myself, I assert. The fan decides on his attachment for personal reasons. These reasons could be geographical in nature, or have something to do with age or occupation. I like that idea. I made the monument series about people I'm a fan of'. Interview with Alison M. Gingeras, in *Thomas Hirschhorn*, ed. by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Alison M. Gingeras and Carlos Basualdo (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), p. 35.

³¹A full analysis of temporary and spontaneous memorials as 'contemporary modes of mourning' can be found in Chapter 2 ('Grief') of Erika Doss's *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Bronx. As he states, the mission of the *Gramsci Monument* was to: ‘establish a new term of monument; provoke encounters; create an event; think Gramsci today’.³² I’m particularly interested here in the fact that as the four monuments progressed, they became more and more geographically dislocated from any reference to the person they celebrate. This is at once a deliberate move and one that is considered to be relatively unimportant by the artist. There is the sense that the *Gramsci Monument* could have been built anywhere: it happens to be in New York because of the funding and support available, and the precise location in the Bronx was chosen because of the quality of the conversations Hirschhorn had with the community organisers there. The location of the monument has no particular ties or links with Gramsci as a person or as a historical figure.³³

This is an important consideration when we assess the monuments both within the context of the ‘site-specificity’ that characterises so much of public or installation art today, but also in the context of most traditional or long-standing monuments or other commemorative works. This detachment from site-specificity is one element we can detect in Hirschhorn’s statement that reinforces his wish to establish a new term of monument: one that is autonomous in its lack of connection to place. This new ‘terminology’ of commemoration is replicated in the structure of the monuments themselves. As Anna Dezeuze remarks, ‘since his displays never have a centre, or single perspective, they look as if they could be extended or reduced, or dismantled and transported elsewhere’.³⁴ Indeed, Hirschhorn has argued that this type of monument could be installed anywhere in Europe: its ‘mental’ transportability is crucial.³⁵ Likewise, the altars for Piet Mondrian, Otto Freundlich, and Ingeborg Bachmann were erected at places that had nothing to do with their subjects’ lives and deaths, and ‘cannot therefore dispense any authentic aura on the flowers and candles, the fans’ scarves, and reproductions of works’.³⁶ They are designed to be independent of context and directed at ‘non-exclusive’ audiences, thus ‘always going beyond their frame to relate to the world’.³⁷ Their free-floating nature allows them to attach in new forms of engagement with the here and now, recalling Gramsci’s own discussions of culture as an unfixed system that could be negotiated and re-negotiated in the everyday under a hegemonic structure.³⁸ It also aligns with the close attention that scholars working in the field of transnational Italian studies so often pay to the mobile circulation of cultural forms. As Burdett, Havelly, and Polezzi remark, the fact of privileging elements of mobility in readings of Italian cultural history in this way reveals how ‘cultural and linguistic practices or products escape and exceed the limits posed by any definition of the term “Italian”, exposing its shifting nature’.³⁹

The *Gramsci Monument* project was composed of various elements: a wooden platform which provided a physical base and frame for all the other elements; an archive (containing documents

³²See www.diaart.org/gramsci-monument/index.php [accessed 19 July 2022].

³³Hirschhorn reflects on this fact of geographical irrelevance in discussing his early work, ‘Skulptur-Sortier-Station’, in Münster in 1997. He sought out ‘a location that’s a non-place, a place with nothing to do with the geography or the history of the town’, yet describes his choice as ‘unambiguous’: ‘unambiguous because I’ve been invited to Münster, and I’m not familiar with the town. I know nothing about its history, its inhabitants. But I have come determined to make sculptures and show them to visitors to the town and to the people who live here. So I don’t want to relate to anything that has anything to do with the town; I think that would be pretentious. I need a location that makes it possible for my work to be seen day and night, seven days a week, and also a location that could just as well be somewhere else, like in another town or another country’. Cit. Buchloh, Gingeras, and Basualdo, eds., *Thomas Hirschhorn*, p. 132; p. 131. It is also interesting that the banners and other textual materials were printed in English and Spanish, but with no mention of Italian.

³⁴Anna Dezeuze, *Thomas Hirschhorn: Deleuze Monument* (London: Afterall Books, 2014), p. 43.

³⁵See Dezeuze, p. 63.

³⁶Sebastian Egenhofer, ‘What is Political about Hirschhorn’s Art?’, in Thomas Hirschhorn, *Establishing a Critical Corpus* (Zurich: JPR/Ringier, 2011), p. 107.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁸Luisa Valle, ‘Object Lesson: Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*: Negotiating Monumentality with Instability and Everyday Life’, *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, 22.2 (Fall 2015), 18–35 (p. 19). Marzia Maccaferri has recently done some important work tracing the global trajectories of Gramsci’s work through the English translations of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* and other texts. In this optic, Gramsci himself becomes a transnationalised Italian cultural symbol, something that is repeated and reinforced through Hirschhorn’s work. See <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/antonio-gramsci-selections-prison-notebooks-fiftieth-anniversary> [accessed 19 July 2022].

³⁹Burdett, Havelly, and Polezzi, p. 231.

and books by and about Gramsci), an internet corner, workshop space, Antonio lounge, library, and exhibition (made possible by support of the Casa Gramsci Ghilarza in Italy and the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in Rome), which displayed some of Gramsci's own prison belongings (slippers, cutlery, a hairbrush and comb, medicine, a wallet, and letters); a sculpture; the Gramsci bar, banners with quotations of Gramsci spray-painted on fabric, and a radio station which broadcast locally and online (Figure 4).

The bar itself in the *Gramsci Monument* is another sign of Hirschhorn's shifting understanding of the role of participation and responsibility of the residents. He first used a bar in the *Bataille Mounument*, in Kassel in 2002. It was important to him that the snack bar not be outside the monument, but that it function 'as an equivalent element of the monument, integrated into it': 'The idea of snack bar: is not, or not primarily, about offering food or drinks, but about offering an opportunity to talk, converse, spend time'.⁴⁰ It is a spatial anchor that also serves to implicate the community, since it is entirely run by residents. Luisa Valle describes how:

At the museum, two elderly African American women pondered the circumstances of the philosopher's imprisonment as they leaned over to look at a shoe that Gramsci had worn in jail. Visitors and residents alike watched as two women carried a giant food container from one of the project towers to the Gramsci bar, where it was turned into plates of *arroz con pollo* that sold for two dollars apiece.⁴¹

As such, the bar demonstrates how Hirschhorn desires for the community not to participate in the work but to be confronted by it. This makes it an active, not an interactive work of art. As Hal Foster says, 'rather than hope for participation, then, Hirschhorn prepares it by presence and production and then prompts it through implication'.⁴²



Figure 4. Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument* (2013). Forest Houses, Bronx, New York City. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation. Photograph by Romain Lopez.

⁴⁰See <https://www.diaart.net/gramsci-monument/page7.html> [accessed 19 July 2022].

⁴¹Valle, p. 26.

⁴²Hal Foster, 'Towards a Grammar of Emergency', in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus*, p. 178. Hirschhorn produced a 'Presence and Production' guideline after the failure of *Deleuze Monument* and which has directed the principle of participation in his subsequent works. See <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/guideline-presence-and-production/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

As well as the non-specific nature of the work's location, another defining feature of this new term of monument is its precarity, its temporary nature that stands in opposition to usual practices of commemoration. In describing these works, Hirschhorn uses the term 'precarity' to differentiate from the ephemeral, since the temporary nature of their duration is designated by human decisions, not by nature. This is a crucial element of the design of the monuments, since:

(A) precarious artwork effectively dramatizes its own existence as a material object that needs to be recognized as such by others. The disappearance of Hirschhorn's public works is just as important as their appearance and presence: it is in this uncertain interval itself, between appearance and disappearance, that the work exists.⁴³

Their status as active and full-time, rather than permanent, adds a different temporal understanding to how we engage with commemoration. Hirschhorn's attention to engaging with precarity through the location of the work in socially 'precarious' locations and through the temporary nature of the display is also replicated in its negotiation of the everyday. Hirschhorn uses only cheap, quotidian materials in his constructions (such as brown packing tape, plywood, and cardboard), whose small monetary value disappears the moment they are used. His mantra throughout the production of the monuments has been: 'Energy: yes! Quality: no!'. Dezeuze describes the monument as follows:

The blue plastic used to cover the bust of Gilles Deleuze in Avignon ended up in poor condition, ripped. This flimsy, brightly coloured shiny surface lent the monument a shoddiness; it mocked the grand ambitions of official, commemorative sculpture and the authority and durability of bronze.⁴⁴

The use of low-quality materials makes the works non-spectacular and posits them as a novel form of anti- or counter-monuments. The commemorative practice underway here functions in terms of an ongoing experience, an event that implicates visitors and communities in a time-limited fashion. For this reason, the dismantling of the monuments is another important, ritual part of the process. Memories here are an essential part of the notion of 'monument', and it is interesting to me that Hirschhorn extends these processes of memorialisation of the monuments through the possibility of engaging with them in his extensive documentation processes. The quantity of photographs, video material, web-based archives, catalogues, written statements, and interviews means that the later monuments at least can be experienced long after the event. The important thing here is the documentation of the process, not the remains of the physical monuments themselves. Hirschhorn has spoken in an interview about the importance of employing a two-dimensional spirit in his work which lends it not the status of an object, but the quality of a map. The objects that make up the different components of his monument works are displayed or laid out as if the artist's work were still in process.⁴⁵ The artist does not direct the reading that the visitors make, allowing them an active role in the construction of meaning. In our engagement with Hirschhorn's monuments, we see in real time how '(t)he world is constructed piece by piece'.⁴⁶

Part 3. *Memory Matters*

'E già, plaudendo, Italia i suoi tesori/Ad uno ad uno impara/E a nuovi acquisti, alto levando i cuori/Non umil, non superba, si prepara'.⁴⁷

Public artworks may reveal the patient construction of the world through material and memorial engagements, but they can also reveal tropes of deconstruction and dissolution using the same methods. In 1884, envoys representing fourteen countries from across the globe (including Italy) met in Berlin to discuss how to partition Africa into colonial territories. The Berlin (or Congo)

⁴³Dezeuze, p. 18.

⁴⁴Dezeuze, p. 41.

⁴⁵Hirschhorn, 'Interview with Alison M. Gingeras', pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶Hirschhorn, 'Skulptur-Sortier-Station', p. 135.

⁴⁷Song lyrics composed by Giuseppe Bertoldi to celebrate the opening of the Esposizione generale italiana in Torino in 1884. See <https://www.museotorino.it/view/s/1fdf975d6df548bf9c795c42f0b9558e> [accessed 19 July 2022].

conference took place only fourteen years after the territorial unification of the Italian peninsula had been achieved through the takeover of Rome, but it was an early sign of Italy's colonial ambitions. Additionally, 1884 was the year that also saw the opening of the Esposizione generale italiana in the Parco del Valentino in Turin, an event that has recently been re-evoked in a series of complex artistic interventions that made up an exhibition called *Memory Matters*. The exhibition ran from 6 October to 7 November 2021 and commissioned new temporary art installations through funding and support from the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and the Biennale Democrazia, in collaboration with Black History Month Florence. The overarching aim of the exhibition was to reflect on how collective memory is constructed and maintained in public spaces, and specifically, to explore how a narrative of national identity in Italy was built through exhibitions such as the 1884 Esposizione generale, in tandem with the country's colonial history. It examines the meaning of monumentality and permanence through the construction of invisible or temporary artistic interventions by five artists: Leone Contini, Adji Dieye with Silvia Rosi, Alessandra Ferrini, and Muna Mussie.

The Parco del Valentino first opened in 1856 and was Italy's first ever designated public garden. Named for the Castle of the same name which lies in the centre of the park, it overlooks the Po River to the east. The park was selected as the ideal site for a grand exhibition which would celebrate not only the history of Italy (through a reconstructed 'borgo medievale' and a 'tempio del rinascimento' and so on), but also a full range of scientific, engineering, artistic, literary innovations. The Esposizione ran from April to November and was a huge success with the visiting public. Divided into eight sections, it boasted over 14,000 exhibitors and was visited by around 3 million people. The various pavilions were meant to be 'effimere costruzioni', and often constructed in flimsy materials.⁴⁸ But traces of some structures still remain: the *borgo medievale*, for example, and a reconstructed version of the original Latteria Svizzera. Near to the banks of the Po, in the present-day 'giardino roccioso', was what Guido Abbattista has called the 'primo caso di etno-esposizione umana vivente nell'Italia post-unitaria'. A group of six Danicali people from Assab (three men, one woman and two children) were put on display in a reconstructed village between June and August 1884 to show off Italy's new colony to the Italians.⁴⁹ Although this was the first live ethnographic display in post-unification Italy, it certainly was not the last, and the experiment was repeated in exhibitions in Palermo in 1891, Genoa in 1892, Turin again in 1898, Milan in 1906, and Turin and Rome in 1911.

This ethnographic village is the principal preoccupation of one of the artists to exhibit in *Memory Matters*, Alessandra Ferrini, but its ghostly presence underpins much of the exhibition's general themes. Ferrini, in collaboration with Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau and Marco Stefanelli, produced an audio tour called *Tra due rive straniere* that narrates the complex histories of four different sites within the park: the Monumento all'Artigliere, Terrazza sul Po, Giardino Roccioso, and the Statua di Paolo Thaon di Revel. Ferrini invites us to experience the park as a living archive, where the materiality of fixed commemorations (such as the monuments or statues) does little to evoke now-forgotten histories. Instead, difficult stories withheld through layers of silences and absences are re-evoked in her audio narrations, as are those who were never memorialised in the first place.

Questo spazio meticolosamente costruito ed epurato è colmo di assenze e di presenze spesso indecifrabili, non riconoscibili. Nella sua concezione, nella sua fiera ordinatezza, questo luogo di memoria e cultura, è uno spazio connotato di violenza, taciuta o celebrata.⁵⁰

⁴⁸See <https://www.museotorino.it/view/s/1c577b094dfc4ab0bdf47f734ebaf192> [accessed 19 July 2022].

⁴⁹Guido Abbattista, 'Torino 1884: Africani in mostra', *Contemporanea*, 7.3 (August 2004), 369–409 (p. 372). Abbattista explains that the Baia di Assab village was envisaged by the organisers and by the Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio as a 'complessiva esposizione coloniale che [...] offrisse al pubblico una immagine attraente della giovane colonia italiana, suscitando, più in generale, simpatia e fiducia verso la politica coloniale del governo' (p. 381).

⁵⁰Alessandra Ferrini, in collaborazione con Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau e Marco Stefanelli, 'Statua di Paolo Thaon di Revel', *Tra due Rive Straniere*. See <https://soundcloud.com/alessandra-ferrini-229444912> for the audio recordings and text reproductions of the tour [accessed 19 July 2022].

In contrast to Ferrini's deliberately non-visual intervention, artists Adjí Dieye and Silvia Rosi produced a large-scale artwork that aims to reclaim the physical space of the park for all to see. Next to the Promotrice delle Belle Arti, the work *Adjí Dieye e Silvia Rosi ringraziano per lo spazio* unfurls across the huge banners used to advertise exhibitions or events in the park to the public. The banners, now featuring huge portraits of the two artists' smiling faces, provoke a reflection on the lexicon of propaganda and advertising in public spaces, but also reclaim physical artistic space for Black artists. Nearby, Leone Contini's *Espositore Universale* shows a selection of squashes both displayed in and confined by a tall wire spiral structure that resembles a cage. Its position near the Orto Botanico, and to other nearby structures concerned with practices of classification, conservation and exposition (such as the Museo della Frutta, Museo di Antropologia Criminale Cesare Lombroso, and the Museo Anatomico), means that the artwork engages critically with these kinds of intrusive museum practices. As Contini says in the accompanying label: 'Esporre qualcosa è sempre un atto di violenza, una costrizione'. The squashes are gourd-like structures, portrayed suspended in the air or lying on the floor. Many have geographical coordinates etched onto them which mean they carry the remnants of other unknown locations and codified histories within their material forms.

I went to Turin to visit *Memory Matters* on a bright sunny morning in October. I followed Ferrini's audio tour, and engaged with the works by Contini, Dieye, and Rosi located across the park. On the map of the exhibition, I noted that Muna Mussie's work, *Oblío*, was located on the other side of the Po River, facing the Parco del Valentino. I duly walked over the fast-flowing, green river and started to make my way down the left bank. I reached a children's park, the Parco Caduti Lager Nazisti, and a sort of balcony structure where I thought *Oblío* should be. I walked further. I tried going up, then backwards in case I had missed it. I looked it up online, found images of a large, dark, tent-like structure I would have been sure to see. All the time a man walking his two dogs had stopped to watch my efforts, wordlessly waiting as I searched. It was a strange episode that quickly became a little unsettling. After some time, mindful of the time of my train back to Pavia, I gave up and left.

Speaking later to Ferrini via Zoom, I asked her about *Oblío*, and she explained that it had been a much more temporary installation than the other pieces. It had, in fact, only been *in situ* for the first few days of the exhibition, and was then dismantled. The transience of its presence revealed strong connections with the thinking behind Hirschhorn's precarious monuments. This precarity also lent *Oblío* a performative element: something that was reinforced by its nature as a collective endeavour. Mussie worked with a group of about twenty women from a local migrant association (l'Associazione Donne Africa Sub-Sahariana e Seconda Generazione) who were invited to come and repeatedly stitch and unstitch the word 'oblio' onto a large piece of material that was then wrapped around the structure. This performative stitchwork was meant to function, in the words of the artist, as a 'metafora del continuo corso e ricorso della storia scritta, cancellata, e nuovamente riscritta di epoca in epoca'.⁵¹ Stitching can recall acts of mending and of treating wounds, too, and there is a therapeutic quality to the ritual of performing an act, repeating, and then undoing it – as happens in *Oblío*. As with many of Mussie's earlier works, such as *Milite ignoto* (2014–15),⁵² *Oblío* thus functions as another type of counter-monument, an attempt to circumvent or to bypass the dominant narratives of a linear History through small acts of unmaking (Figure 5).

In a roundtable event held to mark the opening of the *Memory Matters* exhibition, Mussie spoke at length of her desire to interrogate the multiple meanings of the word 'oblio' in the work.⁵³ As a 'sostantivo deverbale', she explained that the word 'oblio' originates from the verb 'obliare', and so denotes a process, not a sudden act. Its etymology is Latin and builds on the root 'liv' (discolour, or

⁵¹*Memory Matters*. Italiane nere: Il genere all'intersezione delle differenze', Biennale Democrazia, 7 October 2021. Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlQINyqKenM> [accessed 19 July 2022].

⁵²For more information on *Milite ignoto* and other works by Mussie, see <https://www.munamussie.com/> [accessed 19 July 2022].

⁵³*Memory Matters*. Italiane nere: Il genere all'intersezione delle differenze'.



Figure 5. Muna Mussie, *Oblio* (2021). Photo courtesy of the artist.

darken), which is also related to the word ‘limare’. This filing, smoothing activity of the ‘lima’ is slow, patient, and aims to reduce or eliminate friction. ‘Liv’ is also related to the word ‘levis’: something light, or not serious. Much as in Hirschhorn’s *Monuments* series, Mussie here is interested in casting her work as a process, an engagement, or an experience, rather than creating something material that persists in time. The collaborative stitching and unstitching work of the women was the most important element of the work to the artist, as it became representative of an ‘operazione di richiamare e di dimenticare’ in which the women themselves were an active part. This occurred both on a personal level and a public one, since their interventions responded to the wider histories of the places around them: the Nazi atrocities recalled in the commemorative name of the children’s park where *Oblio* briefly stood, but also the multi-layered histories of the Castello del Valentino standing opposite. The material form of the Castle is also stitched in silhouette onto the structure and thus reflects the building back to itself from across the river Po. Standing between and amidst these centuries of histories, the women worked to file and to smooth the passage of History with their bodily actions.

My own ‘failure’ to find *Oblio* and to experience it on an individual level helped me to think about missed opportunities or moments as breaches in time that might engender creative acts of invention, forgetting, and misremembering. Halberstam describes the failure of memory as a ‘queer temporal mode governed by the ephemeral, the temporary, and the elusive – forms of knowing, in other words, that lie at the very edge of memory’.⁵⁴ I began to think of my ‘missed’ experience of *Oblio* as a neat reflection of the efficacy of the absent work in helping the public reflect on the unstable constructions of transnational memory-work in public art. Inscribed in the title of the work, and reinforced through its transient non-presence, the concept of forgetting it embodies stands to challenge traditional commemorative practices, but it also acts out a resistance to the passivity that such monuments normally engender in the public who encounter them. Nora has described how monuments often fail to become receptacles for memory, but instead transform into tools for forgetting, their very existence excusing and enabling people to disengage with the past.⁵⁵ A counter-monument such as *Oblio*, on the other hand, ‘suggests itself as a sceptical antidote to the illusion that the seeming permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of a memorial idea attached to it’.⁵⁶ *Oblio* thus performs a creative act of resistance that ‘hid(es) out in oblivion and wait(s) for a new erasure to

⁵⁴Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 54.

⁵⁵See Nora.

⁵⁶Young, p. 295.



Figure 6. Detail of Muna Mussie, *Oblio* (2021). Photo courtesy of the artist.

inspire a new beginning, [...] jamming the smooth operation of the normal and the ordinary'.⁵⁷ This rupture is reproduced in an evocative close-up image of the stitching, in which the word 'oblio' has been spelled as 'oilbo'. Not immediately visible, and probably even less so within the wider context of the stitched canvas, the misspelling functions as a powerful subjective stance that 'operates independently of coherence or linear narrative',⁵⁸ a 'nick in time' that lays bare the failures of memory and the failures of inscribing memory in conventional commemorative art practices (Figure 6).

Conclusion

This article has identified a set of precarious, temporary, and travelling forms of commemoration that have been expressed in recent public artworks connected to Italy, and has linked them together through thematic threads of association. It has shown how a comparative analysis of the three works in question can help us understand how artistic representations which evoke transnational memoryscapes are formed and function across borders. The shades of cultural appropriation and misappropriation in the built landscape of Italian bars that evoke exoticized locations, or that reproduce cultural commonplaces about Italy (such as Wes Anderson's *Bar Luce*), provide new insight into the constructed nature of memorial concepts. Analysing the complex philosophy behind Thomas Hirschhorn's precarious monuments to famous cultural figures highlights how site-specificity becomes detached from the meaning of the artwork, which is displaced onto the social relations produced through its creation, maintenance, and dismantling. Art becomes process, a process which is, nonetheless, still accessible to what Widrich terms a 'temporally extended' or 'delayed' audience through the proliferation of documentation and press remnants, as well as through the memory of those members of the public who experienced the work.⁵⁹ In commemorating absence and oblivion, Muna Mussie's transient, stitched memory-work in *Oblio* inscribes forgetting as a 'new form of knowing': one that breaks with the 'eternally self-generating present' and a 'self-authorising past'.⁶⁰ These three works, which together add transnational nuance to Young's concept of the counter-monument, enshrine the creativity which can reside in acts of forgetting and misremembering; in experiencing things second-hand or at a distance; and in re-materialising memory through tropes of ephemerality, portability, and dislocation.

⁵⁷Halberstam, p. 69-70.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁹Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 8.

⁶⁰Halberstam, p. 54, 70.

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