

# EXPANSIVE MONUMENTALITY THE PERFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF MONUMENTS ANNIE CHARLAND THIBODEAU

A CONCEPT GIVES ORDER OR DIRECTION TO OUR  
THINKING. AFFECT, BY CONTRAST, IS THE POWER  
TO INTERRUPT SYNTHESIS AND ORDER.<sup>1</sup>

My exhibition, *What we bring into becoming*, invites an audience to think about how *monument and monumentality* can be seen as unique and ever-changing phenomena that shape and are shaped by their environment. The exhibition takes places in Tūnglið Art Space in Reykjavík.

Greeted on Austurstræti, we—the public experiencing the exhibition—walk into a lively common backyard that leads to a small stone tower. Past its columnar basalt cladding is a concrete spiral staircase that terminates in a top-floor room that overlooks downtown Reykjavík. This is Tūnglið's multipurpose white space, outlined by slender translucent glass doors and windows that convey an aura of spaciousness.

Tūnglið's architecture maps out *What we bring into becoming*. The room's left wall axis curves in a slight arc in its centre and is segmented by a row of windows spaced at regular intervals. The domed ceiling is split by a skylight and gridded with anchor beams. Both windows and skylight provide the room's exclusive natural lighting.

We, the public who has arrived

in Tūnglið, note that the site is empty, except for a large hexagonal object placed close to the ground. The object's shape is akin to that of a sounding board—an interpersonal trope for one person listening to another. Standing at our feet, it takes on the appearance of a monumental marble pedestal marked by an indentation; an inflected inlay of faux-granite frames the absence of an object to be erected within its shape. The colossal sculpture rests on a wide platform. This momentary proposition unfolds itself as a low, vast horizontal expanse.

## EXPERIENCING MONUMENTS

Often defined as a quality in the fields of architecture and art history, monumentality remains an abstract notion. The term *monument* refers to an object itself—be it memorial, architectural, a work of art—whereas the concept of monumentality may be seen in the matrix of relationships between an object, its environment, and those who experience it. Monumentality suggests that objects are endowed with the relational and expansive ability to shape social behaviour.

1. Claire Colebrook, "Gilles Deleuze," in *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 35.

Is it possible to rethink the concept of monumentality? Is it possible to detach the monument from our most common experience of it—canonical, statutory, authoritative, historical, permanent?

#### DESIGN AND MATERIALITY

The hexagon can refer to both common architectural features and distinct geological formations of basalt volcanism. In this exhibition context, it extends these references to present itself as a public monument in the space. Through mimesis—its attempt to re-present crystalline hard stones—the hexagon communicates an ambiguous materiality. Its marble and granite patterns can perform as affective forces through which we are reminded of art history, architecture, and memorial sites. These patterns are charged with permanence.

Commonly found in architecture, stone cladding aims to intuit an everlasting state far more often than it serves the functionality of a site. The same can be said for flooring and surfacing as an attempt to improve the appearance of a home. Here, covered with synthetic materials designed to imitate monumental stone, the hexagon's materiality imbues a sense of impermanence and brings it closer to a maquette of public space—as if an ephemeral vestige were erected in front of us. The permanence, inherent in the monumental feature's design and its definite ephemeral materiality, acts as a coextensive force, giving the piece a complex temporality. It invites us to be alert for how it reveals itself through time.

#### PRESENCE AND SPATIALITY

Due to its spatial position, the peaks of the hexagon draw our focus from the northern side of the exhibition room with its urban scenic viewpoint to its diametrically opposed side. There, a temporary additional wall

has been erected over most of the built-in mirror surface, framing its upper part. The faux wall disrupts the frontal mirrored space and uplifts our gaze to the reflected skylight. This shift on a vertical axis contributes to a densification of the vertical absence that marks the horizontal monument. It invites us to look *into* the space rather than *at* the space; it takes us from the materiality of objects to an awareness of an intangible presence. By doing so, the sculptures inhabiting the room act like framed silences within an audience of whispers, disclosing a delicate soundscape. A steady ground integrates distant neap tides.

*What we bring into becoming* activates our spatial sense. The work crafts our choreography in the space through a thought-out pathway, sheds light both on architectural intent and the abilities of any given space to perform in response to the design and placement of site-responsive objects. It sheds light on the magnitude of the objects' presence. In this way, *What we bring into becoming* aims to explore declensions of our most common experience of monumentality by means of speculative models. Moreover, the work brings into question what shapes monumentality.

#### MONUMENTAL INSTABILITY

A paradoxical instability is inherent within the concept of monumentality. The monument aims for perennity through its abiding materiality, even though memorial and architectural sites' meanings and value are never static. As explored through the lens of Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins in the interdisciplinary handbook *Cultural Memory Studies*, "[monuments] are regularly subject to revision by groups who seek to replace, supplement, or revise dominant representations of the past as a way of asserting their own identity."<sup>2</sup>

2. Astrid Erll et al., "Cultural Memory Studies an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook," in *Cultural Memory Studies an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 122-128.

In my mother tongue of Québecois, *pérénité* foremost qualifies the deep-rooted longing for static and everlasting value of memorial and architectural sites. In English, perennity recalls most commonly in the fields of geography and the constant flux of a watercourse. Stone monuments refer to the act of coming into being as a finality. Yet, like other abiotic factors, stone—both on land or in monumental sites—has the ability to shape and be shaped by its environment and is, therefore, ever lively. This close link brings to light an unexpected connection between the experience of monumentality and the experience of surveying a landscape. Exploring this link invites us to think how both the being and the becoming of monumentality can echo other models of becoming. One such echo could be located in natural phenomena unfolding and recurring through time, as with resounding bodies of water bearing expansive monumental presence. Applying this line of thought to the exhibition work, *What we bring into becoming* explores how we may instil the phenomenological affects of surveying a landscape to the design of monuments.

*What we bring into becoming* also evokes and performs the general sensibility that one may feel when experiencing a natural site, without trying to represent a specific one. The aim is neither to reduce human perception of a natural phenomenon to a standard defined experience, nor to reminisce about a personal journey. This approach is rather that of solicitude towards what is before us. It is performed when the monument's closeness to the ground activates our slow wanderings and its presence raises awareness of our own stature in a given site, highlighting the interchangeable roles of the viewer and the viewee in the spaces we inhabit.

#### EXPANSIVENESS AND HUMBLeness

Site-responsive objects built in the exhibition space unfold their presence progressively. In spite of their imposing statures, they are above all endowed with the performative ability to activate our relationship to space, to open us up as well as to reveal us to our environment. These are objects whose meaning is in constant emission. Allowing ourselves time in the exhibition space, our focus shifts from the hexagonal sculpture to momentary light refractions, the framed mirror, the curves of the ceiling, the linear axes of windows, and our own verticality. We come to realise that the proposal is not an immutable image but rather a space to navigate, which acquires its meaning in its relationships.

The host environment affects the objects as much as the objects affect their environment in return. Beyond its practical features—acoustic insulation materials, lighting rig, built-in mirror wall—the exhibition room exceeds its primary function insofar as its singularities reveal an intent that overpowers pure functionality. The hint of its domed ceiling, split by the linear skylight, partners with the curved facade of the building to conduct our movements within the space. By framing some of the architecture's specificities and their expansive natures, the hosted exhibition unveils and interferes with the room's carefully crafted choreographic sequence that is meant to be activated as soon as we step into the building. The exhibition magnifies and reinterprets the intended experience of the space, opening up the possibility of two intended monumentalities entering into dialogue: the architect's and the artist's.

*What we bring into becoming* interweaves architecture, artwork, light, soundscapes, and bodies in a synthesised and sensible whole to elicit a specific perspective on the performative potential of objects beyond their roles as kinetic art and

portable, movable props. Instead, we encounter steady objects that embrace and reveal the complexities of their host environment. Birds and planes are heard. Ambient light bathes us. We encounter footsteps. These silent objects aim to disclose their lively environment, through which our wanderings meander in a slow flux. Such monuments, like inland rocks that may seem static, are empowered with a humbleness that enables their presence to act as a lever.

My longing for a humble monumentality has led me to design still monumental objects. They raise questions about performativity by being expansive in the connections they make with their environment—in this case the architecture, the light of the exhibition room, the city soundscape—and within us—the viewers experiencing them. Enhanced by their physical impermanence, the objects suggest that monumentality is a complex notion which does not lie solely in what can be proven archaeologically and in what can outlive its designer. Such objects create space for new possibilities.

The synthesised whole of the exhibition space becomes a contemplative interval that allows us to connect with abstract notions, such as the effect and the affects of monumentality. *What we bring into becoming* questions our bidirectional relationships to the spaces we share. As we leave the exhibition space, we have on hand the booklet that was offered to us when we were greeted on Austurstræti. Inspired by conversations with geologists, *What we bring into becoming* revolves around phenomenology and the expansive potential of natural elements. The booklet is an extension of the exhibition and accompanies us from the city centre to our homes. *What we bring into becoming* suggests that the ever-renegotiated relationship that defines monumentality is as much embedded in urban design

as it is in memorial sites, architecture, landscape, and art. Two final questions remain. Where does the work start? Where does the work end?