The War and Peace of the Vietnam Memorials

> Western civilization has always glorified the hero, the sacrifice of life for the city, the state, the nation; it has rarely asked the question of whether the established city, state, nation were worth the sacrifice. (Marcuse, 1966, p. XIX)

The present paper is a psychological and aesthetic analysis of the two Vietnam War memorials in Washington, D.C. A recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Freeman, 1985) examined the role of the arts in reflecting the nation's current conceptualization of Vietnam. In its survey of over 45 works in film, painting, sculpture, theater, literature, and television, Freeman stated that "individual artistic efforts point to a fragmentation over the war effort, both then and now", and that . . . "we are a nation that could not agree on a single memorial to Vietnam." The article concludes with Professor Gordon Taylors' observation that "those monuments are the closest thing we have to a common text—a narrative that we as a nation are still learning to read" (p.57). This paper will focus on the memorials as "texts" created in a visual language whose units of meaning (c.f. Arnheim, 1954, 1966) include such elements as balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, color, and tension, and whose grammar may be defined by the interaction of these to produce a perceptual experience with conceptual and emotional meaning. Each Memorial is examined in terms of how the translation of the artist's idea into a formal composition matches the specific psychological response it elicits. An additional component of this paper pertains to the interaction of political and psychological dynamics during the proposal and construction of each Memorial.

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History of the Memorial

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee, organized by three veterans in 1979, sought to build a monument funded entirely by public contributions and situated on the mall in Washington, D.C. Personal views were not to be represented and the passions of the sixties and seventies were not to be recapitulated. The monument, to be sited in Constitution Gardens, adjacent to the Lincoln Memorial, was to be without military or political content and would in some way display the names of the 57,692 Americans who died in Vietnam. The bill which was adopted by Congress gave power of approval to the National Fine Arts Commission, the National Capitol Planning Commission, and the Secretary of the Interior.

Proposals were submitted by blind entry and were evaluated by leaders in the fields of sculpture and landscape architecture whose personal experiences in previous wars would sensitize them to the Vietnam experience. The statement released to the entrants regarding the memorial pointed to the inequities of the draft system and how the brunt of the dangerous service fell upon the young and often socially disadvantaged. Above all, the Memorial was to:

> . . . recognize and honor those who served and died. It will provide a symbol of acknowledgment of the courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty of those who were among the nation's finest youth. The Memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct. It will transcend those issues. The hope is that the creation of the Memorial will begin a healing process. (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1985, p. 53)

Analysis of Lin's Wall

The winning proposal was submitted by a Yale University architecture student, Maya Ling Lin, a 21 year old Asian woman. About her conceptualization Lin stated:

> I felt a memorial should be honest about the reality of war and be for the people who gave their lives. For a

> strong and sobering feeling, it should carry their names. I didn't want a static object that people would just look at, but something they could relate to as on a journey, or passage, that would bring each to his own conclusions. I was mulling these ideas, but I had no form. Then I went to the site. I walked around this beautiful park, surrounded by trees. I wanted to work with the land and not dominate it. I had an impulse to cut open the earth . . . an initial violence that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain, a pure, flat surface, like a geode when you cut into it and polish the edge. I didn't visualize heavy physical objects implanted in the earth; instead it was as if the black-brown earth were polished and made into an interface between the sunny world and the quiet, dark world beyond, that we can't enter. (Swerdlow, 1985, p. 557)

Her idea translated into a design which proposed two, 200 foot long triangular walls of highly polished black granite meeting at a 136 degree angle at a point where the walls and slope would be at their highest. The actual wall stretches 492 feet long and is 10 feet, eight inches high at its center (Figure 1). The proposed Memorial was to be the only black structure on the mall, all others being white. The names of the war dead were to be engraved in the chronological order in which they died. The angle formed between the walls would bring the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument in relation to each other, linking the past and present. The structure would be built into and under a soft rolling hill to create a refuge that would catalyze reflection.

A frequently observed reaction to the wall is that of mourning. Freud's (1917) conceptualization of mourning suggests a process where memories of lost objects or disappointments are incrementally raised to consciousness and experienced within the limits of the ego's strength. In grieving the succession of memories, a loss once potentially disorganizing to the ego is integrated, and a replacement for the object is sought, cathected, and normal emotional development may proceed. Failure to mourn often leads to denial through continued idealization of the lost object.

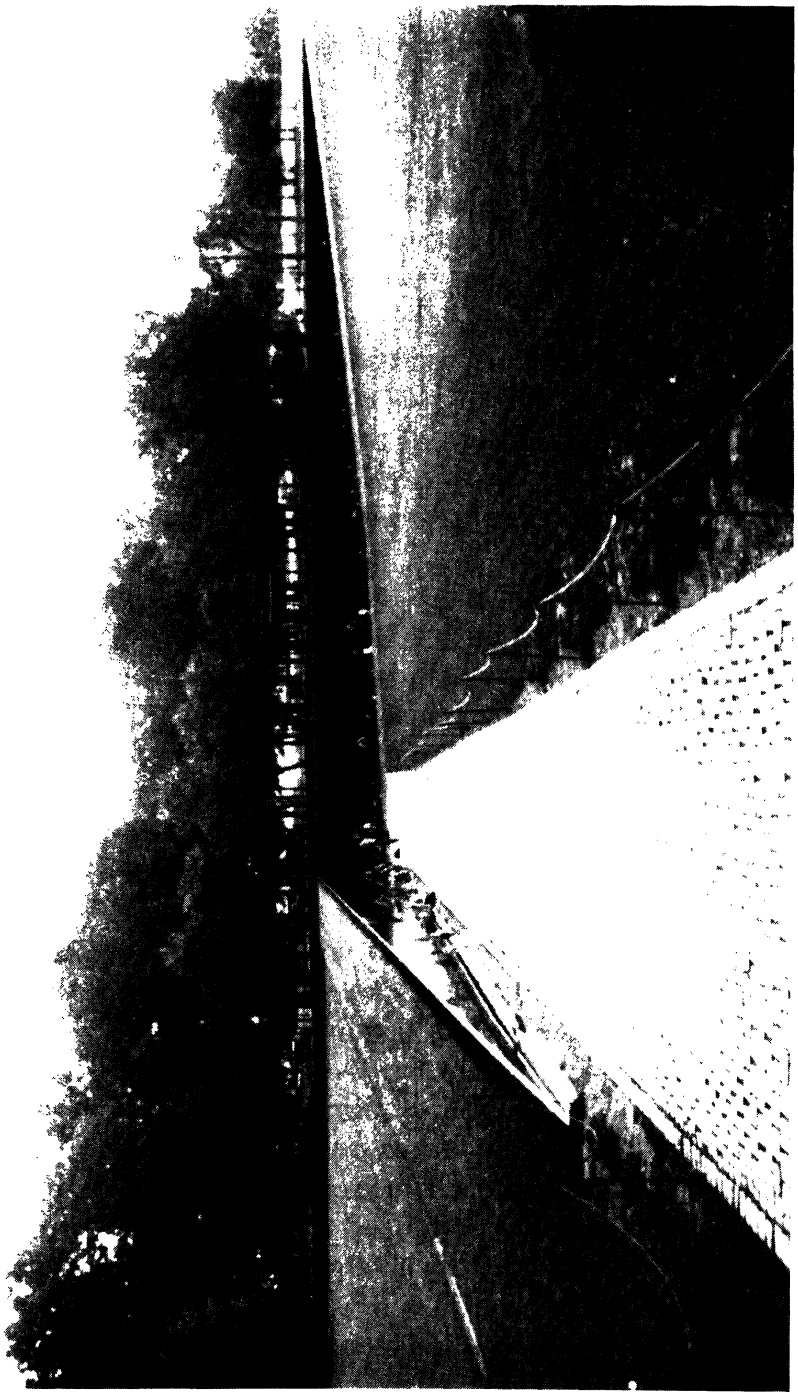

Figure 1. The Vietnam Memorial Wall.

Mourning, as a process of remembering integrated with emotional expression, is multi-determined by the compositional elements of Lin's wall. The use of an engraved stone motif evokes the association of a tombstone and is a reminder of individual lives loss. The theme of loss is again underscored in the selection of black stone with its almost universal association with death. Further, the wall motif itself reinforces a recognition of the massive loss of lives. The use of a triangular shape produces an experience of walking through a crescendo of names which grow, peak, and descend back into the earth, a metaphor for the finality of the life cycle.

This last idea regarding human mortality becomes potentially meaningful to all viewers reminded of their own passage through time. The wall appears to attract not only those who have lost someone in the Vietnam War, but the "general public" as well. In the use of a polished surface, Lin has created a black mirror which reflects the viewer's image against a background of names (Figure 2). The viewer's associations about the war, death, or the passage of time are experienced simultaneously with a concrete perception of oneself. However abstract or emotional the experience may be for the viewer, it is also grounded by the reflection, in this mirror wall, of the present living environment; the trees, sun, clouds, Washington Monument and other viewers. Thus, the wall serves an extroverted function, in directing attention outward towards the specific political-social context of the Vietnam Memorial, as well as an introverted function in directing attention inward to one's own personal history dating from the sixties.

Lin's monument has been called a wailing wall and yet the mourning observed at the site would not adequately be characterized by catharsis alone, but by interaction as well. Again, interactive behaviors are elicited by Lin's design in a way that she intended. The two triangular arms extend and form an open shape which is given closure by the person's presence and response to the work. This conceptualization is reminiscent of ancient Chinese tombs which were built in open rectangular structures that the mourner would enter, and suggests the wall be considered as environmental art rather than as sculpture in the traditional sense. The foot

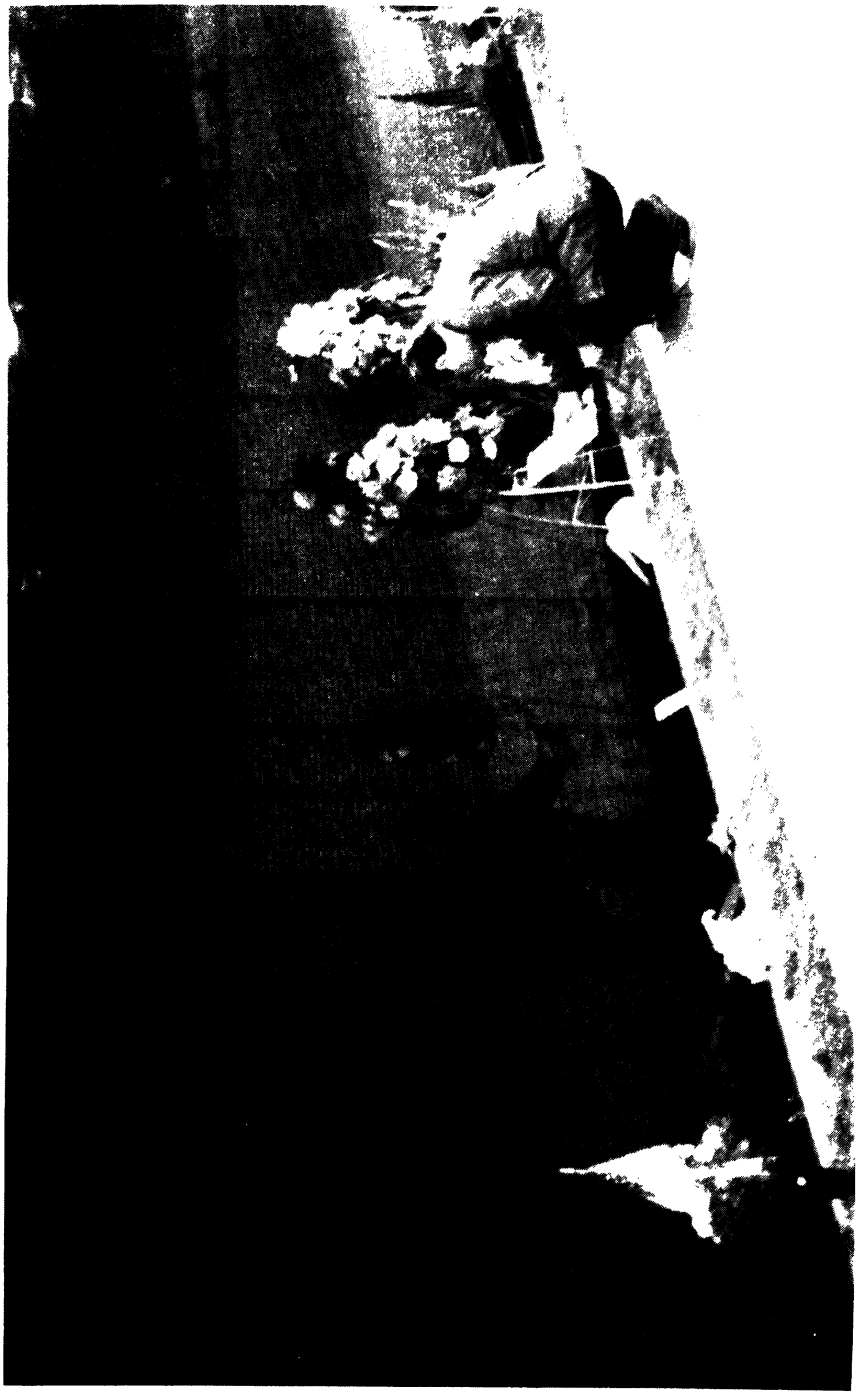

Figure 2. The polished black surface creates a mirror which reflects the viewer against a background of names.

path at Lin's wall takes the viewer down a slope into its center where noise volume, even in large crowds, is perceptibly diminished. The structure's symmetry creates the necessary balance for it to work effectively as a "holding environment" (Winnocott; 1953, 1965).

Participant-observer behaviors can be seen in the many ways people add to or alter the site through meaningful action. They enter the environment in search of a name and leave flowers, poems, messages, clothing, and other created objects. Such symbolic efforts are consistent with reparation attempts within the mourning process to work through guilt and ambivalence:

> . . . Every aspect of the object, every situation that has to be given up in the process of growing, gives rise to symbol formation. In this view symbol formation is the outcome of loss, it is a creative work involving the pain and the whole work of mourning. If psychic reality is experienced and differentiated from external reality, the symbol is differentiated from the object; it is felt to be created by the self and can be freely used by the self. (Segal, 1974, p.76)

The content of the items suggest they are to be received by other viewers, making the interactions more than a personal act of mourning or communion with art, but communication with others on a large scale. This is in contrast to similar, but private acts observed at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, where letters are rolled up and inserted into the wall's cracks.

It is in fact the case that viewers take the time to walk through slowly and read the documents (Figures 2, 3). The wall is effective in its potential to heal, not only in the opportunity for remembering or catharsis, but in its freedom for self expression along with the expectation of empathy, which has a realistic basis. The following was written as an open letter to her son and left at the wall:

> I could feel pulled toward this black wall and yet my feet didn't want to move. I was so scared. I was afraid I would find your name on this wall and yet I was afraid that some mistake had been made and the name was left out.

Figure 3. Viewers of the wall walk slowly and read the documents left in memoriam.

> Then I saw it. My heart seemed to stop. I seemed to tremble. I shook as though I was freezing. My teeth chattered. I felt as though I couldn't get my breath. How it hurt. From the wall, like a mirror reflecting through my blurry tears, I seemed to see faces. Then I realized it was not the faces of the ones who had died, but of the living, who were here, like me, to find the name of a loved one. (Scruggs & Swerland, 1985, p. 134)

Other letters described personal conflict situations which had been left unresolved when the deceased had first gone to Vietnam. One woman described how her car had been wrecked by her brother in an accident shortly before he went to Vietnam, where he died. In her letter, the left side of the page was written as if in the voice of her brother:

> . . .Remember the time before I went to Vietnam, you let me borrow your car and I totaled it? I thought you'd hate me. *But you didn't.* I wanted to make all those things up to you when I came home from Vietnam. *But I didn't.* Your brother.

Never having had a chance to work through this conflict directly with her brother, or perhaps the guilt associated with her survival, she attempts mastery through a type of role play in a public note to her deceased brother on the right side of the page:

> . . . When you left for Vietnam I knew how it hurt you because you had wrecked my car . . . I thought when you came home I could make you understand *it was alright* . . . Over the years since you left us I have wished . . . to have hugged you and said to you . . . *it's alright* . . . *it's O.K.* Love, your sister.

Similarly, vivid descriptions of combat operations were common themes among statements written by surviving veterans.

In addition to the symbolic material, it is important to note that viewers also make direct contact with the wall itself; in touching names, sitting on it, and leaning against it. The wall, as a transitional phenomenon between the dead and living, becomes a direct source of consolation. These behaviors are similar to the way a person might "lean" on a person for "support" (figure 4). The wall draws the viewer into it via the extension of two "arms" from its tall center, a compositional structure similar, or "isomorphic," to a person who would extend arms outward in a consoling gesture. The link between the wall's apparent invitation for contact and that of human consolation, while seemingly remote, has a basis in the gestalt theory of aesthetic expression and physiognomic perception (Arnheim, 1966; Werner, 1940). According to this view, when structural organization of perceptual elements are the same, the response will be similar, regardless of the media.

Politics in Public Art—Dissent to Lin's Wall

In spite of the careful way in which the jury was selected and the criteria of selecting a proposal from blind entries, the

Figure 4. Viewers make direct contact with the wall, touching names or leaning against the wall.

dissent to Lin's minimalist design, even before it was built, was immediate and predictable in content. Her proposal was called a "black gash of shame," was criticized for being below ground, for not having a flag, for forming the antiwar "V" peace sign, etc. Individual veterans and political figures protested that the wall did not honor those who had died. In its abstraction, it did not portray concrete themes of heroism to ease the anxiety associated with life threatening work. Lin's wall, many protesters agreed, would become a mockery, a congregation site for draft resisters and political demonstrations. The passions of the sixties were to be replayed in spite of all efforts to the contrary and a split between those for and against the wall was deep in the making.

Additionally, Maya Lin and a contingent of veterans became increasingly antagonistic. They could not understand her detachment or her abstract approach to the problem. Lin, on the other hand, was insulted by their strong emotional feelings as it manifested in entitlement to changing her design, and she additionally pointed to sexism and racial prejudice to explain the difficulties.

On January 4, 1982 Interior Secretary Watt, responding to pressure from the Reagan Administration, placed a stop action on the Memorial's construction permit. That March, a compromise was reached in the addition of a representational sculpture and flag to the site (Figure 5). The sculptor, Frederick Hart, proposed a bronze statue that would be realistic, capturing the feelings of closeness and camaraderie shared by Vietnam vets. Not to be huge, nor depicting combat, the statue was to present soldiers as fearful as well as courageous. Construction of each memorial continued with disagreements over where the sculpture and flag should be positioned relative to the wall. In November, 1984, the Memorials were formally dedicated by the President.

Analysis of Hart's Sculpture

Although the sculpture is not huge, it stands larger than life at eight feet and on its pedestal are three soldiers; one black, one white, and one Hispanic, with a 50 foot flagpole in the distance. This highly representational work, with its famil-

Figure 5. Frederick Hart's representational sculpture added to the memorial.

iar militaristic referents, is the antithesis of Lin's design. Unlike the wall, which confronts the viewer with those who have died, Hart's work presents three ideal soldiers; alive, healthy, strong, alert and cast immortally in a semi-precious metal. The faces of these "young bronze gods of war" do not quite reflect the tension between courage and fear that Hart sought, though an approximation can be seen in the central figure's muscular arm, whose hand holds only the empty space in which it hangs. The figures are placed above eye level requiring the viewer to stand at a distance and in an upward looking posture. Passive, non-interactive gazing characterizes viewer responses, and mostly from a frontal view position.

Hart's sculpture elicits a different psychological experience than Lin's wall. The size of the statue dwarfs the viewer and deflects the experience of loss to one of idealization, both of the war hero and the reification of traditional American values. For that subset of Vietnam veterans who were drafted prior to consolidation in the ego's development of identity, such idealization defends against the disappointment and anger at political, parental, or internal pressures that sent them into a military experience only to find insufficient resources for integration of the experience once home. In the case of insufficient ego strength, the person is less likely to mourn. Ambivalence regarding loss or disappointment may lead to cathexis of an external object or symbol (i.e., Hart's statue) which carries the projections of perfection and idealization and serves a defensive function (Kohut, 1966). Because the sculpture's symbolism does not portray the consequence of a soldier's action, and diffuses the aspect of war that is mortally destructive, it buffers guilt and preserves psychological equilibrium in a way different than Lin's wall.

Conclusion

Maya Lin's wall environment and Frederick Hart's bronze sculpture are complementary to each other in terms of their different formal aesthetic characteristics and the psychological experience each elicits. Lin's abstract wall-

epitaph motif, with its highly polished surface, functions as a holding environment which alters perception to a consciously reflective mode, facilitating active mourning of war dead and a generation's passing. Hart's realistic bronze sculpture encourages idealization of the war hero and traditional American values and deflects perception of loss. The original idea for one Memorial to begin a "healing process" in the national psyche can be seen as naive from a psychoanalytic perspective. Analogous to Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, where conflict is projected and acted out until made conscious, the attempt to deny at the outset the deep political and emotional splits concerning the Vietnam War era is associated with their symbolic repetition in building the Memorial ten years later.

On a cultural level and stated in polar terms, at least one split exists between a perspective on the war as immoral, unheroic and perhaps even criminal in its sacrifice of almost 58,000 lives. The opposing perspective affirms the role of the United States in Vietnam and views the military efforts as worth the sacrifice for the cause of democracy and defeat of communism. Maya Lin herself said that "in a funny sense the compromise [the sculpture addition] brings the memorial closer to the truth. What is memorialized is that people still cannot resolve the war nor can they separate the issues and the politics from it" (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1985, p. 133). On an individual level, there appears to be a need for survivors and families to complete the unfinished psychological business of the war specifically, and its era generally.

In summary, the two Vietnam Memorials reveal individual differences between those who attempt to process loss through active and interactive reflection and those who attempt to process loss through idealization and possibly denial, differences between people which highlight the tender balance between remembering and forgetting that shape intrapsychic dynamics as well.

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