
Electronic Monuments is an ambitious and at times frustrating book that has two related aims: developing a critical vocabulary for literacy in the age of electronically-mediated communications and theorizing a practice for the Internet as a space of civic identity and political agency. It is based on an experiment in “democratic education” at the University of Florida designed to create a form of “online consultancy called the EmerAgency” (xi). A long introduction to the book outlines the theory of EmerAgency and its practice of creating MEmorials, while the remainder of the book is devoted to working through case studies of the theory in practice, generously supplemented with theoretical background that situates the project in the work of figures such as Derrida, Virilio, and Wittgenstein.

As the author points out, the book’s purpose is situated somewhere between “its most modest claims as a way to teach courses dealing with the Internet to its most ambitious claim as a practice for a virtual civic sphere” (xvi). Electronic Monuments succeeds in its more modest aim and is an excellent text for promoting discussion about the Internet, life in communications-dominated late capitalism, and the erosion of meaningful civic participation. It is not as successful in meeting its more ambitious goal, in large part because it seems at times too negligent of the material context in which practices circulate and thus overly optimistic about the possibilities that its interventions might produce meaningful civil action. Yet because subjects and practices are mutually constitutive, it may well be that future generations—shaped by these and similar practices—may experience the Internet as a virtual civic sphere.

Electronic Monuments develops its own vocabulary for describing a new way of interacting with information technologies. At times this relentless coining of new terms can be irritating and remind one of the heady days of poststructuralism during which no title could be without parts of a word being marked off by brackets. At the same time, however, Ulmer is faced with the challenge of trying radically to alter the way we think about representation and agency, and it is only through the construction of new terms that one can successfully cast off the sedimented history of assumptions and practices that circulate with words. Much of the book is devoted to outlining and explaining electracy, which is “to the digital image apparatus what literacy is to alphabetic print” (xii). An understanding of electracy requires a citizenry of “emeragents (or simple ‘egents,’ to signal that we are concerned with the changes affecting human agency in electracy)” (xiii) who intervene in the public sphere through their active participation in the creation of the public facts that constitute our reality. This process is called “deconstructive consulting (de-consulting for short)” and its aim is “is to add to instrumental knowledge the knowledge and methods of the liberal and fine arts disciplines” (xiii). The main method of engagement is the creation of MEmorials, which are “intended to be to the networked classroom what the argumentative issue paper is to the literate classroom” (xiv). Underlying these ideas
is the sense that electricity can and should produce a collective group subject of
the public sphere and thus is suited to undo the processes of interiority and indi-
vidualism that have shaped subjectivity in a culture dominated by print.
The MEorial is a practice of witnessing that monitors “a disaster in
progress” (xxvii) and tries to bring the disaster into public consciousness via a
method informed by Freudian theories of trauma and mourning. The EmerAgency
links the MEorial to a recognised public monument—examples include Mount
Rushmore, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, and Ground Zero—through the
construction of a peripheral and a website. A peripheral is an electronic device
that is present at the material monument, and with the testimonial on the Internet
it works to bring into public consciousness “abject investments that have not
seemed worthy of public recognition” (p. 50). The intention is to intervene in the
way “rituals of mourning contribute to the formation of a community” (p. 34) by
contesting which deaths or disasters become sites of public memorial and which
are relegated to the realm of individual pathology. In this way, the MEorial
reshapes the collective subject formed by such rituals under the slogan “Problems
B Us” (p. 27).
The book is conscious of the public mourning of 9/11 and the ways it has
shaped the collective American subject and desires to contest this story of group
identity. EmerAgency is an artistic project and sees itself as “focusing attention on
aspects of our cultural unconscious in the way that tragedy was a literate way of
focusing the attention of the classical Greeks” (p. 30). The disasters witnessed are
things that are culturally abject, “meaning that they are a sacrifice on behalf of some
'value' that is more important to society” (p. 42) than is the loss they represent.
MEorials brings to light this value and thus makes it a matter of public debate.
Examples of abject losses include deaths by motor vehicles, sacrificed to the
value of profitability, and the death of children from abuse, sacrificed to the value
of individualism and the greater fear of massive state intervention in parenting.
The MEorial about traffic fatalities is linked to the Vietnam Memorial, and its
design calls for it to compare deaths in Vietnam to deaths in traffic and, when the
latter have surpassed the former, to use a satellite signal to cause all computer
monitors to blink and all traffic lights to be set to red.
The project set out in Electronic Monuments is admirable and presents a
compelling analysis of an avant-gardist aesthetic practice. It is an excellent book
for use in a communications or cultural studies classroom and offers students not
only an original analysis of how representations increasingly dominate our con-
cepts of reality and subjectivity, but also a programme through which they can
actively engage with this culture. Such an analysis is a welcome response to the
pessimism of many older models, rooted in literacy, which see in the society of
the spectacle only the degradation of social life. At the same time, however, the
larger political aims of the book are flawed by its almost exclusive focus on the
efficacy of representation and the lack of attention paid to the material conditions
under which such representations circulate.
The Internet, like any other communications medium in the information econ-
omy, is dominated by the circulation of capital and profit motives. The plans for
MEorials are intriguing but unrealistic: one plan is to have lights blink along a
Y shape originating from Ground Zero each time the stock market has a winning day “as a reminder of Bataille’s General Economy, the principle that accumulation is balanced necessarily by expenditure. When you see the gain, look also for the loss” (p. 247). A wholly effective Memorial, it draws attention to the abject losses of those lives destroyed on a daily basis by capital’s growth. Yet, precisely for the reason that those in control of capital control access to sites of public display, such a Memorial will probably not be realised. This failure to attend to material constraints and dynamics of power ultimately flaw the more ambitious aim of establishing an electracity of civic activism; nonetheless, the book remains a provocative tool for classroom use, insightfully and effectively opening up the important questions with which we struggle in the information economy.

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