The Vietnam Veterans Memorial – Presenting the Unpresentable

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Abstract:
A study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, designed by Maya Lin in the 1980s. The memorial operates on multiple levels simultaneously and this is what gives it its communicative power. The memorial will be examined from both an arts and architecture context. Several interlinked aspects will be explored which include place, social context, diagram, minimalism, phenomenology and time, and materiality. These elements combine to form a dialectical image in the mind of the viewer. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the preobjective and Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of infinite on the border of presentation are used in the analysis along with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the diagram. Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image where multiple elements are combined to form a unique separate experience is also employed. The writer is both an artist and an architect.

Keywords: Monument, Architecture, Urban Design, Place, Phenomenology, Memory, Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

"We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget."[1] (Arthur Danto writing on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in *The Nation*).

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Washington, D.C. was constructed in 1982 and was the result of an open design competition won by Maya Lin. The memorial lists the names of approximately 58,000 American military personnel who were either killed or missing in action in the Vietnam war from 1959 to 1975.[2] The design generated tremendous controversy[3], but once built became one of the most visited monuments in the United States with visitor numbers exceeding 5.5 million people per year in recent years.[4]

Figure 1.01. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., image courtesy of Maya Lin Studio

Figure 1.02. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., image courtesy of Maya Lin Studio

Figure 1.03. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., image courtesy of Maya Lin Studio

The VVM has sense as well as meaning. It produces a deep reaction in the viewer on a figural level that lays beyond rational language and thought. This connection is based on presentation, not representation, and is a presentation of something, that in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy is a "movement of the unlimited . . . that takes place on the border of the limit, and thus on the border of presentation . . . it is the infinity of a beginning.[5] The VVM, like other great works of art, has a special relationship to what is not there and it is not graspable through concept alone. The VVM is a presentation that accesses the imagination. In this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate that the multiple elements of the design amplify each other to create a dialectical image in the mind of the viewer and that this image is created from both pre-objective perceptions and socially constructed perceptions. The elements discussed are place, social context, diagram, minimalism, phenomenology and time, materiality, and absence and presence.

2. Place

The location of the VVM as a place is significant. The VVM is located within the Mall of Washington, D.C. and this carries significant cultural meaning. Charles Griswold observes that "the Mall is *the* place where the nation conserves its past . . . simultaneously recollecting it . . . honoring it, and practicing it (in the White House and Capitol)".[6] By virtue of the place, the VVM will be perceived within this context of Washington, D.C., and it has conferred upon it a measure of institutional significance. In addition to being a place of embedded meaning, the Mall, and specifically the area between the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument (which is adjacent to the VVM site) is also a principal area of civil protest. In large part because of the symbolic meaning of the Mall, it is a place where active protests and demonstrations are held. Figs. 2.01-2.03 show instances of protests which have included demonstrations on civil rights demonstrations, anti-Vietnam War, and women's rights, among others.

Figure 2.02. March on Washington 2020, photo by Isaiah Headen.

Figure 2.01. March on Washington 1963 for civil rights, US Government photo.

Figure 2.03. Vietnam War protest on the Mall, Washington, D.C., 1967, photo by TommyJapan1.

Beyond the site of the Mall itself, the city of Washington, D.C. also has a relevant cultural history. In 1968, following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., riots broke out in Washington, D.C., and other American urban areas.[7] These riots (Figs. 2.04-2.05) were indicative of underlying social tensions around the issue of race. Not surprising perhaps, many of these same tensions were also reflected within the US military fighting in Vietnam.[8] These social tensions were embedded in the collective memory of Washington, D.C., as in other large American urban areas. These tensions, when overlaid with the symbology noted above about the Mall, amplify each other and create a place that is highly emotive and symbolic.

The issue of place alone does not explain the resonance of the VVM, but it is clear that without the context of the Mall and Washington, D.C., the VVM would not be as meaningful or emotive.

Figure 2.04. Washington, D.C. Riots, 1968, photo Darrel Crain Collection / D.C. Public Library

Figure 2.05. Washington, D.C. Riots, 1968, photo by Washington Post

3. Social Context

The social context surrounding the Vietnam War in American society was very fractious. This has a significant influence on those individuals, particularly Americans, who were alive at the time. The Vietnam war was the first televised war,[9] and Americans were able to view the actions of the war on their television screens (figs. 3.01-3.02) in the nightly news, and images of the war were widely distributed in the print media (figs. 3.03-3.04). There were deep divisions within American society about the Vietnam war, as was demonstrated by many antiwar protests (fig. 2.03), particularly as American casualties mounted.[10]

Figure 3.01. Vietnam war on television, 1968. Photo by Warren K. Leffler.

Figure 3.02. Vietnam war, with a television crew in attendance, 1966, photo by Associated Press/Eddie Adams.

Figure 3.03. South Vietnamese chief of the national police, executes suspected Viet Cong officer on a Saigon street, photo by Associated Press/Eddie Adams.

Figure 3.04. Vietnam war, 1972. Photo by Associated Press/Nick Ut.

Adding to the social context was the issue of the draft. The American military relied on conscription[11] to maintain their desired troop levels, as there was a shortfall in requirements relative to volunteers. In the 1960s the annual draft selection was televised (fig. 3.06), with a lottery-style draw of birthdates indicating the order of priority for conscription. This brought the process directly into the living rooms of America and is part of the Vietnam era collective memory.

Alongside the Vietnam war were issues of race and civil rights (fig. 3.05), and this was reflected in the Vietnam war. While there was nationwide conscription in place, there were exemptions and deferments, the net result being, in 1967, that black Americans, while representing approximately 11 per cent of the population were 23 per cent of all combat troops and nearly 25 per cent of all combat deaths.[12]
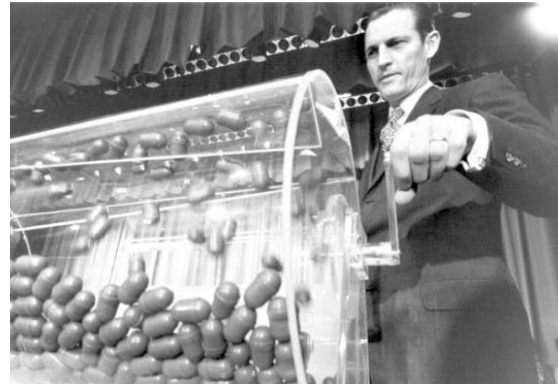
Figure 3.05. Vietnam war protest.

Figure 3.06. Televised Vietnam draft, 1969.

The above examples are not meant to be exhaustive or all-encompassing, but rather to demonstrate the impact that the Vietnam war had on the civilian population in America. These memories will structure part of the perception of the VVM, particularly for those whose memories were formed first-hand. The VVM provides a physical embodiment to which are attached the above memories and perceptions.

Figure 3.07. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Detail, photo by J. David Ake/Associated Press

Figure 3.08. Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The social context noted above will most prominently affect those that lived through the events. Additionally, the memorial is a where individuals, presumably with a direct connection to those that died, leave various physical artefacts (Fig. 3.07) and American servicemen who fought in Vietnam will have a direct connection to the individuals listed on the memorial (Fig. 3.08). The impact of these cultural memories will recede with each successive generation the further they are away from the actual events. In this sense, these cultural memories are different from the implications of place and the context of Washington D.C. which have a longer-lasting influence over successive generations. However, while the social context may only have a shorter-term relevance to the longer-term perception of the memorial, it is an important factor for those individuals who directly experienced it. By extension, this means that the perception of the VVM will change over time, although some themes, such as death will have greater stability over time, whereas the influence of the diagram of Washington, D.C. may lie somewhere between these elements.

4. Diagram

The VVM is located within the Mall in Washington, D.C. On the Mall, it sits slightly north of the centreline of the Mall which connects the Lincoln Memorial on the west and the Washington Monument on the east. Many authors have commented on the relationship of the VVM to both the Washington and Lincoln Memorials.[13] The connection of VVM to these other monuments is more powerful than what these authors have proposed.
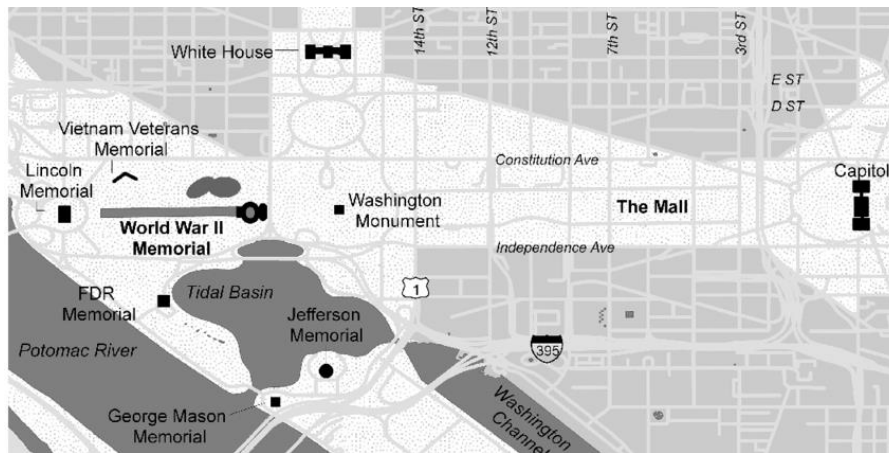
Figure 4.01. Present-day Washington D.C. monuments. Along the Mall, from left to right are the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the Capitol building. Image by Spatial Analysis Lab.

The VVM sits within the context and has a unique connection to the physical structure of Washington DC. The plan of Washington DC was conceived as a series of nodes, with the street pattern focussing on these nodes. The L'Enfant plan of 1791 (Fig. 4.02) shows the initial concept which is still the spatial framework for the present day. This formal structuring of the street pattern underscores the cultural importance of these node points, and elements such as the Mall (shown in the 1791 map).

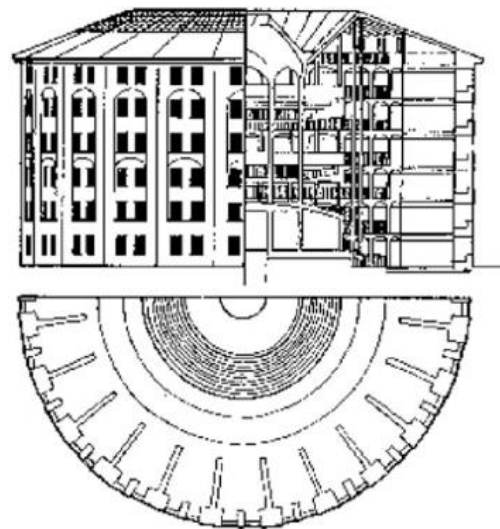**Figure 4.02**. L'Enfant's 1791 plan of Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.03. Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon* (circa 1791)

The formal structure of the Washington D.C. street pattern is both an expression of power, and a power that influences individual behaviour. Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* (circa 1791) (Fig. 4.03) is an often-referenced example in this vein. The *Panopticon* was a model design for a prison where surveillance of all the inmates could be made by one guard, and additionally, the prisoners did not know when they were being watched. Michel Foucault in discussing the *Panopticon* postulates that the permanent visibility induced by the design produces an automatic functioning of power vis-à-vis the behaviour of the prisoners.[14] He further goes on to say that the Panopticon is a generalisable model of functioning and that it defines power relations in terms of everyday life.[15] In this vein, Giles Deleuze discusses the concept of the 'Diagram'. In his book on Foucault, he goes further than Foucault and says that the diagram "is no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map . . . that is coextensive with the whole social field."[16] These concepts directly bear on the meanings created by the VVM.
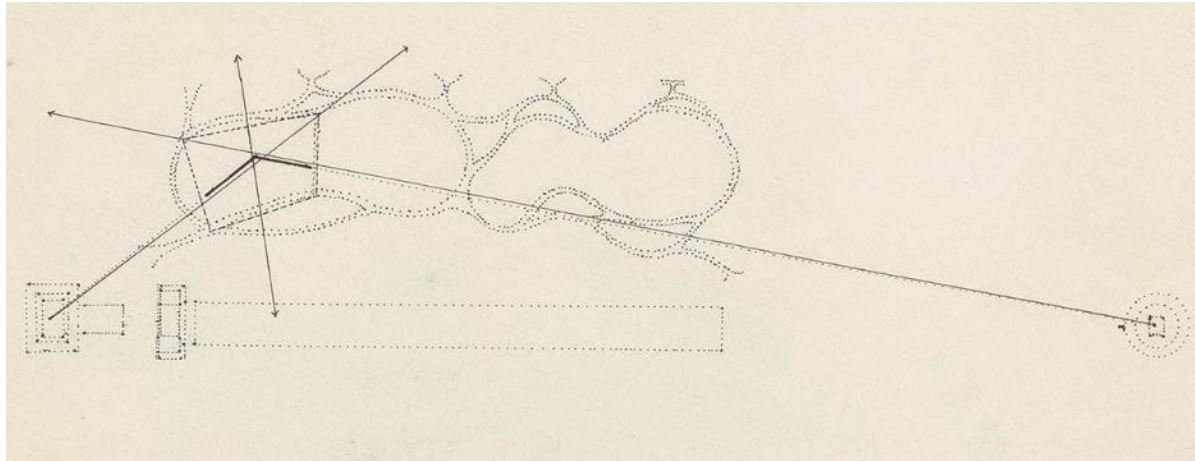
Figure 4.04. Maya Lin, 'Vietnam Veterans Memorial Competition Site Plan'. VVM to top, with Lincoln Memorial to the bottom left, tidal pool (showed dotted) in the centre, and Washington Monument to bottom right.

Figure 4.05. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, View towards the Lincoln Memorial from the VVM. Photo by Stephen S. Griswold.

Figure 4.06. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, View towards the Washington Monument from the VVM. Photo by Stephen S. Griswold.

Figure 4.07. Aerial view of the Mall. Photo by NPS. Lincoln Memorial in the foreground, Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, the Washington Monument in the background, and the VVM to the left.

Consider the site plan of the VVM (Fig. 4.04). The arms of the 'vee' focus directly onto the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument (see Figs. 4.05 and 4.06), and the centreline of the 'vee' indirectly links with the tidal pool. The connection to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument is particularly strong due to the design's geometry, and when in the VVM, the two monuments provide clear visual anchor points. Both the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument are key memorials within both the physical and mental infrastructure of both Washington, D.C. and the entire United States.

Applying Foucault's and Deleuze's concepts to the VVM, the plan of Washington, D.C., is a diagram that both demonstrates the institutional power of the United States government, but also that this manifested institutional power influences the viewer. The VVM, by its seamless and subtle visual linking with the monuments themselves, and with the underlying spatial geometry of Washington, D.C. itself, firmly embeds itself into the physical and psychical infrastructure of Washington, D.C.

One interesting aspect of this is the subtlety of the VVM in making this connection to the diagram of Washington, D.C. A typical monument stands out and makes a declarative statement. The VVM by contrast uses a judo-like move and channels and transforms the energies and meanings of the institutional diagram. This connection and transformation aren't readily obvious when one views the VVM from a distance and only becomes apparent as one approaches the VVM. The solemnity of the individual names is placed in the direct context of the diagram of Washington, D.C.. This context, and the direct linking to it, give added institutional importance to the memorial.

5. Minimalism

While the VVM adopts some of the tropes of minimalism, a reading of it purely in this vein would only give a partial account. The most striking feature of the VVM is the listing of the names, and the resonance this brings. This has parallels to the seriality of minimalism, but with added meaning.

It is interesting to compare the VVM with a monument such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Fig. 5.01). In this monument, the singular object is meant to represent all the war dead. The monument deliberately chooses the remains of a soldier that cannot be individually identified. The concept of the individual is removed. The one represents the many. By contrast, the VVM (Fig. 5.02) individually lists the names of the more than 58,000 American dead. The individual listing of names was a condition of the design competition.[17] While the memorial is read as a whole, it is constructed from each individual name. The many represent the one. The individuality of the names is reinforced by them being presented solely as names, without the addition of institutional rank.

In what was meant to be a critical appraisal of the VVM, the *National Review* stated that "the mode of listing the names makes them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause . . . they might as well have been traffic accidents."[18] This precisely, though inadvertently in the *National Review's* case, identifies what makes the VVM such a powerful memorial. The names are also listed without any denotation of rank or battalion which is common on other military memorials. The absence of this additional information removes the direct connection of the memorial to an institutional structure and instead emphasizes the names as those of individual human beings. Robert Pogue Harrison comments that it is the individual that shines through the generic multitude of names and that the "lyric ambition to monumentalize the Vietnam War in the memorial comes to grief in the lyric singularity of each and every name."[19]

Figure 5.01. Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery, photo by RPavich
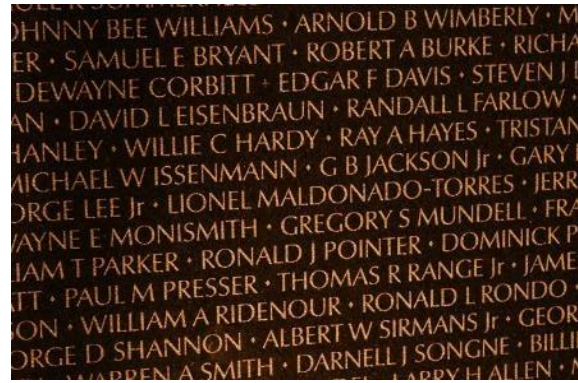
Figure 5.02. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, detail, US Government photo

The use of individual names in a series has parallels in minimalist art, as in the examples of Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt (figs. 5.03 and 5.04). In these works, as in the VVM, the individual components collectively create the entire work, and there is a resonance in the repetition of the components. The individual elements are subsumed to the perception of the artwork as a whole. The listed names in the VVM also combine to form a larger artwork, but what differs significantly with the VVM is the indexical meaning attached to the component, i.e., the individual name. The viewer need not know the individuals whose names are listed, but there is a connection of the viewer to the fact that a single human is attached to each name. [20] The elements in the Andre and LeWitt examples are industrial components and carry meaning in this respect, but they do not carry a deeper and more complex meaning as is the case with the names at the VVM. There is a powerful and visceral connection between the viewer and the component names of the VVM. The VVM's designer, Maya Lin, has commented that she views the names as surrogates for the bodies and that she conceptualizes the dead as being in a space behind the wall.[21] While many visitors to the memorial won't make the connection that Lin states, it nonetheless underscores the degree of connection intended between the physical person and the engraved name.

Figure 5.03. Carl Andre, 'Sculpture as Place', 1958–2010, Installation view

Figure 5.04. Sol LeWitt, 'Four-Sided Pyramid'

Connected to the idea of individual names is the vast number of names. From a distance, the individual names are not visible, but rather appear as some form of colour or texture on the wall of the VVM. It is only when one is closer that one can read the actual names. The VVM is nearly 150 metres long and is covered with the names for the entire surface. The immensity of the names becomes overwhelming and incomprehensible, creating a sublime experience in the mind of the viewer.[22] This is reinforced by the 'vee' shape of the VVM whose two endpoints taper into the ground meaning there is no finite endpoint of the memorial, rather a gentle continuation into the earth.

6. Phenomenology and Time

As a sculptural object in the landscape, the VVM engages the viewer in a phenomenological manner. In the art world, works by Robert Morris and Richard Serra also operate in this manner (see Figs. 6.01 & 6.02). These artworks use simple objects to create a 3-way relationship between the viewer, the environment and the object(s). Robert Morris, in describing his work described these simple objects as 'unitary forms' that he used to create a haptic rather than optical experience that engages the viewer's body with the self-reflective.[23] The haptic quality, i.e., perceiving the work through one's body via touch and memory of touch is a fundamental aspect of this work. Ignoring the individual names on the VVM for a moment, the VVM and the Morris and Serra works all employ objects that are plain and carry no overt material or social meaning in themselves. These objects are used as tools to create the relationship between the environment and the viewer, and they rely on the haptic perception of these relationships.

Figure 6.01. Robert Morris, Installation view 1964–65, Green Gallery, New York. Photo: Rudolf Burckhardt

Figure 6.02. Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1970

The kinaesthetic perception of the VVM introduces temporality as part of its composition. The VVM is a memorial that is perceived by walking through it and by touch and the memory of touch. This further integrates the viewer into the overall context of the VVM and reinforces and is reinforced by other connections the memorial creates. What the VVM does, which neither the Morris nor Serra works do, is to kinaesthetically connect with the deep social and cultural issues of its site. There is more at stake with the social and cultural issues of the VVM site, but these attributes would not be attached in the same way as other, less appropriate designs.

The phenomenological interpretation of the VVM is different from that of other more typical monuments. A good example is to compare the VVM with the Tomb of the Unkown Soldier (fig. 5.01). With the later monument, the viewer is kept at a distance and the viewer's perception is purely cerebral. While one can walk around the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the viewer is not bodily immersed in the installation in the way that occurs with the VVM.

Another way that the VVM is experienced is through the body in the manner in which the memorial is cut into the ground, see figs. 6.03 and 4.06. One approaches the memorial from one of the two ends and then descends along the wall to the centre of the 'vee' which is the deepest point. As one walks along the wall there is a concurrent awareness of the magnitude of the names. There is a physical sense of descending into the earth as if descending into something sacred or other-worldly, and then one ascends back up into the profane world at the other end of the memorial. Several of the elements that make the VVM a great work of art were determined by forces outside of the designer. The approach sequence of the VVM is one of these elements. The original competition design had the viewer approaching from roughly perpendicular to the memorial. Due to controlling the visitor flow, the design was amended so that entry was made at either end of the memorial, and that travel was parallel to the wall along a defined footpath. This emphasizes the connection of the memorial to both the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington

Monument, but it also heightens the phenomenological experience of descending into and ascending from a sacred space.[24]

By being buried in the ground the VVM makes an archetypal connection to the earth, whereas a typical monument makes a connection to the sky. This connection to the earth brings with it the idea and memory of burial chambers and the resting place of the dead. One can understand Maya Lin's sentiment that she felt as if the bodies of the dead were buried on the other side of the wall. This experience would be completely different if the memorial were not buried in the ground, or if one didn't have the feeling of descending into the earth. This is a powerful experience, perceived through the body, that works in parallel with, and amplifies other aspects of the VVM.

Figure 6.03. Maya Lin, Competition Drawings, 1981, shows the concept of cutting into the earth.

A typical artwork usually has restrictions on the viewer physically touching the object. The VVM, by contrast, is touched by many visitors and this is an important part of perceiving the work. Figs. 6.04 – 6.06 show typical examples of visitors touching the engraved names on the wall. Critically important is that the names are engraved, rather than printed, as this gives a tactile response when touched. The names, as previously discussed, create in the viewer a connection to an individual person, regardless of whether that person was known to the viewer. The touching of the name makes a direct physical connection between the viewer and the individual name/person. The haptic nature of interaction differentiates the VVM from a standard engraved tombstone – while a tombstone can be touched, its placement, and general convention, preclude this level of interaction. The kinaesthetic connection builds upon and reinforces other connections that the visitor makes with the memorial.

Figure 6.04. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, detail, photo by Peter Kaspari.

Figure 6.05. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, detail, photo by Wally Gobetz.

Figure 6.06. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, detail.

How the names are listed underscores the phenomenological and temporal perceptions of the work. The design competition guidelines specified that all the names be included, but did not stipulate how they should be presented. A typical manner of display would be in alphabetical order[25], but the VVM is different. Maya Lin proposed that the names be listed chronologically by the date when the individual died, starting in 1959 and finishing in 1975 (see figs. 6.08 and 6.09). There are several interesting and relevant aspects to this. Most importantly, the listing of names in this fashion physically locates the individual name/person in time. This has a double temporal quality in that the names of the dead have a physically expressed temporal relationship with

each other and 'cultural time', and also that the viewer experiences the names of the dead physically when looking at or walking along the memorial. The act of walking along the memorial, traversing the chronological listing of the names of the dead creates yet another bodily-experienced connection to the memorial.[26] The VVM contains different temporalities and creates a density of time that is experienced through the body.

The other interesting aspect is the start and endpoints of the chronological listing. The listing starts and stops in the middle of the memorial at the crux of the 'vee', which is also the memorial's highest point (see fig. 6.07). Maya Lin has written that 'The time sequence, which has the dates of the first and last deaths meeting at the intersection of these walls is the essence of the design. It is a segment in time, meant to recognize all those who served during this war and give special recognition to those who will never return from it. [27] Arranging the names in this manner creates a closed loop in the time sequence. Had the names been arranged sequentially from one end to the other, the slice of time would have been indeterminate, especially given the tapering down to the ground of the memorial on each end. It is a very delicate balance because the closed-loop of time runs the risk of disconnecting other connections the memorial makes in the mind of the viewer. It does however maintain these connections and perhaps paradoxically present itself at the same time as a self-contained monument.

Charles Griswold makes the observation, as do others, that the fact that the names begin and end the way they do recalls the fact that the war did not have an official start, nor did it have an official end, and the returning veterans were largely ignored.[28] While this will have resonance for those Americans who were alive during the Vietnam War, it will, I believe, be an insignificant detail for future generations.
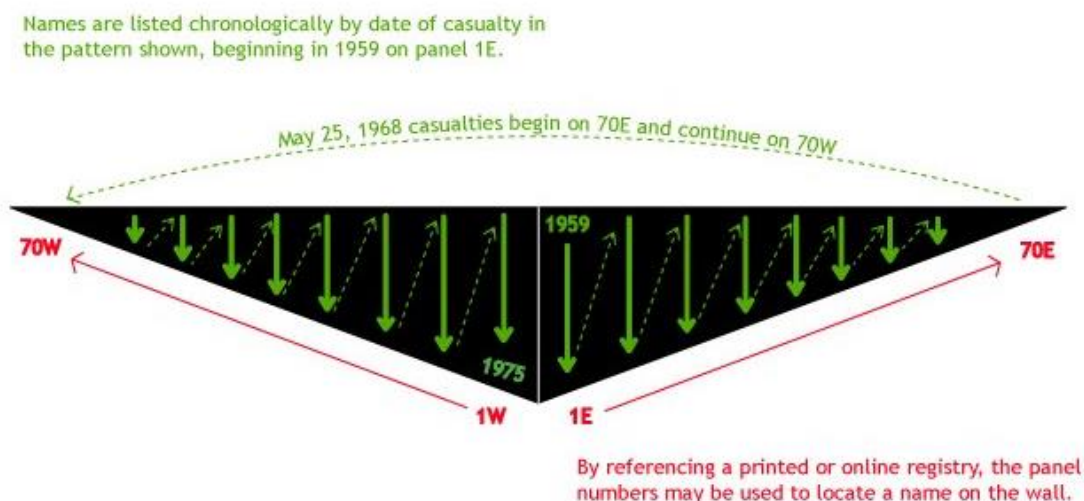

Figure 6.07. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Naming layout diagram, image by National Park Service.

Figure 6.08. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Ending name chronology, photo by Steven Zucker

Figure 6.09. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Beginning name chronology, photo by Steven Zucker

7. Materiality

The cladding of the memorial is polished black granite that is highly reflective (figs. 7.02 and 7.03). The use of black granite is not in keeping with the typical monuments of Washington, D.C., including the adjacent Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial which are both white (fig. 4.07). This immediately sends a message that the work is not a monument in a conventional sense. A monument typically memorialises a cause or event that is larger than an individual. As noted previously, the VVM is a memorial to the individuals themselves that died in the war and is not a commemorative monument of the Vietnam War. Had the memorial been clad in white stone as per other Washington D.C. monuments, then part of its perception would have been that of a monument that would have worked against the combined interpretations of the memorial.

Figure 7.01. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Detail.

Figure 7.02. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Detail.

Figure 7.03. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Detail.

The reflectivity is also a key characteristic of the materiality. Numerous authors have commented upon this[29], but for purposes of my argument, there are two principal aspects. First, the reflectivity lessens the perception that the VVM is a monument and thereby allows a more direct connection between the viewer and the memorial. When, for example, one looks at the Lincoln Memorial (fig. 7.04) there is a separation between it and the viewer that does not exist at the VVM. From certain angles (figs. 1.01, 1.02, and 7.04), the reflections give the memorial an ethereal quality that makes it more of a memorial rather than a monument.

The second aspect of the reflectivity is the more important one, and that is the reflectivity downplays the reading of the material as stone and emphasises the reading of the material as a continuous listing of names (fig. 7.03). This brings the names of the dead/the fallen individuals to the forefront of perception when perceiving the memorial.

Related to the reflectivity is how the viewer perceives the presence of the names. From a distance (fig. 7.01) the memorial appears more monolithic with the names appearing as some form of patination or texture (fig. 7.02). When one gets closer one realises that the patination is indeed a series of individual names, and as touched upon earlier, this contributes to a feeling of sublimity as the vastness of death becomes apparent.

Figure 7.04. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., photo by National Park Service.
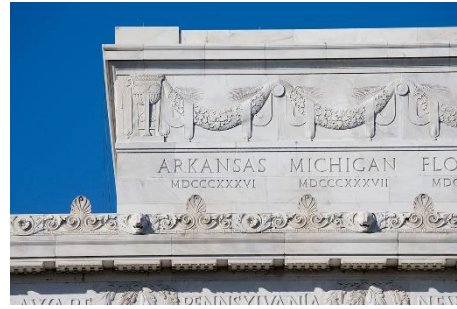

Figure 7.05. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., Detail, photo by National Park Service

8. Absence and Presence

The VVM lists the names of approximately 58,000 Americans that died in the Vietnam war. What gets hardly any mention is the death and suffering of the Vietnamese people. It is estimated that 2 million civilians and more than 1 million Vietnamese military (from both North and South) died in the conflict.[30] Compared to the deaths of the American servicemen, this is a ratio of more than 50:1. If these names were also listed on the VVM, then the length of the memorial would equal that of 750 football pitches.[31]

While the above observation doesn't detract from the emotional resonance of the VVM, it does point to the power of social context, and the skewed nature in which attention is given and what is considered relevant or important.

Figure 8.01. Vietnamese women and children during a battle, 1966.

Figure 8.02. Vietnam war, Saigon.

9. Conclusion

The VVM is an emotionally powerful work, and it touches us at a figural level that is outside of rational language and thought. The work has elements of the sublime, and it is worth repeating the previously reference Jean-Luc Nancy quote in full:

> *In the sublime, it is not a matter of the presentation or nonpresentation of the infinite . . . Rather, it is a matter . . . of the movement of the unlimited, or more exactly, of the "the unlimitiation" that takes place on the border of the limit, and thus on the border of presentation. . . . The unlimited begins on the external border of the limit: and it does nothing but begin, never to finish . . . it is the infinity of a beginning.[32]*

When one is at the VVM it is a solemn experience that I argue borders on the sublime. There is something in the magnitude of the individual names representing individual human beings that hovers on the border of our limits of perception. In this hovering, it is a sensation of experience that does not rely on rational thought.

An important part of the perception of the VVM is through a bodily experience of movement, position, touch, and time. Maurice Merleau-Ponty postulated that:

> *Our bodily experience . . . is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object . . . which has to be recognised as original and perhaps as primary. My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my' symbolic' or 'objectifying' function.* [33]

For Merleau-Ponty, this type of perception is 'preobjective' and exists without social constructs to give the perceptions meaning. In the case of the VVM, the physical perception of time is perceived through one's body as one walks across the wall of the names/the dead. Similarly, the perceived immensity of 58,000 names and the realisation that these conform to individuals is something that overwhelms thought. The descent of the paths to the centre of the 'vee' of the memorial is also a sinking into the earth and its association with burial and death communicates with the viewer at a subliminal level.

But this isn't enough to make the VVM a great work of art. How does the VVM elicit such a deep response in us? Why does this work with the VVM, but not with other nearby monuments such as the Lincoln Memorial or the Washington Monument? The answer, I believe, is in the combination of elements that the VVM presents, and that these elements combine and reinforce each other to create a separate and unique sensation in the mind of the viewer. Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image is a useful way of approaching this idea. Benjamin describes the dialectical images as:

> *It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is presents its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation . . . the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.* [34]

In the VVM, these various elements combine, and, using Benjamin's words, become 'suddenly emergent'. These elements on their own have varying degrees of resonance and had the VVM only exhibited one or two of these elements there would not have been the 'critical mass' required to create the dialectical image in the mind of the viewer. The conditions of the VVM are unique, and the elements that combine to form the dialectical image are authored by different groups and institutions and these coalesce in the VVM. It is the combination of all the elements previously discussed that combined to form a dialectical image that is more than the sum of the parts.

The dialectical image occurs in the viewer in a register that is outside of rational thought or language. However, some of the elements that combine to form the dialectical image are themselves very much perceived based on rational thought and language. For example, the social power structure embodied in the 'diagram' of Washington D.C. and the accentuated importance of the Mall is a rational construct. Similarly, the embedded social context of Washington D.C., e.g., the scenes of national protests, race riots, etc are perceived rationally. The dialectical image formed by the VVM then has elements from a pre-objective perception as well as elements that are analysed through language and thought. This recalls the architect Louis Kahn's quote on the design of great works of architecture that a "great building must begin with the immeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end, must be unmeasured".[35] In the case of the VVM, elements such as the phenomenological awareness of the dead would be an initial immeasurable element, and elements such as the power structure in the 'diagram' of Washington D.C., a measurable element. The dialectical combination of these then presents itself as immeasurable.

The VVM exhibits different temporalities and these influence the meanings perceived by the viewer. To what extent is the meaning permanent or transitory? I would argue that this question is answered by identifying the degree to which socially constructed elements versus pre-objective elements contribute to the dialectical image. Socially constructed elements will have a temporal aspect to their longevity, with pre-objective elements being universal to human beings. For example, the direct connection of 'feeling' the name of a loved relative whose name is on the VVM, and the association with the direct experience of that person is limited to those generations of people alive during the time of the Vietnam war. However, future generations will still experience the tactical sensation of feeling a name on the VVM wall and connecting it to a human being, albeit a human being that is not known to them. In a longer-term socially constructed perspective, the power structure of the 'diagram' of

Washington, D.C. exists in the context of the United States as an ongoing civilization, compared to extinct civilisations such as the Maya, Indus, or Mesopotamia.

Further research will look at the combination of pre-objective and socially constructed elements to consider how precisely they combine to create a dialectical image.

* * *

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