

## How Can We Enact Our Responsibility to the Historical Referent?

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In “Guarding and Transmitting the Vulnerability of the Historical Referent,” Mario Di Paolantonio claims that we have a responsibility to the historical referent and provides a framework for thinking about how to enact that responsibility, especially through his vivid case study of ESMA. In order to probe his argument, I will introduce a second, different but hopefully not unrelated, case.

In November 2003, I walked through the recently shuttered Massachusetts Mental Health Center (MMHC), in which artist Anna Schuleit had created an extraordinary art installation. For this installation, the drab and functional halls and rooms of MMHC were carpeted with flowers. A few pieces of institutional furniture — a grey metal desk, a rolling desk chair — remained in their places, anomalously situated amidst the explosion of color and aroma. Schuleit called her installation BLOOM, “a site-specific installation to commemorate the life and history of the building and its people.”<sup>1</sup>

The dull, institutional context contrasted astonishingly with the vibrant color and overpowering aroma of the flowers. There was no “message,” certainly nothing overt. But visitors, one may assume, found themselves provoked by the contrast to examine their assumptions of mental illness, the nature and functions of institutions of mental health, and of course the particular history of MMHC and those whose lives it touched. Through her art, Schuleit managed to honor that history while employing it in the service of the present.

In invoking BLOOM, I do not at all intend to equate MMHC with ESMA, the detention center in Buenos Aires discussed in Di Paolantonio’s essay. MMHC was a place of healing, not of torture. No one, we may assume, is buried on its grounds; its patients were not “disappeared.” But there is a parallel between the two situations. In each, a person or a group of people are determined to honor a physical space that has a particular, graphic history. What does it mean to honor history, or to honor a place? What are our responsibilities, in situations such as these? And since we are philosophers of education, how might we think about our educational responsibilities in creating pedagogic spaces, which are inevitably oriented toward the present and the future?

When President Carlos Menem sought to demolish ESMA in 1998 — not to put up a shopping mall or a parking lot, but rather to replace a symbol of the unpleasant past with a monument to “national reconciliation” — his effort was thwarted. Immediately, however, an observer might have questions. What is it about this building that is different from other buildings that were used by the regime for nefarious purposes? We have to assume that the building had (during the regime or during the discovery of its crimes after its end) or has (in the present consciousness of victims or the public at large) a kind of significance, a secular sanctity. But again we might ask: what kind of responsibility does that significance invoke?

“An urgent public mobilization unfolded,” Di Paolantonio’s narrative informs us, and “Menem’s decree was annulled through a lawsuit launched by rights groups.” In this disembodied account, democracy apparently triumphs. But why is the public mobilization more democratic than the decision of the democratically elected president? Should public or semipublic art be put to referendum? For the sake of comparison, should Schuleit’s installation have been vetted by the staff of MMHC, by the former patients, or by their families? In Buenos Aires, what rights are the rights groups defending? Are there rights in the MMHC case too?

It is not hard to imagine some possible answers to these questions. Opinion polls, for all their flaws, are valuable instruments of public policy. Nonviolent public protest has a role to play in a well-functioning democracy. Moreover, the symbolic significance of the ESMA site might suggest a kind of public ownership, such that a concept of “rights” may be appropriate here. And perhaps the idea of a unity park is bland to the point of meaninglessness, or is implicated in conservative politics. But Di Paolantonio does not take up these possibilities. Instead, for the purposes of his essay, he frames the issue in terms of the nature of the Menem proposal’s theoretical relationship to the past: the public was “oppos[ed to] the use of the grounds of a past atrocity to justify the terms of the present.” The issue, in his account, lies in an instrumental stance towards the past: the Menem proposal supposedly perpetrates a kind of historical irresponsibility, neglecting to protect the vulnerable historical referent.

But Di Paolantonio emphasizes (correctly) that our responsibility to the past cannot be carried out by acts of absolute preservation. Therefore, preserving ESMA (empty but) intact is not the solution. Instead, “there is broad agreement that ESMA will become a pedagogical space of some kind,” encompassing a preservation of the original space, archives and displays about its history, and, perhaps, art exhibits. Artist Marcelo Brodsky claims that art will give the site a new life, in a generative relationship to its past. “There is something about the very nuance and interruptive potential of art,” writes Di Paolantonio, “that opens us to the work of undecidability that is so necessary for allowing the past to teach us and face us *as the past*” (emphasis in original).

The case of MMHC would seem to bolster these claims. Schuleit’s installation was nothing if not interruptive to settled patterns of thought. Memorializing MMHC, in her conception, could occur neither by preserving the building as an empty space nor by filling it with historical artifacts and testimonies. Instead, by creating the art installation, Schuleit accepted the responsibility of interpretation — to honor the site, through an act of imaginative reconstruction, by turning it into a pedagogic space.

But what would happen if Anna Schuleit were to approach the ESMA site with a parallel idea? Would a carpet of flowers in the hallways of ESMA evoke a similarly interruptive experience for visitors, or would it seem trite? Would it fill the space responsibly, or should the space be preserved as is (as some would prefer), to be filled only in our imaginations as we walk the halls? Would situating a drably painted instrument of torture among the colors and aroma of the flowers serve our responsibility to the historical referent, or would it be obscene? Would such a proposal win

the hearts and minds of the public and the rights groups, or only of the avant-garde arts community?

I, for one, have no idea. But I am not convinced that Di Paolantonio's conceptual framework helps us to work this out. In principle, the idea of creating a space for art — a pedagogic space — avoids what he calls hyperfidelity and hyperrelativism. And yet, the Menem proposal may be interpreted as creating a pedagogic space, too — a space for public gathering and performance. Di Paolantonio argues that Menem sought to “justify the terms of the present” — that is, sacrificing the past on the altar of the present. But, surely, honoring the memory of those who were tortured and respecting the wishes of their relatives are also “terms of the present.” All acts of memorialization, and all pedagogic interventions, are inevitably framed in the “terms of the present” — Brodsky's no less than Schuleit's, and Schuleit's no less than Menem's.

So where does this leave us? Di Paolantonio's thoughtful exploration helps us focus on a kind of pedagogical thinking about historical referents: learning from a space (for example) is a complex enterprise, in which individuals bring experiences, emotions, and ideas into an uncertain encounter with a particular environment. This happens if the space is left empty, in a misguided attempt at absolute fidelity; it happens if the space is filled with artifacts, in a misguided attempt at absolute control of the experience; and it happens if the space is used creatively. It is surely the case that a morally and epistemically responsible stance entails what Di Paolantonio calls a “double bind” — striving to respect the integrity of the past, as past, while also recognizing that we are inevitably shaped by and responsible to our present interests and concerns.

But I am not convinced that this is, as he says, paradoxical. In fact, it is not a function of the particular vulnerability of historical referents at all. Instead, these ideas are at the heart of our everyday practice of recognition, in which we acknowledge that something — a person, an artifact, or a text — has its own status and significance, even as we simultaneously and inevitably impose our own categories upon it. We can and should debate the best ways to recognize the past, including (especially) the painful past. But that debate will be carried out in terms of the emotions and agendas of the relevant parties. Some sites will be destroyed; others will be preserved; and others will become locations for art. All of these may be appropriate, or none. High-minded concepts may prove over time to be trite; populist emotions may contain the seeds of profundity. Negotiating this terrain requires sensitivity, good judgment, and healthy doses of humility. We ought not to imagine, however, that we will find the solutions in philosophy.

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1. See the project's website at <http://www.1856.org/bloom>.