

Stumbling Stones (Stolpersteine). The Moral Authenticity of Micromonuments

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Stolpersteine – zur moralischen Authentizität von Kleinstdenkmälern

Mit den kleinen Pflastersteinen zum Gedenken an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus, den Stolpersteinen, die Gunter Demnig 1990 konzipierte und seitdem in Deutschland in Bürgersteige verlegt, traf der Künstler sofort einen Nerv von Anwohnern, Passanten sowie zivilgesellschaftlichen und politischen Akteuren. Auch nach 25 Jahren haben diese Kleinstdenkmäler nichts von ihrer Überzeugungskraft verloren und heute finden sich Stolpersteine ebenso in 19 anderen europäischen Ländern. Für 120 Euro können Privatpersonen, Verbände, Vereine, Parteien sowie Angehörige oder Freunde der in der NS-Zeit Deportierten und Ermordeten einen 10 x 10 cm großen Messingquader finanzieren, den der Künstler dann mit eingravierten Namen und Daten direkt vor der früheren Wohnstätte eines der Opfer in den Boden verlegt. Diese Stolpersteine setzen Standards in der Geschichte der Denkmalkunst. Sie erinnern an alltägliche Personen, die nicht durch heroische Taten, sondern durch das, was ihnen angetan wurde, bedeutsam sind. Sie lassen erahnen, wie Menschen aus unterschiedlichsten Stadtvierteln willkürlich aus ihrem Lebenszusammenhang gerissen wurden und wie unmittelbar Opfer, Täter und „Zuschauer“ miteinander gelebt hatten. Passanten nehmen diese stolperkantenfrei verlegten Steine nur aus größter Nähe wahr und stolpern über sie doch in geistiger Weise, mit der überraschenden Wahrnehmung einer mit individuellen Schicksalen verknüpften geschichtlichen Dimension des Ortes. Durch die einheitliche Form dieser Kleinstdenkmäler werden die unterschiedlichen Opfer symbolisch zusammengeführt und sind auch nicht – was eher der Täterlogik folgen würde – in verschiedene Opfergruppen geteilt (z. B. Juden, Sinti und Roma, Kommunisten oder Homosexuelle). Passanten oder hier Wohnende werden in persönlicher Weise mit einst hier Lebenden und ihrem Leid konfrontiert und können Empathie für diese deportierten und ermordeten Mitmenschen entwickeln. Obwohl die leicht reproduzierbaren Messingobjekte nicht die Qualität eines künstlerischen Originals beanspruchen, sind sie als Merkzeichen geschichtlich authentischer Orte erfahrbar und fordern eine ethische Positionierung ein.

When the artist Gunter Demnig began to lay commemorative stones for the victims of National Socialism in 1990, he touched a nerve among the users of streets in Germany (and later in nineteen other eastern, central and western European countries) which continues to resonate twenty-five years later.

By inviting individuals, institutions, educational establishments, companies, associations or political parties and also relatives or friends of people persecuted and murdered following deportation or while on the run during the National Socialist regime between 1933 and 1945 to sponsor for 120 euros a brass block measuring ten by ten centimetres to be placed in the pavement in front of the victim's former home, he not only invests public space with a new kind of sign, but also sets a standard in the history of monumental art.

Stumbling Stones and the Tradition of Monumental Art

Although designed to honour individual victims on behalf of those close to them, and for use by individual passers-by, stumbling stones commonly solicit attention among politicians and representatives of public institutions eager to take a stance towards National Socialism. In 2014, political resistance to installing stumbling stones on the streets of Munich was characteristically trivial. According to members of the municipal council, memorials to victims of National Socialism should be neither physically low nor low key, but central, conspicuous and therefore not subject to the symbolic contempt of being 'stepped on' (Pluwatsch 2014). By contrast, local citizens and

relatives of Jewish victims to existing stumbling stones largely celebrate them as signs of genuine recognition of their neighbours' and family's fate (Günther 2015).

The fact that personal memories and public attitudes towards National Socialism and the Holocaust in contemporary Germany are projected onto Demnig's memorial stones is not fortuitous, for they make ingenious use of urban space. By inscribing authentic sites on pavements in front of houses, stumbling stones effectively adapt and renew traditional centuries-old mnemotechnology. One of the founders of the art of memory is considered to be Cicero, as the art historian Frances Yates has demonstrated in her work (Yates 1966).

In order to master oratory, Cicero advocated placing a word or image in an imagined architectural or urban setting. Orators would associate in their minds one idea with each of the marked places then, when called upon to recite their speeches in public, recall in series their ideas by imagining that they were walking past the imagined urban places, encountering each idea on their way. Thomas Aquinas advocated similar mnemotechnology in the Middle Ages by imagining a series of images designed to evoke associations in the mind of readers.

The parallels between stumbling stones and traditional arts of memory are remarkable. Yet whereas the classical art of memory consisted in placing images and words in imagined spaces, twentieth century arts of memory generally place real words and images within real architectural and urban spaces. The use of public space as a support of words, as practised by Demnig and other

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contemporary artists such as Jochen Gerz and Hans Haacke, adopts classical techniques by articulating spaces and words, albeit while reversing the classical relation between the artistic support and human imagination. In classical arts of memory, this support served to construct an association between ideas and the order in which they were to be articulated in oratory. Contemporary memorialists like Demnig do the opposite.

They inscribe not urban places to be walked through in one's imagination with the fixed intention of speaking publicly, but real urban places in which passers-by may be prompted to recall a past event or person without having intended to do so. Moreover, they appeal not to individual or natural memory, as studied by Hunter (1957), for example, but to the historical memory of passers-by who may recall events and ideas which took place before their organic existence.

By putting passers-by in touch with historical events beyond the time of their own lives and thereby fostering historical memory, stumbling stones therefore respond to the intense contemporary public demand for and politically sponsored use of history. In this respect, as purveyors of historical memory, stumbling stones are consistent with traditional arts of memory, which have consistently served expedient needs of their day, whether in the promotion of oratory in ancient Rome, of medieval scholastic theology, or of humanist or occult knowledge during the Renaissance (Yates 1966: in particular chapters II, III, VI and X).

Stumbling stones also appropriate and renew monumental techniques characteristic of the nineteenth century. In the wake of national movements, monuments have been erected in honour of outstanding individuals from the fields of culture and politics (often the very commissioners of the monuments), of the ideals or virtues of heroism (symbolised with iconic swords) or of fallen soldiers (after the First World War) (Mattenklott 1993: 11). These were largely figurative stone or bronze effigies of patrons, monarchs, politicians, soldiers or clergy.

Demnig's stumbling stones, by contrast, adopt techniques of twentieth century monumental art by renouncing symbolism, inscribing the landscape with words, appealing to experience and participation and citing other monuments such as graves. Above all, they conform to contemporary developments by not appealing to national sentiment. Instead, the objects of contemporary memorials have been increasingly and sometimes radically individualised. Stumbling stones thus renounce symbolic representation of exemplary people and their acts.

They mark a place and denote in words unknown individuals who merit attention not for their acts, but for the ways in which they were acted upon as objects of political decisions. Moreover, stumbling stones are not figurative three-dimensional blocks of stone or metal intruding into urban space, but lie flush with the ground. The sole of a shoe cannot literally stumble over and cause its wearer to fall when passing over a stumbling stone. Unlike conventional monuments, therefore, they do not encroach upon urban space physically by rising out of the ground, but appeal quietly to the attention of passers-by who chance to look down at the ground.



The Memorial Signposting of Urban Space

What does stumbling in public space mean? The term 'stumble' suggests that one may either (a) stumble over a stone by falling, floundering or (metaphorically) making a mistake, or (b) stumble upon something when encountering it by chance or unexpectedly. By imposing themselves on urban space conceptually rather than physically, we can only stumble upon, but not over, Demnig's brass stones.

Paradoxically, the initial invisibility of stumbling stones, which only become visible when passers-by are within a range of a few metres or already standing over or stepping on them, appears to make them more effectively surprise and gain the attention of passers-by. Moreover, surprise creates a chance encounter and thereby defies memorial ritualization, which is a primary cause of indifference towards conventional monuments referred to famously by Robert Musil as the 'invisibility' of monuments in urban spaces (Musil 1936: 506). These objects are not big enough for inhabitants to become accustomed to their presence and circumvent them in Musil's sense, yet not small enough to be ignored.

By renouncing almost all symbolism and acting as mere supports of information, stumbling stones acquire an uncanny function as surrogate graves for people whose remains were never found and who therefore have no grave.¹ These feature the victim's name, date of birth, the place to which and the year in which (s)he was deported and the fate met (such as 'dead', 'murdered', 'fate unknown', 'survived' or, in cases of suicide, 'flight into death').

Just as public art removes the art object from the institutional context of museums and galleries and solicits the interest of people who are not habitual consumers of art, stumbling stones lift graves from the institutional context of cemeteries and place them symbolically in streets in front of the places last inhabited by deportees. But their function is not only to provoke the art market

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Figure 1: Sophie Sommerfeld's stumbling stone lies on the corner of Danziger Street and Kniprode Street in Berlin, where her house once stood. Source: © Peter Carrier

Figura 1: El "adoquín de tropezón" de Sophie Sommerfeld se encuentra en la esquina de Danzigerstraße con Kniprodestraße en Berlín, donde antes tenía su casa. Fuente: © Peter Carrier

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¹ National Socialists notoriously aimed to destroy not only people but also the traces of their existence. See Adams 2012: 145.



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Figure 2: At a distance of three metres or more stumbling stones are inconspicuous. They catch our attention only by surprise when we almost step on them. Source: © Peter Carrier

Figura 2: Desde una distancia de tres metros o más, los "adoquines de tropiezo" no se distinguen. Solo llaman nuestra atención inesperadamente cuando casi ya los pisamos. Fuente: © Peter Carrier

and museum goer, or to coerce shoppers or folk rushing home to mourn victims unknown to them. For they primarily provide recognition for people who were murdered by shooting, gassed or starved or worked to death in forced labour camps and whose physical remains were never found by giving them a surrogate grave in the towns in which they last lived and which were governed by the regime responsible for their persecution and death.

Marking the places in which they last lived, rather than where they died, poignantly reminds passers-by today of the former inhabitants of urban dwellings who might have been the neighbours of their parents or grandparents.

It also provokes awareness not only of the fact that the deportees too stepped here on this pavement onto these steps across this threshold into this house, but also of analogies between deportees' lives and the lives of subsequent inhabitants of these houses, and between contemporaneous passers-by (perhaps knowing bystanders) and those passers-by who encounter stumbling stones today.

More pragmatically, stumbling stones compete with street signs to gain our attention (Posner 1995: 10-23). These commonly tell us where we are, how to get to a place other than the one we are in, how far that place may be, where we may consume food or luxury items, or else forbid us from doing something.

A further category of street signs indicates places of cultural activities such as religious meeting places, theatres, museums or historical sights. Stumbling stones belong to the latter category, but also subvert it by inviting passers-by not to consume something and by indicating not how to get to a place, but that they are already at that place, here and now, where they stand. No additional signs tell us where stumbling stones are, for by nature they defy

intentionality by surprising passers-by and by interrupting their train of thought (Schneider 2015).²

The originality of monuments as street signs is that they measure not space but time, and in particular stimulate our awareness of other times. They tell us not primarily where something may be found in a city, but that something occurred on this spot in another time. A stumbling stone is therefore a special kind of signpost insofar as it is an end in itself indicating to users that they are already in the place to which the sign refers. These signs appeal to our historical imagination and to our empathy by pointing to another time and absent people, albeit in connection with a place which is immediately present to the senses.

As urban signposts, stumbling stones may be welcomed as a new genre inciting citizens to not strive to get to another place in order to be there and consume or pray, but learn to reflect historically on the significance of where they already are. Moreover, by surprising passers-by, stumbling stones renounce the intentionality demanded by galleries and museums.

They therefore challenge the historical forgetting habitually induced by ritualization, which implies the 'predictability' and 'automisation' (Posner 1995: 21) of commemoration. Although stumbling stones commemorate only victims of National Socialist crimes, it is plausible that the same type of monument be used with reference to other comparable events.

Hence we must ask ourselves how many stumbling stones may a given urban space contain without risking memorial inflation, burdening its users with the cognitive effort of remembrance. Are there limits to the numbers of them that may be placed per square kilometre in urban space?

Stumbling Stones as Loci of Social Relations

Demnig's website offers instructions how to commission and therefore, by implication, how to use stumbling stones (www.stolpersteine.eu 2014^a). The instructions imply that stones are to be placed in clusters representing family members who lived in the same house.

According to the official website devoted to stumbling stones, 'For example, in front of a house in Amsterdam, a *Stolperstein* might be placed for a woman who survived Auschwitz alongside two *Stolpersteine* for her parents who did not. This "reunites" families.' (www.stolpersteine.eu 2014b) In a similar vein, press reports about stumbling stones generally feature surviving family members who travel to inaugurate a stumbling stone as a family community (Günther 2015).

However, the emphasis on family relations when placing and inaugurating stumbling stones is misleading. In fact, stumbling stones give rise to a larger community than that of the organic family.

Their objects are invariably individuals or clusters of individuals, while their subjects (the people responsible for creating and using them) constitute a plurality, a unique community consisting of the commissioning individuals, institutions or relatives and friends, of the artistic

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Attempts to institutionalise stumbling stones by organising exhibitions of them, such as the one in the local municipal archive or 'Stadtteilarchiv' in Ottensen, Hamburg, are common but fail to undermine their effect of surprise for passers-by. See Schneider 2015

contractor (in this case, Gunter Demnig and his colleagues), but also of all those who encounter the stone by chance.

Since each stumbling stone is both unique (its referent, that is, the person to which the stone refers) and one in a series (its sign standing, like a footprint, for the deported person), the communities brought into being by each stone differ radically from those produced by traditional national war memorials. Demnig the artist is a contractor who relinquishes his role as a creator of a unique work (of art) in order to adopt a new role as an artisan or facilitator of commemoration. And by working individually as a craftsman, Demnig both excludes and obviates the nation-state and its institutions, which have traditionally been the primary commissioners of public memorials. As a result, stumbling stones neither appeal to nor involve a national community. Rather, they create a commemorative micro-society consisting of commissioners, artisans, victims, passers-by and, by extension, teachers who use them in their lessons, or journalists and scholars who write about or photograph them.

Passers-by may think about or mourn the deported people not as Germans, for example, but as individuals who encounter a name, a date of birth, a final place of residence and (when indicated) a place and time of deportation or death. Stumbling stones thus foster a micro-society with a 'chronotopic dimension' (Adams 2012: 148) whose common urban locus denotes dual times and places reaching from the past to the present and from the victim's place of residence to his or her destination in either flight or destruction.

As loci of social relations, stumbling stones effectively depoliticise commemoration. They mark a precise urban locality and appeal directly to its users, thereby forging a relationship, via the stones, between passers-by and victims. What is the nature of this unusual relationship between people, both living and dead or disappeared, who are inevitably unfamiliar to one other since they live and lived in different times?

First, the fact that nothing special or of historical significance happened on the site other than that a victim lived there diminishes the auratic value of the place (which is often one of the characteristics sought on and associated with sites of historical significance) in favour of pragmatic information in the form of a name and dates. Passers-by are not encouraged to stand in awe of an event or heroic figure, therefore, but to recognise the existence of 'ordinary' people, like themselves, whose everyday lives were abruptly ended by force.

The resulting relation between passers-by and victims is marked by distance and proximity at the same time and, in philosophical terms, is moral rather than ethical. While relations between familiar members of a same group may be categorised ethically, those between unfamiliar individuals regardless of their membership of a group are categorised in terms of morality (Margalit 2012: 38).

Anyone who encounters a stumbling stone by surprise on the pavement therefore faces a moral choice, to either ignore the stone and the name inscribed on it, or to recognise it and the name on it. This choice involves an act akin

to the prevention of a biblically connoted 'double murder', whereby remembrance of a name prevents a 'second killing' following the physical destruction of a person (Margalit 2012: 20f.).

The moral dimension of stumbling stones becomes particularly apparent in the context of recent public memorial projects in Berlin, for example, which commemorate groups largely as they were defined by the National Socialist persecutors. In addition to the Monument for the Murdered Jews of Europe, representatives of civil society and municipal and central governments have commissioned further memorials commemorating Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and victims of National Socialist 'euthanasia' killings. By contrast, Demnig's reluctance to categorise victims in terms imposed by persecutors, which provide (unfounded) justifications for their deportation and death, testifies to a universalist impulse designed to evoke empathy between people now and then.

Although historians understandably find fault with stumbling stones because they contain only sparse information about names and dates while forgoing historical causes, categories and contexts, these minimalist memorial signposts lend the act of remembrance a degree of authenticity by establishing links between biographies and historical events and by evoking the immediacy of past and present experience. Such immediacy in turn presupposes that the passer-by is not a passive spectator, but recognises the chronotopic significance of the sites.

The Moral Authenticity of Micromonuments

This article has explored the ways in which stumbling stones appeal to passers-by to acknowledge the historical significance of urban places. Despite attempts by some citizens to reappropriate stumbling stones institutionally (by organising exhibitions about them in museums,

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Figure 3: The brass 'stones' lie flush with the ground and therefore cannot be literally stumbled over. Source: © Peter Carrier

Figura 3: Los 'adoquines de tropiezo', de latón, son colocados de forma alineada en la vereda, así que no hay peligro de tropezar literalmente. Fuente: © Peter Carrier





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for example), I have argued that the specificity of micro-monuments such as stumbling stones lies in the fact that they provide passers-by with an intensely ethical sense of place by eliciting relations between passers-by and victims.

The authenticity of monumental evocations of the past has traditionally been defined in terms of preservation. Art historians have explored in detail whether, for example, aging stone monuments and buildings should be restored to (what is subsequently considered to be) their 'original' appearance, or whether traces of wear and tear should be conserved (Riegl 1903). But contemporary micro-monuments like stumbling stones, whose sculptural quality is minimal and which serve rather as mere supports for written information, can acquire no greater patina than when their brass surface is burnished by passing soles or clouded by the effect of oxidation. The measure of their authenticity must therefore be sought not as a quality inherent in the material object and its urban site, but as a quality of the relation between the object and its users.

Eva Pirker and Mark Rüdiger distinguish between two types of authenticity, either of 'evidence' or of 'experience'. According to the first category, an object is

considered to be authentic when it appears to be an original or genuine rather than a mere replica (a quality of the object itself). According to the second category, an object is considered to be authentic when people experience it as such during a historical re-enactment, for example (a quality of the interaction with the object) (Pirker and Rüdiger 2010: 17).

Stumbling stones fall into both categories. They mark an authentic site insofar as it is considered to be evidence of the former place of residence of deportees, while the brass monuments themselves lay no claim to originality insofar as they can be and are necessarily reproduced as replicas.

At the same time, they appeal to and foster an authentic experience which consists in a heightened awareness of the historicity of an urban site. Yet in order to apprehend the significance and function of stumbling stones, we must add to these two dimensions of 'evidential' (or aesthetic) and 'experiential' (or phenomenological) authenticity a third dimension, for stumbling stones also compel passers-by to participate in what we may call morally authentic commemoration, involving retrieving from oblivion a name and a place in a momentary act of recognition.

Resumen

"Adoquines de tropiezo" – alrededor de la autenticidad ética de micro-monumentos

Hay adoquines de latón en las veredas de ciudades alemanas conmemorando las víctimas del nacionalsocialismo. Fueron concebidos por Gunter Demnig en 1990 y desde entonces dieron en el clavo de la conciencia de habitantes, transeúntes, y actores de la sociedad civil o de la política. Aún después de 25 años, estos micro-monumentos no han perdido nada de su poder persuasivo y hoy en día se encuentran también en 19 otros países europeos. Familiares y amigos de las personas deportadas y asesinadas por el poder nazi, pero también corporaciones, asociaciones civiles, partidos o personas privadas pueden – por 120 Euro – financiar uno de los adoquines de latón de 10 x 10 cm. El artista va entonces a colocarlo en frente de la entrada de la casa anterior de una de las víctimas con su nombre y datos gravados.

Estos "adoquines de tropiezo" marcan nuevos estándares en la historia de arte conmemorativo. Recuerdan a personas cotidianas, que no se hicieron importantes por actos heroicos sino por las violaciones que sufrieron. Dan una idea como en los más distintos barrios las personas fueron sido sacadas de su entorno y que tan cercana convivían las víctimas, los asesinos y los "observadores".

Transeúntes perciben estos adoquines – colocados de forma alineada en la vereda, así que no hay peligro de tropezar – al último momento de acercarse y "tropezan" en un sentido de percepción sorprendente de la dimensión histórica del lugar vinculada al sufrimiento de una persona. La forma unitaria de los adoquines une simbólicamente a las víctimas, que por principio no se distinguen por grupos definidos según la lógica de los perpetradores (judíos, gitanos, comunistas, homosexuales etc.).

Transeúntes y quienes viven aquí pueden relacionarse con aquellas personas que vivían aquí antes y pueden desarrollar empatía con su sufrimiento. Los adoquines de latón son elementos fácilmente replicables y por lo tanto no se entienden como obras artísticas originales. Sin embargo, como micro-monumentos nos indican auténticos lugares históricos y nos piden un posicionamiento ético.



Figure 4: Stumbling stones are special kinds of street signs, standing among hoardings, advertising pillars and the glaring lights of petrol stations. Source: © Peter Carrier

Figura 4: Los 'adoquines de tropiezo' son unos signos especiales de calle, puestos en el medio de carteleros, pilares de publicidad y las luces deslumbrantes de las estaciones de petróleo. Fuente: © Peter Carrier