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**The Museum of Modern Art**

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**EXHIBITION EXAMINES THE PREMISE OF COMMEMORATION IN POSTWAR ART**

***Counter-Monuments and Memory***  
November 5, 2000-January 30, 2001  
Third Floor

New York, November 2000 - ***Counter-Monuments and Memory*** examines the premise of commemoration in postwar art, tracing its trajectory from the rejection of heroic monuments in the late 1960s to contemporary modes that probe the past from new critical perspectives. The exhibition features some 72 paintings, sculptures, photographs and drawings (as well as a video and an architectural model) by artists such as Joseph Beuys, Christian Boltanski, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Horst Hoheisel, Jenny Holzer, Anselm Kiefer, Annette Lemieux, Annette Messager, Marcel Odenbach, Claes Oldenburg, Sigmar Polke, Ugo Rondinone, Michael Schmidt, and Art Spiegelman, among others. On view from November 5, 2000 through January 30, 2001 as part of ***Open Ends***, the exhibition is organized by Roxana Marcoci, Janice H. Levin Fellow, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

"In an era that resonates with the aftereffects of World War II, the Vietnam War, and the removal of the Berlin Wall, the need to recollect has intensified," notes Ms. Marcoci. "Yet, paradoxically, the capacity of traditional monuments to preserve memories proves ever more precarious."

Post World War II artists have often rejected the certainty of monumental forms. Sigmar Polke's painting *Watchtower* parallels ambiguous historical references with a layering of images and styles from different periods. It is unclear as to whether the tower is a surveillance post for guards patrolling the border of a divided Germany during the Stalinist period, a station for Nazi soldiers overseeing a concentration camp, or simply a watchtower for hunters. Conversely, Claes Oldenburg's incisive drawing *Proposal for a Monument to the Survival of the University of El Salvador: Blasted Pencil (That Still Writes)* (1984) is a counter-monument that directly protests Ronald Reagan's interventionist policies in Central America with the image of a shattered pencil.

Also linked to the topic of counter-monuments is KCHO's *Infinite Column I* (1996), a thirteen-foot high sculpture made of stacked rowboats fully equipped with oars, that functions as an emblem for escape, freedom, and migration. The work plays off two historical references: Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, executed in 1937-38 as a World War I memorial, and the motif of *balsas*, the homemade rafts that Cubans use to flee the island illegally. Other works such as Horst Hoheisel's proposal to blow up the Brandenburg Gate, submitted for the 1995 competition for Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, suggest that no monument can better represent the destruction of a people than the vanishing monument.

Another section of the exhibition is devoted to works that address the notion of how we remember, frequently by questioning the way history is represented. Michael Schmidt's *U-ni-ty* (1991-1994), made in response to the fall of the Berlin Wall, suggests the difficulty of constructing history as a linear sequence of events. Comprising both archival photographs and those taken by the artist, the work makes it difficult to discern whether a given image was taken during or after the war, before the division of Germany or after reunification. Other works deliberately fictionalize or de-monumentalize history. Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, for instance, conveys the chilling memories of war in the form of an allegorical comic book tale that is at once historical and autobiographical. A combination of the past and present, the book reveals the artist's own experiences in recounting the story of his father's survival.

A third section of the exhibition examines the fusion of private and public memories. Felix Gonzalez-Torres brings an intimate and personal experience to the forefront of public awareness in his 1991 untitled billboard. Made in memory of his lover who died of AIDS, this photograph of an empty double bed is on view in the exhibition and on six billboards around New York City. Along parallel lines of private recollection is Annette Messager's *My Vows* (1988-91), a votive sculpture made of hundreds of hanging and overlapping black-and-white photographs showing fragments of the body. Although the images are recognizable, no one single figure can be identified. The work speaks of the transience of human life and the photographic record that we rely upon to memorialize it.

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