Q.U.I.L.T.: A Patchwork of Reflections

Kevin Michael DeLuca, Christine Harold, and Kenneth Rufo

Haiku in Process: Repetition Sans Resolution

Uncle John, 1944–1987

I remember lost
keys, your smile, and so much love.
Now, an empty page.

Uncle John, 1944–1987

I remember lost
keys, your smile, deep love. Now, the
empty, empty page.

Uncle John, 1944–1987

I remember lost
keys, your smile, deep love. Now, an
empty, empty page.¹
Ginny’s Panel

My brother died of AIDS twenty years ago.
   I still cry and I am still pissed.
   I sat with John in Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York City the night before he died. “Is it okay for me to go now?” he asked.
   I lied and said yes.
   I still want to sit outside with him, gossiping endlessly about everyone we love and what we feel and what they feel and what they should do and how we should eat right and exercise more and save the environment and create world peace.2

John R. DeLuca died of complications due to AIDS July 18, 1987. He was forty-three years old. I was thirty-four.

Today, his oldest son, Shawn, is married to Mia and John’s first grandchild, Isabella turned two in December. His daughter, Kirsten, is married to Victor and lives in John’s college town, Burlington, VT. His son, Todd, will be married to Haidee this summer.

They are all doing well, I would tell him. Very well.
   And so am I.
   So am I.
Our brother Ken died, I would tell him. And I really want to talk with you, I would say, about how guilty I feel about not saving him from booze and cigarettes. I think he took your death very hard. And, oh, I got divorced (that was a scene) and now am remarried and I think you would really like him. And, Dad made it to 83 and was still arguing politics when he died. And, can you believe it, our kids are all in their thirties, and they all hang out together and plan vacations together—all that cousin bonding that we hoped for is still in place. And I really wish you . . . Well there is really way too much.

I am John’s fifty four year old sister, still crying in my morning coffee for my brother who died of AIDS twenty years ago and I think—this is what all those numbers of AIDS dead mean. This is what it means when our polices allow this disease to ravage the poorest and most vulnerable in the world. It means millions of sisters (and brothers and children and parents and partners and . . . ) weep for years. Our relationships with our dead do not end with their dying.

I did not have my brother, John, in my life for these past twenty years and my life is much less for that.
An Unfolding History

The AIDS Memorial Quilt has been displayed in its entirety only five times in its twenty-three-year history (all in Washington, D.C.). The Quilt was first displayed in 1987, a pivotal year in AIDS awareness. Ronald Reagan gave his first major (and, for many Americans, woefully belated) speech addressing the crisis, calling it “public enemy number one.” San Francisco Chronicle journalist Randy Shilts published And the Band Played On, his hugely influential chronicle of the spread of HIV and AIDS and the U.S. government’s seeming indifference to what many considered a “gay plague.” That same year, the direct action group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded, calling attention to the AIDS crisis by, among other actions, protesting the prohibitive prices the pharmaceutical behemoths were charging for antiviral drugs like AZT. The Quilt’s inaugural display was part of a National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian rights. That weekend in October 1987, nearly half a million people viewed the Quilt, then comprised of 1,920 panels, a space larger than a football field. Approximately 16,488 Americans died of AIDS-related illnesses that year. In 1992, the year of the fourth display of the Quilt, two persons with AIDS—Bob Hattoy and Elizabeth Glaser—were invited to speak at the Democratic National Convention. The previous year, rock star Freddie Mercury of Queen died of an AIDS-related illness, and popular basketball star Earvin “Magic” Johnson told the world he was HIV-positive. In 1992, a reported 41,849 Americans died of AIDS-related illnesses.
The last time the AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed in its entirety was in October 1996, over fifteen years ago. That year, approximately 38,074 Americans died and 61,124 were diagnosed with the disease. Although 1996 did see the beginnings of what would become a significant drop in AIDS cases and deaths, thanks to the widespread use of combination antiretroviral therapy (sometimes called an “AIDS cocktail”), the numbers of people living with and dying of AIDS globally today are staggering. The number of people living with HIV worldwide is approximately 40 million. Last year (2006), nearly 3 million people died of the disease.

The Quilt has continued to expand along with the disease to which it responds. Today, the AIDS Memorial Quilt includes approximately 46,000 individual panels and the names of more than 83,440 people who have died of AIDS-related illnesses. If it were to be displayed in its entirety, the Quilt would cover 1,293,300 square feet (the equivalent of 185 NCAA basketball courts). If the panels were laid out end to end, it would form a 52.25 mile trail of fabric. The Quilt weighs over fifty-four tons. Today, its sheer size makes it impossible for the Quilt to be displayed in its entirety. Few public spaces could accommodate it. Yet, despite its enormity, the Quilt names a mere 17.5 percent of all AIDS-related deaths in the United States alone. As a text representing visually the atrocity AIDS has wreaked on the world, the Quilt fails miserably.
Visiting, One Immersion

A gray building on the margins. Marginal. Hardly visible. 637 Hoke Street. In fact, you cannot get there from Mapquest. The directions skip Bishop Street. No religious link to get us to the home of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The Mapquest directions to the NAMES Project lack a name, a Bishop, authority, so we are lost. It is a gritty part of town, industrialized and decaying, home to flotsam and jetsam of buildings and people. The gray concrete building is colorless, nondescript, and out of the way, only a plain banner notes its contents, its mission as home of the world’s largest memorial, so large it cannot be seen, cannot be visible in its entirety, cannot be whole. The center of Atlanta is in the distance. Yet the place is apt. Margins, boundaries, and wholeness are what AIDS puts at stake and what AIDS activism and the AIDS Quilt question.

Inside, the place is eclectic, haunting photos and quotes of those lost mingle with pop culture kitsch, like Day-Glo teddy bears and feather boas. But the raw wooden barracks dominate, accommodating the memories made material of the people lost, fifty-four tons of colorful quilt stacked in rows from five to nine levels high. The folded quilt panels stuffed into the barracks echo the photographs of the victims of the Holocaust—gaunt, thin, and stacked in bare barracks. Though here the bodies are nowhere to be seen, memories are salvaged in colorful cloth, juxtaposed mementos, pop culture artifacts, image portraits, and heartrending words. Fifty-four tons is the weight of sadness, of loss, of memories of lives dead.

Some twelve-by-twelve-foot blocks of the Quilt are hanging from the barracks, the three-by-six-foot panels often arranged randomly on a block, the juxtapositions jarring. One poem gets at the ethos of the place and the fight against AIDS: “Be strong, / No matter how / Deep the / Entrenched
Wrong, / No Matter how / Hard the Battle, / No Matter how long, / Faint
not, Fight on, / For tomorrow / Comes the song.”

Yet tomorrow never comes. Both the fight against AIDS and the fight to
preserve the Quilt have become salvation projects, Sisyphean fates. “The
gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of
a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They
had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punish-
ment than futile and hopeless labor. . . . But Sisyphus teaches the higher
fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all
is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither
sterile nor futile. . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to
fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

My character is not Sisyphean. The pathos of the place overwhelms
me. The fifty-four tons of sadness. I am constantly on the verge of tears,
only not crying in order to obey social conventions. These people reduced
to a photograph staring at me, and a quote, and a panel stacked some-
where in the barracks. What do they want from me? These images, these
panels, beseech me to pay attention. Attention, the most precious com-
modity in our speed-addicted, distracted realm. But these faces, these
faces of others compelling me to pay attention, to look, are not of the
restricted economy of capital but the more general economy of death,
the economy of the graveyard. These images, these panels, the size of
coffins, attempt to shelter the dead from the ravages of death. The Quilt
as graveyard answers “the need to shelter the dead, not only to inter them,
but also to shelter them from the oblivion that time itself brings. As when,
at the site of a grave, in memory of the one dead and gone, those who
survive place a stone.”
Visiting, A Second Immersion

On a typical day in February, my colleague and I spent the morning at the NAMES Project headquarters in Atlanta. We were greeted warmly by Janece, the director of communications who, like her colleagues, was eager to share with us the profound responsibility of caring for and promoting the Quilt. The small handful of dedicated people who work full time for the NAMES Project truly love and live the Quilt. For a place dedicated to archiving memorials to the dead, this was a surprisingly joyful place. As we entered the space (a freestanding, industrial-looking building off the beaten path in West Atlanta; the inside still carrying the hip, brushed chrome aesthetic of the dot-commers who vacated only months earlier), Janece lead us through a small visual history of the Quilt—faces of children as they poured over felt panels in a grassy football field, an old sewing machine, bits of cloth and string, letters documenting the idiosyncrasies of loved ones. As we turned a corner we entered the heart of the place—a room encircled by the huge shelving units on which the Quilt “blocks” are stored. Deneice, who runs the “warehouse” (although the word fails to capture the warmth of the colorful, softly lit space), easily pulled out one of the units, aided by wheels and tracks, to show us a row of panels. They were stacked neatly, in heavy rows and columns, one on top of another, folded in perfect uniform by Deneice’s expert hands. The floor in the middle of the warehouse just barely fit one block—a twelve-by-twelve section of the quilt made up of four three-by-six individual panels. Deneice unfurled for us one after another, the cumbersome folds of memorabilia. We kicked off our shoes as we tiptoed along the thin aisle around each edge so as not to mar the cloth.

I spent the bulk of my time with one panel in particular, one honoring Jimmy Finzel. Finzel had died exactly seven years earlier, in February,
his life documented through the eyes of his life partner. Finzel’s panel gave some sense of what kind of man he was—an outgoing, Midwestern charmer. But more clear was the pain felt by his partner for having lost him so early. Included on the panel was the handmade program for their commitment ceremony, featuring two clip-art grooms in bow ties and, so that viewers could get a deeper look into the lives of these two men, an eight-by-ten booklet of plastic sleeves containing stained restaurant menus and cocktail napkins, small mementos of an all-too-short romantic history. The final page marks, in an almost quotidian way, the events that would end that history. A page torn from what looked to be an ordinary kitchen calendar, with five hand-scrawled entries:

- February 1: Jim’s B-day
- February 15: Jim’s suicide
- February 23: Jim disconnected life support
- February 27: Jim’s viewing, Michigan
- February 28: Jim’s burial, Michigan

This calendar page documented the last days of one life ended by AIDS. The NAMES Project serves as an archive for thousands of such documents. That surprisingly small and colorful space in Atlanta houses not only the Quilt but also countless letters, videos, paintings, teddy bears, and other items that families and friends want to have stored with their panels. For many, the NAMES Project, more so than a grave in some cold cemetery, is the symbolic resting place for their loved ones. There remains something hopeful about this alternative, stitched in fabric rather than buried in the ground, manifest as a lovingly sewn and cared-for comforter.
A Representative Failure

Earlier we suggested, in a purposely provocative statement, that “as a text representing visually the atrocity AIDS has wreaked on the world, the Quilt fails miserably.” Such a provocation demands further attention. The “failure,” or fault, lies not in the Quilt, but in ourselves, in the expectations produced by our epistemological entrenchment in representation. Taken literally, representation promises that something will be made present again, usually through rhetorical figures such as metaphor, intended poetic capture of its essence. But the relationship between the Quilt and AIDS cannot be understood through the figure of metaphor—one is not like the other, as children are said to be angels, or communism a cancer. One response to this may be “okay, then, if not metaphor, then metonymy,” implying that although the Quilt and AIDS may not be similar, the former stands in for the latter by way of approximation or association. In this view, the Quilt represents the protean face of the global AIDS crisis thanks to the diversity of its subjects—the Quilt as pastiche.

However, the Quilt does not represent AIDS, it responds to it. Response cannot be understood through mechanisms of substitution. Indeed, most of the panels are not about AIDS at all, but the individual personalities of people lost to it, an important difference. The panels and blocks that comprise the Quilt are idiosyncratic and random. No rhyme or reason
governs its aesthetic or its growth. Monuments are metonymic, but this is a schema that cannot account for the power of the Quilt. Let us resist the temptation to ascribe any rhetorical trope to the Quilt. Let us try, instead, to understand how its “failure” to represent is precisely why the Quilt succeeds as a gathering point for AIDS awareness and compassion where traditional memorials might not.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a response that cannot be said to correspond to AIDS. To “correspond” is to answer by way of agreement, in accordance and conformity with. Its goal is harmony between terms or events. As the AIDS crisis has grown, so indeed has the Quilt, but the Quilt could not possibly be up to the task of answering AIDS in some harmonious correlation—one life, one panel. Despite its enormous proportions, the number of names on the Quilt is still only about 17.5 percent of all AIDS-related deaths in the United States alone. That is phenomenal as far as representations go, but, ultimately, as representation the Quilt is doomed to failure. But this “failure,” we submit, is its success.

Not only can the Quilt not re-present AIDS, make it present in a way that makes viewers able to fully apprehend it, but the Quilt itself can quite literally not be made present. It is simply too big, too unwieldy, too expensive to display in its entirety. Even those who know the Quilt intimately cannot know it through seeing it. They know it only through its bits and pieces.
The We That Remembers

A quilt. A patchwork. An improvised creation from odds and ends, the leftovers, detritus, the stuff at the margins, not really needed but made useful. The AIDS Quilt. A public monument to a private illness that became a social cause. A public monument that questions the very concepts of public and monument. A public monument without a plan, an architect, a place, an ending. A public monument as arriangiasti, a making-do in public with the materials available. A public monument so large that it is invisible, panels placed in anonymous buildings, sometimes seeing the light, touring regions; panels archived electronically, lurking on the Web, accessed accidentally, randomly. A public monument that mutates, fragments, changes constantly, interrupting a reading, a meaning, a public memory.

Public monuments and public memory have become entwined, the monument a solidification of the memory, an ossification of public memory, official memory, both responding to and constituting the memory of Vietnam, of the Korean War, of the Civil Rights Movement, and so on. But, of course, the very phrase “public memory” assumes we know what we mean by “public” and “memory,” never mind the two juxtaposed. While many blithely go on doing public memory studies, a questioning has begun. Edward Casey suggests such a questioning in an essay trying to categorize memories, entitled “But What, Then, Is Public Memory?,” asserting that “Remembering is always je meines (‘in each case mine’).” Though Casey goes on to posit a public memory, his question haunts—since memory is a function of an individual human entity, “public memory” affects a misplaced metaphor, extending an individual attribute to a collective function at work in all of society. Society comes to be understood as an aggregation of individuals that somehow forms one large organism so that society is akin to a person with many of the same
functions, including memory. This public memory is then excreted in the form of large stone droppings, sedimentations of the society mind.

But who is this public? Though purportedly the object of numerous studies, the public remains an elusive beast. As John Hartley opens his book on the public and publicity, “This book is about the search for something which, from one point of view, does not exist. Looked at another way, it is something so obvious that its existence is usually taken for granted. It cannot be interrogated, inspected, observed or investigated directly. . . . It has no bodily form, but it is powerful.” Michael McGee writes of the public as “the people,” which he finds to be just as nonexistent: “The people,’ therefore, are not objectively real in the sense that they exist as a collective entity in nature; rather, they are a fiction dreamed by an advocate and infused with an artificial, rhetorical reality.”

Memory proves an equally elusive part of the public memory equation. Charles Scott suggests memory as something that is always already about something that is never present, that memory’s not about something that happened but, instead, is itself a happening: “The basic meanings of memory in this context are those of presencing with a loss of original presence, continuation with absence of guaranteed continuity, and return to beginnings with absence of a primary origin. . . . public memory occurs as an appearing event.”

Of course the problem with all of this is the singularity of both “the public” and “memory.” Such singularity erases politics and denies life in favor of a static, stone-cold vision. At the very least, if public memory remains, it must be publics’ memories. As McGee concludes, “the people’ exist, not in a single myth, but in the competitive relationships which develop between a myth and antithetical visions of the collective life.”
A Source of Sanctuary

We often think of sanctuaries as “safe houses,” holy in nature, where the persecuted can find refuge from judgment, hospice from an inhospitable public out there. Etymological cousins of “sanctuary” include “saint” and, of course, “sanctum,” denoting “a private place.” The NAMES Project, by choosing to memorialize with a quilt those who have died of AIDS, has provided the dead and their mourners with a sanctuary, however temporary, where they can display private, often inscrutable, information about the individual lives of their loved ones. Often, panel makers choose to offer tiny, quiet details that, for the living, are often relegated to mere ephemera, not worth Remembering. In a colorful panel for James Meade, a handwritten chain of text encircles the image of a yellow-haired man lying under a cozy patchwork quilt, a crescent moon shining through the window above him:

—Dawn at the window—Birds singing—The cats crying to be fed—Lingering dreams—The light in the tree limbs—Shaving—Putting on a bathrobe—The smell of the coffee—Ironing a shirt—Picking out a tie—Waking up Harry—Feeding the cats—The warmth of the toaster—Oatmeal with raisins—Cleaning the sink—Making the bed—Packing a lunch—Remembering a song—Riding the bus—The weight of a pocketwatch—Telling a joke—Listening to Mozart—Coworkers complaining
and laughing—The breeze in the grass . . . Chow-mein and fortune cookies . . . The kimono hanging on the wall—Fingernail clippings—Reading in bed—Evening prayer—Stars and sleeping—Dreaming.

These mundane details document, perhaps more powerfully than any sustained narrative could, a day in a life that was lived. Such details domesticate AIDS, in that they provide its dead with a home, a dwelling place, a domicile. A sanctuary. For Marita Sturken, this particular chain of otherwise meaningless signifiers document “a middle-class life disrupted”; and hence, “the evocation of the daily life of this gay couple takes on a kind of compelling ordinariness, and small details become charged with loss.”14 Private though they are, in the context of the Quilt these small, quiet details only become “charged with loss” through their display, their accessibility to a public; those who presumably know nothing of James Meade’s penchant for chow mein or Mozart are affected by his passing nonetheless. Perhaps this is because the particular, not the universal, is what connects us as humans. Perhaps this is because access occurs always already within a sheltering, a gathering together of panels cared for, united, and constitutive of a new place, a sacred place inhabitable by those already intimately connected to it, but recognizable by all.
Limits of Vision

The AIDS Quilt last appeared as a spectacle, as a totalized vision, in October of 1996 on the Mall of Washington, D.C. And it was a spectacular sight, acres of panels swallowing up visitors, immersing spectators in a sea of cacophonous colors, visible as a whole only from a God’s-eye point of view. As we have noted, such a vision is now impossible. The question, though, is if it is ever possible. Is it possible to see, to read, to explain any memorial/monument? The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial? Is the visual ever explicable? Meaningful? More than a decade into what W.J.T. Mitchell termed “the pictorial turn,” we are still grappling with the visual. Mitchell rightly proffers the term “image/text,” but being scribes from Gutenburg’s Galaxy, we err on the side of words, turning from the image to context, a linguistic context, a context of words, a context we can read, a context that can tame the madness of images. We forget John Berger’s observation: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. . . . It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.” Jean Baudrillard warns of the violence of meaning: “Once the hallucination which should properly inhabit the image is buried beneath commentary, walled up in aesthetic celebration and condemned to the plastic surgery of the museum, it is finished. . . . What we have here is quite simply the medium in circulation. And the fundamentally dangerous form of the image gives way to the mere cultural circulation of masterpieces.” The necessary move for us is from meaning to force: “The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows,
processes, partial objects—none of which mean anything.” In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin offers a productive orientation for engaging images, writing of the audience as “a collectivity in a state of distraction” and asserting that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.” Benjamin is suggesting here, and across his work, the form and objects that mimic his critique, a model for the rhetorical critic to displace the focused gaze with the distracted look of the optical unconscious, the glance of habit, which is tactile in the sense that one is not an observer gazing from a critical distance, but an actor immersed in a sea of imagery, a body pressed upon by the play of images and driven to distraction to survive. The very form of the AIDS Quilt forces this immersion. While with a smaller memorial we can maintain the illusion of the all-encompassing gaze, the capturing with meaning, the acres of the Quilt preclude mastery, visual or linguistic. In the face of the unrepresentable, we want to offer speed, distraction, glances, and immersion as modes of orientation, practices for engaging images, modes of intensities for living among the ceaseless circulation of images of the public screen. Speed, distraction, glances, and immersion suggest not a subject dominating an object but a relationship of simultaneous becoming. Images engaged not as objects of study, corpuses, corpses, but as Deleuzian bodies, modes that introduce relations of speed and slowness into the social and produce affects.
The nineteenth-century pataphysicist Alfred Jarry once remarked: “It is conventional to call ‘monster’ any blending of dissonant elements . . . I call ‘monster’ every original, inexhaustible beauty.” If beauty was for Jarry characterized by a “monstrous” dissonance and inexhaustibility, then he would have found the AIDS Memorial Quilt beautiful indeed. No rules govern its aesthetics; the only requirement is that panels adhere to three-by-six-foot dimensions (the size of a burial plot). As a consequence, the Quilt can only be described as a riotous Mardi Gras parade of color and texture. The panels may roughly symbolize plots, but the Quilt is anything but funereal. Elinor Fuchs writes:

Imagine finding a sublime design of mountains, bordered with “comfort, oh comfort my people” in Hebrew and English right next to a splash of sequins celebrating “Boogie,” and directly below a grinning depiction of Bugs Bunny. The Quilt is cemetery as All Fools’ Days, a carnival of the sacred, the homely, the joyous and downright tacky, resisting, even in extremis, the solemnity of mourning.

It is, in other words, a “carnival of tackiness,” but it is precisely this carnivalesque aesthetic that may be “the most moving and at the same time most politically suggestive thing about the quilt: the lived tackiness, the refusal of so many thousands of quilters to solemnize their losses under the aesthetics of mourning.” The aesthetics of mourning. In Western culture, with its dominant Judeo-Christian sensibility, mourning is conventionally a somber affair. We are encouraged to honor our dead with an appropriate solemnity. In addition to “staid,” “sober,” and “sedate,” the word “solemn”
means “awe-inspiring,” or sublime, as in “solemn beauty.” The funereal aesthetic insists on beauty in the face of death. But, of course, beauty is not a universal category. The beauty of the funereal (black dress, hymns, orations meant to capture the essence of a person or point to transcendental human values) helps us to rationalize death, to make it make sense. It is an understandable and deep-rooted response to the monstrous unknown.

However, might not the surreal be a more right and fitting response to the passing from life to death? After all, what is death if not beyond-the-real? Other recent responses to “mass death”—the World War II Memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial, for example—mark the passage from life to death through the classical sense of gravitas, as if memorializing the dead through the weighty medium of stone will anchor life and death, mark the transition with a formal heft that realizes it for the viewer in such a way that makes it more recognizable. This is an aesthetic response that hopes to orient the viewer by centralizing death. The Quilt functions quite differently. Although its raison d’être is a serious one, to be sure, its way of being can only be described as surreal, committed to the relentless exercise of the imagination—a playful, experimental, dreamlike aesthetic that forms new and unexpected associations. Surrealism, pace funerealism, is decidedly disorienting. Likewise, in the Quilt, a patchwork of otherwise unrelated lives—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Atheists, disco queens, librarians, schoolgirls, truck drivers—are stitched together in a vast and fluctuating tapestry of grief, anger, tenderness, and joy. The Quilt is a surreal monster of inexhaustible beauty; a cacophony of color and texture that allows the mourned and the mourning to speak death with evanescent and glittering breath.
Sublime, Sublated

The AIDS Quilt exceeds sight; it is too large to be seen, to submit to a view. It is too chaotic to be sensible, to be apprehended by reason. Fundamentally, the Quilt is excessive. In its excess it evokes the sublime. The sublime is a long-standing concept in Western thought, with roots in Ancient Greece and developed by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and, more recently, Jean-François Lyotard.23 For Burke, the sublime is an intense passion rooted in horror, fear, or terror in the face of objects that suggest vastness, infinity, power, massiveness, mystery, and death.24 In addition, objects linked to privation are a source of the sublime. “All general privations are great because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence.”25 The most sublime object is God, though many objects of nature are often seen as traces of God. There is a sense in Burke that is even more developed in Kant that the sublime is both provoked by nature and unrepresentable. Burke writes of the “passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully.”26 Kant adds a twist by arguing that the sublime is not actually in nature but in the subject’s mind when the subject reaches the limits of representation.
While Kant’s move inflates the subject at the expense of the object/nature, we would want to suggest that the sublime emerges in the engagement of the two, with both becoming in that relationship. Working from Kant, Lyotard reads the encounter with the sublime, the failure of representation and reason, as a freeing event: “Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. . . . Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.”27 In a different take, Charles Scott posits a Dionysian sublime that relates directly to the Quilt and AIDS, for it emphasizes loss and sacrifice: “Nondetermination opens to loss of self and rebirth of different life. . . . His blessing comes after and through dismemberment and the violent touch of uncivilization and in life that is reconstituted and remembered. . . . It is a strange blessing in which the violent loss of ‘civilization’ is transformed into a way of being civilized out of the ashes of Dionysus’ upsurgence.”28 In the encounter with the AIDS Quilt—the excess, the unrepresentable, the chaos, the unfathomable loss—is the sublime.
Stone vs. Cloth

Public monuments. Lincoln Memorial. Washington Monument. FDR Memorial. Vietnam Memorial. Civil Rights Memorial. Stone. The link of monuments to stone seems natural. Stone challenges time. The monuments are made to speak over time, well beyond us, to shape the memories of those yet to come. Stone is elemental. Stone is of the earth. Memory, which is ephemeral, is grounded by stone: “stone is ancient, not only in the sense that it withstands the wear of time better than other natural things, but also in the sense that its antiquity is of the order of the always already. Stone comes from a past that has never been present, a past unassimilable to the order of time in which things come and go in the human world; and that nonbelonging of stone is precisely what qualifies it to mark and hence memorialize such comings and goings, births and deaths.”

So what do we make of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a memorial made of the softest of materials—cloth, cotton? Well, first, that time already haunts the Quilt. The Quilt is aging, decaying. It is the patient of preservers, a salvation project. At the cost of millions. Second, the softness of the material sets up a relationship of becoming that the hardness of stone conceals. In butting up against stone, we feel we do not leave a mark, the touches are not reciprocal. Of course, we do leave a mark over time, but it is over a span that exceeds us. Trudging up the steps to St. Peter’s Dome, we can see how our steps have worn the stone, shaped it, left a mark. But such a “we” contains millennia and multitudes. We are always touching cloth and cotton. They embrace us all our days.
Quilts encourage us to touch, to embrace, to cuddle. The Quilt is a sensuous experience. It’s a relationship of mutually becoming. Our identities transform in the engagement. The quilt takes on my form. My self is extended into the quilt. The quilt is an extension of my skin, of my ability to keep warm. Where I can be is expanded. The Quilt invites me to touch the memories of people I know and do not know. To feel them. To feel the loss. To huddle with the Quilt. Third, and finally, though, perhaps the form of the Quilt, its very material being, the relationships it engenders, what it does in the world, suggest it is not a monument at all. An archive? Perhaps. The archive of the cost of AIDS. An archive of the lives, bodies, experiences lost. Each panel houses the record of a person, inscribed in words, objects, photographs. Not to mention the 500,000 materials housed in a separate room—letters, lists of meds taken, and so on. In the face of a virus that prompted institutional silence and denial, rendering victims invisible, the makers of the Quilt seize the institutional power to name and interpret the event of AIDS. Derrida explains how archive comes from the Greek *arkheion*, the home of the *archon* or magistrate, those with the right and power to interpret the law: “It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public.”30 In challenging institutional silence, Quilt makers made manifest the AIDS crisis, made record of it, transforming a private tragedy into a public catastrophe.
The Quilting Point

In their official literature explaining how individual panel submissions are added to the Quilt, the NAMES Project explains:

After your panel arrives at our main offices . . . it is carefully logged and examined for durability. Sometimes a panel may require hemming to adjust for size, reinforcement, or minor repairs. Next, it is sorted geographically by region. When eight panels from the same region are collected, they are sewn together to form a twelve-foot square. Once sewn, each twelve-by-twelve is edged in canvas and given a number, making it possible to keep track of that block. All the panel, panel maker, and numerical information is then stored in our huge Quilt database.31

In this way the patches build, the Quilt grows, and the archive is expanded. What point in this process can be identified with certainty as a rhetorical operation or a moment of signification? Is the rhetorical artifact the individual patches, full of specific meaning and epideictic import? Is the Quilt itself a cohesive and singular artifact, one that manifests a political and rhetorical meaning more than the sum of the patches that comprise it? The answer, we contend, is both/and, and therefore, properly speaking, neither. We believe that while rhetoricians can encounter and engage the Quilt both at the level of individual panels and at the level of
a totality, the truly rhetorical moment occurs behind the “scenes,” so to speak, in that the essential rhetorical act is not celebrated or made visible in the sense we are accustomed.

This rhetorical moment, the moment when meaning coheres, is named by Jacques Lacan as, coincidentally, the quilting point. Attempting to explain how the subject comes to be structured through language, Lacan contends that there is a point de capiton, a quilting point, “at which the signified and the signifier are knotted together.” Consequently, he continues: “Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of a material. It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively.” Without embracing the discourses and systematicity of psychoanalysis, we can still see in Lacan’s formulation the reality that meaning comes about through the ties that bind, the stitches that link a signifier to the signified. In other words, it is neither the signifier of each individual panel that matters most nor the signified of the Quilt-as-totality, from which the Quilt achieves its particular rhetorical force. Rather, it is the act of quilting itself, the never-ending, always expanding, stitching together of panels, batch after batch, and their storage and integration with the archive. The quilting point is, in this instance, quite literally the act of quilting itself.
When the Quilt moved to Atlanta, it did so under a cloud of controversy. The creator of the Quilt, Cleve Jones, in 2004 sued the NAMES Project in an attempt to keep the Quilt in San Francisco, where activism and awareness of AIDS was, presumably, much higher than in the Georgia capital. Jones feared that the Quilt would simply languish there, essentially locked in a warehouse, stored for future generations but no longer a visible reminder of AIDS. “We have got to constantly be vigilant against the idea that AIDS is over—that’s what the quilt can do, particularly for young people who think this is just a treatable chronic condition,” he argued. Jones’s concerns seem at odds with the evolving nature of the gift he created, and his fundamental distrust of its archiving may have produced more confusion than it did insight. The Quilt is, fundamentally and from its conception an archive, an instrument of memory. This instrument does not gain its power, its authority, from its visibility (though early on, when the Quilt was significantly smaller, such visibility did have an important political and rhetorical function). In the beginning, when the Quilt could still hide itself in the role of a monument or conventional memorial, such visibility made sense, but as it grew, and its capacity to function as a discrete, visible object—as a totality—succumbed to its sheer monstrous size, the reality of its archival character became clear.

The archive gains its power from its capacity to alternate between remembering and forgetting; the very fact that much of it remains, if not properly invisible, at least concealed, induces hypomnesia, lowering
a particular panel or block below the threshold of memory and hence risking its forgetting. At the same time, the capacity to recall any panel, to search the database, extract the block, and see in that presentation the testimony of the departed, preserved in the archive, engages an anamnestic function, once more thrusting the panel into consciousness. This memory ballet may, at first glance, seem to justify Jones’s concerns; a person or organization has to request a panel or request a viewing for the archive to become public. In the absence of such a request, perhaps the risk of forgetting is made real.

But this function of memory, the ambivalent relation that it has to the forgetting and remembering of any particular panel, block, or theme, is a secondary function of the archive. Its primary function is as a site of technology. The capacity of the archive to remember, which stands as antecedent to its capacity to forget, is precisely its particular rhetorical power. For the archive itself will remain visible as a site, a pledge, and a technology of memory long after the cotton threads have worn bare, and long after the public grows tired of viewing a monument, or condemns a memorial to the domestication of tourism. That the archive remains declares there is something to keep, something that is always already contested in the public memory. As such, the archiving of the project in Atlanta may do more for the longevity and rhetorical force of the Quilt than could a lifetime of celebrated displays on the doorsteps of political power.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Jay Scott</td>
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Methodological Reflection

As is apparent, this essay takes a decidedly nonconventional form. Rather than a series of linear expositions in the service of constructing a larger and conclusive claim, we have chosen to pay homage to that which makes the Quilt such a fascinating and powerful rhetorical artifact: its patchwork of panels, sewn together, each meaningful, and each contributing to something larger than itself. Within the patches of thought that precede this one are the voices of five distinct personalities, and within each of those personalities countless voices more.

Constraining invention in such a fashion makes obvious to author and reader a certain truncated quality, as each panel ends prematurely, its thought processes unfulfilled within the limited space allotted. Like the three-by-six-foot panels of the Quilt, each panel gestures toward something larger than itself; combined they offer a promise of coherence without the steady and reassuring hand of a conclusion. Each thought panel hints at rhetoric at work in the Quilt, but each panel runs up against the limits of its size, and each thereby makes explicit the limits of its own analysis. It is here that the power of the Quilt becomes manifest: like our thought panels, like the Quilt’s panels, each life saluted and memorialized within the cotton and canvas blocks ended prematurely, truncated. It is the shared variable of AIDS that unites the record of lives past, but there remains no definitive and unary lesson to be drawn from those deaths, any more than there is to be drawn from the Quilt itself, anymore than there is to be found in the segments of this essay.

What we hope does come across in reading this essay is the sense of its segmentation and the very real limit that such segmentation implies. Like the quilt itself, this essay works, if it works at all, through the stitching together of disparate threads, linked together by a reality that likewise shows no sign of concluding. The Quilt, like our understanding of AIDS, like the reality of AIDS, remains a work in progress.

Thus we come to a close with this, our final panel.
Until the next set of stitches.
Celine Nguyen created the quilt panel reproduced in this chapter.

1. Like the construction of this poem, the process of constructing a quilt panel is, for many, a difficult and arduous one. According to those working for the NAMES Project, many panel makers report that the temptation to tinker constantly when trying to capture perfectly the life of a loved one can be overwhelming. Daunted by the process, many wait years before constructing a panel for their loved one.

2. This panel was contributed by Virginia DeLuca.


4. The poem is by Stephen Vincent and appears on his panel, which is part of Block #05410.


34. Ibid., 18.