Remembering the AIDS Quilt

Morris III, Charles E.

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Collage/Montage as Critical Practice, or How to “Quilt”/Read Postmodern Text(ile)s

Brian L. Ott, Eric Aoki, and Greg Dickinson

Both in its creation and display . . . the NAMES Project quilt represents a provocative instance of postmodern cultural politics.

—Van E. Hillard, “Census, Consensus, and the Commodification of Form”

The panels, attached together in groups of eight, are arranged to make space for people to walk between them, so that viewers also become part of the quilt, adding their presence and voices to the composition of the quilt.

—Judy Elsley, “The Rhetoric of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt”

The cultural politics of the 1980s were especially divisive and contentious. The political and social conservatism of the Reagan administration, with its politics of exclusion and ethos of conformity and moral absolutism, ignited deep-seated fears surrounding difference,
fanned the flames of prejudice and bigotry, and produced a toxic atmosphere of intolerance. Meanwhile, progressive movements aimed at multiculturalism, aided by the forces of globalization and the development of information technologies, ushered in an era of unprecedented cultural difference and plurality. It was the height of the U.S. “culture wars,” and its battles were vigorously being waged in the arenas of art, education, religion, politics, law, and even the home. As this high stakes fight for the future of America unfolded, traditional boundaries between public/private, individual/collective, and elite/popular increasingly eroded, collapsed, and dissolved, paving the way for new artistic and political forms.

Such was the context that both witnessed and occasioned the emergence of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. The Quilt was and continues to be a poignant and potent rhetorical performance—one that fosters community while honoring individuals, affirms life while invoking death, elicits hope while summoning sorrow, functions politically while appealing aesthetically, challenges the status quo while providing comfort and catharsis, calls for collective action while commemorating personal loss, and envisions a better tomorrow while remembering a painful past. The strange affectivity of the Quilt, as well as its capacity to bridge differences, combat ignorance and intolerance, and speak to diverse audiences, arises from its unusual rhetorical character. Unlike more traditional rhetorical texts, the Quilt is decidedly protean, populist, mobile, material, multivocal, spatial, and fragmentary. It is, simply stated, a postmodern text(ile) whose rhetorical consequentiality is as colorful, compelling, and varied as its countless panels.

The Quilt’s postmodern (anti)form poses a series of interpretive difficulties and challenges for the would-be critic. How does one assess a text(ile) whose meaning is infinitely diffuse, personal, and mutable? Such a dynamic and ever-changing performance surely cannot be understood, we contend, by traditional manner or method. Commenting on another text of singular eloquence, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Edwin Black once cautioned, “sometimes—maybe even all the time—a subject deserves to supersede a method, and to receive its own forms of disclosure.” Gregory Ulmer, in an essay titled “The Object of Post-Criticism,” goes further still, arguing that postmodern texts resist any critical enterprise aimed at meaning, interpretation, and representation. He proposes,
instead, that the critic—following Susan Sontag’s call for an erotics of art in place of a hermeneutics of art—attend to the object of study impressionistically, experientially, and sensuously. For Ulmer, this can best be achieved through the device of collage/montage, for it allows the critic to register multiple, even conflicting, sensations and experiences. Such an approach seeks to understand the Quilt not in terms of some generalizable meaning, but in terms of its personal meaningfulness.

In this spirit, we—Eric, Greg, and Brian (the three authors of this piece)—have each written independent accounts, short literary panels, that probe and reflect upon how the Quilt speaks—how it becomes meaningful—to each of us. Although these “panels” are diverse in their content and voice, collectively they provide an entry into the Quilt’s wide-ranging affects/effects. It is our hope that readers find value and insight in the distinctiveness of the individual panels, as well as in their essayistic threading together. The panels are arranged alphabetically in an attempt to avoid privileging a particular logic or authorizing a “correct” reading. Indeed, we invite the reader to wander through the essay—to begin wherever he or she likes, to skip ahead and double back, to speed up and slow down in accordance with personal interest and desire—just as one might do in wandering through the Quilt. The reader’s chosen path, pace, and movement will, no doubt, create unintended and unpredictable juxtapositions that may, in fact, turn out to be more (or differently) meaningful than anything we intended. Before sharing our individual panels, however, we briefly explore the practice of quilting as a way of introducing the unique form of both the AIDS Quilt and this essay. The essay concludes by discussing the implications and benefits of our approach for criticism.

On the History, Practicality, Aesthetics, and Politics of Quilting

Quilting is a centuries old practice of stitching together multiple layers of cloth. Its history in America is rich and varied. In colonial times, women—though typically only those who were affluent enough to afford household help—would spend their free time engaging in decorative needlework.
But, unlike modern patchwork quilts that involve small pieces of fabric stitched together, early colonial quilts were most often of the whole-cloth variety. Contrary to popular myth, quilting did not, in fact, become a widespread practice in America until the 1800s, and the emergence of quilting bees, or groups of women who quilted together, occurred even later. Quilting’s surge in popularity was a consequence, at least in part, of economic and practical necessity. Pioneer women with limited access to (and financial resources for) fabric, for instance, would repurpose swatches of worn-out clothing into quilt squares that could be combined to make quilted blankets and comforters needed to withstand the harsh conditions of frontier life. So, though the history of quilting in America extends back to the Colonies, it did not develop into the practice, as it is understood today, until about the mid-nineteenth century. Since that time, quilts have performed four primary interlocking functions: historical, practical, aesthetic, and political. It is worth briefly reflecting on each of these functions.

“Quilts,” in the words of Karen Warren, “are historical records: they capture diverse or distinct cultural traditions and thereby serve collectively to help preserve the past.” Quilts are strongly connected to storytelling on multiple levels. The process of quilt making was, by the mid-1800s, frequently a communal activity and also a time for storytelling. For quilters, quilt making provided an opportunity to share one’s daily trials and tribulations, as well as her hopes and dreams, with others. No less important than the stories told by quilters are the stories told about them through their quilts. As Joan Mulholland elaborates, “The sewing of patchwork quilts is a social practice which has developed in America over the last three hundred years into a major discursive genre which provides opportunity for women to engage in special kinds of individual or social speech actions.” The discursive character of quilts is evident in friendship quilts, for example, which include some type of signed remembrance. For pioneer women, friendship quilts served as precious memories of the friends and family back home, with whom communication was impractical and infrequent. Through their stories, then, quilts preserved the memories, traditions, and histories of the (mostly) women who made them and the friends for whom they made them. The AIDS Quilt functions similarly. “Each panel tells several stories,” comments
As important as quilts are to preserving history, they are designed to serve practical and utilitarian purposes. As Charlotte Pierce-Baker succinctly puts it, “We all understand that a quilt is a blending of disparate pieces to make a whole, and that it is designed for a specific purpose, usually a utilitarian one.” The various layers of fabric that comprise quilts function to trap air, which in turn performs an insulating function. Indeed, it is precisely because of quilts’ capacity to provide warmth materially that they are often associated with comfort symbolically. No doubt the quilts made as bedding for Union soldiers during the Civil War conveyed a sense of security by evoking the home, where quilts are typically found. However, the comforting character of quilts is more than a metaphor. On the frontier, the ailing were wrapped tightly in quilts to prevent chills and begin healing. Since the comfort and healing that quilts afford is both physical and emotional, the AIDS Quilt provides an ideal vehicle for symbolic action. “In part,” Elsley explains, “the panels provide a way for survivors to make a difference. Because caretakers feel particularly helpless in terms of healing those afflicted with the disease, the quilt is something concrete and lasting over which they do have control. . . . Making a panel provides the grievers with a way to begin to deal with their loss.”

Anyone who has ever owned or even viewed quilts can recognize their aesthetic value, for “they can be very exciting visually, with precise, varied, and vibrant designs, bold color combinations, and exuberant displays.” So, while quilts may be constructed primarily to fulfill practical needs, they also serve as creative and artistic outlets for the persons who make them. According to Jill Schachner Chanen, “Though quilting is a form of needlecraft in which layers of fabric are sewn together with an intricate stitch to create a layered, puffy effect, quilters say it really is an art form.” Elaborating on the fact that quilting is not simply a technique, Catherine Amoroso Leslie remarks, “the fineness of the stitches and the way the pattern is executed” involves considerable “artistic skill.” Based on their obvious aesthetic appeal, Peter Hawkins notes that, “from the beginning it was clear that the patchwork quilt is our quintessential folk art.” Unlike fine art, folk art is produced by ordinary people who have
little or no formal artistic training. As a consequence, quilts possess a de-
cidedly local, vernacular, and populist voice—one that is especially well
suited to commemorate personal loss. In contrast to official expressions
of memory (typical of most public monuments and memorials), which
speak for “the people,” the vernacular expression of the Quilt originates
from “the people.” Thus, the creative, artistic, and aesthetic choices made
by panel makers are significant precisely because they are so intensely
personal and meaningful.

Like all art, quilts can also be political, for as Van E. Hillard observes,
they provide “a vehicle for subverting dominant ideology” and enacting
“alternate readings of the world.”
16 Elaborating on this point, he adds:

We should keep in mind that quilts have long been created by marginal-
ized groups: by European-American women, who had few opportunities
to express themselves in public discourse and employed their quilts to
give expression to private thought and feeling; by African American
women who, carrying forward African traditions, practiced the art of
salvage and reclamation for utilitarian and expressive purposes; and by
African American “quilting slaves,” trained to produce quilts for mem-
biers of the oppressive culture.

One of the most commonly cited examples of quilting’s political
character is “the freedom quilts that marked the way stations of the Un-
derground Railroad” and “displayed a means for slaves to flee the plan-
tation and journey to freedom.”
18 Though there is some question today
concerning whether or not quilts actually performed this function (at
least as explicitly as has been claimed), scholars agree that the practice of
quilting has long utilized tactics of symbolic inversion, double coding, and
subversive aesthetics.
19 The use of polyrhythmic and nonsymmetrical pat-
terns, as well as looser, broader stitches by African American women, for
instance, signals a departure from and challenge to the dominant white
European aesthetic. The political import of such practices is less about
the specific meaning of these quilts, then, and more about the creation of
alternative forms of expression in public spaces. This point is especially
noteworthy in the case of the AIDS Quilt, which made visible and public
a tragedy that had been and was largely being ignored and disregarded in official and traditional forms of speech.

Highlighting its crucial role in giving voice to the voiceless, Christopher Capozzola notes, “The AIDS Quilt creates an alternative site of memory for many who have been excluded from traditional means of mourning.” Central to the power of this “alternative site” is its very public display. Capozzola continues: “Laid out in the symbolic heart of American political culture and cultural memory, within view of the White House, the United States Capitol, and the Lincoln Memorial, The Quilt confronted the exclusions of American political authority and argued for the inclusion of people with AIDS into not just memorial, but political structures from which they had been left out.”

In addition to the symbolic significance of the places in which the Quilt has been displayed, there are the very material consequences of its sheer size. Because of the immense volume of space it covers, the Quilt is all but impossible to ignore. Even as the Reagan administration stubbornly refused to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic and its countless victims, the Quilt demanded to be seen. As Hawkins notes, “It leaves the dead to rest in peace, but it does not hesitate to disturb the peace of the living, to force everyone to look beyond the illusion of immunity in order to see a catastrophe that affects us all.” In the location (public space), mode (traveling), and manner (immensity) of its display, the Quilt brought “mourning from the margin to center.”

Having garnered the public’s attention, “The Names Project made extensive use of what its founders called ‘traditional American’ symbolism in an effort to reach out to ‘mainstream’ America’s hearts and pocketbooks.” That symbolism was, as Hawkins elaborates, closely tied to the Stars and Stripes:

Perhaps the only event similar to it in our national mythology is the making of that other needlework of fabric, color, and pattern that Betsy Ross turned into America’s most revered symbol—the American flag. . . [Cleve Jones] found a brilliant strategy for bringing AIDS not only to public attention but into the mainstream of American myth. He found a way to turn a “gay disease” into a shared tragedy.
This paradoxical invocation of and challenge to traditional American mythology ultimately makes the Quilt both a compelling and consciousness-raising instance of eloquence—one that “tells a complex story of public and private, personal and political, protest and acquiescence, inclusion and resistance.”

Throughout this section we have been suggesting that—like quilting more generally—the Quilt functions historically, practically, aesthetically, and politically by telling the stories of those lost to AIDS, providing comfort to those who have lost loved ones, allowing for the creative and artistic expression of panel makers, and challenging the silence and stigmas surrounding this epidemic. But such broad brush strokes, though important, miss how the Quilt “privileges the body [of the viewer/critic] as a site of knowing,” how the Quilt, in addition to being historical, practical, aesthetic, and political, functions as a (co)performance—one that is necessarily collective and individual. And if, as Edwin Black argues, “a subject deserves to supersede a method, and to receive its own forms of disclosure,” then the Quilt deserves to be engaged on its own terms. As a postmodern text(ile) that is simultaneously fragmented and unified, communal and individual, the Quilt invites a critical performance that is equally fragmented and unified, communal and individual. For this, we turn now to our three experiential panels. There will, no doubt, be some who insist that what follows is not criticism at all. If what is meant by criticism is objectivity, critical distance, and interpretive exhaustion, then we do not disagree, for we scrupulously avoid these dominant regimes of reading in favor of text(ile) immersion, embodied practice, and “an intensely sensuous way of knowing.” Through our panels, we seek—to the extent possible in print—to adopt a style that is homologous with the Quilt itself. In short, we engage the Quilt with a quilt of our own.

Panel One: Stitches of Remembrance and Healing

Eric Aoki

As an individual affected by the loss of a romantic partner to AIDS, I know that I have never given the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt...
its due attention. Although I have seen blocks of the Quilt on display and felt a sense of humility and emotionality in looking at it, I have never looked for too long or actually allowed myself to be fully vulnerable to the personal and sociocultural healing—the metaphorical stitching—for which the Quilt has become so venerated.

Over the past five to six years, my coauthors have been directly connected to my healing process. When I could not speak of the loss of my partner, Stephen, they often sat in silence with me. When I needed to speak of the loss, they listened. When I needed to work, they encouraged. And when I spiraled downward, they lifted me up. My work colleagues, along with the voices of many compassionate students, then, helped to sustain my existence in academia. Over the years, my personal life and work life have become intermingled, often in complex ways, but always in ways that fostered both healing and growth.

So, when I finally engaged the Quilt in a more active way, I found myself in a different mind-set. For the first time in my life, I was ready to learn about the history, hope, and powerful symbolism embedded and embroidered within it. While researching and writing about the Quilt, community friends would approach me at the local cafés I frequent in Old Town, Fort Collins, and ask why I had so many books and materials on quilting. As I shared with them my newfound insights on quilting and, more specifically, the Quilt, I often did so with a telling smile on my face. The smile was present because I had never before envisioned myself writing at a café with a mound of materials about quilts and quilting to both work and heal. Indeed, I found myself increasingly amused by how one’s personal life and academic life intersect, how the exigencies created by personal difficulties and scholarly duties can mutually inform and influence one another.

I will, in due course, address my late partner’s desire not to be a part of the Quilt, as well as the many issues and questions that have arisen because of his wishes. Let me begin, however, simply by noting that Stephen was well aware of my various roles and modes of expression as professor, writer, and artist; Stephen cared not what I did with our stories to educate as a writer, for throughout his own lifetime he educated and advocated as an out and proud gay male. As someone who had AIDS, however, it is fair to say that his path was more challenging. Some of my
life stories with him about communicating love and loss are spoken about in my Interpersonal Communication class, and some of his ashes are even embedded in a painting that he knew I would likely do as an artist. Much of our life together, as he knew would be the case, is shared in articles I have written over the years—of course, with selected discretion and privacy on matters and life moments distinctively kept just for us. This manner of expression is the one in which his memory and spirit are primarily carried on in my own work and voice, a space less communal/collective than the Quilt, yet a space more to his wishes. And, yet, in the midst of reading through academic writings on the Quilt, I experienced a sense of disconnection from a memorial that I know holds moving and powerful associations.

In the remainder of this panel, I share a series of autoethnographic reflections about how I have come to make peace with the Quilt—a quilt I know to be so vital to the voice of a community affected by AIDS and a society working to remember and heal. In the end, my voice is meant to celebrate the personal and cultural healing of everyday people who have engaged its material and responded.

More than anything else, I remember seeing all the names. At the time that I came in contact with the impressive and eclectic blocks of the Quilt on my own university campus in the early 2000s, seeing all the names was different than the first time I had seen blocks of the Quilt in San Francisco, in the mid- to late 1980s. On this second viewing, my life had changed. I was now someone who had lost a partner to the disease; I was now someone who understood differently the lives affected by the stitched construction of the Quilt; I was now someone affected by AIDS, perhaps not directly in the medical sense, but in the aftermath of its devastation left upon the lives of families, friends, and loved ones. Critic and life scholar bell hooks reminds us that “our collective fear of death is a dis-ease of the heart.” For many years and through many medical waves of better to worse health, I feared Stephen’s death. When his death came, so did devastation, followed by an overwhelming sense of anger, melancholia for a future with(out) him, and a strongly destabilizing disease that comes with the heartbreak of someone you love and have lost to AIDS. Only now, almost six years later, have I finally appeared to catch my breath. For many years I have been functional and even successful in
life and career while slowly yet increasingly working to find a new stride; the loss of Stephen, however, has always been on my mind and in my heart, every step of the way. These days, however, I catch myself smiling when elements of my life with him surface. I laugh at the thought of how funny he was and how unconventionally we lived. Yet even with all this betterment in the recovery from his loss, in an effort to respect his wishes, I have never constructed a panel in his memory.

As noted on the AIDSQuilt.org Web site, “The mission of The NAMES Project Foundation” is “to preserve, care for, and use the AIDS Memorial Quilt to foster healing, heighten awareness, and inspire action in the struggle against HIV and AIDS.” Additionally, the Web site reads, “The goals of The AIDS Memorial Quilt” are “to provide a creative means for remembrance and healing, to effectively illustrate the enormity of the AIDS pandemic, to increase awareness of HIV and AIDS throughout the general public, to assist others in providing education on the prevention of HIV infection, and to raise funds for community-based AIDS Service Organizations (ASO’s).” I find it disorienting to have connection to some of the elements in the mission and goals of the project yet know that my connection is not a direct one of participation in the construction of the Quilt.

Sometime after Stephen passed on, I took one of his rugby jerseys and handed the worn material over to a friend of mine. She knew how to sew well, and I asked her if she would mind sewing his jersey into a pillow for me. I wanted to keep the pillow as something embedded with the personal but also which held a sense of utility. I had given away most of Stephen’s clothes, but I had kept selected garments and ball caps to wear, or to simply have near me. For awhile, his clothes smelled like him. When his scent dissipated, I knew it would be time to transform his jersey into something new—a stylish pillow to decorate the sofa in my painting studio. But, by the time I was ready to request this transformation of my sewing-skilled friend, too many years had passed on, and I began to feel concerned about asking her if she still had Stephen’s jersey. Since the time that she and I had initially spoken about it, and having once spoken about me helping her with the stitching and the stuffing, she had only mentioned that she was ready to work once, but the topic had become one that had gone unaddressed by me for far too long. Today, although
I would like to see his old jersey (the one I most saw and remember him in), I do not want to ask about it, particularly in case my friend has lost the material after so many years. Only now, due to this essay, have I again begun to think about such elements as the *material preservation* of Stephen’s memory, his old rugby shirt, and a panel of a quilt that I will not contribute; his rugby shirt is what I would likely put on the Quilt panel if I could. The connection between quilts and loss are long established. As Janet Catherine Berlo writes,

> Looking at my quilt books some months ago, I was moved to tears by a quilt made in 1839 by Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell of Kentucky. It is a repeating Lemoyne Star pattern, but it has a central square that is a graveyard with a gate. . . . If my mate should die before me, I will make a mourning quilt. Like Elizabeth Mitchell’s quilt, mine will be elaborate and detailed, not one that can be completed in a week or month. . . . This will be my path out of sorrow.30

Having never made a panel in Stephen’s memory (or a homemade pillow either), yet aware of the reasons why one would likely contribute a panel, I have wondered if perhaps my own personal and sociocultural healing had been delayed. Some individuals told me it would be “a couple of years” before I felt present in my life again, but I have taken at least six years to realize that I cannot and do not want to carry the weight of his loss so closely to my heart anymore. Just recently, I breathed differently and let it go. Emotionally and physiologically, I feel different. I believe even in my walk I carry myself differently.

In addition to Stephen’s own wishes, I know that there is something overwhelmingly powerful in the symbolism and purpose of the Quilt that steered me away from participating in its construction and away from trying to access his *lost* jersey—the Quilt makes too clear his name, his life, and Stephen, even with all his progressiveness and advocacy, did not want to be remembered for dying of AIDS. I understand the conflict this raises with claims of an individual’s progressiveness while simultaneously opening up criticisms on the politics of shame. But, I know there is no logic sometimes with how one lived his life while living and how he wished to be remembered. With Stephen’s death, his own wishes have
been the strongest factor in directing me away from completing a panel in his memory. Again, the representational absence of his life within the fabric of the Quilt was his wish, not my need; over time, I have had a strong need to see his life and name as part of the Quilt. I believed that participating in the Quilt would be about healing. Again, for Stephen, the Quilt was different than being embedded into my art or my own academic scholarship. In the end, I have never made sense of his logic and wishes; I suppose I do not need to.

With regard to the never-made pillow, despite its utilitarian function (or perhaps even, *utilitarian masking*), Stephen’s rugby jersey reminds me of his body, a body that I held onto in my lifetime and a body that I no longer hold. Although his scent is gone from the fabric of the jersey, it seems easier on my heart to remember him for what he *did* in his lifetime and also for his *advocacy* and strength in *living* rather than for a piece of cloth that rested perhaps too closely to his physical form. Although I can re-create a connection to the good spirit of all he did, I can no longer be in his physical presence, and for me that is where the hardness resided for so many years. As I have thought about the Quilt and how important it became for me to want to participate in it, I am left wondering how the Quilt is fortunately yet complexly not only about *memory* and *remembrance* but also about the *wishes* of those lost, and the *healing* of those left behind.

As a supplement to respecting his memory, I volunteered my voice and skills by serving on the board of directors at the Northern Colorado AIDS Project (NCAP) in Fort Collins for two years. Serving on the board was more challenging than I ever imagined, but it also became a way to engage a different and much needed type of healing, both personally and socioculturally. Important to my love and remembrance of him, it happens to be the manner of social response that most mimics Stephen’s way.

Although I undoubtedly choose to respect Stephen’s wishes in how he would be remembered, visibly or not in name, materially or not in a most eloquent of quilts, I have wondered if a piece of my healing is lost to the collective stitch of the Quilt. It is clear to me that I will not have participated with so many others whose lives have been affected and whose lives are being remembered and preserved for the generations to come in the Quilt.\(^3\) The spirit and important teachings of the Quilt will
have a life beyond our own, a life beyond my ability to participate in community service and advocacy on behalf of Stephen’s memory. I continue to think about the fact that his life struggle with AIDS, his identity, his humanity, and his name will not be among those unified and stitched into the collective fabric for the future. So, in the meantime, I celebrate the beauty of community, remembrance, and healing that so many others have engaged in, in meaningful and eclectic ways.

Perhaps Stephen’s own remembrance in this world will be revealed through other mediums, perhaps with other important implications, perhaps less material in size, perhaps less visible, perhaps less symbolic in social magnitude, but perhaps just as essential to understanding all that we might come to know about how we remember and heal after losing a loved one to the tragedy of AIDS. This way is what I choose to believe and do, for today, in his memory.

*Panel Two: Movement, Materiality, and Memory*

*Greg Dickinson*

In the middle years of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, I was—like the Quilt—moving through. I was moving through graduate school, but I was also moving through the moral, social, and geographic landscapes memorialized in the Quilt. Shifting south from Berkeley and Oakland to Los Angeles and San Diego, my path and the path of the Quilt kept intersecting. Displays of the Quilt in my neighborhoods, participation in HIV/AIDS walks and rallies, and discussions of memory and memorialization punctuated my life as a scholar, community member, and individual. I come to this writing about the Quilt at another particular moment—years into a career of writing about space and place, materiality, and memory. I am struck by the profound (im)materiality of the Quilt and of the relations among the Quilt’s materiality, the memories the Quilt encodes, and the theories of memory the Quilt embodies.

It is worth remembering the earliest mnemonic systems of the rhetorical tradition. Young orators in Greece and Rome were advised to memorize an abandoned and striking temple filled with ruined statues
and empty rooms. Into this memorized space, orators could place materials to be remembered: the first part of a speech in the entrance of the temple, the conclusion in some backroom, so that by walking through the temple, the orator could also walk through the speech. But, tellingly, behind this architectural mnemonic lies the mythic story of the poet Simonides of Ceos.

Simonides was invited, one day, to present a poem in honor of a rich ruler. But the ruler refused to pay Simonides for services rendered. The gods, desiring to punish the ruler, called Simonides from the banquet hall and then ruined the hall, killing the celebrants inside. The bodies of the dead were so destroyed that their relatives could not identify them. Simonides, remembering where each attendee was sitting, identified each body, making possible a proper burial. Western mnemonics arises out of the ruins of a banquet hall and out of a need to remember the dead. Within this story, remembrance, materiality, and place are interconnected.

And so they are in the Quilt. Here too we see the deep need to memorialize the dead and to do so in ways that connect remembrance with materiality and place. And yet the Quilt offers very particular performances of the connections among remembrance, materiality, and place. The particularities of these relations can be read as generated out of the particular needs to which the Quilt and the Quilt’s quilting responds.

**Fluid**

So many other memorials are made of bricks and mortar, of hard, seemingly permanent materials. The concreteness of these memorials situate them in particular places—the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s materiality is deeply connected to the ground into which it is built. Understanding the material of these built memorials depends not only on taking the granite, stone, or wood of the memorial seriously, but also on attending to the memorial’s surrounding landscape.

The Quilt’s materiality and spatiality functions differently than we have come to expect from built memorials. Made of cloth and produced by many hands, the Quilt’s material marks it as distinctive from other built memorials. The Quilt’s softness, composed as it is from cloth,
opposes the hardness of built environments. More, the multiplicity of authors and the variety of designs within each quilt panel sharply contrasts with the professional designs and relative univocality of more traditional memorials. Though these differences are often noted, the understandings of these differences are read primarily as metaphors (the Quilt as comfort and warmth, for example). But, what of the material itself within the experience of the Quilt on the Mall or in Cheesman Park in downtown Denver, where I spent a few hours in September 2007 with the Quilt?

Rather than solidity or permanence, it seems as fruitful to think of the Quilt’s materiality and spatiality as a form of fluidity or nomadism. In a most literal sense, the Quilt is nomadic. It travels from site to site, available for display across the country and across the globe. Like the global economy (or a virus), the Quilt circulates, moves, shifts, changes. It is global and local. As such, the Quilt is a way of thinking about HIV and AIDS. It is also a powerful mode of thinking about the contradictions of family, health, communication, and communicable disease, faith and faithlessness. It is, in short, a material instantiation of late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century thinking. Rosi Braidotti writes: “Thinking is a nomadic activity, which takes place in the transitions between potentially contradictory positions. It is not topologically bound, especially in the age of the global economy and telematic networks, but this does not make it ungrounded, like a view from nowhere.” The Quilt, as a particular form of nomadic thinking, specifies the contradictions. It is not topologically bound; it is inserted into particular landscapes at particular moments—as the punctuation of an AIDS walk in Denver, for example. The Quilt—or pieces of the Quilt—could be anywhere and at any time. But this “anywhere” and “any time” ought not to be confused with “nowhere” and “no time.” Instead, there is a radical specificity to the Quilt, a radical materiality and spatiality.

This specificity relies absolutely on the material conditions of the Quilt. From the very smallest material detail—the broken vinyl record sewn onto cotton cloth, the leather jacket turned into the backdrop of one square—to the immensity of displaying even a small portion of the Quilt panels, the Quilt as experience is always here. And, of course, it is always somewhere/sometime else. The names and the dates, the pictures and detritus sewn into the Quilt trace lines (topoi) to people and
moments gone by. They trace a passing (and, sometimes, a passing in too many senses) of a life, of a moment; a passing of a virus, of a word, of communication, of a time. Thus, the Quilt is local and locatable; it offers a material rhetoric of locality: “here lies . . . ,” “here are the lies. . . .” or, “come and lie down”—the Quilt can beckon, like a picnic blanket in a park under the sun of a late summer’s afternoon.

But the materiality of the Quilt’s here and now does not rely only on the Quilt’s material. The Quilt demands and constitutes its own audiences and its own authors (and, indeed, the Quilt assiduously works against this authorizing distinction between audiences and authors). The here and now of the Quilt is also, and at the same time, the here and now of the Quilt’s visitors. The Quilt invites—no, it demands—the active participation of the viewer. This participation is fully and completely embodied. To see the Quilt is to walk through the Quilt, to stop, move, twist, kneel (as if in prayer, as if in mourning), stand, stroll, sob, cry, laugh, look up, look away, look over, gaze, glance, take in the whole, study the part: synecdoche and metonymy. To visit the Quilt is also, always, a social event. Visitors stand next to each other, look around each other, and look at each other. From across the vast distances of the globe, the Quilt becomes a nodal point of looking and walking, talking and silence.

To be in process or transition does not place the thinking subject outside history or time: postmodernity as a specific moment of our historicity is a major location that needs to be accounted for. A location is an embedded and embodied memory: it is a set of counter-memories, which are activated by the resisting thinker against the grain of the dominant representations of subjectivity. A location is a materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of the subject, and thus anything but an instance of relativism. The politics of location, or situated knowledges, rests on process ontology to posit the primacy of relations over substances.

Braidotti here shifts—willy-nilly, it seems—between time and space, here and now. “Historicity,” she writes, “is a major location that needs to be accounted for.” The Quilt is just this sort of (ac)counting. Visiting the
Quilt and thinking with the Quilt is a powerful reminder of embedded and embodied memory. As we left the Quilt, Eric and I talked of how the losses of our life are most powerfully felt in the loss of a body; the body’s smell, feel, warmth, presence. This is not only a loss of a body but an embodied loss. The absent body returns as a kind of muscle memory, a memory of the curving of one body into another. The loss of the other’s body is the loss of a fluidity of connection where skin seems less like a boundary and more like conduit. And so the loss commemorated and remembered is also radically local—localized in the body of the mourner.

Walking

“Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks,’” writes Michel de Certeau. “All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through propositions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taking and the walker.”36 This localizing (and, thus, performing and realizing) of the Quilt depends on walking, on, what Certeau calls the “pedestrian speech act.” “If it is true,” Certeau writes, “that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge.”37 The Quilt exists and emerges quite precisely in the walking through the panels. It is easy to think this existing and emerging metaphorically. The visitors quilt the panels together in their walking through the panels. The steps are the stitches, the memories the thread.

While productive, the metaphor of quilting the Quilt with steps may urge us to avoid the materiality of the act. Walking is not so much symbolic (like stitching); it is the thing itself. The Quilt’s meaning is made not so much in the past or for the future, but in the productivity and performativity of this moment. This performativity of walking in, among, through, by the Quilt creates “a discreteness” of the Quilt and of the Quilt experience. The experience, without a doubt, may be lodged in the memory and may inspire action, but in the first instance walking and the choices created by the walker is the Quilt’s meaning. Crucially, this
walking of the Quilt creates relations: “both a near and a far, a here and a there.” These relations are at once relations of connection and disconnection, of saying and silence, of performing and ignoring. This near and far, here and there, produces the Quilt and produces the walker. And so the Quilt and the walker become sutured. The Quilt depends on the walker for its enunciation (just as the structure of the language depends on the speaker for its utterance). The Quilt shifts and sorts the possibilities for the walker but does not determine the walker’s path. “These enunciatory operations are of unlimited diversity.”

But in moving through the Quilt together, in watching others mourn losses, the Quilt becomes located in the body public. One of the key characteristics of built memorials is that visitors share the memorial with others. Not only does each visitor construct the Quilt out of a walking rhetoric, but the visitors, together, construct the Quilt. This body politic is not a generalized public sphere but is a publicness that occurs in this particular place at this particular time and with these particular people. Further, the publicness of the Quilt does not have as its major rhetorical mode argument or reasoned discourse. Instead, it is a public and embodied sharing of the loss of bodies. In a most fundamental sense, then, the Quilt is co-constructed, made of the materials of the Quilt, the grass on which it lays, the people who wander through, the memories triggered and repressed. The public experience of the Quilt is performed through conversations among the participants, the panels, and the moment. The walking rhetoric of the Quilt, then, is individual and collective, private and public.

**Memory**

What does it mean, then, to walk in the Quilt, to walk in the memory/present of HIV/AIDS? And what does it mean to walk in the Quilt with and not with two of my closest friends and writing partners? In part, it means to share with Simonides the duty of remembering the dead, of remembering embodied and emplaced lives. If the mythic story of Siminodes the poet is told as a way to inaugurate an ancient mnemonic system useful for the shift from orality to literacy, perhaps the Quilt is a founding mnemonic of late modernity. In the late modern world, gods
no longer kill for retribution (reactionary preachers not withstanding). Instead, viruses circulating among bodies (politic) damage, destroy, and kill. In response to this biologized, depersonalized, globalized, mutating, microscopic danger, a new mnemonic is needed. This new mnemonic has no founding story; it is not located in a single banquet hall, nor locatable on a modernist map, nor woven into a compelling metanarrative. Instead, this new mnemonic is nodal, networked, nomadic, embodied, and performative. This new memory system is not so devoted to laying to rest the dead or our fears. Instead, this memory system is about walking on in the face of an increasingly inscrutable world. This mnemonic can give shape to the shapeless, location to the placeless, specificity to the abstract. The Quilt materializes and performs memories and theories of memory for and of our time.

Panel Three: Pleasures of the “Text”

Brian L. Ott

On Sunday, September 9, 2007, I made the short jaunt from Fort Collins, Colorado, to Denver to view the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. This was only my second time seeing the Quilt and my first in more than ten years. On both occasions, my experience was profoundly moving; indeed, it lies beyond words—exceeds the very limits of language. This failure of language was particularly troubling to me during the more recent visit, as I was there as a critic and scholar. But as I later reflected on my experience, my mind kept returning to Roland Barthes’s famous and oft-cited “Theory of the Text” from the Encyclopaedia Universalis. Barthes’s short, thirty-eight-year-old essay—which begins rather inauspiciously with the question “What is a text?”—remains one of the most noteworthy articulations of poststructuralist theory. As I read and reread the piece, I realized that while I was still unable to discursively capture (to utter) my experience, Barthes’s “Theory of the Text” supplied a critical discourse or metalanguage for speaking about my experience. My aim in this panel, then, is to employ that language to give an account of viewing, or as Barthes might say, “writing” (écriture), the Quilt.
before doing so, I would like to reflect briefly on what can be gained by such an undertaking.

As a cultural critic, I have over the years analyzed a wide assortment of “texts,” from films and television shows to rave culture and museums. In one way or another, my interest in each of these cultural artifacts has been animated by questions of identity and ideology, and more specifically by whom the “text” invites me and others to be. The assumption behind these questions is that texts (or textual structures)—while potentially polysemic—are unified, stable, and closed enough to make similar demands on readers or viewers. But the Quilt—as a text—is fascinating precisely because it challenges and undermines this assumption. More than any other public memorial, the Quilt is infinitely diffuse, variable, and open. Like Barthes’s “writerly” text, the Quilt “answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination.” The rhetorical force of the Quilt, I contend, lies not in its interpellation of subjects or construction of a preferred subject position, but in its deconstruction of subjectivity itself. One cannot uncover the meaning of the Quilt, for the Quilt abolishes the very possibility of a reading/interpreting subject. To experience the Quilt is, if only temporarily, to unravel—to come undone. Or seen from another angle, the Quilt is living theory, a material instantiation of Barthes’s “Theory of the Text.” To illustrate this claim, I approach the Quilt via Barthes’s five theoretical concepts for defining the Text.

Signifying Practices

For Barthes, the Text is a signifying practice because signification is generated not at the abstract level of system or structure (langue) as Ferdinand de Saussure proposed, but at the level of individual utterance or practice ( parole). By the late 1960s, Barthes had realized that there were no universal, discursive structures that could function as the ultimate grounds for a text or subject, and he renounced his structuralist past. The insight that accompanies this shift in thinking is that neither text nor subject is ever stable. In rejecting the notion of the Cartesian subject and the supposed unity of the cogito, Barthes had, in effect, sketched a postmodern, antiessentialist view of the self in which subjectivity is itself a discursive
performance. Drawing upon experience and available cultural resources, the self is always in a process of becoming and is thus fluid, constructed, and contingent. Consequently, one can never read the same book twice, for one can never return as the same reader. Similarly, one never returns to the Quilt unchanged. Though this is true of other texts and not just of the Quilt, the Quilt destabilizes our sense of self even as we experience it. The Quilt confronts subjects with such a plentitude of deeply personal, yet distinctive images, stories, and memories that responding in a singular, unified way is all but impossible. The multiplicitous voice(s) of the Quilt multiplies responses and splinters subjects, denying would-be visitors any coherent narrative of AIDS, its victims, or its consequences. One loses one’s sense of self in the presence of the Quilt.

**Productivity**

The Quilt, like the Text, is a productivity, for it is a *production*, not a product.\(^4^4\) It does not generate a meaning or even several meanings, for it is never finished; it proliferates meaning endlessly, not just by the constant addition of new panels, but by the never-ending performances it stages. The Quilt, as with the Text, is “the very theater of a production where producer and reader of the text meet.”\(^4^5\) It is a live performance of grief, love, celebration, and remembrance. And, like theater, each performance is unique—an irreducible and irreproducible interplay and exchange between performers, visitors, and venue. As the Quilt, or more accurately as a small selection of its diverse and ever-increasing number of panels, moves from town to town, city park to college gymnasium, a new performance is staged. During my most recent experience of the Quilt, some panels were displayed on a grassy hill overlooking a reflecting pool at Denver’s Cheesman Park, while other panels hung like tapestries in a classically Greek-styled pavilion. The day was sunny and warm, and bright colors and metal objects reflecting the sun were the first to capture my gaze. This was a very different performance than the one I had experienced during graduate school, in which the Quilt was displayed on the freshly waxed wood floor of the artificially lit gymnasium at Rec Hall on Penn State University’s main campus. The panels and the audience
had changed too. The steady stream of college students that had marked my experience more than ten years ago had been replaced by families, couples, and professionals. Part of the power of the Quilt is that one can never see the same Quilt twice. Each performance is fleeting, a singular and never-to-be-repeated experience.

**Significance**

Having been trained as a rhetorical critic, I sought to understand the meaning of the Quilt as I walked among its many panels in Cheesman Park. “But once the text is conceived as production (and no longer as product),” Barthes argued, “‘signification’ is no longer an adequate concept.” Indeed, the harder I searched for one or several fixed signifieds in the Quilt, the more they eluded me. In place of canonical signification, which suggests “that the text possesses a total and secret signified” that can be revealed through interpretative criticism, Barthes proposed the notion of ‘signifiance’ (not to be confused with significance) in which the text is read/written as a mobile play of signifiers. Though I had not set out to play with the Quilt, each question I posed to it returned three, eight, a dozen more. Soon, I was thinking not of the Quilt (at least not in any limited or limiting sense) but of flowers, relationships, mortality, and my own life. My thoughts continuously generated new connections and dis/associations, but never answers. At one point, I was so overcome by a sense of spinning that I stumbled and nearly fell on/into the Quilt. “‘Signifiance’ is a process,” observed Barthes, “in the course of which the ‘subject’ of the text, escaping the logic of the ego-cogito and engaging other logics (that of the signifier and that of contradiction) struggles with meaning and is deconstructed (‘is lost’).” As I tried to reorient myself, I caught a glimpse of my friend and colleague Greg. Still feeling light-headed, I made my way over to Greg and told him that I needed to sit down and rest for awhile. Slumped over on the concrete bench/retaining wall of the reflecting pool, I slowly began to regain my sense (of logic, balance, and wholeness). In stepping out of or departing from the Quilt, I reentered a world of boundaries, categories, and classifications.
Genotext

The notion of the *genotext* comes from one of Roland Barthes’s students, Julia Kristeva, who contrasts it with the *phenotext*. For Kristeva, the phenotext denotes “language that serves to communicate”; the genotext, alternatively, “is not linguistic” and entails presymbolic processes such as psychological “drives, their disposition, and their division of the body.”

Adopting the vocabulary of rhetorical scholars, the phenotext might be thought of as the symbolic inducements of a text and the genotext its material inducements. The Quilt, I argue, offers a particularly clear instance of how texts operate on a material, bodily, and affective level, as well as on a symbolic, linguistic, and rational level. The Quilt, for instance, literally engages the bodies of its visitors, who, on perhaps the most obvious level, move between and through its many panels. Movement involves time and space, pace and direction, and, consequently, is primary (not secondary) to the experience of the Quilt, for its many symbols are framed by the velocity and vector of its visitors. Vision is central too, not just as a mechanism for processing signs and symbols, but also as a tool that allows the body to pursue its own drives and desires. “The pleasure of the text,” commented Barthes, “is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”

Intertext

According to Barthes, “any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations.” Though I certainly concur with Barthes that any text is an intertext, I would note that the intertext is often not readily apparent. Many texts *appear to be* the original work of an autonomous author. The Quilt, however, explicitly exposes this authorial illusion, as it is comprised of nearly 6,000 blocks, each of which consists of eight “individual” memorial
panels, many of which were themselves collaboratively created. The more than 44,000 panels that are recognized as the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt so fragment and disperse the notion of the Author as to render it obsolete. One cannot interpret the Quilt, not simply because the interpreting subject is mutable, the object is fluid, the signifying process is boundless, and the body is primary, but also because “it reads without the inscription of the Father.”50 It is for this reason that the reader comes to occupy the space of the author—that he or she produces rather than consumes the Text, and that writing is opened up rather than closed down.51 The two occasions on which I have written (perhaps sewn is the better metaphor here) the Quilt lie beyond words, not because of a lack of language, but because of an overflowing of it. Barthes could just as easily have been describing the Quilt when he wrote, “the current theory of the text turns away from the text as veil and tries to perceive the fabric in its texture, in the interlacing of codes, formulae and signifiers, in the midst of which the subject places himself and is undone, like a spider that comes to dissolve itself into its own web.”52

**Reflections and Reverberations**

In this brief essay fragment, I have attempted to illustrate how the Quilt, like the Text, “is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.).”53 I do not mean to suggest that the Quilt is meaningless. On the contrary, the Quilt is so meaningful—so full of meanings—that my experience cannot be yours and vice versa. One’s experience of the Quilt is not, I maintain, the result of idiosyncratic impressions of its plentiful signs. It is, at least to the extent it is experienced as Text, a singular and momentary deconstruction of the self. As the Text “is bound to jouissance,”54 so the Quilt is necessarily an ecstatic experience in the manner that Judith Butler understood it: “To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and this can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief. . . . I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it is in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage.”55 The Quilt, then, is an intensely political memorial, not in the traditional sense of a carefully constructed rhetorical message.
designed to persuade its audience of a particular point of view, but in its affective ability to foster a moment, a flash of experience, outside the confines of ideology. The Quilt temporarily frees us from a world of prejudice, injustice, and inequality. And therein lies not its meaning, but its power.

**On “Quilting”/Reading the Quilt**

“What,” queries one of this chapter’s authors in another context, “is the role and function of the critic when confronted with postmodern textual-ity?” It is the same question that plagued us as we began to think, talk, and write about the Quilt as a postmodern text(ile). In the course of this essay, we have suggested that one possible answer—following the lead of critics such as Gregory Ulmer and Susan Sontag—is to practice an erotics of art in place of a hermeneutics of art. In temper and disposition, such an approach is immersive, embodied, and sensual rather than distant, rational, and objectivist. In style and execution, such an approach favors collage/montage rather than mimesis. Though such an approach is well suited for engaging the Quilt, we wonder along with Ulmer, “Will the collage/montage revolution in representation be admitted into the academic essay, into the discourse of knowledge, replacing the ‘realist’ criticism based on the notions of ‘truth’ as correspondence to or correct reproduction of a referent object of study?”

In closing, we make a case for why collage/montage, as well as other nontraditional critical forms and practices, ought to be admitted into academic discourse by reflecting on its productive and interventionist dimensions.

First, as a device for criticism, collage/montage is productive, for it “invent(s) social knowledge rather than discovering it.” Unlike more traditional critical modes, which attempt to accurately reflect or re-present the object of study, collage/montage utilizes Derrida’s principles of grafting and textual miming to create something more (and other). **Grafting** is the process of writing “on” not just “about” an object; it adds to the object, builds upon and is superimposed on it, combines, joins, and assembles with it. Just as visitors add their own voices to the Quilt, grafting adds the (voice/body of) the critic (as text) to the text. Grafting can be enacted
in a wide variety of ways. But when the technique is specifically one of collage/montage, what is grafted onto the text is a textual mime or a “compositional structuration of the referent, resulting in another text of the same ‘kind.’”\textsuperscript{60} In other words, the critical text (criticism) mimes (formally imitates) its object of study (the text).\textsuperscript{61} In the case of the AIDS Quilt, the practice of collage/montage necessarily grafts “a quilt” upon the Quilt. This secondary “critical quilt” produces knowledge of the Quilt through performance rather than explanation. With Eric, it produces knowledge of mourning and healing; with Greg, movement, materiality, and memory; and with Brian, pleasure and critical theory.

Second, collage/montage as critical practice is interventionist. Since this practice writes on, adds to the text, it therefore transforms the text (and the critic). The “procedure of montage” is governed, according to Walter Benjamin, by “the principle of interruption,” for it “disrupts the context in which it is inserted.”\textsuperscript{62} Elaborating on this perspective, Ulmer explains that “montage does not reproduce the real, but constructs an object . . . or rather, mounts a process . . . in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality.”\textsuperscript{63} To understand how our critical quilt intervenes in the world, it is useful to recall the chief functions of quilting—historical, practical, aesthetic, and political—discussed earlier in this essay, and to view our essay through them. In “quilting”/reading the Quilt, we have recorded our own stories and voices, and we have done so in a manner—namely, academic writing—that preserves something of our unique (professional) traditions. Moreover, as we wrote (that is, grafted our voices onto the Quilt), the Quilt aided each of us in confronting struggles of our own, be they highly personal ones like Eric’s struggle with loss or highly abstract ones, like Brian’s struggle with language. That is to say, “quilting”/reading the Quilt had (practical) consequences. It also allowed us to express ourselves creatively (and aesthetically) through writing—a writing whose very form functions (politically) to challenge the dominant mode of criticism.\textsuperscript{64} And if these interventions seem insignificant, we would simply remind readers that the Quilt activates and multiples them infinitely.
NOTES

4. Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 14.
12. Warren, Ecofeminist Philosophy, 68.
19. We are using “tactics” here in de Certeau’s sense of “a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision’” and “the art of the weak” (Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 37). On the transgressive and tactical potential of quilts, see Linda Pershing, “‘She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman’: Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue,” in Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 98–125.


26. Ibid. The distinction we are making here resonates with McKerrow’s distinction between “rhetorical criticism” and “critical rhetoric.” Our own practice is much closer to the latter, which “is a performance played out in and among the discursive practices it enjoins in critique” (Raymie E. McKerrow, “Space and Time in the Postmodern Polity,” Western Journal of Communication 63 [1999]: 274).


31. Seeing and experiencing the Quilt at the public park in Denver with my colleagues Brian and Greg was an emotional journey. I had spent that morning walking AIDS Walk Colorado in silence mostly and in high reflection on my life with Stephen, knowing that I would engage the Quilt at the walk’s end. Brian and Greg know that I have decided to keep this experience with the Quilt mostly to myself.

32. Of course, as Carole Blair points out, the seeming permanence of built memorials can, in fact, mark their impermanence. If the stone is destroyed or the building neglected, the memorial can eventually disappear. Carol Blair, “Contemporary U.S.


37. Ibid., 99.

38. Ibid., 100.

39. I, of course, viewed only a small portion (or fragment) of the Quilt. It has not been displayed “in full” since October 1996, when it was shown on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Given its size today, it is unlikely that the Quilt will ever be displayed again in its entirety.


44. Indeed, Barthes argued that “the Text is experienced only in an activity of production” (*Image*, 157).


46. Barthes, “Theory,” 37, 38. “The Text,” wrote Barthes, “practises the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier. . . . the infinity of
the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the un-nameable signified) but
to that of *playing*; the generation of the perpetual signifier*” (*Image*, 158).


every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be con-
fused with some origin of the text: to try to find the ‘sources,’ the ‘influences’ of a
work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text
are anonymous, untraceable” (*Image*, 160).


51. On this point, see Barthes, *Image*, 147.


54. Ibid., 164.


56. Brian L. Ott, “The Pleasures of *South Park* (An Experiment in Media Erotics),” in
*Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany: State Univer-


tor’s introduction.


62. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Au-


64. Given our (visually) playful use of language, this is an essay that must be seen and
not simply heard to be fully appreciated.