

Monumentality and Urban Myth: Labyrinth, Absence and Sacrality in Public Art

Site-Specific Interventions in the Creative City

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a series of artistic interventions that critically reconsider monumentality in contemporary public space. Through the analysis of five paradigmatic cases, including Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Rachel Whiteread's Nameless Library in Vienna, Gregor Schneider's domestic installations, Anselm Kiefer's monumental ruins and SPY's Golden Monoliths in Lille, it explores how these works destabilise official narratives of memory and generate experiences of interruption within urban space. The findings suggest that these interventions do not close debates on memory but instead open them, engaging inhabitants through bodily experience, affect and liminality. The article concludes that a truly democratic creative city is not defined by the quantity of artworks installed but by their capacity to interrupt, unsettle and re-signify everyday urban experience.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary public art has fundamentally transformed the relationship between inhabitants and urban space. Beyond the ornamental function characteristic of classical statuary and nineteenth-century monuments, artistic interventions in public settings have, in recent decades, assumed a critical, political and social role, engaging with debates surrounding memory, identity and collective experience. This shift situates art at the heart of urban processes and frames the city as a space of symbolic and performative contestation, where questions of memory, absence and monumentality are continually negotiated.

This article analyses how a selection of contemporary works, Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin (Eisenman, 2005), Rachel Whiteread's *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna (Whiteread, 2000), Jorge Oteiza's theoretical and sculptural production, particularly his reflections on the cromlech and the aesthetics of emptiness (Oteiza, 1963), Gregor Schneider's dystopian installations (Schneider, 2004), and the work of Anselm Kiefer (Kiefer, 2015), construct a repertoire of spatial strategies that engage the viewer not only aesthetically but also politically and urbanistically. These works share a number of recurring elements: the motif of the labyrinth, the thematisation of absence, forms of critical monumentality, the relationship between the inhabitant and the sacredness of space, and a rethinking of urban use articulated through what is here termed the poetics of interruption (Garrido Castellano and Raposo, 2023; Martínez García-Posada and Navarro de Pablos, 2025; Nora, 1993).

The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, inaugurated in Berlin in 2005, constitutes a paradigmatic example of this critical monumentality. Eisenman designed a field of 2,711 concrete stelae arranged in a grid that generates an ambiguous space suspended between mathematical regularity and the disorientating experience of the labyrinth. Far from offering a univocal narrative, the project opens a space of experience that oscillates between the monumental and the intimate, between collective memory and the individual experience of each visitor. As Martínez García-Posada and Navarro de Pablos (2025) observe, the cracks and fissures that have appeared in the stelae over time are not technical defects but material traces that intensify the work's processual and open character, underscoring the proposition that historical memory is never complete.

Rachel Whiteread, for her part, radicalises the notion of absence in the *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna (2000), also known as the *Nameless Library*. The British artist reverses the logic of the traditional monument: rather than exposing, she conceals; rather than celebrating, she indicts. Her concrete block reproduces in negative the interior of a library whose volumes remain inaccessible, symbolising the names and stories of the murdered Austrian Jews. This strategy resonates with Pierre Nora's theory of *lieux de mémoire* (1993), in which the materiality of the monument operates as a critical mediation in the face of memory's fragility.

Other artists extend this exploration of emptiness and the labyrinth from distinct perspectives. Jorge Oteiza, in his reflections on the cromlech and on the notion of the labyrinth, articulates the search for a 'new man' who, through emptiness, attains a transcendent dimension. Gregor Schneider, in his series *Haus u r o* and *Die Familie Schneider*, stages the uncanny through the duplication and enclosure of domestic spaces, activating in the viewer a sense of estrangement that connects with repressed memories and collective traumas. In a different register, Anselm Kiefer employs ruins and devastated urban landscapes as allegories of modernity and the trauma of the Holocaust, conceiving the city as the locus of fragmented and abyssal memory.

The relevance of examining these practices from the perspective of the creative city lies in the fact that public art not only shapes urban imaginaries but also redefines the inhabitant as an active subject in processes of memory and meaning-making. Garrido Castellano and Raposo (2023) demonstrate how public art in peripheral contexts, such as Quinta do Mocho in Lisbon, articulates forms of cultural agency and the resignification of urban space, challenging both territorial stigma and the neoliberal instrumentalisation of art. Such dynamics indicate that urban creativity cannot be disentangled from the politics of place, conflicts of memory and practices that disrupt the dominant spatial order.

The aim of this article is therefore to analyse a selection of contemporary works that, from different artistic positions, reconsider the relationship between inhabitants and urban space through absence, emptiness and critical monumentality. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that brings together urban theory, art semiotics and memory studies, the study seeks to understand how these interventions configure new forms of secular sacredness in public space, unsettling established dynamics of habitability and generating sites for collective reflection.

The article is structured in five sections. Following this introduction, the theoretical framework reviews key contributions on public art, memory and the city, with particular attention to the concepts of critical monumentality, the labyrinth and the poetics of interruption. The methodology outlines the criteria for case selection and analysis, focusing on paradigmatic works by Eisenman, Whiteread, Oteiza, Schneider and Kiefer. The results and discussion then identify the shared elements that emerge across these practices: labyrinth, absence, critical monumentality, the inhabitant space sacredness relationship, the poetics of interruption and the social and political function of space. Finally, the conclusions synthesise the principal findings, contributions to the fields of public art and urban theory, and implications for the creative city model, as well as proposing directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Public Art and Collective Memory

Public art constitutes a privileged field for the articulation of collective memory, situated at the intersection of aesthetics, politics and urban space. Since the mid twentieth century, monumental sculpture, site specific installations and commemorative dispositifs have reconfigured the social function of art. It is no longer concerned solely with decorating the city, but with activating processes of participation, identity formation and community agency (Garrido Castellano, 2022). In this context, memory is understood as a dynamic practice rather than a static archive, continually renewed through interaction with places, objects and narratives.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (1993) provides a useful framework for understanding how contemporary monuments and memorials crystallise collective memory while simultaneously generating contestation about the past. In this vein, works such as Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin (Eisenman, 2005) and Rachel Whiteread's *Nameless Library* in Vienna (Whiteread, 2000) displace commemoration from the heroic figure to spatialised forms of experience in which the visitor becomes a co constructor of meaning. Public art thus emerges as a site of interpellation, enabling memory to be experienced, questioned and debated within the urban fabric.

2.2. Critical Monumentality, Counter-Monument and Rhetoric of Impact

Critical monumentality stands in opposition to the heroic and affirmative monumentality of the nineteenth century, exemplified by the equestrian statue, the obelisk and the triumphal arch. Rather than consolidating an official narrative, it subverts the representational regime and adopts discomfort, ambiguity and silence as strategies for engaging historical knowledge. Such memorials may be understood as 'site monuments'. Instead of imposing heroic iconographies, they narrate and problematise traumatic events through spatiality itself.

Recent scholarship has also identified the emergence of a 'new monumentalism' in contemporary art, in which scale, immersion and affective intensity serve to legitimise works that seek to overwhelm the viewer (Schneemann, 2013). This rhetoric of impact, evident in immersive architectures and large-scale installations, corresponds to what Böhme (2017) terms aesthetic capitalism, whereby sensory experience, attention and visual appeal become strategic resources in the production of value. Although such a logic may result in spectacularisation, in its critical dimension it displaces representation towards embodied experience, allowing the visitor's body to function as a site of memory. Eisenman operates precisely at this threshold in *Memorial to the*

Murdered Jews of Europe (Eisenman, 2005), a stereotomic, regular and anonymous field that becomes an existential labyrinth. Here, material deterioration does not invalidate the work but rather intensifies its temporal dimension, suggesting an open temporality and unresolved mourning.

The 'counter monument', a canonical concept in Young (1992), designates the most radical trajectory of this critique: works that reject verticality and celebratory permanence, and that commemorate through subtraction, whether by emptiness, collapse, inversion or disappearance. Whiteread's intervention in Vienna encapsulates this logic: an inverted cloister, a sealed library, inaccessibility as an index of the unrepresentable (*Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial*, 2000).

2.3. The Labyrinth as an Aesthetic, Political and Existential Figure

The labyrinth is a persistent figure in Western culture, dramatising search, loss and the experience of the sacred. In contemporary art, it re-emerges as a spatial device that disorients and decelerates perception, compelling the body to deviate from linear movement. Politically, the labyrinth obstructs univocal interpretation, resists narrative closure and exposes the inhabitant to the persistence of a past that does not fully recede.

Oteiza conceived the labyrinth as an initiatory trial and the cromlech as an aesthetic and spiritual point of passage. His interpretation, marked by Jungian resonances, places emptiness at the centre of an aesthetic of transcendence (Oteiza, 1963). In Eisenman's work, the stable and repetitive grid becomes a field of disorientation and loss (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005). In Gregor Schneider, the labyrinth is domesticated and turned inward: rooms within rooms in *Haus u r*, duplications, dead end passages and blind doors that transform the familiar into the uncanny, opening repressed memory from within lived experience (Freud, 1919; Schneider, 2004). In Anselm Kiefer, the labyrinth assumes a temporal and material dimension. Ruins, sediments, lead and ash trace pathways through the debris of modernity, as though history might be traversed among its remains (Kiefer, 2015).

2.4. Absence and the Poetics of Emptiness

Absence and emptiness constitute central categories for thinking about memory and form in recent public art. Whiteread works with the negative, the emptied interiors of the domestic and the bibliographic, in order to materialise what is no longer present. Her library in Vienna is a volume whose meaning resides in what it withholds: reading, the name, access. The sculpture renders non saying material, transforming negation into form (Whiteread, 2000). In Kiefer, ruin is not a romantic allegory but an epistemology, a mode of knowing the past through fragments, as Benjamin suggests in his conception of history as ruin (Benjamin, 2005; Kiefer, 2015). Schneider, for his part, converts absence into latent claustrophobia: boarded up doors, basements that lead nowhere, repetitions of the same space. His monumentality is subterranean and affective, without ostentation (Schneider, 2004).

Within this trajectory, absence does not equate to silence. It operates as a technique that interrupts the habitual circulation of signs and generates spheres of attention and care within public space. Many of these works therefore function as thresholds, liminal spaces in which the city suspends its rhythm and experience acquires a sacralising dimension without becoming religious: a secular ritual of mourning and reflection.

2.5. Poetics of Interruption, Creative City and New Urban Monumentalism

We designate as the poetics of interruption the set of strategies through which certain works disrupt normalised patterns of habitability in order to open a temporal space for attention, dissent and critical reflection. In Eisenman, this takes the form of labyrinthine disorientation (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005); in Whiteread, the foreclosure of meaning (*Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial*, 2000); in Schneider, uncanny duplication (*Haus u r* and related

installations, 2004); in Kiefer, ruin as method (Kiefer, 2015); and, in SPY, the totemic irruption of non-narrative monumental objects into everyday landscapes, as in *Golden Monoliths* (SPY, 2021). These large-scale golden columns resacralise the banal, fracture the functional decor of the neighbourhood and compel a renewed act of looking.

This mode of interruption enters into dialogue with the contemporary shift towards partial and fragmentary monumental forms (Krzyżanowska, 2016; Young, 1992), as well as with the tensions inherent in the notion of the creative city. Public art may empower communities and re-signify urban space, yet it also risks instrumentalisation within place branding agendas and so-called revitalisation strategies that aestheticise conflict (Lehtinen, 2019; Pavoni, 2019). A genuinely critical urban monumentality does not embellish neoliberal processes of urbanisation. Rather, it renders them visible and subjects them to scrutiny.

3. Methodology and Case Studies

3.1. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative methodology oriented towards the critical analysis of five paradigmatic works of contemporary public art. The selection of cases is grounded in three principal criteria. First, their relevance to debates on memory and critical monumentality, as the selected works have received sustained attention in academic literature for their capacity to transform established commemorative logics (Young, 1992; Krzyżanowska, 2016; Schneemann, 2013). Second, the diversity of aesthetic strategies they mobilise, with each work activating a distinct repertoire, whether the labyrinth in Eisenman, the void in Whiteread, ruin in Kiefer, the uncanny in Schneider, or symbolic irruption in SPY, thus enabling both points of comparison and lines of differentiation. Third, their urban and social implications, since all are situated in, or conceived in relation to, public space, whether in historic capitals such as Berlin and Vienna, in urban peripheries such as Lille, within expanded museum environments in the case of Kiefer, or through domestic architecture transposed into exhibition space in Schneider's practice.

The analysis draws upon approaches from urban anthropology, critical art theory and visual semiotics. From these perspectives, a set of shared interpretative categories was identified: spatial dislocation, symbolic ambiguity, collective memory, and embodied and affective experience. The comparative framework does not seek to homogenise the works; rather, it explores the resonances that emerge among them within a common conceptual field defined by critical monumentality and the poetics of interruption in the contemporary city.

3.2. Case studies

3.2.1. Peter Eisenman: *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin, 2005)

Located between the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, Eisenman's memorial constitutes one of the most influential examples of the counter monument. The work comprises a field of 2,711 concrete stelae arranged in a grid across gently undulating terrain. There are no inscriptions or figurative symbols. Meaning emerges through the embodied experience of walking among blocks that vary in height to more than four metres (Eisenman, 2005).

The design generates a sense of labyrinthine disorientation while preserving the regularity of the geometric pattern. Visitors move between the apparent order of the grid and moments of perceptual uncertainty. This oscillation reflects the tension between bureaucratic rationality and human trauma associated with the Holocaust. The experience deepens over time. The cracks and fissures that have appeared in the concrete, far from diminishing the memorial's force, intensify its symbolic resonance, underscoring the proposition that memory remains unfinished (Martínez García-Posada and Navarro de Pablos, 2025).

From the perspective of monumentality, Eisenman overturns heroic rhetoric. There is no exaltation of individual figures, but rather immersion within a structured void. Sacredness arises not from an explicit narrative but from the radical interruption the work introduces into the urban centre of Berlin, an island of silence within a space otherwise defined by political activity and tourism.

3.2.2. Rachel Whiteread: *Nameless Library* (Vienna, 2000)

Situated in Judenplatz, Whiteread's work takes the form of a concrete volume that reproduces the interior of a library in negative: shelves filled with books whose pages face outward while their spines remain concealed. The structure is hermetic. There are no doors or windows permitting access to its interior (Whiteread, 2000).

The aesthetic strategy centres on absence. The books, symbols of knowledge and memory, appear sealed and inaccessible, evoking the names of the 65,000 Austrian Jews murdered in the Shoah. The work confronts the viewer with that which cannot be read or restored.

In urban terms, the *Nameless Library* establishes a liminal space at the heart of Vienna. It enters into dialogue with the statue of Lessing and with the plaque commemorating the medieval pogroms, layering distinct temporalities of memory within the same site. Critical monumentality is articulated here as a form of solid silence, a mass that interrupts the square and compels the passer-by to pause.

3.2.3. Gregor Schneider: *Haus u r* (1985–present)

Schneider's installations radicalise the notions of the labyrinth and the uncanny. In *Haus u r*, the artist reconstructs his childhood home in Rheydt, duplicating rooms, sealing corridors and creating dead end spaces. Partially transposed into museums and exhibition contexts, this domestic architecture generates a sense of claustrophobia and disorientation in the visitor (Schneider, 2004).

The monumental dimension resides not in scale or permanence but in emotional intensity. Schneider transforms the home, conventionally understood as a space of security, into a site of unease and latent trauma, activating what Freud (1919) defined as the *unheimlich*, the familiar rendered strange.

Within the broader field of public art, these works complicate the notion of habitability. The everyday is disclosed as a potential space of confinement, calling into question the boundaries between protection and oppression. The interruption at stake here is internal and psychological, yet it carries pronounced social resonances, reminding us that traumatic memory also inhabits the domestic sphere.

3.2.4. Anselm Kiefer: *The Monumentality of Ruin*

Kiefer works with material ruins, including lead, earth, ash and rusted steel, in order to evoke the impossibility of closing the door on Germany's past after the Second World War. His installations and architectural environments recall devastated libraries, ruined temples and landscapes of rubble.

Monumentality here assumes the form of collapse. The sublime is reconfigured as an experience of devastation. As Salvatori (2015) observes, Kiefer's work articulates an aesthetic of ruin that does not idealise but confronts. The viewer encounters fragments of a fractured world that resonate as metaphors for historical trauma (Kiefer, 2015).

The connection with the poetics of interruption is clear. Kiefer introduces the materiality of rubble into the present, disrupting narratives of progress and compelling reflection on the fragility of cultural construction. His work operates as a temporal labyrinth, a passage through ruins that activates a critical and open form of memory.

3.2.5. SPY, *Golden Monoliths* (Lille, 2021)

The Spanish artist SPY has developed a practice of urban intervention that combines irony, symbolism and ephemeral monumentality. In *Golden Monoliths*, he installed a series of golden columns between social housing blocks in Lille (SPY, 2021).

The work intrudes upon an everyday landscape through a gesture of monumentality that appears simultaneously archaic and futuristic. Gold connotes wealth and sacredness; placed within a peripheral urban environment, however, it generates a critical tension. The intervention invites reflection on what it means to erect monumental totems in spaces marked by urban precarity.

These monoliths function as speculative thresholds. They do not narrate a specific story, but open the possibility of imagining latent urban myths. As Pavoni (2019) argues, such interventions do not simply illustrate the city; they interrogate it, destabilising its apparent normality and proposing alternative modes of reading.

In relation to the poetics of interruption, SPY articulates a form of monumentality without narrative that fractures the visual homogeneity of the neighbourhood, prompting residents to re encounter their surroundings and to experience everyday life as a field of symbolic resonance.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of the works analysed

Artist / Work	Location and date	Main aesthetic strategy	Visitor experience	Relationship with critical monumentality	Associated theoretical category
Peter Eisenman, <i>Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe</i>	Berlin, 2005	Field of grid-like stelae, repetitive geometry	Physical disorientation, labyrinthine transit	Replacement of representation by experience	Labyrinth / Poetics of interruption
Rachel Whiteread, <i>Nameless Library</i>	Vienna, 2000	Inverted, hermetic library	Confrontation with the inaccessible, silence	Monument that evokes the absent rather than showing it	Absence / Emptiness
Gregor Schneider, <i>Haus u r</i>	Rheydt, since 1985	Duplication of domestic spaces, enclosure	Estrangement, claustrophobia, the <i>uncanny</i>	Interior and psychological monumentality	Domestic labyrinth / Sinister
Anselm Kiefer, ruin installations	Various locations, 1980–present	Ruins, degraded materials (lead, ash, iron)	A journey through ruins, an abysmal experience	Fragile monumentality, criticism of progress	Ruins / Fragmentary memory
SPY, <i>Golden Monoliths</i>	Lille, 2021	Golden monoliths on the urban periphery	Visual intrusion, contrast with everyday life	Ephemeral, speculative monumentality	Interruption / Urban myth criticism

Source: Authors own elaboration based on the analyses of Eisenman (2005), Whiteread (2000), Schneider (2004), Kiefer (2015) and SPY (2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. *The Labyrinth as an Aesthetic and Existential Figure*

A comparative analysis of the works examined confirms the centrality of the labyrinth as a structuring figure in contemporary public art concerned with memory. This motif, with its mythological and philosophical resonances, acquires particular significance in Eisenman,

Schneider and Kiefer, where it exceeds the formal to become a device for experience and knowledge. In *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, visitors enter a grid-based field that initially suggests rational order. Yet the progressive increase in the height of the stelae produces a gradual loss of orientation, transforming the site into an existential labyrinth (Eisenman, 2005; Martínez García Posada and Navarro de Pablos, 2025). In Gregor Schneider's practice, the labyrinthine dimension unfolds within domestic space. *Haus u r* multiplies rooms and corridors to produce a claustrophobic fabric with no clear exits or stable directions. The result is a psychological labyrinth that renders the familiar uncanny, recalling Freud's formulation of the *unheimlich* (Schneider, 2004; Freud, 1919). Anselm Kiefer, by contrast, constructs a temporal labyrinth through ruined architectures, lead lined corridors and destroyed libraries. The viewer moves through passages amid rubble that evoke both the devastation of war and the impossibility of bringing historical memory to closure (Kiefer, 2015). Taken together, the labyrinth operates as a defining figure of contemporary critical monumentality. It designates a space that resists linear progression, compels pause or deviation, and situates the visitor within a liminal condition in which memory is apprehended as embodied experience.

4.2. Absence and the Poetics of Emptiness

A further central finding concerns the significance of absence as both an aesthetic and a political category. Rachel Whiteread articulates this with particular clarity in *Nameless Library*, a hermetic volume that materialises what is missing, what cannot be read or restored (Whiteread, 2000). In Schneider's work, absence manifests through enclosed spaces: locked rooms, boarded up doors and doubled thresholds that lead nowhere. The impossibility of progression becomes a metaphor for traumatic memory that persists without resolution (Schneider, 2004). Kiefer engages absence through degraded materials such as ash, lead and straw, which signal what has been destroyed. His devastated landscapes do not depict specific events; rather, they evoke the limits of representation itself (Kiefer, 2015). In Eisenman, absence is experienced as radical anonymity. No name or inscription interrupts the field of stelae. Monumentality is sustained through semantic emptiness that must be activated by the visitor's embodied experience (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005).

4.3. Critical Monumentality and Counter-Monument

The five works analysed converge in their questioning of traditional monumentality and in their alignment with what the literature defines as critical monumentality or the counter monument (Krzyżanowska, 2016; Young, 1992). Eisenman departs from the convention of the centralised and figurative monument. His memorial does not represent; rather, it activates an embodied experience in space (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005). Whiteread inverts the paradigm through a sealed library that is more memorable for what it withholds than for what it reveals (*Nameless Library*, 2000). Schneider extends the concept to its limits: a monument without exteriority, invisible from without and existing only through the unsettling experience of its interior (Freud, 1919; *Haus u r*, 2004). Kiefer, by contrast, approaches monumentality through ruin and collapse, constructing a fragile form of monumentality composed of remnants that stands in tension with the stable and enduring monumentality of tradition (Kiefer, 2015; Vila Vázquez, 2008). Finally, SPY appropriates monumentality as an ephemeral and critical gesture. His *Golden Monoliths* emerge within the urban periphery with a visual intensity that evokes both the archaic and the futuristic, yet without instituting an official narrative (SPY, 2021).

4.4. Inhabitant-Space-Sacredness

A transversal dimension across the cases analysed concerns the relationship between inhabitant, space and forms of secular sacredness. At the Berlin memorial, the movement between the stelae generates a ritualised experience of entry and exit, evoking the structure of a procession or pilgrimage, while the relative silence of the site, in contrast with the surrounding urban environment, produces an atmosphere of contemplation that approaches the condition of the sacred (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005). Whiteread's *Nameless Library* operates as a space of collective mourning, in which the impossibility of accessing the books engenders a sense of reverence and restraint that momentarily suspends the everyday character of the Viennese square (Whiteread, 2000). Kiefer activates a different modality of sacredness, one associated with ruin and myth, as his installations recall destroyed temples and devastated libraries, becoming spaces for reflection upon the fragility of culture and the persistence of historical memory (Kiefer, 2015). In Schneider, sacredness is inverted: the domestic interior, traditionally associated with security and familiarity, becomes a site of disquiet that confronts the visitor with what has been repressed (*Haus u r*, 2004). SPY introduces a form of secular sacredness into everyday urban life through monumental interventions within peripheral landscapes, in which the *Golden Monoliths* do not commemorate a specific past but transform the neighbourhood into a field of symbolic intensity and speculative resonance (SPY, 2021).

4.5. Poetics of Interruption and Urban Use

The interventions examined converge in producing what has been defined here as a poetics of interruption. Each disrupts the continuity of urban or domestic experience in order to open a reflective interval within everyday life. In Berlin, the geometric regularity of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* interrupts the political centre of the city, transforming a space of transit into a site of mourning and contemplative disorientation (Eisenman, 2005). In Vienna, *Nameless Library* disrupts the functional logic of the square through the insertion of a sealed architectural volume that compels pause and reflection (Whiteread, 2000). Schneider interrupts the normative stability of domestic space by introducing unease and spatial ambiguity within the home, thereby unsettling the boundaries between familiarity and estrangement (Freud, 1919; *Haus u r*, 2004). Kiefer disrupts narratives of historical progress by foregrounding the persistence of ruin and material degradation, insisting upon the unfinished condition of memory (Kiefer, 2015). SPY, finally, destabilises the visual and symbolic normality of peripheral urban environments through the unexpected presence of golden columns that reorient perception and provoke critical attention (*Golden Monoliths*, 2021; Pavoni, 2019).

4.6. Social and Political Function

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that the social and political significance of these works resides in their capacity to activate disquieting memories, challenge civic subjectivities and resist dominant historical narratives. Eisenman and Whiteread evoke the Shoah without recourse to heroic symbolism, thereby avoiding the authoritarian monumentalisation of memory (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005; *Nameless Library*, 2000). Schneider exposes latent violence within the structures of everyday life, revealing how the familiar may assume oppressive dimensions (*Haus u r*, 2004). Kiefer confronts the public with the material remnants of history, resisting any premature gesture of reconciliation and insisting upon the unresolved condition of the past (Kiefer, 2015). SPY, in turn, destabilises the apparent homogeneity of peripheral urban space, articulating critical questions concerning prevailing urban discourses (*Golden Monoliths*, 2021).

In this respect, all the works examined fulfil a pedagogical as well as a political function. They do not seek consensus; rather, they cultivate interrogation. As Krzyżanowska (2016) observes, counter monuments do not provide certainties but instead reintroduce discomfort into public

space. Such discomfort constitutes the social value of these practices: a reminder that memory and the city remain inherently conflictual, unfinished and perpetually open to contestation.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Main Findings

The review of the cases of Eisenman, Whiteread, Schneider, Kiefer and SPY confirms that contemporary public art has undergone a decisive shift from celebratory monumentality towards critical monumentality, characterised by interpretative openness, embodied experience and the activation of disquieting memories (Eisenman, 2005; Kiefer, 2015; Schneider, 2004; SPY, 2021 ; Whiteread, 2000).

The labyrinth has emerged as a transversal structuring figure. In Berlin, it appears as a geometric grid that gradually dissolves into spatial disorientation; in Schneider, as an oppressive duplication of domestic space; in Kiefer, as a passage through temporal ruin. In each instance, the labyrinth disrupts linear progression and situates the inhabitant within a liminal condition in which memory becomes a form of spatial transit (Martínez García Posada and Navarro de Pablos, 2025).

Absence and emptiness have likewise been identified as fundamental aesthetic and political resources. Whiteread transforms inaccessibility into a metaphor for the Shoah; Eisenman embraces radical anonymity; Schneider foregrounds the closure of familiar spaces; Kiefer mobilises ruin as an allegory of the unrepresentable.

The concept of the counter monument has enabled the identification of a shared paradigm. All the works reject heroic representation and instead construct critical, experiential encounters that resist authoritative narratives (Krzyżanowska, 2016; Young, 1992).

Equally significant is the dimension of secular sacredness. Although not religious in character, these spaces generate atmospheres of contemplation, mourning or disturbance that suspend the everyday rhythms of urban life.

Finally, the notion of a poetics of interruption is consolidated as the principal analytical framework of this study. It designates a constellation of strategies that halt, divert or fracture the continuity of urban and domestic space, compelling inhabitants to look, remember and experience their surroundings differently.

5.2. Contributions to the Field of Public Art and Urban Theory

From the perspective of public art, the works analysed show a paradigm shift. The monument is no longer a figure of authority that dictates a univocal narrative, but an open device that problematises the past and its inscription in the present. In this sense, the interventions of Eisenman and Whiteread have become canonical references for critical commemoration (*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005; *Nameless Library*, 2000), while Schneider and Kiefer expand the possibilities of monumentality towards domestic unease or historical ruin (Kiefer, 2015; *Haus u r*, 2004). SPY, for his part, introduces ephemeral monumentality into the peripheral landscape through *Golden Monoliths*, reminding us that the debate is not limited to historic centres, but cuts across the entire urban fabric (SPY, 2021).

5.3. Implications for the Creative City

The discourse of the creative city has been adopted globally as an urban development strategy. However, as critical authors warn, this model risks instrumentalising art as a mere tool of territorial marketing (Garrido Castellano & Raposo, 2023; Pavoni, 2019). The works analysed here offer a counterpoint to such instrumentalisation. Rather than embellishing or decorating, they introduce conflict, silence or discomfort. Rather than presenting a complacent narrative, they raise open questions. This resistance is crucial, as it demonstrates that urban creativity does

not consist in producing consensus, but in opening spaces of friction in which memory can be debated. In this sense, critical monumentality may be understood as an ethical corrective to the creative city paradigm.

5.4. Future Lines of Research

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, it would be relevant to extend the analysis to non-European contexts, exploring how critical monumentality manifests itself in cities in Latin America, Asia or Africa, where traumatic memories respond to distinct colonial and postcolonial genealogies. Second, it is necessary to examine more closely the social reception of these works. Although academic theory has emphasised their critical value, public debate may be more ambivalent, as some residents perceive these interventions as intrusive or incomprehensible. Third, the relationship between critical monumentality and new technologies could be further explored. Digital art projects, augmented reality and immersive installations may expand strategies of interruption and emptiness, generating new forms of counter monumentality adapted to digital culture (Schneemann, 2013). Finally, it would be useful to analyse the relationship between these practices and memory policies within a comparative framework. To what extent do states promote, permit or tolerate these critical forms of commemoration? What tensions do they generate in relation to official discourses on identity and heritage? (Krzyżanowska, 2016; Pavoni, 2019; Young, 1992).

5.5. Final Synthesis

The works of Eisenman, Whiteread, Schneider, Kiefer and SPY constitute a significant corpus for understanding the contemporary transformation of the monument (Eisenman, 2005; Kiefer, 2015; SPY, 2021; Schneider, 2004; Whiteread, 2000). All coincide in rejecting heroic monumentality and opting instead for critical experience, the poetics of interruption and the activation of uncomfortable memories.

Overall, this article has demonstrated that critical monumentality is not an isolated tendency, but a consolidated paradigm within contemporary public art. Its function is not to close debates, but to open them; not to reassure society, but to unsettle it; not to beautify the city, but to recall what the city prefers to forget.

The conclusion is clear: a genuinely creative city is not measured by the number of works displayed in its squares, but by the capacity of those works to interrupt, disturb and transform urban experience. It is within this interruption that the deepest value of public art resides: in making the city a space in which memory, critique and imagination coexist in productive tension.

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