

Architecture

Monumental Questions

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A LARGE question is being asked in a small gallery this week. At the cozy Museum of Contemporary Crafts, 29 West 53 Street, is a tiny, tidy selection of models, photographs and sculpture called "Monuments, Tombstones and Trophies," scheduled to run through May 14. Set neatly among primly potted chrysanthemums, it deals with a huge, unsettling theme: the validity of memorial construction for our time.

It does not, ostensibly, start out to do this. The overt purpose of the exhibition is to explore the broad potential of 20th-century commemorative art, from conventional memorialization to social protest. It is meant to demonstrate new forms, materials and meanings for an old, almost timeless use of art and architecture. But the question of why it seems to be so difficult today to produce a convincing or moving monument pertinent to our times seethes quietly beneath the surface of the show.

The examples, by artists,

architects and engineers, range widely. There are photographs of Eero Saarinen's famous parabolic arch in St. Louis with the improbable Pop name of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. There are the even more improbable Pop baked potatoes and giant ice cream sticks proposed for public streets and squares by Claes Oldenbergh, who also contributes the idea of a huge, monolithic cube as a memorial plug for the intersection of Broadway and Chambers Street. The monumental traffic backup would be as impressive as the monument itself, and one assumes that it is an implied part of the design. The subject is literally run into the ground in Michael Steiner's buried drainpipe, into which the viewer would peer for his symbolic kicks.

The show has moon monuments, portable monuments, temporary monuments and disposable monuments—a deliberate contradiction in terms. It includes memorials

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and tombstones that do their level Pop best to put down society and its more tiresome conventions, an effort yielding diminishing returns as the once-shocking vocabulary of esthetic protest takes on an almost old-shoe acceptability. The trophies run the full, familiar gamut of esthetic black humor from the satiric visual non sequitur to generously applied genitalia. Most are one-line, one-time sight gags.

But all serve to focus on that nagging, unasked and unanswered question — the legitimacy or viability of monuments in today's culture and society. It is a sticky question, as almost a decade of unsuccessful effort on the part of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission clearly demonstrates.

Red Herrings

In that case, the basic issue was never faced. Matters of size and style, traditional representation versus abstract forms, were all superficial considerations. They were esthetic red herrings obscuring the pertinent problem of whether a traditional memorial stressing traditional values can be produced convincingly and responded to sincerely by our age. Even the best intentions of the best artists and architects seem consistently to fall flat, or at most to achieve a bland or lukewarm artistic or associative success. The memorial vacuum is filled only with the

most redundant and weary clichés.

Actually, either of the two proposed designs, with some adjustment, was esthetically acceptable as a "modern" version of a conventional solution based on a conventional premise. Probably neither was acceptable examined in relation to today's real standards and beliefs.

The fact is that the emotional, intellectual and spiritual climate of the 20th century has changed so much in response to a radically changing world that the familiar memorial is an anachronism. Mere structural mass does not impress when a miraculous technology has made superhuman scale the everyday norm. Simple nobility verging on pomposity or sentimentality reflects nothing of the strange and shifting values of these peculiarly transient revolutionary, violent and questioning times. This is an age of moral uncertainty, of strange twists of behavior and judgment, of hope, cynicism and despair, of horrible destructive potential and new cosmic frontiers. The old yardsticks for men or monuments simply do not apply.

When art does not reflect or contain the thought and standards of its own age, when it is not infused with the meaning or values of its time, it has no meaning or value at all. That is the dilemma of the conventional memorial built today. It

offers false reassurance that the old values still exist to the unsophisticated, but the more aware are unmoved and unconvinced and even a little ashamed of its sham-heroics. It seems spurious and oversimplified; at best, hollow; at worst, a mockery.

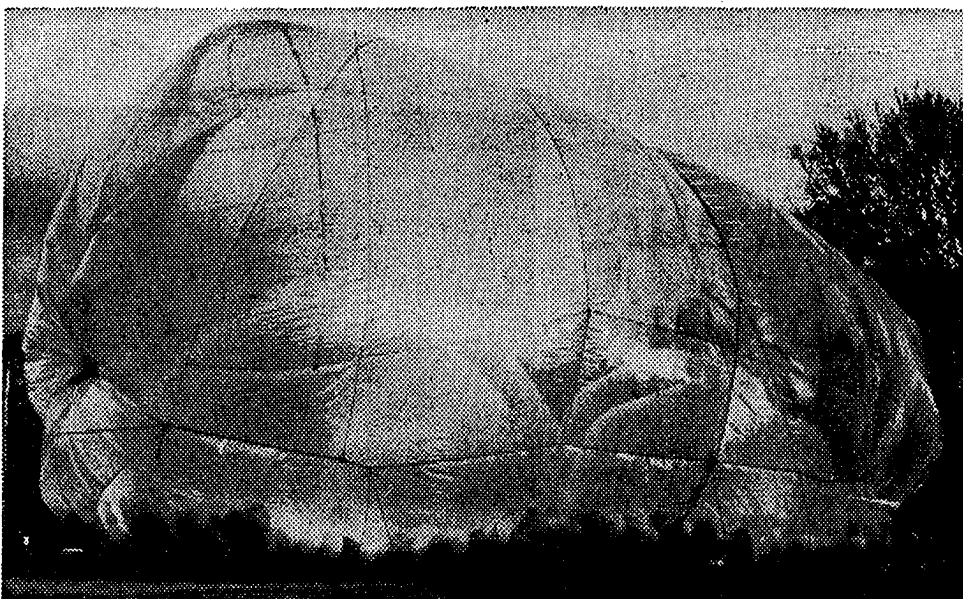
It is not surprising that the only modern monuments of any measurable impact are those dedicated to a particularly grim form of modern death. They are the memorials to 20th-century group massacre that eschew most traditional figurative symbolism, such as the hovering slab of the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome.

Anti-Heroes

This does not mean that there are no longer men or ideas worth honoring. There are heroes, even when the anti-hero is acknowledged and in vogue. There is beauty, even when the tastemakers look on it suspiciously as a deceptive instrument of sensuous depravity. But there are no longer the cultural absolutes, the emotional innocence, the intellectual faith and naiveté that legitimizes the kind of monument that correctly expressed that faith and naiveté in an earlier time. Thoughtful men are no less concerned with society; it is just that their faith and feelings are infinitely more vulnerable and complex.

The great memorial era really ended with the Victorian Age. Sentiment and the search for sublimity, intensification of feeling, were all 19th-century goals. It was the style to take one's Sunday stroll in a well-landscaped cemetery, with suitably dramatized intimations of mortality. And of immortality, as well. Emotions were large, elementary and exaggerated. Standards were literary and moralistic, and so was the full spectrum of the arts. Nobility rode high and noble heroes charged unrelentingly across public spaces.

Today, the 19th-century hero charges through a traffic jam or guards a slum. Esthetic puffery has little place in a time of tough questions and answers and terrible uncertainties. Man was never more mortal or his world more insecure. The exhibition offers no better comment on today's human condition than Carl Andre's pile of sand, meant to sink invisibly into the surface of the grave.



Empaquetage by Christo, a weather balloon used as a temporary monument
Sight gag or symbol?