

# Blake Fitzpatrick and Vid Ingelevics | The Labour of Commemoration

## A Monument in Motion: Walls, Borders and The Labour of Commemoration

by Jayne Wilkinson

We live in an age of global wall-building. Walls, fences and barriers of all types are being built along and within national borders, preventing the movement of citizens and denying citizens' rights while allowing the free flow of goods and services to the benefit of a wealthy minority. In the post-9/11 world, perceived threats to national security (through terrorism) and to jobs and labour markets (through immigration) have come to define a culture of anxiety predicated on the irrational fear of outsiders. "Us versus them" is an increasingly familiar trope in nationalist Western media. The construction of border walls is a strategic geopolitical act that reinforces this rhetoric, defining national sovereignty at a time when it is perceived to be under threat. A border is a miles-long testament to deep divisions of space and populations, and to cross one is to experience the checkpoints, border officers and cramped interrogation rooms that are its public parameters. This oppressive interface makes the border wall a unique type of public infrastructure, one that functions symbolically and practically, keeping out what is unwanted and fencing in what anxiously needs protecting. Yet the power of the border wall is not only that it functions but that, as an image, it travels.

In this sense, perhaps the most circulated border wall—the most photographic or iconic—is the Berlin Wall, which existed from 1961 to 1989 and which divided Berlin and Germany into East and West, acting as the de facto symbol of the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War. When citizens, en masse, breached, dismantled and destroyed it on November 9, 1989, the wall became a different kind of object—a souvenir, an attraction, an icon, and a monument in ruins. Unlike statues or public artworks constructed to celebrate people, generals or military events, the Berlin Wall first became a monument through its destruction, not its construction. The absence of the wall created the space to monumentalize it, whether in the physical locations of its absence (demarcated with various plaques and markers sprinkled across the city) or through its dispersal in pieces—chunks of concrete—which can be found in private museums or on public display in spaces around the world.

In fact, anyone can now own a piece of the Berlin Wall. Tourists visiting Berlin can take a piece of history home in their pocket, a "freedom rock" as one vendor brands it, although one may not always be certain of what one has purchased. Is it a piece of concrete with a bit of spray paint, a 3D-printed likeness, an actual bit of rubble collected in 1989 and then carefully stored in identical plastic bags to be later sold, a supposed rarity in seemingly endless supply? Enterprising Berliners could conceivably operate with this business model in perpetuity, since what is being monumentalized here—the idea of the Berlin Wall as an *absent* wall within the city—actually requires no connection to an original.<sup>1</sup>

As a mobile ruin and a complex but ambiguous symbol, and as a monument formed only through destruction, the Berlin Wall and its afterlife raise compelling questions around monuments, civic memory and the treatment of symbols of oppression that persist, even when the politics of the public realm in which they first existed have drastically changed. In *The Labour of Commemoration* (2017), documentary artists Blake Fitzpatrick and Vid Ingelevics reveal the slow, mundane and

relatively *uneventful* work of preparing for, constructing and dismantling the apparatus of memory required by large-scale public celebrations. Collapsing time scales of past, present and future into a continuous whole, albeit one divided into three parts, their multi-channel video documentary suggests a reading of commemoration that is without fanfare or climax. The "event" itself barely registers, unless one notices the slight variations in the dates stamped at the bottom of each screen. Construction happens slowly, work is in pieces and little is seen that would suggest a unified, singular event. Cranes, dump trucks, front-end loaders and all manner of construction vehicles slowly but precisely transform a city over a period of weeks. Temporary cladding, scaffolding, fencing, staging and platforms all interrupt the natural flow of the city and form new pathways, in a city overly familiar with the interruptions that borders and walls have on daily life. While Berlin has hosted many civic celebrations to commemorate the fall of the wall, and the date of its destruction is annually recognized in the press through images, articles and blog posts, the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2014 provided an opportunity for recognition and state-sanctioned celebrations on a national and international level.

What is the nature of celebration and commemoration here? And for whom are these events held? Does the building of stage sets and the theatricality of the wall simply promote selfie tourism for a population which is increasingly too young to remember the Cold War, a divided Germany or even the fall of the wall itself? Who benefits from the festivalization of such an anniversary? Street traffic makes way for drunken revellers, families explore sites of official record and historical significance, passers-by get stuck in the middle of cheering crowds, speeches are made by current and former heads of state. People seem most interested in having their photographs taken in front of concrete slabs that may or may not be parts of the original wall. But to what end? Is this a signifier of shifting German political ideology as perhaps it was originally intended or, increasingly, an international tourist attraction that supports the city's economic growth? Although simplistic, it seems clear that these widespread, expensive forms of celebration function in the service of the state, accomplishing the largely performative tasks of marking an anniversary so that citizens, and tourists, will internalize the image of a democratic governing power and an economically successful state.

However, in the case of the Berlin Wall, commemoration is more complicated than the celebration of a singular national ideology. It offers a complex mix of historical citizen actions and democratic ideology, and is symbolic of the end of the Cold War era that polarized geopolitics and allowed for the opening of vast new global trade networks. The wall is often used as a symbol of the excesses of the Cold War and the "fall of communism," demarcating the flourishing of the democratic values of the West. It may well be the most iconic, symbolic and visually represented border wall of the twentieth century, but it was as a result of its destruction that a new global order emerged, one that has seen a sharp increase in the size, scale and number of border walls dividing citizens and states around the world. The late 1980s ushered in an economic recession across the West and the slashing of social-security networks through aggressive neoliberal economic policies became common throughout the 1990s. Today's tightening of borders and increasing restrictions against immigration and refugees are in many ways the true outcome of the end

Thursday, October 5 to Saturday, November 25, 2017  
 Opening Reception: Thursday, October 5, from 7 to 10 PM  
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of the Cold War, hardly the democratizing vision of a world without borders that the wall's destruction seemed to portend. Yet the crumbling Berlin Wall is still widely celebrated as a symbol of freedom, an icon of the success of democracy and a symptom of a failing Soviet Union and the failures of communism.

Political philosopher Wendy Brown has articulated some of the unusual paradoxes surrounding the rise of increasingly walled states during this period of neoliberalism, as globalization purported to open borders and allow for the free trade and circulation of goods while, at the same time, borders were closed and the movement of people and the flow of citizens attempting to cross borders were restricted. She argues that, with the rise of multinational corporations and other global actors, sovereign nation-states no longer exclusively define global political relations, even while national identification requires symbols and icons. In Israel, India, South Africa and, most famously, along the border between the United States and Mexico, a new generation of highly fortified border walls has become symbolic of this predicament of diminishing state power.<sup>2</sup> The paradox is that border walls "project an image of sovereign jurisdictional power and an aura of the bounded and secure nation that are at the same time undercut by their existence and also by their functional inefficacy."<sup>3</sup> Walls do not keep out the people they intend to keep out. Instead, they function theatrically to project a kind of power that cannot actually be produced.

A wall is not, in and of itself, a monument. If often ineffectual, it still has a practical function. And, while many were able to successfully breach the Berlin Wall in order to move from East to West, the constant surveillance of the checkpoints and the threat of injury or death in the snipers' no-mans-land were real, visible, obvious deterrents. The wall created a clear physical and ideological division, serving to divide citizens from their families, places of employment and daily routines. Monuments rarely operate with such obvious functions in public space, until they become flashpoints for destruction when their ideological underpinnings come to the fore.

This is happening in the United States right now, as calls for the removal and destruction of monuments to confederacy are, justly, proclaiming that such memorials glorify slavery and uphold systems of white supremacy. Bree Newsome, an activist who became known worldwide when she scaled a flagpole to remove a confederate flag and was subsequently arrested, reminds us that the fall of a regime is often marked by the falling of monuments.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the falling Berlin Wall marked a change in regime on a global scale, but what then does it mean when the destruction *is* the monument, and when the anniversary is memorialized and taken up anew, in annual intervals? As public tenor shifts to recognize that monuments serve to historicize and valorize oppressors, what social effects does the continual celebration of the destruction of Berlin Wall, and thus its monumentalization, produce?

A possible response can be found in the articulated experiences of those living close to another border wall, one with its own particular public space of memory and commemoration. Accompanying the multi-channel video documentary is a short video that was shot along the westernmost point of the Mexican-American border, where the long, fortified wall spectacularly drops into the Pacific Ocean. Like the Berlin

Wall, this border wall is highly photographic, and the images of its endpoint are well circulated. Less known is a strange, adjacent site officially, and somewhat ironically, called Friendship Park—ironic since the governments of the United States and Mexico are no longer likely to be called "friendly," and are increasingly at odds with each other around President Trump's assertion that Mexico should pay for an increased, heightened, permanent border wall to prevent illegal migration from South to North. Every day in Friendship Park, from 10 AM to 2 PM, people on both sides are permitted to visit with their friends and loved ones by speaking through the metal fence. Mimicking this daily routine, the video shows an interview with a man on the Mexican side, but shot through the fence from the American side.

His story is one of monuments.

He describes how the twinned site used to exist under similar conditions, with similar monuments attesting to an official history of friendly relations between the United States and Mexico. But, as the Americans increased security along the border, in frenzied and racist attempts to exclude migrant workers or "undocumented" labourers from crossing, the aims of equality and national friendship have waned. While the Mexican side is relatively unpatrolled and its monument to "friendship" is maintained, the American side is heavily secured, and they have removed their plaque. If a first incident of erasure is the monument itself, which surely denied the history of war and colonization between the United States and Mexico in favour of the promotion of friendly relations, then here we have a second moment of erasure, a different kind of absent monument that exists only in social memory and, now, in video documentation.

Documentaries typically use a variety of devices to narrate a story or frame an issue. Rarely is the camera simply aimed and activated. But, in both of these works, the so-called "straight" shot reveals much about what is overwritten in official histories and the state-led celebrations, or erasures, of historical events. Such events seldom happen instantaneously and are instead memorialized slowly, over time. In *The Labour of Commemoration*, the preparations for and clean-up after the celebration reveal the intensity of public work demanded in service of official memory. For an absent monument to be addressed, the work of commemoration and the laborious nature of public memory is a necessary requirement for the reinforcement of state sovereignty. The lifespan of any monument is never assured, and in an era when borders are increasingly fortified and monuments are being called into question, we should likewise question what histories are overwritten or erased precisely through such highly visible acts of public celebration.

1 Almost all of the original, 160-kilometre wall was removed or destroyed in the aftermath of November 1989. It took several years for the wall to be dismantled entirely, and there are now just a few sections, such as the East Side Gallery on Niederkirchnerstrasse by Checkpoint Charlie and the memorial on Bernauerstrasse, which remain in their original locations and operate as tourist attractions.

2 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2010): 24.

3 Ibid.: 25.

4 Bree Newsome, "Go ahead, topple the monuments to the Confederacy. All of them," *The Washington Post* (August 18, 2017).

For their assistance with the presentation of this exhibition, Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art gratefully acknowledges the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Toronto, the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.



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