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Dissolving Monuments

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World Expo 2000, a case study

They are on vacation. Huddled under an umbrella, they enjoy drinks together in the sand. Nearby, a child digs into his "beach." The sea is missing. Maybe next time at least the sound of waves will make the scenery complete. This snapshot taken last fall in Hanover shows how the world expo — initially based on the display of new inventions — is losing its collective significance. If in fact there is any collective significance left, what kind of monument serves it? Have new technologies and media induced a new, more personal and more transient sort of monumentality?

Throughout the history of world expositions, expressions of monumentality have evolved in relation to the use of changing media. In the last century, new media have not only accelerated communication, but have also refined space, condensing geographical distances and enabling the creation of smaller-scale illusory spaces of a temporary character. As the output of technological progress becomes more and more intangible, technology can hardly express itself as a physical object as could, for instance, the Eiffel Tower in 1889.

At the same time, the idea of the world expo as an international marketplace has become nearly obsolete. The original purpose of these manifestations — to put new tech-



nologies onto a common international stage — has dissolved as international corporations find venues for their techno-performances at the thousands of other expositions that are explicitly based on commercial interests, like the Volkswagen Autostadt, which opened in June 2000 simultaneous with the Hanover Expo.

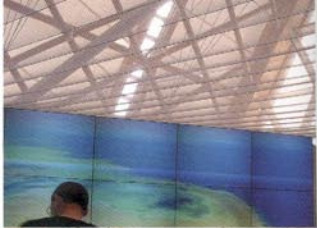
In Hanover, with the theme "Human-kind, Nature, Technology: A New World Arising," countries presented themselves as little more than four-dimensional travel agencies where visitors were offered quick tastes of other cultures. The primary tool used to immerse visitors into these "unforgettable experiences" and to load them with impressions was the video projection. In the assumption that there were more video beamers than food stands on the Hanover expo site, we are left to ponder the role of electronic media in creating space as it competes with architecture, or even debases architecture to become a mere surface upon which these projections can be displayed.

At Hanover, four approaches to the use of these media could be distinguished. Using an *aesthetic approach* videos were displayed like framed pictures as in Portugal's neutral white pavilion by Alvaro Siza. *Image montage*, the merging of motion pictures with fixed large-



scale pictures, was used in the Finnish Pavilion and in the theme park "Nature-Environment." The third concept, *blurring materials*, enabled one to actually enter a video projection, to become fully surrounded, immersed in a performance where real and virtual "materials" were merged; this was the experience of "Health Futures," the theme park by Toyo Ito. The fourth approach, used by Peter Zumthor in the Swiss Pavilion, was the exclusive use of *natural media*; here the smell and the pure mass of wood blended with an archaic music performance to address the basic senses.

Though the expo was not entirely void of traditional monuments (the Dutch Pavilion, for instance, stacked varied landscapes to appear as an iconographic manifestation) its overall character signals another era of monumentality: that of the intangible object. "Monuments" today are registered as the mental imprints of moments experienced by the individual, not the group, though bits of these "individual experiences" may repeat themselves for countless individuals. This series of impressions forms a long-lasting source from which each individual can select and assemble a unique pattern of memorable fragments. In Hanover, only memorabilia like the ticket stub or



the "Expo-Passport" which could be stamped in each pavilion, could serve as souvenirs – as physical micro-monuments of the event; these are the remains of the collective monument as we once knew it.

In observing various world expos, one can identify an increasing shift from a collective monumentality – traditionally sedated in the form of buildings – towards an individual monumentality that is transient in its character and close to non-physical in its expression. Though it may seem contradictory to combine these two words – *individual* and *monumentality* – into a single concept, true monumentality has become increasingly related to the individual's mind, and the information it retains from the flood of input it receives.

World expositions have indeed become temporary frames in which diverse experiences are gathered into a single event. Perhaps by highly concentrating this "everyday-everywhere" experience, there could be a chance to give visitors to future expos new and unexpected experiences that re-establish the collective significance of world expos.

