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Critical Terms: Commemoration Transcript

LEAH CLARK: Hi. I'm Leah Clark. I'm a senior lecturer in art history here at the Open University, and I specialise in the Italian Renaissance. And I'm here with my colleague, Susie.

SUSIE WEST: Hi, I'm Susie West. I'm a senior lecturer in art history and heritage studies here at the Open University. My main interest is in the history of buildings. I'm an architectural historian, and I particularly like thinking about how people use buildings to make statements about society.

LEAH CLARK: So today we're going to be looking at the term "commemoration."

SUSIE WEST: Yeah. I'm really excited to be talking about commemoration because this picks up on my interests in heritage studies. And I think it's very powerful within art history because it helps us think about who gets to be remembered and how we do that visually. Who's in, who's out.

LEAH CLARK: So what does the term "commemoration" actually mean?

SUSIE WEST: Well, it's pretty simple in essence. It's to do with remembering. But specifically, remembering people or events in an official way. So it doesn't matter how that's done, but it usually means that something physical is created out of making that memory. So that's where art history and visual culture comes in. That's where we get our objects of commemoration from.

LEAH CLARK: And what kind of objects? What kind of visual culture can we associate with commemoration?

SUSIE WEST: Well, I think most recently, we've been thinking a lot about commemoration in terms of war. Whether that's war that's 100 years ago or more recently. And I think most of us are familiar with the idea of a war memorial.

Now, that has a great role to play in associations with historical events, but I think for art historians, they can be treated as works of sculpture. And of course, they're usually commissioned from artists who are sculptors. Very occasionally, you get war memorials that are very architectural. So I think that's a good place to start actually - war memorials because they evoke so many strands, but they have a very, very high visual content.

LEAH CLARK: Right. And I think the interesting thing about war memorials is, of course, you can find them in big cities, somewhere like London. But they're also quite local too, aren't they?

SUSIE WEST: They are everywhere. I mean, growing up in England, you would find a war memorial in almost every village, and certainly in different boroughs of towns. So they're quite important, I think, to think about because they are rooted in place, which art historians are also interested in thinking about. And they're quite diverse. But you can analyse them in formal terms as you'd analyse any work of sculpture.

LEAH CLARK: So what kind of issues or question does the term raise?

SUSIE WEST: Well, I think one of the things for art historians is about the relationship between the work of the object, as it were, of commemoration and what it's standing for. Who or what it's representing. And I think we can look at that in terms of the relationship between something that's tangible - that's the object - and something that's intangible. So that might be the history, say, that we can't physically see or talk about in concrete terms anymore. So that's quite important, I think.

Secondly, I think there are a whole set of questions about the work that commemorative objects are supposed to do. So clearly, they have a purpose, but that purpose might actually be quite exclusive. So I think a lot of what art history does is to think about who isn't being shown, who is not being represented, and why that might be. So those are questions that really interest me.

LEAH CLARK: So for me, someone who works on the Italian Renaissance, I think of commemoration in terms of maybe a sculpture that would commemorate a prince in a courtly city. You might have a tomb sculpture. There's also different kind of portraits. So, for example, medallions are medals that would commemorate a particular individual. But also is, for instance, a Renaissance portrait a form of commemoration? Something that we imagine kind of an oil painting of the famous individual with their beautiful dress or whatever. Is that a form of commemoration?

SUSIE WEST: Well, I think those are really lovely examples. But I think they also open up this question about, where is something a record or a tribute, say, to a person from the past-- your Renaissance prince - and where does it actually become commemoration? And I just changed the emphasis on the "co"-memoration bit there because I think commemoration really needs some sort of group buy in.

So say I was somebody who wanted to commission a portrait of my life partner, and I am a Renaissance princess and I have my prince painted. I'm not sure that's commemoration because that's much more about personal memory. So I think the emphasis is where is the collective aspect for this.

LEAH CLARK: Right. I suppose you could put it on the other side and say, well, it's not just about one person. It's about a dynasty. And so if that represents a larger court that represents a city, that that individual stands in for somebody else.

SUSIE WEST: I'd agree with that. No, I really would. And I think your example of the tomb fits that perfectly. It's a public monument. So it's not quite a war memorial, but we know that it's intended to be displayed in a reasonably publicly accessible place-- the church. And it's intended

to do a lot of work about signalling not just the individual who may be buried, but as you say, that whole raft of connections, the dynastic connections, that it represents.

LEAH CLARK: I wonder too, in some ways, a leader, a political leader. You might have a statue that commemorates them. But it's not just an individual. It might be a regime, which might be both celebratory or actually oppressive.

SUSIE WEST: And of course, that's when we also have to think about the symbolism. So even if we're looking at a work of sculpture that's highly realistic, we might think it's also a portrait of somebody. But because of the context in which we understand it as a symbol of a particular regime, then of course, the commemorative work does come into play there. That's not to say that commemoration can't be resisted. Of course it can be. But I think that's part of the power it holds. That it does occasionally require resistance.

LEAH CLARK: Right. So I've just been talking about kind of Renaissance examples, but are there examples from the more recent past - 19th, 20th century - that might be more contemporary?

SUSIE WEST: Well, we started thinking about war memorials, didn't we, at the beginning of the conversation. And those are, I think, most famously connected with the history of the 20th century and with the two world wars in particular. I suppose war memorials are sort of on the ground monuments, aren't they? They often are funded by, put in place by local people. They carry local names on them. I'd like to move us up a level, actually, to think about commemoration as an important practise that nation states have used.

LEAH CLARK: Right.

SUSIE WEST: In the last couple of centuries. And we mentioned statues perhaps in the middle of an Italian piazza or in Trafalgar Square. We're all familiar with cities that have quite a collection of statues, often of people we have no idea who they were, what they did. But here they are, they got themselves a statue.

LEAH CLARK: Right. Yeah.

SUSIE WEST: And so that aspect of commemorations is not necessarily something you associate particularly with our very modern democracy. It reflects particular expressions of power, doesn't it, about who gets access to a political world, then rewards them by this sort of commemoration. And that's, of course, where we can also find ways of contesting that sort of memory, the material culture of that memory that may no longer have resonance with us or, in fact, be actively in opposition to how we are in society today.

LEAH CLARK: So do you think that there is a kind of new understanding of commemoration in terms of thinking about who is left out or who isn't represented? I'm just thinking about the people who would have been historically commemorated in terms of war are the leaders and actually less about the soldiers who were on the ground.

SUSIE WEST: Definitely. That's part of the really big sea change. So you might call it the democratisation of commemoration, if there weren't too many syllables in that phrase! But I think you might bring to mind campaigns to have a statue, perhaps of a suffragette, who's never been commemorated, never had a prominent public space for a pedestal to be erected. So there were still aspects of catch up in terms of who gets that public commemoration.

But I think another thing that's changed is who else can be involved in making commemoration. So one thing to think about is the amazing impact that an artwork had that was comprised of thousands of ceramic poppies. There was an art installation called *Blood Swept Lands and Fields of Red*, and it was designed and installed by the artist Paul Cummins and Tom Piper. This came about, really, to comment on the time that Britain first got involved in the First World War at the end of 1914. So it was a centenary celebration. And yet, how do you celebrate - that's the wrong word. It's a commemoration.

And this became an amazing piece of public art, and it was a true public spectacle. It was first presented in London and it filled what is a dry grassy moat around the Tower of London. And it became a crimson river, and the artists involved constructed it, so the crimson poppies appeared to spill out from this otherwise rather grim and entirely castlelike Tower of London. And it really caught the public imagination.

LEAH CLARK: But it's also interesting because those things get then taken - people could buy those poppies.

SUSIE WEST: Yes, exactly. So I had to think about that quite hard. When I realised that poppies were for sale, my first instinct was to say, well, is that right? Is that what the artist intended? I think because we're not used to having artworks broken up like that.

LEAH CLARK: No.

SUSIE WEST: And when you find out a bit more, you realise, oh, actually, that's a strategy. That's deliberate. Because the funds raised were for some prominent charitable causes. So it's another way of giving an afterlife to that installation.

So another aspect of commemorations its opposite, really - anti-commemoration or certainly decommemoration. So I'm thinking of an interesting historical example. If you think back to Napoleon trying to conquer the rest of Europe, he was vanquished by, amongst others, the Duke of Wellington.

Now, Napoleon had the most beautiful statue of himself carved by Canova, but that became part of the spoils of war and it ended up in the Duke of Wellington's own house in London. So that's a really sort of personal twist to decommemoration, I think.

LEAH CLARK: Well, I think it raises the issue that these things might have multiple stories. And that over time, historically, something that was made to represent somebody -

SUSIE WEST: Yeah.

LEAH CLARK: People might actually feel uncomfortable at looking at that particular person because they represent, a certain regime or oppression.

SUSIE WEST: Very definitely. So coming into the 20th century, I think it's pretty widely known that after the fall of a range of hitherto communist regimes in Europe and beyond, that certain commemorative statues of communist dignitaries and leaders were no longer acceptable. They had no place in the democracy that succeeded them. And so these things were dismantled and removed, and nothing is fixed, is it? Things will always change.

LEAH CLARK: Right. And this dismantling is also an interesting point because it also relates to other types of objects. I'm just thinking about the Protestant Reformation, where you get Catholic images as seen to be having to be taken down from churches.

SUSIE WEST: Yes.

LEAH CLARK: And there's this kind of the power of art, in a way, is quite evident in both commemoration and the kind of decommemoration of feeling like you need to remove something because it represents something so strongly.

SUSIE WEST: Yes. Although, I suppose when we think about religious art, a lot of that may not have an originally commemorative purpose. But then it is seen to enshrine a particular sort of collective memory that the next group in power wants to erase. So that does bring us back really to the power of memory and how changeable that is. And actually how you do need to consciously work to reinforce and renew memory, and you do that through commemoration.