

Covid Memorials Offer a Place to Put Our Grief

From “anti-monuments” to ephemeral sand portraits, four art exhibitions encourage viewers to slow down and take stock of our pandemic losses.



A still from Coco Fusco’s video “Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word” (2021), which captures the artist rowing a boat around Hart Island, New York City’s public cemetery for the unclaimed dead. Credit...Coco Fusco and Alexander Gray Associates

By Jillian Steinhauer

May 5, 2022

The pandemic has made illness and isolation constants in our society. It’s also produced a tremendous amount of grief. In the United States alone, people are mourning close to a million lives lost to the coronavirus. How do we make sense of our losses while we’re living through them? How do we move forward and look back at the same time? Our leaders have offered few spaces for or moments of reflection, so artists, as they often do, have stepped in to fill the gap. Four projects currently on view in New York take up the work of memorials and monuments: They offer us a place to put our grief, somewhere to store it so it doesn’t reside solely in our bodies and minds.

In 2020, for a project called “Tender,” the artist Jill Magid had 120,000 pennies — the sum of a federal stimulus check— engraved with the words, “The body was already so fragile.” Magid put the coins into circulation by spending them at, and sometimes giving them to, bodegas around New York City. The idea for the project, titled “Tender,” was to make people think about the connections between economic and social conditions: The coins spread through human interaction, like the virus, and “the body” could refer to the physical ones or to an already vulnerable body politic. Magid documented the process, which took place during the lockdown, and created a short film that anchors her new installation, “Tender Presence,” produced by the public art organization Creative Time.

The first thing you see when you enter the once grand Dime Savings Bank of Williamsburgh are rows of bouquets in green buckets, as if they were still for sale at the bodegas where they were purchased. The display is a poignant riff on the custom of using flowers to mourn the dead, further charged by the knowledge that the flowers are already in the process of dying. Behind them is a large screen; depending on when you attend, you may sit and watch Magid’s 29-minute film with musicians performing around you.

The live score — composed by T. Griffin, with sound design by Eric Sluyter — is haunting, at times discordant and often tense, as if accompanying a thriller. During one section, a musician clacks out a repetitive, pulsing rhythm, punctuated by steady puffs on a flute. The screen shows a tattoo artist at work, followed by a machine engraving Magid's pennies — creative markings on different kinds of bodies. The beat gives way to wavering, droning strings after a shot of an empty gurney inside a makeshift morgue.

“Tender Presence” is thought-provoking and sometimes gripping, but it suffers from being partly about Magid's work and partly about the pandemic itself. She connects the two conceptually with images of hands, many using cash to pay for bodega purchases, but the premise of following her custom coins distracts from the commentary about how the U.S. values the economy versus human life. The anonymity and invisibility of the pennies' circulation are what make it fascinating.

Magid calls “Tender” a “dispersed monument”; arguably, so is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Covid-19 project, although his preferred term is “anti-monument.” Called “A Crack in the Hourglass,” it also began in 2020, when Lozano-Hemmer and his assistants built a special sand plotter with a robotic arm and an A.I. image processor. As participants submit photographs of people who died from the coronavirus via a dedicated website, the machine draws them in sand, which streams down from a partial hourglass chamber. When the portrait is finished, the plotter disperses it and recycles the sand. Watching that moment of dissolution is particularly moving.

The Brooklyn Museum is now hosting the first physical presentation of a “A Crack in the Hourglass.” Filling a single gallery, the exhibition consists of the machine, archival time-lapse videos of the portraits being made, benches and gray-scale printouts of the completed drawings. Despite the sophistication of the plotter, the installation feels purposefully simple, designed to welcome anyone. And its physicality gives the project new life after such an intensely virtual two years; seeing pieces of paper tiled on the wall made the losses they represent feel somehow more real. As a Covid mourner told Ed Yong for a recent piece in *The Atlantic*: “Putting my grief into a physical thing would take off some of the emotional heaviness.”

That was part of the impetus for the Zip Code Memory Project, which examines the impact of the pandemic on hard-hit neighborhoods in Harlem, Washington Heights and the South Bronx. Sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University, the sprawling project involves workshops, public events and an exhibition at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Titled “Imagine Repair” and curated by Isin Onol, the show features creations by workshop participants and artists, most of whom live or work in the affected ZIP codes.

The pieces primarily document on-the-ground experiences of Covid-19. Some of the strongest contributions are photographs, enhanced by their integration with the architecture of the space. For example, Kamal Badhey's “Let Your Heart Not Be Troubled” (2020-22), a poetic assemblage of words and images about moving in with her parents during the pandemic, is laid out on decommissioned pews and kneelers. Susan Meiselas's diptych of the doors to her local butcher shop — whose proprietor died from the coronavirus — hangs against imposing chapel doors.

Not all the work is of the same caliber, but the show excels at eliciting particularity and intimacy, as with the “Depository of Anonymous Feelings” (2022), a hotline that New Yorkers can call to share stories and feelings about the pandemic, created by Chelsea Knight with Candace Leslie, Sandra Long and Zahied Tony Mohammed. Like “A Crack in the Hourglass,” which is represented in the exhibition by videos, “Imagine Repair” breaks down overwhelming statistics into individual narratives, while insisting that the people who live uptown, many of them people of color, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and must be heard and honored.

For me, the show's counterpart can be found downtown, in the Whitney Biennial. Coco Fusco's 12-minute video “Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word” (2021) captures the artist rowing a boat around Hart Island, New York City's public cemetery for the unclaimed dead. Where many Covid projects have tried to puncture the anonymity of numbers with participation and specificity, Fusco gave herself a harder task: memorializing those whose stories we don't know. People like the artist Melinda Hunt have been exploring this in regards to Hart Island for decades, but Fusco renews the topic with dazzling drone imagery and a meditative text, voiced by the poet Pamela Sneed. “The loss of life becomes a manageable sum,” she says. “We may treat it as a debt that could be forgiven one day. Forgiven and forgotten, we will walk away.”

All of these artists, and many others, are trying their hardest to make sure we don't.