

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

INSTALLATION

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Brian Knep's *Deep Wounds* at Memorial Hall, Harvard University

My first experience of Harvard's Memorial Hall was as a potential transfer applicant touring the campus in search of a college in the Northeast, many years ago. And it was one stop on my first major trip to New England, alone as an adult searching for a change in life direction. I was struck immediately by the beauty of this churchlike Victorian building, which actually features the largest secular collection of stained glass in the country. I didn't realize at first that it wasn't a church: It took me awhile to notice that the windows featured philosophers and writers rather than biblical scenes. These educational goals were augmented by more generic, but no less elegant motifs of soldiers, scholars, and virtues. When I entered the transept and began reading the 136 names inscribed on twenty-eight marble tablets on the walls, realization set in. This was a temple after all, one dedicated to Harvard students who had fallen serving the Union army in the Civil War. No matter that most of the space was given over to a campus dining hall, and the other (where the apse would be were this a church), a concert hall dedicated to innovative music. Those had evolved from the original (and still functioning) purpose: a memorial created by Harvard graduates to their fallen fellows.

Though grand and dark and stately, it is actually a lot like the memorials I had grown up with, similarly commemorating young men lost in a battle that threatened the unity of our country. Only as I was from south of the Mason-Dixon Line, our memorials commemorated the Confederate dead.

It was a private instance of culture shock, a revealing surprise for me to see the importance that America's premiere university placed on what was, from my previously limited perspective, the sacrifices of the opposing side in that long-lost conflict. Over time (though I never went to school at Harvard, I did settle in the Boston area after college) the resonance of those names inscribed in stone has only become clearer to me. Coolidge, Storrow, Emerson, Lowell, Sargent—the very foundation of the intellectual and cultural life of the city that was once the Athens of America.

I could easily compare this heartfelt memorial to the similarly sincere creations that I grew up with, and equate the losses on both sides. But not everyone has had my bifurcated experience as a Southern immigrant who relocated to the North. Artist Brian Knep, however, has made that leap

conceptually, bridging the symbolic divide through a technological means that intervenes in this hallowed hall.

The marble plaques on the walls are as full as the stained glass windows commissioned by subsequent generations of Harvard students. But the polished marble floor was only an expanse of blank tiles, until Knep installed his visual projectors to create the aptly titled *Deep Wounds*.

The floor is now a milky, cloudy film, one that can be disturbed by the shadowy treks of visitors to the space. Where we walk, "blisters" open up, holes in this film of light that reveal snatches of text in the same font and color as the carved names on the walls. Interestingly, these visual illusions don't include names.

Rather, relationships ("friend," "son," "roommate") are given as well as sites of death, which are familiar battle locations from the Civil War—a long list of killing fields that dot the South. And these "relations" are, we realize, all Confederate dead, the implied other half of the conflict that Memorial Hall has always elided.

On the floor, underneath our feet, as ghostly reminders swimming up through a murky white fog, these other fallen comrades are no longer implied. One imagines a litany of familiar Southern names could fill the floor as well, but for Knep it's enough to remind us that Harvard's student body at the time was not only of New England stock, and that rifts that developed between close acquaintances in the Ivy League mirrored the rifts that divided the country at large.

Is there room in this large, ornate, and stolid structure to admit an expanded definition of loss and regret? One can extrapolate from Knep's conceptual incision comparisons to other wars, other societal rifts, both present and past. If a Northern audience can consider the loss of Confederate dead, can we consider the loss of Iraqi insurgents alongside the deaths of American troops abroad? If we take the Confederacy to task for its unacceptable positions on commerce, industry, and human rights, can modern-day Southerners take responsibility themselves for this legacy of violent rebellion against federal policy? Is there a comparison to be made between Reconstruction South and post-Holocaust Germany?

These are thorny issues, some of which were reflected in impassioned viewer comments left in the book for the show during the exhibition. Knep doesn't answer them, but he does more than merely open old wounds. That these potentially inflammatory words are obscured until we walk over them is an important aspect of the installation. If we want to read closely, we have to intrude, and therefore involve ourselves. The interactive nature of this piece requires an act similar to excavation.

Knep requires us not only to take responsibility for unearthing a certain kind of truth; he leaves us with a need to respond, to process and understand for ourselves. These discoveries, he seems to say, have been laying in wait for us for over a century. His minimal, temporary intrusion critiques one of Harvard's iconic spaces without violating it. The wound he reopens has been there all along, and it still needs attention. ■

