35

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abstract:

Critical analysis of Sebastián Díaz Morales' Smashing Monuments presented within documenta fifteen.

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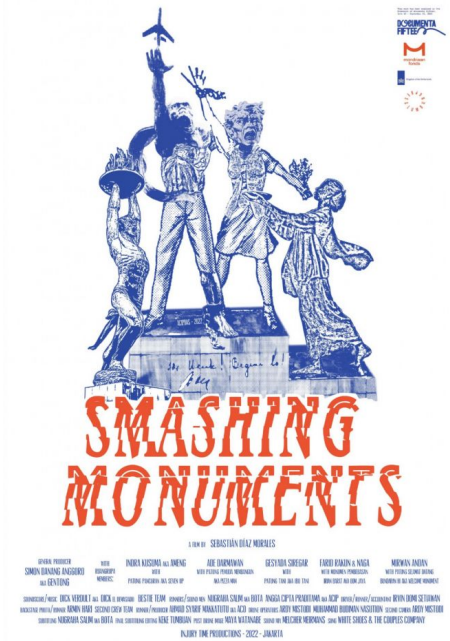
Smashing Monuments as a Counter-Monument

- **Sebastián Díaz Morales,** *Smashing Monuments*, **video installation, 50min, stereo, 2022**



Sebastián Díaz Morales' film *Smashing Monuments* is shown on a big, vertical LED panel, and lasts for 50 minutes. Nowadays, one sees these kinds of panels a lot in cities, usually for commercial purposes, but most often in horizontal positions. The verticality of the panel in Morales' work enhances the monumentality of the film's subject matter: monuments established by the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, after liberation from Dutch colonialism, in the city of Jakarta. The film's title is surprising and in a sense also provocative, because in the last decade monuments have become more at risk of toppling and smashing, rather than being adored and called "smashing" in the "splendid" sense of the word. The film's five parts or chapters each consist of a different "smashing" monument which is intimately addressed in the second-person, as "you." This second-person address is rather amazing, because the phenomenon can only be encountered in religious contexts. In Catholicism, for example, it is common to address the Virgin Mary or specific saints in the second-person, and to ask them for good luck, prosperity, pregnancy, and other such favors. Yet the modern monuments of post-liberation Jakarta are not religious, but secular; they are supposed to speak to the people, instead of the other way around. The interaction between monument and visitors goes in one direction

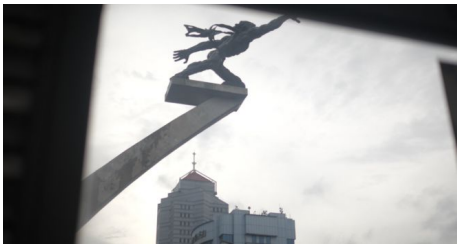
only and is hierarchical. This inequality is emphasized by them being elevated on extremely high plinths; the monuments tower above their surroundings, and visitors must look up in order to see them. The hierarchical relation between the monuments and the human beings they speak to is rather extreme in the case of the five monuments in Jakarta. But by addressing these monuments in the second-person, this extreme inequality is transformed into equality.



The Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa, responsible for *documenta 15*, asked Sebastián Díaz Morales to make a film which would "harvest" the results of that edition of the festival. The expression "harvest" is central to ruangrupa, and depends on *lumbung* – the Indonesian word for a communal rice barn, where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community. "The *lumbung* enables an alternative economy of collectivity, shared resource building and equitable distribution. *Lumbung* is anchored in the local and based on values such as humor, generosity, independence, sufficiency, and regeneration."[1] Although *lumbung* is first of all a noun referring to a rice barn, for ruangrupa it refers to the social practice enabled by the barn. This practice is not conventionally fixed – it changes dynamically through interactions between people. The social practice of *lumbung* affected the artistic processes of *documenta 15*, which was shaped collectively. Ruangrupa can be seen as a new incarnation of the youth movements that have played an important role since 1942 in Indonesian liberation – first from the Japanese who occupied the Dutch colony, and then from the Dutch after they returned following the Japanese occupation. These youth movements, with all their social differences – rich and poor, educated and not, from cities and rural areas – were

inspired by emancipatory ideals and an ethical politics.[2] When ruangrupa commissioned a film from Díaz Morales, he was supposed to enact the main principles of *lumbung*, as social and artistic practice, in whatever way he wanted. He went to the home base of ruangrupa in Jakarta and worked with five members of the collective. Each member was to visit a post-liberation monument in Jakarta and address it according to his or her own ideas. So, there was no fixed script, only a few basic principles which the five performers were asked to enact freely. Díaz Morales structured the film as five chapters, each devoted to one performer and one monument. He titled the chapters after five values important to ruangrupa: "Endurance," "Friendship," "Generosity," "Independence," and "Not Goodbye." He asked Dick Verdult to make music and sound for the film.

All five chapters have the same structure: they begin with a near-two-minute sequence of a ruangrupa member walking to a monument. This gives an impression of the monument's environment, but not much else, as the camera is focused on the feet. We mainly see walking feet and the pavement, suggesting that the ground he or she walks on is his or hers – they belong here. The longest section of each encounter is devoted to the actor addressing the monument. Finally, each chapter ends with the camera showing the monument at eye-level or from above; these shots are made by a drone.



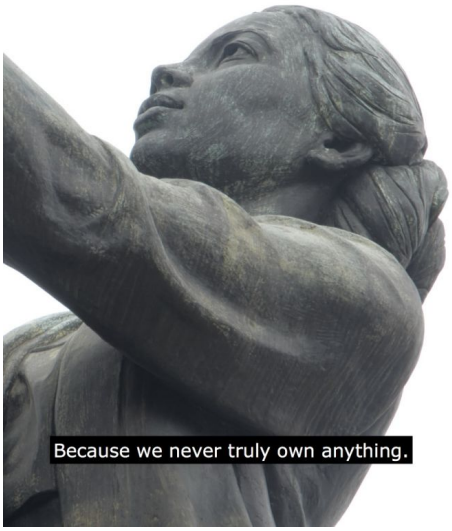
In the first chapter, "Endurance," we see Indra Kusuma aka Ameng visiting and addressing the Dirgantara Monument, also known as the Gatot Kaca Monument, after the Javanese *wayang* figure. It has the alternative name of *Tugu Pancoran*, after *tugu*, a word for statue and pedestal, and the South Jakartan district of Pancoran where it is located. The monument was commissioned by President Sukarno in 1964, as a tribute to the Indonesian Air

Force and early Indonesian aviators who flew against the Dutch to achieve independence.[3] Its present location is between two lanes of a highway, so visitors to the monument cannot approach it closely. Indra finds a place near the highway from where he can see and address the monument: "My chance to have a chat with you." At the end of his conversation with the monument he says: "I would like to play a song for you," which is his gift to it.



In the second chapter, "Friendship," we see Ade Darmawan visiting the *Patung Pemuda Membangun* (translated as "Youth Advancement Monument" or simply "Youth Monument"). The statue is located at the southern end of Jalan Jenderal Sudirman. It marks the entrance to the Kebayoran Baru district of South Jakarta. It is a 25-meter, Soviet-style dark-gray terrazzo statue which stands on a roundabout. The statue was erected to inspire people, especially the youth of the new nation, to participate in the nation's building.[4] The statue's design shows a near-naked young man shouting while holding a flaming plate or bowl above his head, his sinews and muscles straining at full effort. The flaming plate symbolizes youth taking forth light into the future. Visiting the monument, Ade Darmawan addresses it as follows: "Happy birthday pizza man, I brought you a pizza pepperoni. I hope you like it." The statue is nicknamed "pizza man" because of the flaming plate it carries. The monument has existed for 50 years, which is an occasion to celebrate (the day Ade visits the monument is its anniversary). The way this statue inspires young people is due especially to its muscular physique: "you still have an eight-pack, whereas most people have a one-pack."

In the next chapter, "Generosity," Gesyada Siregar visits the Heroes Monument [*Patung Pahlawan*]. This monument, commonly known as *Tugu Tani*, is a bronze statue and an important Jakartan landmark. It celebrates the heroes of the struggles of the Indonesian nation, symbolized by a peasant youth wearing a *caping*, with a rifle on his shoulder, a mother behind him offering him a dish of rice. The *caping* is a traditional Indonesian farmer's hat; thus the statue is also referred to as the Farmer's Monument [*Patung Pak Tani* / *Tugu Tani*].[5] Gesyada does not address both figures, only the mother offering the rice: "Excuse me Madame Statue, I just want to ask your permission to take a picture." Madame Statue reminds Gesyada of her own mother, who is now dead. Gesyada asks Madame Statue if she has memories of her mother when she passed by or visited the monument, because she herself has only a few.



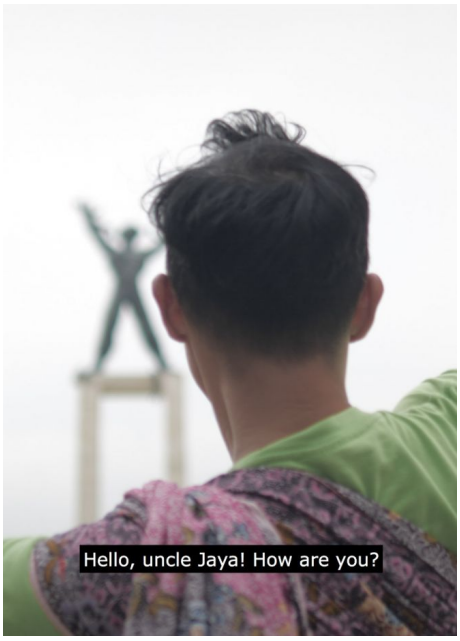
The fourth chapter, "Independence," shows Farid Rakun and his young daughter Naga visiting the West Irian Liberation Monument. The *Monumen Pembebasan Irian Barat* is a post-war modernist monument standing on a very high plinth, located in the middle of the Central Jakartan *Lapangan Banteng* (formerly Waterloo Square). President Sukarno commissioned the monument in 1963, following the West New Guinea dispute, in which Indonesia received the territory of Western New Guinea from the Netherlands.[6] Farid addresses the monument as "uncle Jaya": "Hello uncle Jaya, how are you. I am here." The gift Farid brings is his daughter; he wants to show her to the monument and for her to become acquainted with "grandfather Jaya."

In the fifth and final chapter, "Not Goodbye," we see Mirwan

Andan visiting the Welcome [*Selemat Datang*] Monument. It was built on the occasion of the Asian Games in 1962, and welcomed athletes from Asian countries who arrived at the airport and traveled to the new capital of Jakarta.[7] It consists of two figures, a man and a woman, with raised hands, again standing on a very high pedestal. While the athletes were on their way to the Indonesian capital, they would be looking to the future, not to what had happened in the past. This is the rather surprising function of the Welcome Monument, because most conventional monuments are focused on the past, embodying past events and enabling and activating memories of those events. But one could argue that, in this case, the past remains central, albeit a very recent past: glorious liberation from the Dutch colonizers. The chapter's title emphasizes that the two figures are welcoming those arriving, instead of saying goodbye to them. Semiotically, though, the monument is ambiguous, and can be read both ways. As one of the central values of ruangrupa, "not goodbye" suggests that contact will continue into the future, and not end when one says goodbye. Mirwan mentions that the Indonesian capital will be moved from Jakarta to Kalimantan. He asks the monument: "Will you also move to the new capital, because you are welcoming athletes to the new capital?" Each visitor addressing the respective monuments is from the post-liberation generation; they were born after Indonesia was liberated from Dutch rule. And each brings a gift to the monument they visit. By doing so, they respect the conventions of hospitality. For example, Ade Darmawan brings a pizza to the Youth Monument. The fact that Jakartan residents have given this monument the nickname of "pizza man" shows intimacy and friendship rather than distance and veneration; it is part of their world. Visiting the Dirgantara Monument, Indra Kusuma brings an old photograph showing the monument's original context. But this is not his gift; that is a song. Originally, there was a large open space around the monument, but now it is surrounded by

highways. Movement, passing cars, is what the monument looks upon, instead of an audience that quietly pays its respects to it and what it embodies. Originally a major symbolic landmark in Jakarta, it has been reduced to a point of orientation for drivers.

The monuments' respective visitors do not say very much about the original, historical reasons for their establishment, or the symbolic values they are supposed to embody. And the memories which the monuments activate in their interlocuters do not concern the events that they embody and commemorate, but the visitors' personal memories. The visitors relate to the monuments on the basis of equality – as close friends with whom they grew up. Addressing them in the second-person is a crucial device in establishing the suggestion that, as viewers, we are watching an encounter between friends. The question, however, is whether this friendly atmosphere is completely sincere, or rather a provocative way of challenging and undermining the monuments and the original memories and symbolic meanings they embody. For the atmosphere is completely created by the five visitors and the way they address the monuments, while the statues remain silent and unresponsive.



The five monuments are very conventional, not only because they consist of big statues in the socialist-realist style known from the former Soviet Union, but also because they stand on sometimes excessively high plinths. This makes the inequality between monument and audience disproportionately large. The Western, socialist-realist impression of the statues is especially evoked by the heroic poses and gestures of the figures. Their

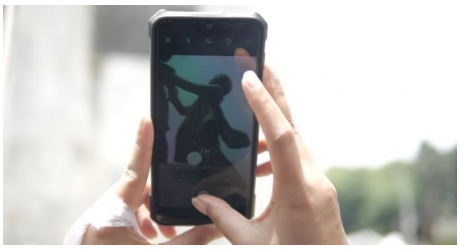
facial expressions sometimes look like those of the warrior-guardians that can be found in front of Buddhist temples. This gives a local edge to Western-style monuments.

Watching Díaz Morales' *Smashing Monuments*, there is a striking contrast between the monuments it shows and the film in which they figure and appear as characters met by their visitors. While they once held central locations in Jakarta, the monuments do not seem to be "alive" anymore; they now attract little attention, because their immediate context is determined by highways and high-rises. They seem to have lost their original functions. The film, in contrast, shows in each chapter a social practice suggesting that they are still alive. They have become intimate friends with the people who visit them and bring them gifts. The sculptural manifestations of the monuments transform in the film into friends who are addressed and listened to. In this respect, they are utterly "smashing."

Conventional monuments enable memory practices, and are therefore by definition focused on the past. The living social practice we see in *Smashing Monuments* is an encounter with "old friends." This connotation suggests that the past is involved in the social practice, but its main function is in the present, where monument and visitor meet. The memories that are shared in the encounters concern less the events for which the monuments were established than the personal memories of their visitors. In his book *The Texture of Memory* (1992) James E. Young characterizes the memorial function of traditional monuments as static: a monument "speaks" to the people who visit it, but the visitors' engagement is passive. What we see in *Smashing Monuments* is a highly dynamic relation between visitors and monuments – the very active engagement of those who address the monuments. The Jakartan post-liberation monuments central to the film are prime examples of conventional monuments; active engagement as the result of a dynamic relationship is, however, characteristic of what Young

has called "counter-monuments." Whereas conventional monuments are monumental, counter-monuments usually consist of negative or invisible configurations. Because such configurations do not "embody" any memories, at least not in a conventional way, the work of memory has to be actively undertaken by those who visit the monument.

In *Smashing Monuments*, however, we encounter the paradoxical situation of highly conventional, monumental monuments and highly active visitors. The memories enabled by the encounters with the monuments are, first and foremost, personal memories. These are not imposed *on* them by the monuments, but are activated *in* them by the monuments. The kind of memory practice we see occurring is a prime example of "living memory." For memories can never be solidified in stone, in stable monuments. Memory is an act that establishes a relationship between the present and the past, an act that begins in the present and is directed at the past.[8] This activity is work performed by a subject in the present, which also explains the notion of the "work of memory," because it is indeed work to be done. Memories are not pieces of the past carried from the past to the present, but an active engagement in the present, establishing a relationship with the past. *Smashing Monuments* shows the work of memory in the most impressive way, but not on the basis of negative or invisible configurations. It demonstrates how monumental monuments can also provide the inclination for acts of memory and the work of memory. Instead of designing counter-monuments for redesigning memory practices, by making this film, Sebastián Díaz Morales has appropriated the conventional monument. Instead of toppling monuments, he shows with his film how past ideas and ideals of old monuments can be countered and



given new, future life in new memory practices. It is only when this happens that a monument can be called "smashing."

So far, I have especially pointed out the differences between the monumental monuments and the visitors of a younger generation who address them in the second-person. In spite of these differences, they communicate on a level of equality and friendship. The ideals radiated by the modern monuments seem to resonate in later generations visiting them. As explained earlier, the visitors are members of the artistic collective ruangrupa, which was inspired by the emancipatory ideals and ethical politics of the youth movements that had played a very important role in liberation from the Japanese and the returning Dutch. Ruangrupa can be said to be a reincarnation of those ideals. Walter Benjamin's concept of "image-space" helps me to explain the intimate relation between the monuments and the visiting members of ruangrupa.

Sebastián Díaz Morales' film can also be understood as re-enacting Benjamin's concept of image-space [*Bild-Raum*]. But what did Benjamin mean by it? As Sigrid Weigel explains, it is based on the idea that:

> memory and action find articulation in images, that ideas are structured as images, and that what is at stake is therefore a praxis that can operate with images—a politics of images, not a figurative or metaphorical politics. In Benjamin's political image-space, ideas and actions, the imaginings of and their representation by the actors/agents are contingent upon one other.[9]

But how does image-space differ from another Benjaminian concept that is much more well-known, the dialectical image? The later "is concerned with the way that history is conceived and constructed, with recollected or quoted moments of the past, with images of what is past or correspondences between the present and what has been."[10] Although still part of present-day Jakarta, the modern monuments are from the past, the 1960s;

they are quoted moments from the recent past. But when we think about the film in terms of image-space rather than the dialectical image, the past and present figure differently; image-space conceptualizes a very different relation between past and present. In order to understand this paradoxical temporality, one should be familiar with yet another of Benjamin's concepts. In his text "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), he not only uses the concept of image-space but also of body-image; the two are closely related. In these two concepts, time is cancelled – there is "an elimination of time because [...] it is a quite literally incorporated image that rings in the elimination of time: the image here takes possession of the body of the subject."[11] Thus, not only is time eliminated, but the boundary between subject and object is also dissolved: "The reader can no longer be distinguished from the agent, nor the one who deciphers an image from the one who represents or in actuality is an image."[12] In this process, image-space and body-space gradually coincide. This is described by Benjamin as "a process of putting forth or of absorption, a process which, with the total absence of distance and the construction of a self-related closeness ('where closeness looks at itself through its own eyes'), blasts apart the dialectical constellation of closeness and distance."[13]

One could now say that *Smashing Monuments* creates an image-space around monuments of the post-liberation period with which members of the ruangrupa collective merge; their body-image is the result of an image-space that is home to the ideals of the youth movements that were of central importance to the fight for independence. These movements, with all their social, class, and religious differences, were inspired by emancipatory ideals and ethical politics. The film's atmosphere of friendship and equality, along with the second-person address, demonstrate the successful creation of an intimate relationship between an image-space in which old monuments figure, and the

body-image of a young generation inspired by old ideals embodied in the monuments.

1 *lumbung – documenta 15*, https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung/ (accessed February 2, 2023).

2 See: David van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2020).

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirgantara_Monument (accessed February 2, 2023).

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patung_Pemuda_Membangun (accessed February 2, 2023).

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes_Monument,_Jakarta (accessed February 2, 2023).

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Irian_Liberation_Monument (accessed February 2, 2023).

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selamat_Datang_Monument (accessed February 2, 2023).

8 See: Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in: idem, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), vii–xvii.

9 Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1996), 9.

10 Ibid., 15.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 Ibid., 16.

13 Ibid.