

## *Healing through Art*

*By Gabrielle McCombs*

### **Intro**

This project is by no means comprehensive. It would take thousands of pages and years of research to fully examine and write a piece that would do justice to even the most prominent memorials and community art projects throughout the world. Additionally, this piece focuses on a few memorials and community art projects but neglects other forms of artistic healing (i.e. art therapy, prosthetics, and more). However, I am interested in the opportunity that memorials provide for remembrance of loved ones. Especially in situations in which it is impossible to recover and identify individuals who have been lost. I am also interested in the collective healing that can occur through memorials and community art projects. The following pages will touch on *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, *Shoes on the Danube*, the *Freedom* sculpture, *Non-Violence (Knotted Gun)*, and *Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial*.

### **Memorials**

#### *Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial*

Since creating the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Maya Lin has designed the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama and the Yale University Women's Table created to honor the first female students admitted to Yale. However, *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* was her first designed memorial and arguably launched her successful career. She created the memorial at 21 years old as a project for her funeral architecture seminar. Her professor urged her to enter her design into the national design competition for the construction of a Vietnam Memorial. Her anonymous entry was selected from the 1,400 submissions, including her professor's submission,

and became the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* we know today.



*Photo Credit: @506thcurrahee via Washington.org* (<https://washington.org/dc-guide-to/vietnam-veterans-memorial>)

The black wall holds the names of over 58,000 men and women who perished or remain missing and the names are listed in the order that they were lost. So, when one strolls from one end of the wall to the other, they are effectively following the timeline of death that occurred during arguably the most controversial war in American history. The purpose of the memorial is to honor the “courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty and country of all who answered the call to serve”<sup>1</sup>. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund website allows individuals from all over the world to search the wall for the name of their loved ones. The website provides the individual’s location on the wall, branch of service, home of record, date of birth, state, date of casualty, full name, and a photo of the individual (if available).



Photo credit: Goodworld (<https://goodworld.me/472/vietnam-veterans-memorial-fund>)



Photo Credit: Johnathan Ernst via *The Jamestown Sun* (<https://www.jamestownsun.com/news/3944045-us-could-limit-collection-items-left-vietnam-war-memorial>)

One need only google “Vietnam Veterans Memorial” to see the various pictures of flowers, balloons, photos, and other objects of remembrance placed at the foot of the wall. According to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund website, more than 400,000 items have been left at the wall since its construction in 1982. In addition to these photos, there are also photos of individuals gathering, crying, and speaking to their loved ones through Maya Lin’s work of art. Memorials, such as this one, create a temporary community of individuals linked by their loss. It is a space to process one’s grief alongside other’s who share a similar experience. Furthermore, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund holds an in-person memorial ceremony each year at the wall. The ceremony allows for collectively healing and remembrance on a large scale. Without the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* many individuals would be left without a space to grieve or communicate with their deceased family and friends.



*Photo credit: GreatNonProfits: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Inc.*  
(<https://greatnonprofits.org/org/vietnam-veterans-memorial-fund-inc>)

*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*

A memorial can serve as a place of remembrance, communication, and grieving for the loss of loved ones. However, it can also function as a visual reminder of an event or time in history or a warning to future populations. It can be used as a powerful visual education tool to inform younger generations. The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* serves all of these purposes.



*Photo credit: AFAR: Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*  
(<https://www.afar.com/places/memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe-berlin>)

The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was opened in 2005 and was designed by architect Peter Eisenman. It covers over 204,514 square feet and is constructed from 2711 concrete slabs of varying heights. The slabs resemble coffins or gravestones and are grey in color. The memorial was constructed on uneven ground to create a feeling of uncertainty and unease in the visitors who choose to immerse themselves in it. The memorial also contains an underground information center, designed by Eisenman, that provides visitors with information about the lives lost and the locations of concentration camps. Visitors are presented with biographies of individuals, their photographs, diaries, letters, and their fate. The memorial is commonly occupied by guided school tours and workshops.



*Photo credit: Berlin Love* (<https://withberlinlove.com/2012/03/15/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/>)

As Richard Brody mentioned in his New Yorker article entitled “The Inadequacy of Berlin’s ‘Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’”, it is common to see tourists sitting on the shorter stelae or to see children climbing and playing hide and seek. Brody described the memorial as having the aesthetic of a welcoming park. However, once an individual enters the maze of taller stelae, other visitors are cut off from view and one feels isolated, alone, and slightly claustrophobic. Brody likened this juxtaposition in experience and title to the experience of the Jews in Europe at that point in history. They lived carefree until they wandered into the “frightening canyons of shadows from which the escape routes were narrow and distant”<sup>4</sup>. Yet, even during times of violence and danger children played and families came together despite the slaughter of their neighbors and friends. Additionally, unlike other memorials, the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* does not contain the names of individuals who were lost. The memorial maintains the same anonymity of those buried in unmarked graves. That is until one visits the underground information center.



*Photo credit: Berlin Love* (<https://withberlinlove.com/2012/03/15/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/>)

### *Shoes on the Danube*

Located in Budapest on the banks of the Danube River, the *Shoes on the Danube* is composed of sixty pairs of shoes of all sizes and shapes. They are strewn on the bank as if their owners kicked them off temporarily to take an impromptu swim. However, these shoes are constructed from iron and fastened to the concrete underneath them. They serve as a reminder of the Hungarian Jews who were shot on the banks of the Danube by the Arrow Cross militia men in the winter of 1944-45. The memorial was created by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer in 2005. The antisemitic Arrow Cross militiamen often beat, tortured, and killed Jews in Budapest during their time in power. Shoes were extremely valuable during World War II; so, the militiamen would force their victims to remove their shoes before shooting them near the river. The river would



then carry their bodies away. Sometimes, shoelaces would be removed from children's shoes and used as rope to bind an individual's hands together. This memorial serves as a warning, a reminder, and a place of remembrance for those who were lost.



*Photo credit: Norbert Lepsik via Culture Trip*  
(<https://theculturetrip.com/europe/hungary/articles/a-history-of-the-shoes-on-the-danube-bank/>)

## **Community Art Projects**

### *Freedom Sculpture*

The Freedom Sculpture, also referred to as the “Statue of Liberty” for the West Coast, was designed as a reminder of the importance of cultural diversity and inclusivity. It was a funded through a widely successful crowd funding campaign whose supporters were located in America and fifty other countries. It was erected in the heart of Los Angeles on July 4, 2007. The efforts were led by the Farhang Foundation. The Foundation is a non-religious, non-profit Iranian American organization whose goal was to bring attention to the importance of cultural

and ethnic diversity and freedom. It was designed by Cecil Balmond Obe and serves as a reminder and education tool for all generations.



Photo credit : [Freedomsculpture.org](http://Freedomsculpture.org)

### *Non-Violence Sculpture*

The *Non-Violence* sculpture, also known as *The Knotted Gun*, was created by artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd in response to the death of his friend John Lennon. John Lennon was murdered by David Chapman in December of 1980. Chapman fired five shots at Lennon who was pronounced dead on arrival at Roosevelt Hospital in New York. The sculpture is a commentary on the importance of world peace and the dangers of violence. It is currently located outside of the United Nations headquarters in New York. However, there are more than thirty replicas scattered throughout the world. It has become an international symbol for non-violence.

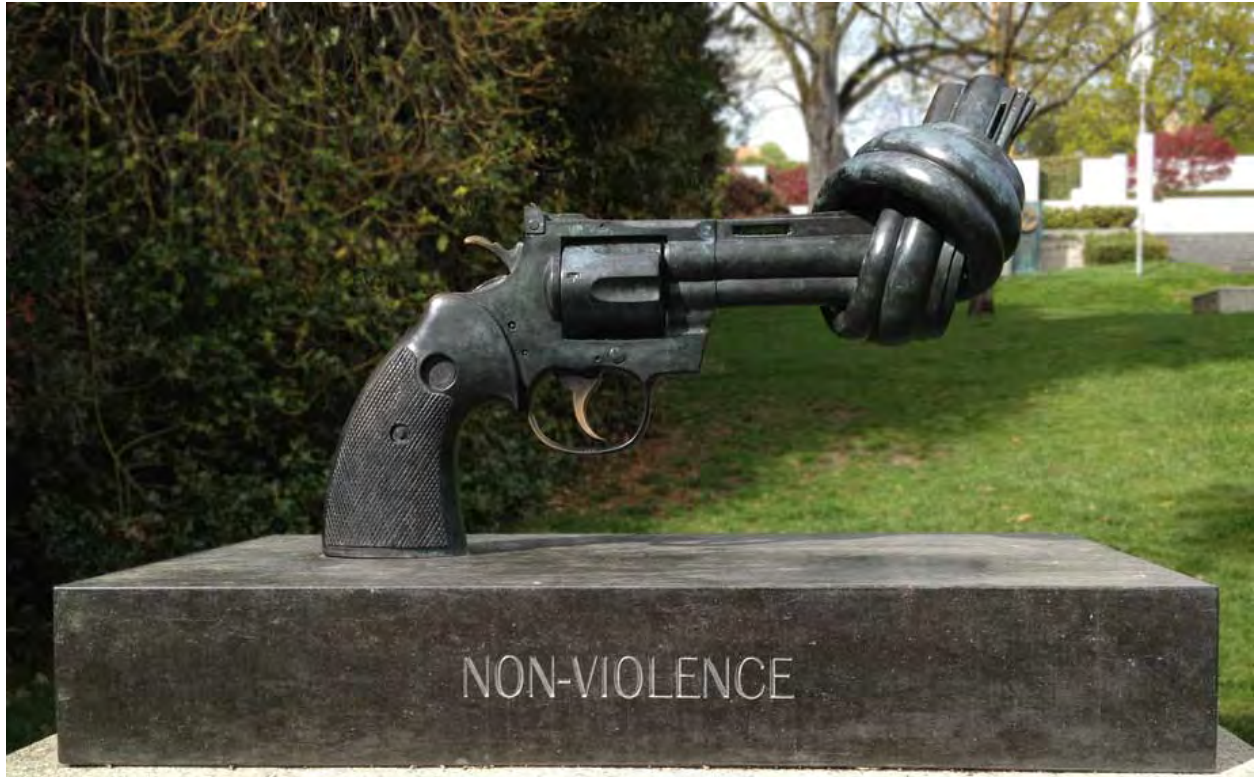


Photo credit: Nonviolence Project

## **Conclusion**

Memorials and community art projects provide opportunities for remembrance of loved ones, communication with those who have passed, and collective healing. They create spaces where those who are grieving can grieve alongside strangers who are going through similar experiences. They offer the families and friends tangible and beautiful places to communicate with those who have been lost. Additionally, they serve as reminders of historical events, educational tools for future generations, and physical representations of humanity's ideal of a better world. Art can serve as an important tool for healing.

## References

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- <sup>4</sup> Brody, Richard. “The Inadequacy of Berlin's ‘Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.’” *The New Yorker*, 12 July 2012, [www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-inadequacy-of-berlins-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-inadequacy-of-berlins-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe).
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- <sup>7</sup> “The Shooting of John Lennon: Will Mark David Chapman Ever Be Released?” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 2 Mar. 2020, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/john-lennon-shooting-murder-anniversary-death-mark-david-chapman-jail-yoko-ono-a9330231.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/john-lennon-shooting-murder-anniversary-death-mark-david-chapman-jail-yoko-ono-a9330231.html).