New York’s Spontaneous 9/11 Memorials and the Politics of Ambivalence

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This essay considers the political significance of the temporary 9/11 memorial that took form in New York’s Union Square Park in the ten days immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center. While the gathering at Union Square can be seen as part of a wider popular phenomenon of spontaneous memorials appearing at locations of tragedy, it is distinct in terms of the unusual diversity of messages and sentiments communicated at the site, from rituals of mourning to anti-war speeches. The paper outlines the conflicting academic reactions to the spontaneous memorial phenomenon and suggests that neither side of this scholarly debate entirely accounts for the dynamics of political communication that occurred in Union Square after 9/11. In an attempt to fill this theoretical gap, the essay turns finally to the work of Paolo Virno, a philosopher who examines the potential for new forms of community to emerge from within the constraints of our contemporary post-Fordist economy. Virno’s thought helps us acknowledge the fragile yet potent political force residing within spontaneous memorials in general and the Union Square gathering in particular.

Perfectly opposed in scale, the temporary memorials that materialized throughout New York in the weeks that followed September 11 offered a visual counterpoint to the massive destruction at Ground Zero. Appearing almost immediately after the attacks, these modest memorials were the first additions to New York’s changed topography and, as media playback of the collapsing towers waned, the next iconic images to circulate on television screens and in the pages of newspapers. In Washington Square and Tompkins Square, at the Brooklyn Heights Promenade overlooking Lower Manhattan, at the multiple fire stations around the city, gatherings of votive candles,
poems, banners, flowers and keepsakes formed in similarly chaotic arrangements. The sight of battered placards reading ‘We Will Never Forget’, baseball hats, family snapshots of the missing and wilted bouquets clinging to metal railings and wired fences was no less powerful for being frequent.

Perhaps the most prominent of the temporary memorial sites was also one of the shortest lived. Located just north of the Fourteenth Street police cordon and the closest accessible public space to the World Trade Center site, Union Square became a natural gathering point for those attempting to locate lost family members, for people in search of information regarding the still developing state of emergency and for many who simply wished to be in the presence of others in the days following the attacks (Kimmelman 2001). Documentation of this brief but important occurrence is now distributed across hundreds of amateur photography websites and Flickr photostreams. In this dispersed digital archive we can still see crowds of people gathered day and night around the aggregation of candles, flowers and American flags that spread out to surround the park’s statuary and lamp poles. Specific objects stand out from the colourful background of melted wax: a child’s painting of two towers embracing, a cardboard sign that reads ‘Killing More Will Not Honor’, a pair of shoes still in their box. These and thousands of other individual contributions combined to transform Union Square into something unplanned and unrehearsed—a place for grieving, but also a place for discussion.

The distinctive aesthetics of the memorials that appeared throughout New York in the days following September 11 make them participants in a larger cultural phenomenon. Although increasingly common occurrences at sites of tragedy, whether small-scale traffic accidents or large-scale disasters, there is little consensus amongst scholars as to the social and political significance of these spontaneous memorials. From one vantage point, the rituals of mourning are interpreted as forms of popular political expression and seen as exemplary cases of mass mobilization, a developing vernacular aesthetic and the unsolicited occupation of public space. From another perspective they represent a suspicious fusion of media intensified emotions channelled through the kitsch materialism of consumer product goods. What then are we to make of these popular sites of memory and the complex intersection of affect, political communication and materiality that they embody? Are they proof that a functioning public sphere continues to exist, or a confirmation of its erosion within our contemporary consumer culture?

I wish to explore here the ambivalent reactions to spontaneous memorials by considering the specific events that unfolded in Union Square after 9/11. The Union Square memorial was remarkable both in terms of its size—the image of the square overflowing with memory objects was a visually arresting one—and in terms of the unusual diversity of messages and sentiments communicated at the site. It’s
my contention that the existing interpretations of temporary memorials, both celebratory and sceptical, do not fully explain the specific events that took place in Union Square during the short ten-day period of the memorial’s existence. The type of community that took form in the park, one involving the coexistence of political discussion and kitsch materiality, complicates some of these critical assumptions. I suggest that a voice from outside the current memorial discussions might offer a different path through some of this equivocal terrain. It is with this hope that the paper will turn finally to the writing of Paolo Virno and its attention to the inherently ambivalent emotional and communicative situation of the contemporary multitude. Virno highlights the current economic conditions that pattern and restrict the political forms available to the mass populace, providing an important explanatory background for the emergence of popular memory rituals. While never underestimating our current political challenges, Virno helps us acknowledge the fragile yet potent force residing within spontaneous memorials in general and the Union Square gathering in particular.

The Cultural History of Spontaneous Memorials

There is no single point of origin from which springs the cultural phenomenon of unauthorized public memorials and their distinctive aesthetics of impermanence. We are left instead with the task of assembling a number of possible sources of influence. In the United States, the mourning practices that have developed around Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC are one commonly cited visual precedent. Immediately following the completion of the memorial in 1982, which features two black granite walls gradually sinking into the ground and engraved with a list of the American soldiers who died in the conflict, visitors began depositing objects beneath the names of specific individuals: flowers, messages, cards, flags and possessions belonging to the deceased (Kristin Ann Hass's *Carried to the Wall* (1998) provides a detailed account of the custom). The minimalist surface of Lin’s memorial seems to invite these eclectic and personal contributions. The items left behind, objects ranging from ‘bubble gum wrappers [to] wedding rings’ (Hass 1998, p. 22), are collected by the National Parks Service staff and added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection (VVMC). The memory objects, common items now made sacred, are preserved in the Museum and Archaeological Storage facility (MARS) in Lanham, Maryland where over 250 000 objects (excluding flowers and flags) had been collected by 1993 (Hass 1998, p. 23).

Similar unplanned collections of mementos and flowers emerged at numerous sites of trauma in the US in the 1990s. The security fence surrounding the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building, site of the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, became an impromptu memorial wall, adorned with bouquets of flowers, teddy bears, flags and posters. Large spontaneous memorials also emerged at the sites of such violent occurrences as the Columbine High School shooting in
Littleton, Colorado in April of 1999 and the bonfire collapse at a Texas A&M University student rally in November of the same year (Girder 2006, p. 254).

In the UK, comparable rituals of public grieving have followed such tragedies as the Hillsborough soccer stadium disaster in Sheffield in 1989 (Walter 1991) and the Dunblane school massacre (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti 1998). The death of Princess Diana in the summer of 1997 brought the phenomenon of the spontaneous memorial to a heightened scale and level of media exposure (Kear & Steinberg 1999). Within hours of the first reports of the accident, the gates of Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace were blanketed in floral tributes, photographs and trinkets. By the end of the public outpouring ten to fifteen thousand tons of flowers had been removed from the various royal sites (Greenhalgh 1999, p. 42). The Liberty Torch monument at the Place de l'Alma, nearby the accident site in Paris, was also refashioned into a surrogate Diana memorial and yet another place for the depositing of flowers and keepsakes.

Another possible chain of influence connects American spontaneous memorial practices to Roman Catholic and particularly Latin American traditions and rituals for the public commemoration of death. Holly Everett, for example, traces the custom of placing roadside crosses or altars at the site of traffic deaths in the southwest to the longstanding Mexican cultural traditions in these states. She points to the Catholic Descansos (resting places for the souls of travellers who died en route) that peppered the region as far back as the 1700s (Everett 2002, p. 27). Regina Marchi considers the contemporary rituals of El Dia de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) in America as a form of recurring spontaneous memorial (Marchi 2006). And Celeste Olalquiaga, comments on the process of ‘Latinization’ of the US in the 1980s, charting the influx of Catholic religious trinkets in New York’s Fourteenth Street markets, the interest in Latin American altares (home altars) within the New York City art scene and the prevalence of Latino Catholic iconography in the club culture of the period (see her Megalopolis, 2002). Spontaneous memorials, particularly in Latino influenced cities such as New York, are perhaps a translation of these aesthetic sensibilities and cultural practices into more general modes of public expression.

Many of the scholars who have sought to understand this developing phenomenon detect a clear form of social engagement within these rituals of public mourning. Jack Santino, whose principle objects of study are the ‘spontaneous shrines’ of Northern Ireland, suggests that the memorials have both a commemorative and a ‘performative’ quality, adapting JL Austin’s linguistic theory of ‘performative utterances’ to the materiality of these popular memory practices. While Austin used the designation to refer to statements that cause the effect they declare (the marriage pronouncement ‘I do’ being a prime example), Santino extends the meaning of the term ‘to events that attempt to cause social change’ (Santino 2006, p. 9). He
suggests that every memorial, however modest, possesses a degree of this performative quality in that it brings a specific issue into the public realm through the insistence of its very presence. This is certainly true of the shrines marking the site of sectarian killings in Northern Ireland, but it is also true, Santino claims, of less overtly political memorials. Spontaneous shrines left at the roadside after a car has struck a cyclist or pedestrian, for example, commemorate the death of an individual, while also making a statement on the public issue of road safety. Even the display of mourning following Princess Diana's death can be viewed through this lens as signalling the people's changing relationship to the monarchy and presenting the public demand for a state funeral and permanent memorial. Santino interprets the phenomenon of spontaneous memorials as a method of marking the concerns of a community within public space and therefore as a practice with intrinsic political relevance.

Adopting a similar critical stance, Harriet F Senie suggests ‘spontaneous memorials are inherently also expressions of protest’ (Senie 1999, p. 27). She points for example to a mural and shrine that appeared in Detroit to mark the site where Malice Green, a black unemployed steel worker, was beaten to death by two white police officers. Senie comments on the role the memorial played in bringing public awareness to an occurrence that may otherwise have gone unnoticed (Senie 2006, p. 41). Likewise, Marchi, in her aforementioned study of *El Dia de los Meurtos*, points to the history of political negotiation incorporated within these popular rituals. She highlights the anti-colonial roots of the custom within Latin America, characterizing it as an indigenous resistance to Roman Catholic power through the continuation of traditional observances of ancestor worship hidden in the guise of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day celebrations. According to Marchi, this element of cultural resistance continues to be manifested in contemporary American versions of *El Dia de Los Meurtos* where the identification of social problems facing Latino communities, such as farm workers’ safety, are incorporated into the rituals. She comments, ‘U.S. Day of the Dead rituals create sacred spaces that serve both as sites for cultural affirmation via the enactment of ancestral customs, and sites for political expression, in which the dead become allies of the living in the condemnation of injustice’ (Marchi 2006, p. 272).

Not all who study these emerging forms of popular memory share this faith in their political potential, however. An opposing position is vehemently argued in the writing of Patrick West, a researcher for the liberal British think tank Civitas, who criticizes the public outpourings of grief after Dunblane and the death of Diana as displays of inauthentic ‘conspicuous compassion’. West views spontaneous memorials as manifestations of a fundamental social anomie, symptomatic of an atomized consumerist culture devoid of the traditional institutions (family, Church, neighbourhood) that would direct these energies towards more genuine forms of civic involvement (West 2004, p. 65). In his dismissal of popular mourning West draws on sociologist Stjepan Mestrovic’s theory that we are
witness to a modern ‘postemotional society’, one in which ‘[m]echanization has extended its imperialistic realm from technology and industry to colonize ... the emotions’ (Mestrovic 1997, p. 146). West maintains that it is this form of simulated and pre-packaged emotional experience that spontaneous memorials provide the public, distracting them from the real work of sustained political commitment (West 2004, p. 2).

Recent considerations of memory rituals in a post 9/11 New York City have tended to adopt a similarly sceptical view of the underlying political intentions of these practices. Marita Sturken’s work Tourists of History charts the interconnection of memory, security and patriotism in America from the Oklahoma City bombing to current architectural developments in Manhattan. Her study sets the recent obsession with the memorialization of sites of trauma against the background of a general atmosphere of fear that dominated 1980s and 1990s America (a period which saw the proliferation of prisons and a preoccupation with personal security, despite being a time of relatively low threat) (Sturken 2007, p. 42). Sturken argues that the diffused sense of fear that was endemic to the eighties and early nineties gave way to the full-blown terror generated by the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks and an already developing culture of comfort and security was pushed to a new level of intensity. The result, Sturken claims, is a ‘frenzied consumer response to the fear of terrorism’ (2007, p. 5). Among the manifestations of this reaction highlighted by Sturken are the rising sales of sports utility vehicles in post-9/11 America. The civilian adoption of the Hummer military vehicle is put forward as the quintessential example of a purchasable sense of security.

Sturken extends her analysis to the spontaneous memorial phenomenon and the increasing number of official memorial sites in America, claiming that they too are reflections of this fear driven form of consumerism. Both participate in a realm of kitsch, she argues, where the experience of history is mediated through commodities. The flowers and keepsakes left behind at sites of trauma and the souvenir trinkets taken away from the gift shops at official monuments are equally symptomatic of this merging of mourning and consumerism. Even the spontaneous memorials appearing as an initial reaction to the WTC attacks were, according to Sturken, ‘quickly incorporated into the media spectacle of 9/11 as the media operated to shape the public aspects of mourning’ (2007, p. 174). The kitsch aesthetic of these practices, she argues, made them readily available for repackaging by the media. The photographs of the missing included in the makeshift memorials, for example, return as the ‘Portraits of Grief’ featured daily in the New York Times (2007, p. 174). These rituals of mourning with their dependence on consumer objects (from the erection of street corner memorial shrines to the circuit of trauma tourism) are, according to Sturken, oriented towards the production of comfort and the reconstitution of a sense of American innocence that delimits any potential political response to these events. She ultimately claims that the ‘culture of comfort’
fostered by popular memory practices ‘functions ... as a means to confront loss, grief and fear through processes that disavow politics’ (2007, p. 6).

Considering the proliferation of 9/11 memorabilia available near the Ground Zero site, Karen J Engle makes an even stronger claim for the disastrous political consequences of a kitsch response to world events. In her view, ‘Kitsch says: we can all be One, and be united in our common purpose. But this One is totalitarian, and it desires no less than the extermination of its foes’ (Engle 2007, p. 77). In Engle's reading the inauthenticity of cheap, mass-produced items becomes a channel for equally counterfeit sentiments and a method of fulfilling a melancholic desire to incorporate lost objects—not only the towers or the victims, but also the sense of American innocence identified by Sturken. For Engle, mass-produced memorabilia and government policies are part of an interrelated response, one that produces a kitsch communitarianism with an orientation towards military retribution. Although Engle remains focused on the 9/11 souvenirs available to tourists, epitomized by a Twin Tower key ring purchased for two dollars at Ground Zero, the trinket-laden materiality of spontaneous memorials would seem to put them within the same problematic political continuum.

Engle and Sturken document persuasively the commodification of grief and disaster tourism that developed in New York post-9/11. Following this line of critique, it is possible to view the public's participation in spontaneous memorials as an extension of what Lauren Berlant labels an increasing ‘privatization of U.S. citizenship’ (Berlant 1997, p. 3). Writing in the late 1990s and reflecting on developments initiated in the years of the Reagan administration, Berlant outlines a process through which the American public sphere of collective politics came to be dominated by private and individualized concerns. This movement towards an ‘intimate public sphere’, where questions of sexuality, abortion, morality and family values take precedent, is one in which even the most privileged citizens begin to view themselves as victims of the cultural and economic changes taking place within the nation. We are left, Berlant argues, with a political field that is saturated with a widespread ‘public rhetoric of citizen trauma’ (1997, p. 2) that obfuscates the specific oppositional discourses of historically disenfranchised social groups. She suggests these changes ultimately serve a conservative agenda, muting direct criticism of state policy and encouraging a strongly patriotic defence of a mythic traditional American way of life.

Samantha J King has recently adapted Berlant’s concepts of privatized citizenship to her analysis of such mass displays of volunteerism as the breast cancer ‘Race for the Cure’. She argues that these public events encourage, ‘a remolded view of the United States as a nation whose survival depends on publicly celebrated, personal acts of generosity mediated through—and within—consumer culture’ (King 2003, p. 297). While not questioning the good intentions
of the participants, King suggests that a very specific form of political subjectivity is generated through these public exhibitions of caring. Corporately sponsored events like the ‘Race for the Cure’ position individual philanthropy (fuelled by the affective charge of participating in a mass event) as the model of responsible citizenship, while more critical forms of collective activism, protest and dissent are dismissed as naive and unproductive. Given the image of mass emotionality, kitsch consumerism, unquestioned patriotism and deferred political engagement presented by West, Sturken and Engle it is certainly tempting to interpret the public outpourings at spontaneous memorial sites as another expression of this conservative form of privatized citizenship. Yet, as I hope to describe, what transpired in Union Square immediately after 9/11 does not correspond entirely to this reading. But nor does it quite match Santino’s model of performative protest. I believe the specific memorial gathering at Union Square calls for a different explanatory framework.

Union Square 9/11-9/20

The Union Square memorial began taking shape soon after the WTC towers collapsed and while clouds of debris still engulfed much of Lower Manhattan. Its genesis can arguably be traced to the actions of a nineteen-year-old NYU student, Jordan Schuster, who on the afternoon of September 11 taped a fifteen-foot long roll of butcher’s paper to the pavement of the square providing a surface for gatherers to write their initial reactions to the events. Messages ranging from outrage to grief soon began accumulating on the affixed paper, reflecting the diverse sentiments of New Yorkers following the attacks. More than 150 such rolls were filled during the ten-day existence of the memorial (Collins, 2002). The accumulated materials (flags, patriotic signs, bouquets, candles and other small objects) that were common features of other such memorial sites were present in Union Square as well, but here they were accompanied by other elements that were unique to this space. Local musicians occupied the square throughout the period playing impromptu concerts and creating an atmosphere where solemnity was mixed with what could almost be called festivity. Local performance activist Reverend Billy (a.k.a. Bill Talen) led gatherers in chants of ‘Our grief is not a cry for war’ and encouraged the formation of a speaker’s corner in the square. He describes the excitement produced by the unauthorized occupation of the park in the following way: ‘I got the feeling that people felt the tragedy, but were not objectifying it, therefore making possible an on-purpose continuation of this wonderful rehumanizing, renarrating of public space’ (Talen 2002, p. 21). The anticipation of military retribution for the attacks was a repeatedly expressed concern in the square and the equestrian statue of George Washington (designed by Henry Kirke Brown in 1856) that dominates the south side of the park was quickly refashioned into an anti-war monument. The base of the statue was covered in anti-war graffiti and a large peace flag was placed in the general’s outstretched hand. Marshall Berman captures the atmosphere of the site when he writes, ‘Overnight, Union Square became the city’s most exciting public space: a small-town Fourth of
July party combined with a 1970s be-in’ (Berman 2002, p. 11). The park has long been an important location for protests and labour activities (it was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1997 in particular for being the starting point of the first Labor Day Parade in 1882). According to Reverend Billy, the square’s history, ‘the May Day celebrations, the general strikes of the sweatshop workers almost a century ago’, helped foster the politicized atmosphere during the memorial period (Talen 2002, p. 20).

And yet this political activity did not prevent the square from functioning as an important site for grieving and reflecting on the destruction that had so recently occurred. The Union Square subway kiosk was covered in a ‘Wall of Hope’, a sobering display of photocopied missing person notices. Museum curators James B Gardner and Sarah M Henry described the square as a ‘civic church—a place of pilgrimage, prayer and protest’ (Gardner & Henry 2002, p. 40). Mourning and political critique were attended to simultaneously in the space, two activities that have been placed in opposition in much post-9/11 commentary and Union Square seemed remarkably capable of accommodating and brokering this potentially conflicting range of emotions and viewpoints. Commencing prior to the media circulation of official rhetoric and rehearsed sentiments and before 9/11 could be positioned within stock patriotic narratives, the Union Square gathering preceded the establishment of sanctioned or habitual reactions to the attacks. The spontaneous memorial was a site where opinions and emotions were still very much in the process of formation. Under these conditions the multiple elements of the site, material and participatory, appeared to intensify rather than extinguish each other. The assemblage of candles and memory objects drew people towards the square and helped preserve it as sacred, occupied space. The speeches and peace vigils provided an atmosphere of activity and togetherness to a grieving population still making sense of the events.

This particular spontaneous memorial was not granted a long existence by city authorities. Just nine days after September 11, with the first threat of rain, New York City Parks Department workers dismantled the collection of poems, banners and missing person flyers that had accumulated in the square and erected a fence around the area. The reason provided was a concern over the park being occupied by the homeless (Jacobs 2001). The rapid dispersal of the Union Square memorial by city officials foreshortened this political community and public space in formation. Other memorial sites around the city were granted longer lives. The spontaneous memorial at the end of Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn Heights, for example, was cleared on May 30, 2002, the official end of the recovery effort at Ground Zero (Senie 2003). While public mourning was officially sanctioned in New York, the mixture of grief and political discussion that emerged in Union Square in the days following the attacks seemingly was not. The memorial quickly moved from public space to archival space as remnants of the gathering were preserved and displayed by The Museum of the City of New York. The museum also
created a ‘Virtual Union Square’ on its website inviting participants to submit photographs and accounts of the occurrence (Gardner & Henry 2002, p. 49). Within ten days of its formation, the Union Square memorial had itself been safely relegated to the realm of memory.

Perhaps as a result of its short duration, the Union Square memorial is mentioned only in passing in the majority of academic considerations of public responses to the 9/11 attacks in New York. Its limited presence in discussions concerning the political significance of spontaneous memorials is consequential, as the public sphere and space of contestation considered by many scholars to be largely absent in post-9/11 America seemed very much present in Union Square in the week following the attacks. The specific occurrences at the site were certainly not simply a kitsch patriotic response or an example of depoliticized collective grieving. This by no means diminishes the relevance or importance of the critiques provided by scholars such as Sturken and Engle. They offer insightful descriptions of the manner in which the very immediate experiences of those directly impacted by the 9/11 attacks became, over time, extended and diffused into a form of mass mourning that was often directly articulated to a reactionary form of nationalism. But we should hesitate to collapse all sites of memorialization into an expression of consumerism and protectionism averse to political engagement. What transpired in Union Square challenges the depiction of a population uniformly pursuing comfort in the face of fear and participating in a disavowal of global responsibility. In the process of cataloguing the political shortcomings of the American population I wonder if we risk passing over the moments when a more promising scene of collective action appears. The Union Square events invite a reconsideration of the potential relation between spontaneous memorial practices and the formation of responsive political communities.

The gathering at Union Square also complicates some of the assumptions held by those scholars, mentioned above, who attempt to inscribe spontaneous memorials within a long history of protest politics. These accounts tend to present the memorials as a medium through which specific communities express their concerns within the public realm—a mode of communication involving statements of protest in response to clearly defined injustices or social conditions. The involvement of the spontaneous memorial phenomenon in circuits of popular media imagery and its frequent dependence on mass-produced consumer objects is often downplayed in these readings. The phenomenon tends instead to be viewed in relation to well-established customs and traditional cultural or religious symbols. In other words, several of the defining characteristics of the memorials, including the way they are embedded in our contemporary social and economic context, are sometimes overlooked in these accounts. I would also argue that the notion of a ‘performative’ rhetoric of protest does not entirely explain the dynamics of political communication that took place in Union Square. The gatherers in the park were neither linked by their belonging to a specific community or tradition nor by their participation in a pre-existing struggle. The anti-war sentiments
expressed were, significantly, in anticipation of events yet to come, rather than condemnations of specific government actions and these views were not uniformly accepted by those in attendance. In important ways, the politics initiated by the memorial gathering was less oriented towards the issuing of particular statements then it was directed towards the establishment of a space of discussion, a demonstration that within a moment of grief and uncertainty a community of concern could be formed. How then might we begin to consider the events in Union Square in all of their complexity and what might they tell us about the political status of other spontaneous memorials? Although never approaching the topic directly, the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno provides us with a number of theoretical guideposts for taking on these questions. Virno’s thought confronts the intersection of emotion, politics, language and materiality that defines contemporary life. While acknowledging the many ways in which the current social and economic situation constricts the political possibilities available to the mass population (what he, following Spinoza, calls the multitude), Virno also attempts to recognize the places from which new forms of political potential may yet emerge. The memorial at Union Square is perhaps an example of such a place.

Paolo Virno and the Politics of Ambivalence

One of the reasons that Virno’s writing helps inform an examination of popular memory rituals is that it foregrounds the influence of economic conditions on modes of political expression. If spontaneous memorials are indeed a relatively recent phenomenon emerging out of our contemporary consumer culture then an understanding of their significance requires some recognition of their relationship to political economy. A member of the Italian autonomist or operaismo movement, Virno begins by addressing the profound impact the economic shift from Fordism to post-Fordism has had on Western nations. In a knowledge-based and de-centralized climate of production, he argues, the boundaries between spheres of activity that were previously thought to be separate grow increasingly porous—work, sociality and politics begin to resemble each other. Informal communications and political manoeuvring become essential qualities of the workforce in a post-Fordist economy founded on change and uncertainty rather than bureaucratic planning. The mechanized worker of the Fordist assembly line has been supplanted, Virno suggests, by a contemporary wage labourer that must possess qualities of:

habitual mobility, the ability to keep pace with extremely rapid conversions, adaptability in every enterprise, flexibility in moving from one group of rules to another, aptitude for both banal and omnilateral linguistic interaction, command of the flow of information, and the ability to navigate among limited possible alternatives. (Virno 1996, p. 14)
It’s a set of qualifications that Virno maintains is not a ‘product of industrial discipline’, but is instead developed through ‘a socialization outside of the workplace’ (1996, p. 14). What is harnessed by capital and made productive then are not determinate skills or abilities, but rather the general human capacities required to navigate the insecurity and mutability of contemporary life. The abilities that the new economy demands of its workers (to be creative, to react well to uncertainty, to be spontaneous) are not learned on the job, but are developed instead in an increasingly lengthy pre-work period. The constant media exposure, rituals of consumption and instrumentalized education that make up our social world provide a diffused, but effective training program. So in this sense, labour arrives at the office ready to work, already possessing the attitudes and aptitudes necessary for production within a highly variable information and knowledge economy.

Chief amongst the innovations of post-Fordism, Virno notes, is the bringing of language into the workplace. The general linguistic competencies required for normal social interaction, improvisation and cooperation become a ‘primary productive resource of contemporary capitalism’ (Virno 2004, p. 98). Every workplace in the post-Fordist economy (the Fiat factory as much as the offices of a media conglomerate) can therefore be viewed as a communicative space in which workers ‘are asked to invent and produce new cooperative procedures’ (Virno 2004, 62). This is far removed from the image of the factory in which workers are expected to silently and obediently follow specific commands; labour is instead required to be a creative and verbal presence, managing contingency and actively participating in the improvement of work processes. The workplace, in other words, has become a social and even loquacious space. One of the troubling aspects of this socialization of work for Virno is the possibility that the realm of production has effectively absorbed the qualifications and activities commonly thought to belong to the sphere of politics. He notes, for example, how Hannah Arendt’s list of the essential characteristics that distinguish political action from labour—being in the presence of others, the act of setting something unpredictable and irreversible in motion, the establishment of relationships—have all become inherent features of the workplace. Virno suggest that this tendency has reached the point that ‘political action now seems, in a disastrous way, like some superfluous duplication of the experience of labor’ (Virno 2004, p. 51). Indeed, the very capacities on which political resistance depends would seem already to have been harnessed and put to work by capital.

In a sense, Virno discloses the economic processes that have produced the depoliticized American population identified by Sturken, Engle and others. Samantha J King’s description of corporately sponsored citizenship, fostered by events like the ‘Race for the Cure’, is one offshoot of the world Virno depicts, a world in which the economic sphere and the social and political sphere have become virtually indistinguishable. Virno also shares with scholars like Sturken, Berlant and King an interest in examining the contemporary
conjunction of economics, politics and affect or emotion. But while Sturken, for example, positions consumerism as a comfortable refuge for the fearful masses, for Virno it is precisely the conditions of the market place that generate the pervasive feelings of anxiety in circulation. In a social context in which substantial communities have been eroded and no longer offer protection from economic instability, an unspecified feeling of dread becomes the norm. Anguish, Virno argues (adopting the term from Heidegger), has moved from being a feeling of isolation experienced by the individual cast out of the community, to being a feeling shared by the majority of its members. In his words, ‘there is nothing more shared and more common, and in a sense more public, than the feeling of “not feeling at home”’ (Virno 2004, p. 34, italics are his). Where might we find refuge from this dispersed feeling of dread? One answer, according to Virno, is by acclimatizing ourselves to the conditions of the market place. He explains, ‘insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself’ (Virno 1996, p. 17). This adaptation to the market carries with it a series of negative ‘emotional tonalities’—opportunism, cynicism and cheerful resignation become the dominant affective moods of the general population.

To this point the picture painted by Virno of the emotional and political status of the multitude under the conditions of post-Fordism is decidedly bleak, yet it is precisely from within these conditions that he claims an adequate mode of politics must spring. The multitude is an ambivalent mode of being, according to Virno, ‘it contains within itself both loss and salvation, acquiescence and conflict, servility and freedom’ (Virno 2004, p. 26). While initiating the rather catastrophic social trajectory outlined above, post-Fordism also creates a situation in which the multitude is in many ways better equipped for a transformative collective politics than ever before. We are, now more than ever, beings in the possession of communicative and political skills. The common faculties and capacities that capital now seeks to harness always exceed this attempt at containment and Virno holds out hope for the positive redirection of the communicative action and cooperative abilities that are caught up within the space of the market, but do not belong to it. The emotional tonalities of opportunism and cynicism have the potential to be converted into their affective counterparts: political enthusiasm and communicative openness.

The first move towards establishing this newly invigorated public sphere is, according to Virno, a moment of ‘exodus’—a stepping outside the constraints of current economic relations. He explains, ‘The breeding ground of disobedience does not lie exclusively in the social conflicts which express protest, but, and above all, in those which express defection’ (Virno 2004, p. 70, italics are his). This exodus or defection from the increasingly life-encompassing space of work allows those linguistic and cognitive abilities that we hold in common to be once again applied to the establishment of a functioning political community. A somewhat unexpected
consequence of the shared feeling of anguish and insecurity that is generated by post-Fordism is, according to Virno, a heightened awareness of ‘belonging as such, no longer qualified by a determinate belonging “to something”’ (Virno 1996, p. 32, italics are his). Here James Carey’s differentiation (derived from John Dewey) between two distinct views of communication, one based on transmission and another based on ritual, comes to mind. Virno clearly prioritizes the latter, emphasizing the role of communication in developing a common space, or to use Carey’s terminology, ‘[manifesting] an ongoing and fragile social process’ (Carey 1989, p. 19), rather than its function of ‘sending’ or ‘impacting’ a specific message (Carey 1989, p. 15). Importantly, the form of community Virno theorizes is not one founded on pre-existing customs or traditions, but instead one that is constituted and reconstituted in the activity of its formation. Language plays a crucial role in this process, but it appears as that which exists ‘in the relation between the members of a community’ (Virno 2008a, p. 46, italics are his), more so than in the form of statements or utterances directed outwards.

Thus for Virno, the linguistic capacities, creativity, spontaneity and cooperation that the post-Fordist economy demands of all its workers are also the pre-requisites for a form of political engagement adequate to the task of confronting our current social conditions. The philosopher does not advocate a return to an earlier and purer sphere of communication, claiming instead, ‘The point is not to withdraw language from being put to work, but to translate the economic and productive powers of language into political and aesthetic powers’ (Virno 2008b, p. 45). Might we see in the spontaneous memorial at Union Square a glimpse of this translation of power and the exodus from the confines of capital that Virno promotes? Could the attacks of 9/11 and the specific fear they produced have necessitated the formation of the type of community Virno depicts, breaking through the dispersed feeling of anguish that otherwise prohibits this occurrence? It’s perhaps no coincidence that the Union Square gathering occurred in a rare interval when work in New York was brought to a standstill. In this brief suspension of economic roles and activities, the general capacities that are otherwise subsumed in this sphere could be redirected to both the need for mourning and the need for political debate and discussion. I think it can be argued that overriding the importance of any particular statement uttered at the site was an awareness of a ‘belonging as such’ that, amazingly in this time of threat, extended beyond the space of the park to those that might become victims of military retribution. These events occurred, of course, weeks prior to the US military engagement in Afghanistan and some eighteen months before the beginning of the campaign in Iraq. This was not the time for delivering clearly defined protest messages to elected officials or political representatives. The gathering at Union Square was instead a confirmation that it was possible for New Yorkers to spontaneously come together and generate through language a space of politics that was quite radically open and unrehearsed. Here communication took the form of a process, the commencement of a community without predetermination. Union
Square would eventually become an important location for more conventional anti-war protests, but the 9/11 memorial was an important precursor to this later role.

The memorial also served as a demonstration that a temporary community can be initiated with the most modest of resources. Although Virno emphasises the creative potential of language itself, the visual and material elements of the memorial also contributed to the site’s ability to foster discussion and a sense of connection. Through a collective act of assemblage, disposable consumer objects were turned towards an originally unintended use and invested with considerable social energy. The vulnerability and precariousness of the memorial’s materials seemed to strengthen rather than diminish its affective resonance. The Union Square memorial may then embody an exodus of both language and commodity objects from their normal circulation within the economy.

Virno’s thought, with its acceptance of ambivalence, helps us to acknowledge the political potential that exists within the spontaneous memorial, while also recognizing that it too is susceptible to being drawn into the cynical, opportunistic and divisive relations that unfortunately dominate our current social situation. As scholars like Sturken and Engle rightly remind us, memory practices that helped bring about a temporary public sphere fostering empathy and concern in Union Square later became articulated to reactionary expressions of patriotism and the desire for absolute security. But whether a spontaneous memorial facilitates a space of meaningful exchange or a disavowal of politics is neither arbitrary nor inevitable. In the case of Union Square, the memorial’s ability to serve the former function was contingent on the park being available to the public in a relatively unrestricted manner. When Union Square was made off limits—its temporary community brought to an immediate and deliberate halt by a municipal decision—the paucity of such spaces within the city was brought into relief.7 With access and restrictions on behaviour in all of New York’s parks tightening (in part because the city has handed control over to the private interests of Business Improvement Districts)8 the unique, but fragile political status of Union Square has become more apparent.

Apart from the temporary closure that brought the spontaneous 9/11 memorial to an abrupt end, Union Square faces a more permanent threat to its ability to maintain its public role. The Union Square Partnership, the area’s own Business Improvement District and Local Development Corporation, has recently initiated a large-scale renovation of the park, which includes plans to enhance its economic feasibility. Amongst the proposed changes to the square is the installation of an upscale restaurant in the park’s nearly eighty year-old north side pavilion. The plans to convert the former bandstand have been opposed, however, by community groups who view the initiative as a further privatization of New York’s diminishing public spaces. The rallying of local activists around a ‘Union Square Not For
Sale’ campaign suggests that the political community that was brought into being in the days of the 9/11 memorial may not have dissipated entirely. Reverend Billy (having also just run for city mayor) has been a particularly vocal member of the citizens group, defending the public right to assemble at the pavilion. Under the name the Union Square Community Coalition, the group filed a lawsuit against the New York Parks Department and the Union Square Partnership in April 2008 and successfully attained a preliminary injunction against the restaurant installation. According to the coalition, the court supported their central claim that without state legislative approval, the restaurant would be an unlawful alienation of public parkland. The organizers of the ‘Union Square Not For Sale’ campaign recognize that it is the basic conditions for political communication that often need defending. The exodus from the sphere of work advocated by Virno requires a space of enactment. Union Square became such a space in the days following the 9/11 attacks, as it has so many times in the past. At stake now is the question of whether or not it will be permitted to occupy this role in the future.

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Notes

1 Laura Kurgan’s ‘Around Ground Zero’ project, a temporal map of the Ground Zero area, attempted to chart the appearance and disappearance of spontaneous memorials in Lower Manhattan. Kurgan marked memorials sites with a teddy bear icon on her fold-out maps, one of which was published in the Spring 2002 issue of Grey Room.

2 I am grateful to Bill Talen for providing a detailed account of the Union Square gathering during a conversation we had in New York in June 2005. Video footage of Reverend Billy’s anti-war and anti-consumerism speeches in the square shot by media activist DeeDee Halleck is available at: www.archive.org/details/RevBillyUnionSquare

3 See for example Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites’s comparison of the flag raisings at Iwo Jima and at Ground Zero in their co-authored study No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy (2007).

4 The writing of Harriet F Senie is a notable exception and the Union Square memorial is also referred to in several essays contained in the collection

5 Santino, for example, emphasizes the use of sacred Catholic imagery and objects in the spontaneous shrines of Northern Ireland, firmly embedding them within regional folk culture (Santino 2001, p. 78).

6 See chapter five of Arendt’s The Human Condition (1958) entitled ‘Action’.

7 Mayor Bloomberg’s refusal to allow anti-war protesters to access the Great Lawn in Central Park during the run up to the Republican National Convention in 2004 highlighted the need for New Yorkers to not take that park’s publicness for granted (Cardwell 2004). When a year later an anti-war speech by Cindy Sheehan, the mother of an American soldier killed in Iraq, was cut short by police in Union Square on the grounds of a permit violation, it was viewed by many as a sign of the city’s growing general disdain for public protests (Rahimi 2005).

8 See for example Sharon Zukin’s account of the impact of these public-private partnerships on the city’s public spaces, particularly Bryant Park’s administration by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, in her book The Culture of Cities (1995).

9 The blog site http://unionsquarenotforsale.wordpress.com/ details the coalition’s ongoing campaign.

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