

The Shape of History

An anecdote about a failed attempt at an artwork provides a moment of pause, to think about the inadequacies of normative constructions of history, and their assigned forms. Late in the summer of 2019 in Berlin, my friend told me about a monument in the Columbiadamm Cemetery, Neukölln. This red granite stone is situated behind the oldest mosque in the city, in a section of the cemetery where several WW1 memorials have been placed.

In 1904, an uprising of Ovaherero and Nama people against their German colonisers in Namibia (formerly South West African), led to a genocide, carried out by the Germans between 1904 and 1908, killing over 100 000 indigenous people. This stone is a memorial to the German generals who died while perpetrating this attack.

The stone is round, and almost as tall as me. I estimate about 1.5m in diameter. It is cut and polished to create a smooth surface on the front facing façade, where the names of the fallen soldiers are engraved. On the top surface of the stone, German army insignia are painted. These were symbols that were later used by the Nazi military.

The large stone looms over a small granite plaque on the ground in front of it, which commemorates the victims of the Genocide. It was added to the monument in 2010; the result of a 10-year campaign by the activist group Berlin Postcolonial. The plaque is cut in the shape of the map of Namibia. It's organic edge, which traces the country's Western coastline, is in stark contrast with the geometric lines defining the country's inland borders. These lines are obvious colonial delineations, drawn out at the infamous, and euphemistically named 'Berlin Conference' of 1884, just a few kilometers to the North of this site.

Besides for one other monument in Bremen, a statue of an elephant in the middle of the town, this is the only memorial in Germany to commemorate the victims of the Namibian Genocide.

I had an idea for an artwork that involved making a mould of the shape of this stone. A very rudimentary way of gaining an impression of a three dimensional shape- is to first wrap it in cling film, and then cover it with several layers of packing tape- to create a hard shell. I realised early on that I had nowhere near enough tape- this thing was bigger than I had remembered. After wrapping and taping with all the materials I had, I cut the inadequate mould into sections to take home with me. In the end, all that was left, were large pieces of undulating clear plastic, lying in a heap on my studio floor for some weeks. Any attempt to embalm the already crystallised rock, already engraved with the violence of the history to which it attests, with flimsy see-through plastic stood no chance.

The failure to form a shell over an already fixed monument becomes the work itself, it opens up a space for a critique of the structure, and its inherent absurdities. What I would like to advocate for, and something to which I aspire, is to approach cultures of memorialisation more akin to a floppy, indeterminate malleable piece of plastic. One that is fashioned off of existing shapes and structures, but refuses to conform to their rigidity. A transparent form, made of cheap materials, somewhat messily and inexpertly assembled, presents an opportunity for questioning not only the contents of historical narratives, but also their constitutive forms and material presences.