

smallest that we had come across, less than half an inch, which is unheard of in monument type sizing. What it does is create a very intimate reading in a very public space, the difference in intimacy between reading a billboard and reading a book.

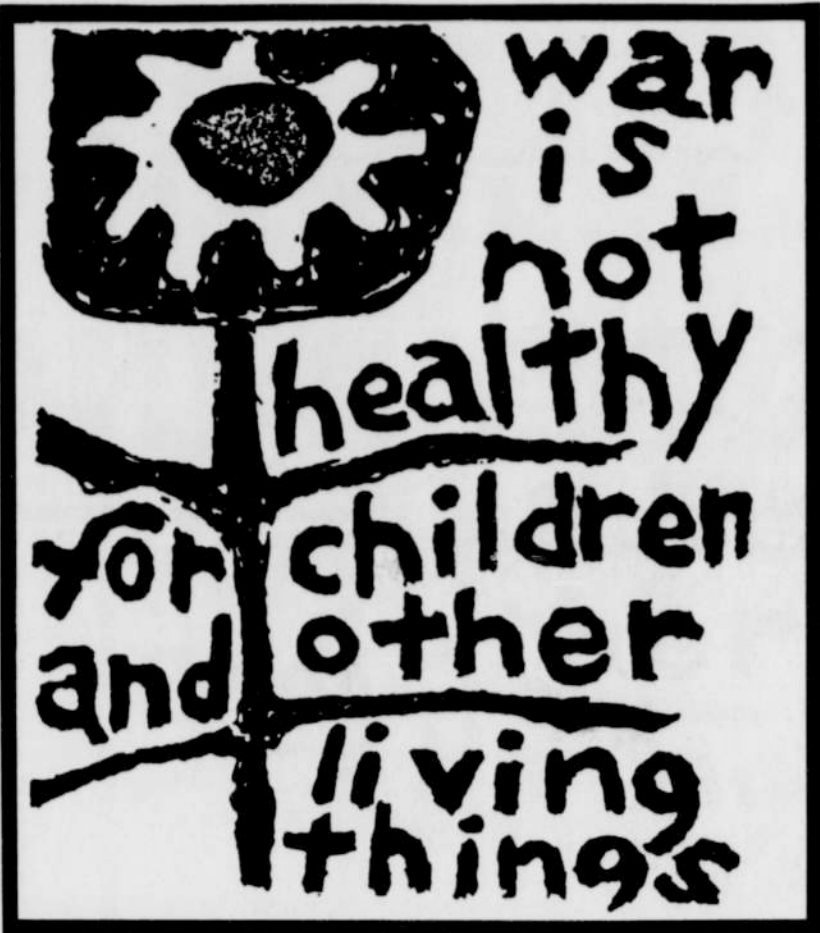
The only other issue was the polished black granite and how it should be detailed, over which I remember having a few arguments with the architects of record. The architects could not understand my choice of a reflective, highly polished black granite. One of them felt I was making a mistake and the polished surface would be "too feminine." Also puzzling to them was my choice of detailing the monument as a thin veneer with barely any thickness at its top edge. They wanted to make the monument's walls read as a massive, thick stone wall, which was not my intention at all. I always saw the wall as pure surface, an interface between light and dark, where I cut the earth and polished its open edge. The wall dematerializes as a form and allows the names to become the object, a pure and reflective surface that would allow visitors the chance to see themselves with the names. I do not think I thought black as a color, more as the idea of a dark mirror into a shadowed mirrored image of the space, a space we cannot enter and from which the names separate us, an interface between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

One aspect that made the project unusual was its politicized building process. For instance, the granite could not come from Canada or Sweden. Though these countries had beautiful black granites, draft evaders went to both countries, so the veterans felt that we could not consider their granites as options. The actual building process went smoothly for the most part, and the memorial was built very close to my original intentions.

As far as all of the controversy is concerned, I really never wanted to go into it too much. The memorial's starkness, its being below grade, being black, and how much my age, gender and race played a part in the controversy, we'll never quite know. I think it is actually a miracle that the piece ever got built. From the very beginning I often wondered, if it had not been an anonymous entry 1026 but rather an entry by Maya Lin, would I have been selected?

I remember at the very first press conference a reporter asking me if I did not find it ironic that the memorial was for the Vietnam War and that I was of Asian descent. I was righteous in my response that my race was completely irrelevant. It took me almost nine months to ask the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, in charge of building the memorial, if my race was at all an issue. It never occurred to me that it would be, and I think they had taken all the measures they could to shield me from such comments about a "gook" designing the memorial.

I remember reading the article that appeared in the *Washington Post* referring to "An Asian Memorial for an Asian War" and I knew we were in trouble. The controversy exploded in *Washington* after that article. Ironically, one side attacked the design for being "too Asian," while others saw its simplicity and understatement, not as an intention to create a more Eastern meditative space, but as a minimalist statement which they interpreted as nonreferential and disconnected from human experience.



This left the opinion in many that the piece emanated from a series of intellectualized aesthetic decisions, which automatically pitted artist against veterans. The fact that I was from an Ivy League college and had hair down to my knees further fueled this distrust of the design and suspicions of a hippie college liberal or aesthetic elitist forcing her art and community upon them.

Perhaps it was an empathetic response to the idea about war that had led me to cut open the earth — an initial violence that heals in time but leaves a memory, like a scar. But this imagery, which some detractors would later describe as "a black gash of shame and sorrow" in which the color black was called the "universal color of shame and dishonor," would prove incredibly difficult to defend. The misreading of the design as a negative political statement that in some way was meant to reflect upon the service of the veterans was in part fueled by a cultural prejudice against the color black as well as by the misreading or misinformation that led some veterans to imagine the design as a ditch or hole. It took a prominent 4-star general, Brigadier General George Price, who happened to be black, testifying before one of the countless subcommittee hearings and defending the color black, before the design could move forward.

But the distrust, the fact that no veterans had been on the jury, the unconventionality of the design and the designer, and a very radical requirement made by the Vietnam veterans to include all the names of those killed made it inevitable that the project would become controversial. I think ultimately that much of the negative response goes back to the very natural response to cover up or not acknowledge that which is painful or unpleasant. The very fact that the veterans themselves had required the listing and therefore the acknowledgment of the more than 57,000 casualties, which is a landmark in our country in terms of seeing a war through the individual lives lost, was very hard for many to face. I remember Ross Perot when he was trying to persuade the veterans that it was an inappropriate design, asking me if I truly didn't feel that the veterans would prefer a parade instead, something happy or uplifting, and I can remember thinking that a parade would not in the long term help them to overcome the enormous trauma of the politics of that war.

I do not think I fully realized until the dedication and homecoming parade that the veterans needed both. In effect the veterans gave themselves their own homecoming. In November 1982, I was in tears watching these men welcoming themselves home after almost ten years of not being acknowledged by their country for their service, their sacrifice.

But until the memorial was built I don't think I realized that the design was experiential and cathartic, and, most importantly, designed not for me, but for them. They didn't see that the chronology of the names allowed a returning veteran the ability to find his or her own time frame on the wall and created a psychological space for them that directly focused on human response and feeling. I remember one of the veterans asking me before the wall was built what I thought people's reaction to it would be. I realized then that these veterans were willing to defend a design they really didn't quite understand. I was too afraid to tell him what I was thinking, that I knew a returning veteran would cry.

An architect once told me to look always at what was originally envisioned and try to keep it. I left *Washington* before ground-breaking. I had to. The fund and I knew that we had to accept a compromise. The closer you watch something grow, the less able you are to notice changes in it. When I saw the site again, the granite panels were being put up and the place was frighteningly close to what I thought it should be. It terrified me. It was a strange feeling, to have had an idea that was solely yours be no longer a part of your mind but totally public, no longer yours.

There was always the expectation that since the war had been controversial, the memorial must be also. It wasn't so much an artistic dispute as a political one. The choice to make an apolitical memorial was in itself political to those who felt only a positive statement about the war would make up for the earlier antiwar days, a past swing to the left now to be balanced. It was extremely naive of me to think that I could produce a neutral statement that would not become politically controversial simply because it chose not to take sides.

Anyway, the push, as one congressman put it, to "politicize" the design didn't really affect the memorial in this way. The addition of the statue of the infantrymen and then the addition of the female statue to make them equal are to me sad indicators that some politicians believe that you can please all of the people all of the time by compromise and conglomerate works. These statues leave only the false reading that the wall is for the dead and they are for the living, when the design I made was for the returning veterans and equally names all who served regardless of race, creed or sex. I am only glad that the three infantrymen are not where they had been originally intended to be, right in the center of the memorial, heads sticking up higher than the walls, converting the walls to a backdrop and violating that private contemplative space. Ironically, the compromise memorializes the conflict in the building of the piece.

People cannot resolve that war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it. As for me, the first time I visited the memorial after it was completed I found myself searching out the name of a friend's father and touching it. It was strange to realize that I was another visitor and I was reacting to it as I had designed it.

This article has been excerpted from the N.Y. Review of Books. Maya Lin is an artist/architect and lives in NYC. She has written a book *Boundaries*, from which this essay has been taken. She has been commissioned to design four sculptures along the Columbia River to commemorate the Lewis & Clark bicentennial; one of these sculptures will be in Pacific County, Washington.

BODYBAG PATROL

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"I was just minding my own business trying to kill people," Kamajui laughed with visions of a woman running into a street screaming. "Then a grenade this guy was carrying exploded on his belt and that was the end of the war for both of us." A car screeched to a halt and swerved past the woman who was kneeling and crying, almost hitting her. "They told me later his insides looked like they'd been scooped out with a spoon," Kamajui said, remembering he ran to the woman crying in the street. "The Marine Corps killed my son!" she screamed.

It was a very hot day in Long Beach and Kamajui was sitting in a sun roasted car across from a dock at the U.S. Navy shipyard, talking to an old friend from the Vietnam War. His big gray ship was waiting to heave anchor and go back to war, or somewhere. He was a U.S. Marine, sweating out a final year before discharge back to "The World." Kamajui means clown on the island of Okinawa where everyone he knew called him that the year he was stationed there.

It took a long time to sew his hide back together. The faulty grenade went off somewhere south of DaNang where a green river wraps itself into a bow and the Americans call the place the Horseshoe. Marines die there all the time.

"I don't remember much about those months in the hospital, except most of the time I wanted to die," Kamajui said, then laughed. He laughs at everything most of the time, a real clown. "Anyhow, I got out of there finally and shipped back here to play ghoul."

For a year he drove USMC officers to the homes of Marines killed in action.

"One time we told this woman her kid was dead. She went hysterical, ripped up the captain's shirt and tore off his medals — then she got around to mine and almost stripped me naked. She ran outside and threw herself on the lawn screaming then got up and ran into the street. She was kneeling Jap-style, face in her hands, screaming, when a car almost got her. It was her only son."

Kamajui said at the funeral, when an officer handed the woman a U.S. flag, which is the custom, she threw it in his face.

"A lot of people took it hard. She was the worst I saw, but most of them broke down and cried and I remember a few guys shouted at us to get the hell out of their homes."

One woman asked Kamajui why couldn't he have been killed instead of her son.

"They know what you're there for, right when you get out of the car and start walking toward the door. There's no other reason a Marine would come to that door. He's sure not selling calendars."

By the time Kamajui and whatever officer was stuck with the task told the parents, their son would already have been dead close to a week. Another two or three weeks would pass before the body reached the States.

"They're pretty ripe by then and every funeral I went to was a closed casket," Kamajui said. "I don't know if a family has the option of an opened or closed casket or even gets to see the body — but it would be a pretty disgusting sight, not just because the kid might be all chewed up from whatever he got hit with, but for the fact he's been dead so long."

He said he went to about 20 funerals.

"Almost every one was a big joke. When we pulled the caskets out of the Hearse we all smiled and snickered saying,

'dumb fool!' 'Idiot!' 'That's what you get baby!' There's nothing sentimental about it.

He laughed.

"After the funerals the VFW used to invite us down to their hall and we'd get drunk and tell animal jokes about the poor guy we just planted."

He said some of the fun revolved around a singing telegram one of the Marines made up and gave Kamajui to deliver to a family.

"I was supposed to go up to the door and sing 'Your son is dead, shot in the head!' Everybody got a kick out of that."

There was also the chance of mixups, more so than anyone ever knew about, Kamajui said.

"You know how those body packers are, they don't care," he said, meaning the enlisted men responsible for stuffing the KIAs into plastic bags with the right name tags. "Most of the time the brass just takes some grunt (infantryman) and makes him a body packer. They stuff cotton in all the holes, tag the stiff and ship him out."

He reminded his friend of the olive-green ('odious drab') body cases that used to line the dusty roads into Chu Lai after a slaughter. Sometimes they stretched a few miles, generally four to a box, wrapped in plastic bags; all refrigerated against Vietnam's sweltering, moist heat.

Helicopters and transport planes would eventually get around to taking the corpses, a few at a time up to DaNang — from there to various places where the painters practiced their arts upon bodies not too badly mangled, then to the States where USMC guards transported them across the country on trains or planes. Last stop, home and a hole at the nearest cemetery.

"What used to crack me up," Kamajui said, "was this stone the casket would be placed on in the hole. It had a Marine Corps emblem, all polished up and painted. It's like they're trying to recruit somebody the same time they're burying somebody else."

When Kamajui was in USMC boot camp he said the drill instructor made the recruits kneel and pray for war every night. After the doctors put his pieces back together, Kamajui went home on leave and locked himself in his room for almost the entire 30 days. One night he woke up screaming and his father found him crying in a cold sweat.

"People question you like a machine when you get back," he said. "They want to get all excited and hear about all the blood and how your best friends died. I decided I didn't want to be a good Marine like I was told I should be if all it means is killing people."

He said the biggest reason most Marines volunteered for Vietnam was the extra \$65 a month combat pay.

"We're just democratic mercenaries, that's all, saving all that money for a new car."

Navy petty officers and Marine sergeants and corporals started running around, shooting sailors and Marines to the ship. It was ready to get underway. Kamajui and his friend left the car.

"I don't know why they just don't take a guy's body and throw it in a garbage can," he said just before boarding. "It's just been wasted anyhow. He don't know why he died, his parents don't know — he just goes to Vietnam thinking he's going to kill gooks."

(Long Beach Herald American, 1969)

Specializing in Forest Inventory
& Reforestation

PHILLIP KEIM
Forestry Technician



Keim's
Forestry
Services

Office (503) 325-2690 • Cell (503) 338-9691
1505 Irving Avenue • Astoria, Oregon 97103-3721



URIAH HULSEY

Columbian Cafe

1114 Marine Drive
Astoria, OR 97103
503-325-CAFE (2233)

Hours: Mon - Fri 8am - 2pm
Sat 10am - 2pm
Dinners: Wed - Sat, Open 5pm

VINCE MORRISON

Individual & Group Psychotherapy
Chemical Abuse Treatment Program
Couple & Family Counseling
Consultation ~ Training ~ Assessments
555 Bond St, Astoria, Oregon
325-8438 FAX 325-4402