Jonas Dahlberg

NOTES ON A MEMORIAL

The following text is the script for **Jonas Dahlberg**'s film *Notes on a Memorial* from 2018.

1

On the afternoon of July 22, 2011, a powerful car bomb exploded at the government headquarters in central Oslo. The bomb killed eight people and injured more than 30 others. The terrorist who carried out the bombing then traveled from central Oslo to the island of Utøya, in the municipality of Hole, where the youth association of the Norwegian Labor Party holds a summer camp with approximately 560 attendees. There, he killed 69 people and injured 66, most of them under 20. His actions were politically motivated and his goal was to prevent the development of the next generation of social democratic leadership in Norway.

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Two and a half years later, I sat on a bus on my way from Oslo to Utøya. The Norwegian government had announced an international competition for the creation of memorials to commemorate the victims of this act of terror. In the bus were the architects and artists invited to this competition.

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The island of Utøya sits in Tyrifjorden, a large lake in the municipality of Hole. Hole has about 6,000 residents and leans rightward politically, but the island of Utøya itself has been owned by the Norwegian Labor Party since 1950. Every year, the party's youth association holds a summer camp there that includes political workshops.

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It takes about 40 minutes to drive to Utøya from central Oslo, and on the last leg you find yourself on a small country road. The idea was to put a parking area next to the planned memorial site and from the parking area, a walkway would cross over a field to the memorial. The spot chosen for the memorial was on the mainland, at the tip of Sørbråten Point, which juts out towards Utøya.

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My idea for the memorial was based on some emotional observations from our initial visit to Utøya, when we were taken around the island by one of the survivors of the attack. It struck me at that time how different it felt walking around out in nature, compared to the feeling of walking through the rooms in the main building where many had been killed. The experience of seeing those empty rooms, and the traces of extreme violence, filled me and the others with deep sorrow. Some of us started to cry.

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But while the building served as a reminder of the terrorist act, things were very different out in nature. Though we stood in places where many people had lost their lives, and were told who they were and how they had died, nature had already begun its work of hiding the traces. As time passes, the emotions we felt inside the building will begin to shift, and ultimately to fade to some degree – like an open wound that is sewn up and eventually becomes a pale scar.

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After the visit to the island, we went to the planned site for the memorial. The land narrows to a point that juts out from the mainland towards Utøya, and here you have a view of Utøya over the water that's like the perfect landscape composition.

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I felt almost immediately that it was important to me for the memorial to offer something very different from that type of experience. Before we got to the memorial site, we had the opportunity to hear from some of the survivors. They talked about "taking back the island and making it theirs again." It started to feel more and more problematic that, while these kids were trying with all their might to move on so that they could gather there again each summer to talk politics, listen to music, sneak a beer, and maybe meet that special someone, at the same time there would be a group of people standing at the tip of this outcropping, looking and pointing at the island as if it were evil incarnate.

The thought of that kind of gaze reminded me of something that had happened during our bus trip to Utøya from Oslo. As we crested a rise and saw Tyrifjord lake for the first time, someone in the bus thought they saw Utøya. This made everyone in the bus jump out of their seats and peer out the side of the bus where you could see better. But pretty soon someone told us it wasn't Utøya we saw, and we all sat down again right away.

There is a powerful force of attraction in places like this. It may not always be a positive force in us, but it's human and it's hard to resist. For this reason, the journey to the memorial clearly becomes an important part of the memorial itself, because the journey also contributes to this energy. The risk, of course, is that it unwillingly seizes that energy and enables a gaze towards the island that is primarily passive, almost voyeuristic. It transforms Utøya into a monument in itself. So it felt important to me that we, as visitors to the memorial, would look at Utøya and at what happened there through our own sorrow – turning our gaze first inward rather than outward.

9

This was the first thing I focused on when I began sketching – how to counteract that type of gaze out towards the island.

First, I placed a sort of wall out in the water. But that felt wrong. I didn't want to create a monument.

Instead, I moved the wall up onto the point so that it blocked the view to the island, and also hindered access to the actual memorial site.

10

But something still felt very wrong, as if it became a kind of monument anyway, or a structure that risked expressing something different than what was intended.

So I started thinking about taking away the wall, pushing it down into the ground.

Making it disappear, or become invisible.

Create a kind of void. Like a cut or a wound in nature itself.

11

The monument was now gone, and the viewer's ability to move toward the tip of the point was disrupted. But the view of the island remained, and the site was missing a more intimate and private spot.

So I pushed the movement itself down into the ground and let it create a ramp and a tunnel that led down to a somewhat more private room inside the cliff.

12

To bring together the whole progression to the memorial site, I moved the proposed straight path over the fields so that it wended its way through the woods instead. Visitors would now move from the parking area along a contemplative five- to ten-minute walk through the woods up to the spot where the path cut into the landscape, down into the cliff, to a short tunnel that leads to the edge of the cut itself.

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Visitors now find themselves in this private room inside the cliff. Surrounded by nature, they hear the water floating by, the wind. They see the light reflected against the cliff wall across the canal, where the names of those we can no longer reach are engraved in the rock.

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My proposal for the memorial at Sørbråten Point is to make a cut or a wound in nature itself. It seeks to recreate the physical experience of taking away, and to reflect over the sudden and permanent loss of those who died. The memorial tries consciously to disrupt the view of the island in order to create a more private space where our gaze turns inward on ourselves.

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The cut that slices off the tip of the point is a three-and-a-half-meter wide excavation, and the void created in the landscape makes it impossible to reach the tip. The rock removed during excavation would be transported to Oslo and used to build the memorial in the government district.

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Immediately after it was announced that my proposal had won the competition, the one image in which the cut was most apparent began to go viral. Maybe in a way the memorial did end up being built during this time, despite everything, because it shows up in books, newspapers, tv, radio, dissertations, and other publications.

After about a week of almost exclusively positive responses, a group of 20-30 residents in the area made their reaction known. They were led by a local right-wing politician who also sat on the planning committee in Hole. They said that the memorial was brutal and that they didn't want to be reminded every day of what happened.

While the image of the memorial continued to spread around the world, I now got requests from the Norwegian government, wondering if it was possible to make the cut a little less visible. Could the "gap" be reduced slightly? Could it be turned another direction? Could trees be planted to conceal it? They even suggested filling in parts of the cut to make it a little less violent. But to me it's strange to talk about the memorial in itself as brutal. Isn't it the event it's meant to remind us of that is brutal? The memorial tries to capture the brutal nature of the act and some of what lies behind it, but also to draw near the fragility of the grieving process.

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The wound – the 40-meter long and 3.5-meter wide cut through the rock of an unpopulated point of land – could only be seen from certain angles. It would barely be visible to those who lived or traveled through the area. But since the illustration that spread in the media was from another angle, it didn't matter if reality looked different at the actual locations in question. The viral image of the memorial was so strong in people's minds that it now looked that way no matter where you looked from.

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During the next three years or so, there was an intense public debate about the memorial in the Norwegian media. It often seemed to me that the debate was focused on the wrong issues. But even though it got rather strident and skewed at times, I still believe that debate is an important part of the grieving process that a community, and individuals, need to go through. After all, how are you really supposed to remember an event like this? What guided me throughout my work was my belief that artistic creation can help in a very specific way to keep the conversation about traumatic events alive, and that this conversation in itself can have a healing effect. I believe that visual art plays a special role in relation to events that seem almost incomprehensible, and so hard to describe with words. It's not that art replaces other forms – on the contrary, journalism, science, religion, and other ways of responding are necessary. What I mean is that art plays another role, less dependent on language than the others but no less important.

Twice, the government pushed back construction on the memorial. A planned 2015 opening became 2016, then 2017. But the group of local residents had made their decision, and then, in the summer of 2016, they sued the Norwegian government. The matter was led by Jan Tore Sanner, minister for local government in Høyre, who proposed a settlement to the locals in which the government would stop work on the proposal about a month before construction was scheduled to begin. However, since the group had clearly stated they did not want any sort of memorial in the area, they rejected the proposed settlement. Work on the memorial at Sørbråten Point was now put on hold until the outcome of the suit, but it was decided that, in the meantime, I should continue working on the memorial for the government district in Oslo.

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As I sat in my studio in Stockholm working on my competition proposal during the fall and winter of 2013, I was completely sheltered and existed in a kind of zone of silence. I had lost my father about a year earlier, and for the first time I was able to get close to my own grief and process it. There were a lot of emotions from my own situation that I could draw on for the work with the memorial on Sørbråten Point – a place that, in a way, didn't much differ from the mental place I was in there in the studio. The memorial for the government district in Oslo lacked a clear, specific site for me to respond to – not just because it was going to be new, meaning that no one in the competition really knew what to respond to, but maybe also because it was harder for me in general to relate to a government location, a center of political life. But in fall 2016, when I was asked to further develop the sketches for the memorial in Oslo, both my internal and external landscape had changed. The public debate surrounding the memorial at Sørbråten Point meant that I could anchor my work in a different way. It gave me the site-specificity in relation to the government district that was missing in 2013. Now I was at the heart of the national conversation, in the center of the debate, and sketching a memorial for the center of political life.

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The government buildings in Oslo lie in the heart of the city, and like all such districts around the world they tend to lose much of their urban character in the evening. Pretty much nothing happens in these neighborhoods at night, when the people who work there have gone home. After an act of terror it's not just national borders that risk being closed, but also in buildings, sites, and even in people. As I started to think about this, it felt important for the memorial to try to counteract that kind of development, to work instead towards openness and to try to create life and movement in the area. As I sat and thought about this, and about the conversations that had occurred about the memorials, I started thinking about what it would mean if, rather than showing the people who the terrorist killed, the way most memorials do, it showed everyone else. The whole society.

21

And in this way allow those who died to emerge through everyone else. If one were to work off the Norwegian population directory, which is based on residence and not citizenship or nationality, then there were just over five million people in Norway on July 22, 2011. All such directories are of course problematic in and of themselves. Who is seen, and who is made invisible? However, I felt that such an archive or document of this day would also problematize important questions related to what happened. This rather simple idea, or image, became a starting point for me in the work. It felt natural to imagine that this archive of five million names would be carved in stone, like an ancient text.

From the beginning the idea was to use the rock taken from the memorial at Sørbråten Point to make stone slabs, but if that memorial wouldn't be done in time, or at all, then another type of stone could be used without significantly weakening the concept.

22

The memorial in the government district in Oslo would consist of this archive of approximately 2,000 large stone slabs engraved with just over five million names. The names would belong to the 77 people who died, along with every other person who was registered in the Norwegian population directory on July 22, 2011. The names of those who lost their lives were to be distinguished by being surrounded by a few extra centimeters of space. The five million names would not be in alphabetical order; rather, they would be placed next to each other at random. My hope was that a first glance would emphasize our shared connection: we are all people, we are all named, we are all witnesses on this day.

23

During the construction of the new government buildings, the memorial would gradually expand over the course of the 7-10 years it will take to complete the building process. As the large stone slabs with engraved names were completed, they would be installed on-site at ceremonial occasions. With all the stone slabs installed, there would be 77 stacks that together would contain the names of those who lost their lives as well as everyone who was registered in Norway on July 22, 2011.

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When the new government buildings was completed, the stacks of stone slabs would be moved and laid out on the ground, thereby creating a larger area for reflection and engagement. Those who came to the memorial would perhaps search for their own name, or that of a family member or friend. It's a sort of existential need: our search for our place in the world.

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This searching makes it a potentially active place, since generation after generation would find a reason to search for the names of parents, relatives, and others. This simple activation means that, as in an oral storytelling tradition, the five million people who were there on that day would carry forward the story of what happened and of those who lost their lives.

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Because when you search for your name, you would sometimes encounter names that have a little more space around them, like a breath: the names of those who lost their lives to that act of terror. In this encounter, your existential search would be reframed.

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As your body walks there, you encounter those who have been robbed of this possibility. The living and the dead, side by side. Living entails a responsibility to others; it even entails a responsibility for what happened on July 22, 2011.

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Before my proposal for the memorial for the government district was made public, I found out at a press conference held by the government in June 2017 that my work on *Memory Wound* at Sørbråten was being called off. Soon after the press conference, I also found out that my entire contract for the memorials was being revoked. This meant that not only would *Memory Wound* at Sørbråten Point never be realized, but the ongoing work with the Oslo memorial would end. At the press conference, the government also announced that it was important for future memorials to be "low-key." But what does this mean, exactly? I am convinced that the point of a national memorial is to honor those who lost their lives by insisting on a continued collective conversation about what happened. Though uncomfortable at times, this conversation in and of itself is what allows trauma to be processed in the long run. A memorial that strives for everyone to be in silent agreement runs the risk of minimizing what happened, and contributes to our forgetting of the circumstances.

FJORDLAND

Jonas Dahlberg, *Memory Wound*, 2014. Land Art

Jonas Dahlberg woke me up, I was asleep on my couch.
You have to come, he said.
Go to the panoramic window, look! Now it's happening all by itself!
It's a marvel, it just happened, here in Hole municipality.
The marvel itself marveled. Of course, everyone who had tried to say that mountains cannot shout any hoorays or comfort anyone, silent and marvelous, went quiet.
That's the way it went, because mountains can divide after all.
Just as everyone had turned away, had turned their chairs, had been indifferent and had to head over to such-and-such town and mind their own business, or extend the terrace, the land simply divided itself.
The fjord filled up, because water can't stand being empty. But I saw nothing. I relaxed, had stopped gazing at the fjord long ago. Meanwhile the memorial was in place.
Just like the competition winner. Just right.
A loaf of sliced bread missing a slice. Our own void with water under, our void with sky above.
We can't tell anyone about this, Jonas Dahlberg, no one would take us seriously, I said.
No, he said. No one wants to believe that nature is like that, that it can be comforting.
My daughter was so sick and tired of my monument. She felt so sorry for nature out here, he said.

No, and now this covers my rubber boats. It happened this evening I can tell. It happened on its own with a spell. It happened in a parallel.
It happened in a Fjordland that is not.
I don't believe you're aware of what you're doing, Jonas, I said. I scrounge up some dinner. Do you want to watch the Saturday soccer game with me?
The microwave beeped.

Cecilie Løveid, *Vandreutstillinger*, Kolofon forlag 2017