

# Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Sonja K. Foss

*Visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial generally are deeply moved by it—regardless of their positions on the Vietnam War itself. In this essay, five visual features of the memorial are identified that enable it to appeal to virtually all visitors: (a) It violates the conventional form of war memorials; (b) It assumes a welcoming stance; (c) It provides little information to the visitor; (d) It focuses attention on those who did not survive the war; and (e) It generates multiple referents for its visual components. The effectiveness of the memorial suggests that it may serve as a model for contemporary anti-war rhetoric.*

**KEY CONCEPTS** *Vietnam Veterans Memorial, ambiguity, aesthetic response, meaning, intentionality, form, multiple referents, anti-war rhetoric.*

*SONJA K. FOSS (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 1976) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.*

**A long and a painful process has brought us to this moment today. Our Nation, as you all know, was divided by this war. For too long we tried to put that division behind us by forgetting the Vietnam war and, in the process, we ignored those who bravely answered their Nation's call, adding to their pain the additional burden of our Nation's own inner conflict.** (Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bill, 1982, p. 1268)

**W**ith these words, President Jimmy Carter signed into law the legislation that authorized the construction of a memorial in Washington, D.C., for those who fought in the Vietnam War. The result of the legislation is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, set in a park in sight of the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the dome of the Capitol. It is a V formed by two black granite walls that diminish in height as they extend outward, making the monument appear to descend into the earth. Chiseled into the walls are the names of the 57,930 men and 9 women who died or are listed as missing in the Vietnam War. The names are arranged chronologically according to date of death, beginning with July 8, 1959, when two military advisors were killed.

The monument bears two inscriptions. On the first panel are the words, "In honor of the men and women of the armed forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam war, the names of those who gave their lives and of those who remain missing are inscribed in the order they were taken from us." On the final panel, an inscription notes that the memorial was built with private contributions (Clarke, 1983).

A memorial to honor those who fought in the Vietnam War was the idea of Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran who was seriously wounded during the war. In 1979, he organized and became president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, founded to erect a national monument to those who had died in the Vietnam War. Legislation authorizing the memorial passed Congress on January 3, 1980, with all 100 members of the Senate co-sponsoring the resolution. It was signed into law by President Carter on July 1, 1980.

In October, 1980, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund members announced a juried competition to select a design for the memorial; seed money to launch the contest was provided by Texas millionaire H. Ross Perot. Two design requirements were stipulated: The names of the 57,939 Americans who died or are missing in Vietnam had to be engraved on the memorial, and contestants were required to be sensitive to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, which bracket the site (Hess, 1983, p. 122). Jurors for the competition were landscape architects Hideo Sasaki and Garrett Eckbo; architects Harry Weese and Pietro Belluschi; sculptors Constantino Nivola, James Rosati, and Richard Hunt; and Grady Clay, editor of *Landscape Architecture* (Wolfe, 1982, p. 13). In May, 1981, the design selected as the winner of the competition was that of Maya Lin, a twenty-two-year-old, Chinese-American undergraduate majoring in architecture at Yale University.

After the design had won the approval of the National Capital Planning Commission, the Fine Arts Commission, and the Department of the Interior, opposition to the design surfaced. It began when Tom Carhart, a Vietnam veteran and lawyer in the Pentagon, called Lin's design "a black gash of shame and sorrow" (McCombs, March 1982, p. 14). He was joined in opposition by Perot, who had funded the competition, and James Webb, a Vietnam veteran and former counsel to the House Veterans Affairs Committee. The opposition gained momentum, and two dozen Republican Congressional representatives wrote President Reagan demanding reconsideration of the design. In January, 1981, Interior Secretary James Watt withdrew his support for the design just six weeks before the scheduled groundbreaking.

In March, after sponsors of the memorial agreed to incorporate the American flag and a statue of an infantryman in the design and the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission approved the changes, Watt gave approval and cleared the way for the memorial's groundbreaking and construction. In October, 1982, the Commission on Fine Arts ruled that the statue and flagpole must be separated from and not intrude on Lin's original design (Shannon, 1982). Lin's memorial was dedicated on November 13, 1982; the statue, *Three Fightingmen*, was dedicated on November 9, 1984. Designed by Frederick Hart, a Washington, D.C., sculptor, it is a seven-foot-high, realistic depiction of three soldiers—one Caucasian, one Black, and one Hispanic—dressed in fatigues and carrying guns and ammunition. The statue now creates an entrance, with an American flag, to the park in which the memorial designed by Lin is located.

Since the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, visitors have responded to it positively and with great emotion. Regardless of one's opinion on the war or the role one assumed during it, the monument has the

capacity for strong appeal. "Breathtaking" was the description of it by one veteran, who was moved to tears by his visit to it (Thornton, 1982). Those who did not participate in or who protested against the war, however, are similarly moved. "It just pulls you in. It's incredible as a monument," explained a former protester of the war. She admitted that she was completely unprepared for the emotional experience of seeing the memorial for the first time (Schmidt, 1982). The opposition and negative reaction to Lin's design that surfaced prior to the construction of the memorial has quieted as a consequence of its overwhelming favorable reception by visitors.

The capacity of an object such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to appeal to audiences of diverse and often opposing perspectives offers the opportunity to study rhetoric of exceptional breadth and force. A truism in speech communication is the need to tailor rhetoric to appeal to a particular audience and particular circumstances if it is to be effective. This memorial represents a case in which a rhetorical work is confronted by very different audiences who experienced the Vietnam War differently; nonetheless, it manages to transcend the differences and appeal to virtually all audience members. My purpose in this essay is to identify the characteristics of the memorial that enable it to perform this function and thus to serve both as a symbol of the opposition to the Vietnam War and as a symbol of honor to those who participated in it.

### **Rhetoric of the Visual Image**

My analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is based on a number of assumptions concerning the relationship between the visual arts and rhetoric. I believe that the visual image is a form of rhetoric, a view congruent with Burke's view of symbolicity as encompassing not only talk, but "all other human symbol systems, such as mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on" (Burke, 1966, p. 28). As the conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, and other elements in a manner that affects or evokes a response, visual art is included in the definition of rhetoric suggested by Ehninger—"all of the ways in which men may influence each other's thinking and behavior through the strategic use of symbols" (Ehninger, 1972, p. 3). A building provides an example of just how a visual structure influences those who use it or look at it. The building not only "tells" us about the people who designed and chose it, but its features can modify our own reactions, encouraging us to feel, for example, more courtly when we enter a palace, more pious when we enter a church, more studious when we enter a library, or more businesslike when we enter an office (Mumford, 1968, p. 265).

The definition of art as rhetoric, admittedly, requires the acceptance of still other assumptions. I am presupposing, in a work of art, intentionality, which is a concept that is problematic in discursive and even more so in non-discursive rhetoric. While beliefs, fears, hopes, desires, perceptual experiences, and the words we use to describe them are intrinsically intentional in that they are directed at objects, events, and conditions, visual objects are not intrinsically

intentional in the same way; they exist simply as physical phenomena in the world (Searle, 1980, pp. 250–251). A work of art can be seen as representing the intentionality of its creator, however, in that the creator's intention or purpose exists only in terms of the formal matter of the work. The actual art object is not merely the end result of an initial purpose, but it is itself the purpose from the very beginning of the creative act. The image first held in the artist's mind had to be conceived in terms of materials and processes to become the matter of the work (Dewey, 1934, pp. 276–277). Thus, the art object itself *is* intended meaning, and it contained intention to be what it is from the moment of its conception (Nemerov, 1980, p. 9).

Visual works of art, then, may be considered rhetoric in that they produce effects and are intentional and purposive objects. To study visual works of art *only* as rhetoric, however, is to ignore important features of the works that distinguish them in significant ways from discursive rhetoric—their aesthetic qualities and the aesthetic responses they may evoke. I propose that a useful way to conceptualize a viewer's response to a visual object is that it assumes two forms or occurs in two steps—the aesthetic and the rhetorical. While these will be described more fully in the discussion that follows, in short, the aesthetic precedes the rhetorical response and consists of a direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the object. The rhetorical response that follows constitutes the processing of the aesthetic experience and thus the attribution of meaning to the object.

Certainly, there is no general agreement as to the nature of the aesthetic experience, but it tends to be seen as the apprehension or perception of the sensory elements of an art object. Of primary consideration in this experience is the recognition that the form of the art object itself is interesting or significant. Experience of a work at an aesthetic level might mean, for example, enjoying its color, sensing its form, valuing its texture, or responding to its complexity. Because an aesthetic response requires that we pay attention to and contemplate an art object simply for the sake of enjoying the way it looks, the aesthetic response is not functional or instrumental; we do not view an object out of concern for any purpose it may serve. When we apprehend a color, for example, its significance consists simply in the way it looks to us; it has no meaning beyond itself. There is no purpose governing the experience other than that of simply having the experience (Stolnitz, 1960, pp. 34, 35).

A work comes to mean more than what we directly perceive as a result of a rhetorical response to it. At this stage, the aesthetic components are processed by the viewer, using symbols, so that an interpretation of the aesthetic experience results. A rhetorical response, in other words, involves a critical, reflective analysis of the work or a cognitive apprehension of it. With a rhetorical response, the colors, lines, textures, and rhythms of the work no longer are apprehended for their own sake, but their presence provides a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of something else; they begin to refer to images, emotions, and ideas beyond themselves. A blue color, for example, may be interpreted by the viewer as representative of the sky, adventure, or freedom.

In an art object's function as a symbol for other elements, however, no one true meaning or interpretation can be made. To say that an art object has meaning does not mean that it signifies some fixed referent. Rather, meaning results only from a viewer's creation of an interpretation of the visual object. Different meanings are attributed to a work of art, then, by different viewers as a result of the different endowments and experiences brought to the work. Their varying observational abilities, knowledge about and familiarity with the object, beliefs, values, and emotional predispositions serve as filters for them as they experience and interpret the work.

An audience remains a crucial variable in the process of interpretation even when an artist does not show a work of art to anyone, creating it only to serve as a focus for his or her personal images. The artist is an active perceiver and interpreter of the art and thus serves as his or her own audience for the work (Berleant, 1970, p. 61). The artist is subject to the same processes of interaction with the work as is the external viewer, attributing some meaning to it and experiencing its effects. As Kaelin explains, "the artist learns as much from his work as does his audience. The artist is his first appreciator, . . . the first one surprised to discover 'his' idea" (1970, p. 38).

The predominant role of the audience in the establishment of the meaning for a work of art, however, does not mean that a viewer has total freedom to attribute any meaning at all to the work. A viewer's interpretation is limited by the actual object itself. I do not intend to suggest that meaning is a constituent part of the object and that there is something about the object itself that is responsible for the meaning attributed to it. For if meaning were intrinsic to the object, of course, all those who perceived it would apprehend the same meaning. Yet, the solid physical presence of a work of art makes possible the work's aesthetic and rhetorical effects and, more important, renders one rhetorical interpretation more likely to occur than another.

The boundaries imposed on interpretation by the physical object do not determine specific meanings for the work but rather discourage certain interpretations and encourage others by providing experiential limits to the range of interpretation open to a viewer. Even when the meaning attributed by a viewer is far removed from the contemplation of a physical element of a work, that meaning ultimately can be traced back to that element of the work itself. Thus, the pointillism of Seurat provides a material starting point for interpretation that is distinctly different from the cubism of Picasso, and these physical forms themselves are likely to lead to different attributions of meaning by viewers (Berleant, 1970, p. 53). The attribution of meaning in the rhetorical response, then, has a basis in the formed matter of the work. The various interpretations viewers bring to it are grounded in the material or physical aspects of the work. Individual experience alone is not a reliable clue to the meaning of a work; to be considered valid, meaning must be shown to be grounded in the material characteristics of the work.

Although I have discussed them separately, the aesthetic and rhetorical responses are not distinct processes that occur apart from each other. An aesthetic response generally becomes a rhetorical one. Rarely do we have an experience that is purely sensory and in which we do not interpret in some

way the sense data we perceive so that they become meaningful or rhetorical. We see more than a patch of color, for example; we see a stop sign or a flag.

Some responses may appear to be predominantly rhetorical and to occur without a concomitant aesthetic experience. The work of art itself may appear to be simply a vehicle for the communication of ideas or emotions, and because our focus is on the effect of the object, we do not apprehend it for its own sake. For example, the hearing of a song ("They're playing our song") may call up memories so that the listener responds minimally to the actual music, which becomes simply a backdrop for the memories. But even in such a case, the aesthetic response still cannot be separated from the rhetorical experience since the aesthetic/physical qualities provide a foundation and a starting point for the rhetorical experience.

The analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that follows relies on the assumptions I have just described about the relationship between the visual image and rhetoric. While I recognize that viewers may have both aesthetic and rhetorical responses to the memorial, my focus in this essay is on the rhetorical responses generated to it. If a viewer responds primarily to the regularity and pattern of the names on the memorial, for example, the response is predominantly aesthetic and beyond the scope of my analysis. But if that viewer attributes meaning to the names and they are used to consider the tragedy of war, the response has become a rhetorical one of the type in which I am interested.

My method of analysis will be to identify the physical or material properties of the memorial that a viewer is likely to use as the basis for attribution of meanings to the memorial. While my description of these may be seen as anthropomorphic in that I will use phrases such as "the memorial provides" or "the memorial generates," this style was selected simply as a matter of convenience. I do not intend to suggest that the meaning of the memorial lies in these physical attributes or that the memorial is itself a rhetor capable of producing purposive communication. Rather, I am suggesting that as the physical embodiment of its creator's intention, the memorial can be examined as containing particular characteristics that are likely to guide the viewer's interpretation in particular directions. The viewer is free to interpret the memorial or create meaning for it according to his or her own experiences, as long as the meaning attributed is grounded somehow in the material form of the memorial. This material form provides the starting point as well for my analysis of how the memorial generates meaning to viewers.

### **Visual Appeal of the Memorial**

I have asserted that a predominant feature of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is its apparent capacity to appeal to diverse viewers who assume very different stances toward the Vietnam War. I will argue that this appeal stems from five major visual features of the memorial: (a) It violates the conventional form of war memorials; (b) It assumes a welcoming stance; (c) It provides little information to the visitor; (d) It focuses attention on those who did not survive the war; and (e) It generates multiple referents for its visual

components. My discussion will apply only to Lin's design; Hart's statue will not be considered in my analysis.

### ***Violation of Conventional Memorial Form***

Most visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial approach it with some knowledge of the form of conventional war memorials and expect to see yet another such memorial. Burke discusses the operation of this kind of conventional form as "the appeal of form as *form*" (Burke, 1968, pp. 126-127), and it is characterized by built-in expectations of a particular form that the audience brings to a work. That this memorial is a far cry from the customary warriors' monument is immediately evident. We do not see soldiers erecting a flag, a general on a horse, white marble bearing inscriptions of quotations by the famous about the war and those who served in it, or flags waving. We have, then, in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, violation of the conventional form of war memorials.

Conventional form is violated here primarily in that the memorial lacks any realistic depiction of those who fought in the war, a feature generally included in war memorials. There is no statue reminiscent of John Wayne, with the hero engaged in a task representative of the fighting done in the war. Missing also are the realistic details of his uniform and a stoic, brave facial expression. These traditional kinds of realistic depictions of a person, action, clothing, and facial expression suggest that these conventional statues are to be viewed as representative of a universal type. The soldier depicted is to be seen as wearing the uniform all soldiers wore, wearing the facial expression common to soldiers, and performing actions they all performed or were capable of performing. We are asked, at such memorials, to focus on a representative of a class and thus to see the war in abstract terms.

In contrast, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we are given no encouragement to see classes of people and an abstract, ideal, remote war. The listing of each name and the fact that each can be touched by the visitor demands that we see the Vietnam War in concrete, personal terms as the killer of each person whose name appears. Each name suggests individual features, actions, personalities, families, and friends that defy their placement in a general, ideal class. Thus, our conventional expectations of a war memorial as abstract and general and thus lacking in capacity to involve its visitors personally in the war are violated.

The memorial breaks conventional form as well in that it does not provide, as described by the Congressional representatives who protested the design, the patriotic uplift expected in a war memorial (McCarthy, 1982). Viewers tend not to leave the memorial with a positive feeling about the role and actions of the United States in the war. This unconventional response can be attributed to the absence of the American flag from the design of the memorial itself—the traditional symbol for eliciting American pride in values such as freedom and liberty. Similarly, no heroic action is depicted to suggest bravery and nobility and to generate a spirit of patriotism, and no inscription quotes a general or a President on the goals or benefits of the war to remind us of American values. Consequently, also missing are the implications, suggested

by many war memorials, that America was right (and always is right) in fighting the war being depicted, that all Americans' actions in that war were noble ones, and that the war resulted in the protection of the American way of life. In this break with the conventional form of war memorials in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we are apt to think about how the Vietnam War changed our perceptions of our country and of war itself. We are likely to experience some confusion simply because what we are expected to think about America and the war is not made clear in this memorial.

Lacking the clear, patriotic sense that emerges from most war memorials, visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are able to bring new kinds of expectations to the work. Because the form we expected is not there, we are encouraged to replace it with expectations for new forms that may be more personal and individual. This is an important first step in the memorial's process of appeal to divergent individuals—conventional expectations for the work are destroyed, requiring us to bring to it something out of our individual experiences that does not necessarily conform to conventional expectations.

### ***Welcoming Stance***

Despite the violation of conventional form and expectations about war memorials, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does not distance or threaten the visitor. Instead, it invites, draws us in, and almost seems to embrace us. Lin herself described the memorial as conveying a non-threatening welcome to viewers: "It's like opening up your hands. It's not so threatening. You're using the earth, asking people to come in, protecting people from the sounds [of the city] and in a way that's no more threatening than two open hands" (McCombs, January 1982, p. 12).

The invitation to enter what the viewer perceives will be a safe, non-threatening place is achieved largely through the V shape of the memorial. That it appears to be sinking into the ground also adds force to the image of engulfing, nurturing, and enfolding, creating a safe and secure place for the viewer. This aspect of the memorial has been described as typifying a "female sensibility," in contrast to "phallic memorials that rise upwards," towering over and threatening other elements in the area. "I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it, . . ." (Hess, 1983, p. 123), Lin has explained, recognizing the inviting, non-threatening quality of the memorial that is suggested through the embrace of the V shape.

Another explanation for why the memorial appears more secure and less threatening is because it suggests respect for the elements that surround it. It does not appear to struggle against them, nor does it convey that it dictates to them. The memorial is integrated into and interdependent with the earth as it is engulfed by and conforms to the earth's contours. It is attuned and sensitive to the landscape around the memorial. Each arm of the memorial points to the northeast corners of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, suggesting as well a connection between the memorial and America's earlier history.

We feel no threat as we begin the walk down into the memorial because we already know it will not dictate to us what we must think, overpower us



with one perspective, or attempt to alter whatever relationship we have with the Vietnam War. The safe, engulfing embrace of the arms of the memorial suggests simply that our own personal expectations are legitimate.

The lack of information provided by the memorial reinforces this expectation. I will discuss this lack of information in more detail later, but the fact that the memorial does not, through its physical form, shout one message or seek to control what we should think also contributes to the ease with which the viewer accepts the invitation to enter the work. It confirms, supports, and reinforces whatever individual expectations and perspectives visitors wish to bring to the memorial so that we are able to maintain them without fear of challenge or rejection.

### ***Lack of Information***

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's lack of information does not function only to enable us to feel that our own views and perspectives are legitimate and will not be challenged. It also places the emphasis of the memorial on form. An obvious omission from the memorial is any story or plot line of the Vietnam War—information such as why Americans fought in Vietnam, who sent them there, and how long they fought. Not only are there no words to provide such information, but it is not supplied in the visual elements of the work, either. The visitor is given no clue—through facial expression or heroic deed depicted realistically—of how to answer questions about Vietnam. The message the viewer receives about Vietnam, as a result, is a diluted, ambiguous one. In the words of one respondent, "Lin's memorial is intentionally not meaningful" (Hess, 1983, p. 124). No one meaning emerges from the memorial.

The lack of information allows supporter and protester of the war alike to see the memorial as eloquent. "It says everything it needs to say," explained one veteran. "It's eloquent" (Vietnam vets, 1982, p. 3). This term, "eloquence," is one Burke uses to describe a reliance on form rather than information in a rhetorical work for appeal (1968, pp. 29–44). A reliance on information has the plot and subject matter as intrinsically interesting, and the techniques used to create and sustain interest are surprise and suspense. Once we know the information—how the story ends—we are less ready to repeat the experience of the work; we are less ready to read the book again or, in this case, visit the monument again.

In contrast, eloquence is the minimizing of an interest in fact and a reliance instead on the psychology of form, where the presence of one quality calls forth the demand for another and certain expectations generated in a work are fulfilled. Reliance on the formal arrangements within the work to create its appeal allows for a great deal of repetition in exposure to a work because a viewer, listener, or reader may bring to and see developed a wide variety of expectations that then are fulfilled. Lin asserts that she designed the memorial with this kind of freedom in mind: "What people see, or don't see is their own projection" (Hess, 1983, p. 123). Frederick Hart, artist for the additional sculpture placed at the memorial's site, also described this capacity of the

memorial, although he viewed it as a negative, rather than a positive, quality: "People say you can bring what you want to Lin's memorial. But I call that brown bag esthetics. I mean you better bring something, because there ain't nothing being served" (Hess, 1983, p. 124).

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, then, relies for its effect on formal aspects that enable various expectations to be created for the viewer and then fulfilled because of the limited information it supplies. The diverse kinds of perspectives that can achieve fulfillment and find reinforcement in the memorial will be discussed later, but an enormous range of different expectations may be brought to the work because information suggesting the proper or appropriate one is missing.

### ***Focus on Those Who Did not Survive the War***

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial also is able to appeal to many different individuals because it does not focus on the Vietnam War itself. The war was divisive, frustrating, and confusing for the country; a focus on it would have served as a reminder of old divisions, antagonisms, and ambiguities. But the memorial says nothing about the war and does not honor or glorify it. Instead, because of the listing of the names, the emphasis in the memorial is placed on the individuals who died as a result of the war. As one viewer explained, "It's not a glorification of war and those who fought in them, but a memorial to the dead who don't survive them" (Schmidt, 1982). The names represent what once were living human beings, and they remind visitors that these people are no more. The memorial simply suggests the message: "In war, young men die; here are their names" (McGrory, 1982). Lin has explained that this was, in part, her intent in the memorial: "These [American troops in Vietnam] died. You have to accept that fact before you can really truly recognize them and remember them. . . . I wanted something that would just simply say: 'They can never come back. They should be remembered'" (McCombs, January 1982, p. 9).

The memorial's focus on those who did not survive the Vietnam War also is apparent in the objects deposited at the memorial by visitors—objects such as flowers, candles, incense, medals, parts of uniforms, personal treasures, and photographs of the dead. These make the individuals and the relationships they once had with families and friends particularly vivid for visitors. But we also are asked to examine ourselves at the memorial and to focus on our own relationships and our own views of death. As we read the names inscribed in the granite, we can see ourselves reflected in it. "You are looking at yourself through the names of the dead," explained a volunteer for the National Park Service at the site (Clarke, 1983).

The memorial's focus on those who died, rather than on the war, suggests a means by which all visitors potentially can become united. Whatever one's perspective on Vietnam, that so many died in the war is seen as tragic and terrible. "All those names," was one visitor's response. "It simply washed over—the utter futility, the incomprehensible waste, . . ." (Schmidt, 1982). A Green Beret's reaction was similar: "What a horrendous waste it all was. So

many names . . ." (Vietnam vets, 1982, p. 1). The message presented is "that it should never happen again, that the loss of all those young lives was too great a price to pay, . . ." (Schmidt, 1982).

This focus asks us not to bring to the work our views of the war itself but rather anger at the waste, sorrow at the loss, and empathy for those who grieve. The repetitive form of name after name continually restates the message of waste and provides a common feeling and experience of sorrow in which all visitors share. This response of grief seems to be the unifying, universal experience that draws all visitors together at the memorial, enabling our differences to be transcended. As one visitor succinctly explained this response, "The names. The names. They make a man cry" (Vietnam vets, 1982, p. 3).

### ***Generation of Multiple Referents***

One major difference between discursive and non-discursive rhetoric is the greater variety of referents and thus meanings available to an audience of non-discursive rhetoric. Certainly, numerous referents and meanings are likely in the decoding of discourse, but written and spoken language have greater constraints such as grammar and denotative meanings that limit, to some degree, the referent and meaning options available to the audience. Because of its abstract form, lack of realistic visual depiction, and lack of explanatory discourse, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows a wide variety of referents to be attributed to its various visual elements. The referents accorded to the work's visual characteristics often are very different among viewers, but the result is broad appeal of the memorial as all are able to see it as conforming to their perspectives on the war simply by the referents selected.

The V shape of the memorial serves as one example of the capacity of the memorial to elicit a variety of referents. The V can be seen as standing for the peace sign that was used by anti-war protesters; this referent led some critics of the memorial's design, such as the Marine Corps League and Tom Wolfe, to call the memorial a tribute to Jane Fonda (Wolfe, 1982, p. 13). The V shape also has been seen as "a great privy, an outside urinal of German beer garden design . . ." (DeVaul, 1982), suggesting a negative interpretation of the memorial's meaning—lack of respect for the veterans and the war. The V shape suggests as well an index finger pointing. Some have suggested that it asks those who served in the war why they did so; others might interpret it as pointing a finger of blame at those responsible for Vietnam (Wolfe, 1982, pp. 11, 13).

The black color of the memorial also can be interpreted in various ways. Because black is a color associated with shame, the memorial can be seen as representing America's shame at participation in the war. For others, black is a color of sorrow and mourning, suggesting that mourning at the memorial is proper. The walls themselves can be seen both as a "wailing wall" for such mourning and as a "wailing wall" for the vociferous protests of the anti-war and anti-draft demonstrators (McCombs, March 1982, p. 14).

The submersion of the memorial in the earth elicits equally contradictory referents or meanings. It can be seen as a trench, a pit, or a ditch, suggesting a desire to bury the dead of and thus our experience in Vietnam. Such referents also might suggest that Vietnam was something too horrible and shameful to be out in the open and exposed above ground. The submerged monument also can be interpreted as an admission of guilt by the United States—an acknowledgment of the crimes committed by the United States in Vietnam. It can indicate as well a descent into hell—perhaps the hell of the United States' presence in Vietnam or the hell experienced by those who fought in Vietnam. Still others might see the submersion as representing the healing power of time in the experience of grief, an interpretation made by Lin: "You never get over it when someone close to you dies, but as time goes by, you heal over. And when the memorial went into the earth, the grass healed over the cut, . . ." (Ditmer, 1983).

While all rhetoric is ambiguous and open to interpretation because of the various meanings symbols elicit in individuals, abstract, non-discursive rhetoric is particularly subject to diverse interpretations and the assignment of a wide variety of referents to the aspects of the design. The capacity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to allow opposing referents and divergent meanings to emerge from the same elements is yet another feature of the memorial that enables it to appeal to individuals who approach it from very different perspectives.

### Conclusions

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not likely to change anyone's views on the Vietnam War. Quite likely, however, is that it prompts reflection for many of its visitors about war itself and the waste and loss that war generates. In this sense, the memorial functions as an effective anti-war symbol, as "a nearly perfect statement against the lunacy of war." It guides the viewer to acceptance of the message that "it should never happen again, . . . that there must be a better way to resolve quarrels between nations" (Schmidt, 1982). Whether visitors are veterans of the war, relatives of those who died in it, supporters of it, or former protesters against it, we are encouraged, at the memorial, to put aside political, ideological, and nationalistic perspectives. Our commitment to positions or issues surrounding the Vietnam War—that America must engage in such conflicts to stop Communism, to defend the American way of life, or to maintain an image of strength for America, for example, is irrelevant. The memorial encourages us to look at the personal consequences of war—death of individuals—and to oppose such a method of the destruction of life.

The memorial's presentation of an anti-war message suggests that it can be used as a model of effective anti-war rhetoric by those currently involved in anti-war efforts such as protesting the United States' activities in Lebanon and Granada, protesting American involvement in Central America, counseling young men not to register for the draft, or seeking to stop the proliferation of nuclear arms. The characteristics of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that

enable it to serve an anti-war function suggest strategies that might be used effectively by those involved in such anti-war efforts—strategies not derived from the confrontational era of the late sixties but ones more suited to the particularities of the times in which we now live.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial suggests that contemporary anti-war rhetoric would do well to avoid confrontative strategies that polarize thinking into "us versus them" and that indicate that those who are not with you are against you. The divisions of the late sixties that clearly delineated the establishment from the anti-war protesters are gone, and ideological and life-style differences among Americans are less clear cut. As the memorial is able to communicate acceptance of numerous perspectives leading to similar conclusions, anti-war rhetoric must allow for diversity and recognize as legitimate multiple perspectives. It must provide freedom for people with different motives for opposing war and different perspectives on war to be welcomed and incorporated into the movement. The anti-war rhetoric of today must communicate not that one group's view is right and that another is wrong but that everyone is right to some degree and that all kinds of "rightness" can be accorded room and value in the movement.

The effectiveness of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial indicates, as well, that contemporary anti-war rhetoric must generate and utilize new images. In a society that has been overexposed to images of war through television news reports, news magazines, films, and television programs (some of which even glorify war), a depiction of the conditions of war is not likely to be sufficient to move an unconverted audience to adopt an anti-war stance. What are needed instead are unconventional, unusual images or symbols that attract attention because of their freshness and unpredictability. These images thus will stand out from those to which we are exposed daily and cause us to stop, inquire into, and examine the issue of war.

Finally, the memorial suggests that, at this particular time, the substance of anti-war rhetoric perhaps should be focused less on ideological and ethical arguments against war and more on what war is in its essence—death. Much anti-war rhetoric of the past relied on the arguments that a country has the right to choose its form of government without interference from others, or that to kill other human beings is immoral. In our current society, seemingly characterized by a desire for financial success at the expense of ethical considerations, such rhetoric lacks broad appeal. Ultimately, however, death is a personal matter that affects everyone, and rhetoric that forces a personal reflection on death as the basic fact of war, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial suggests, is able to elicit anti-war responses.

In an essay written in the late sixties, Nat Hentoff discusses the types of symbols and strategies used by anti-war demonstrators then: "Dead rats were thrown in front of city halls. Rush hour traffic was stalled. Young people chained themselves to pillars in front of court buildings" (1969, p. 255). While such acts undoubtedly made the demonstrators feel relevant and that some of their own guilt had been purged, he argues, little happened as a result; "the doctrine of the announced idea" (p. 261) ultimately did not succeed as a

strategy. The reason, he hypothesizes, is that

those demonstrations made it easier for the bystander—the *moyen* citizen—to separate himself from the activists and their concerns. . . . [T]he *moyen* citizen . . . regarded the activists as so different in kind from him that the thought of ever possibly allying himself with them was inconceivable. (p. 266)

There must be some way to bridge this division, Hentoff asserts, and he asks for suggestions for strategies and symbols that close the gap between the converted and the unconverted. Particularly in these times, when former anti-war symbols and strategies have even less appeal than they did in the late sixties, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial well may provide an excellent model for anti-war rhetoric that offers one answer to Hentoff's request. For as one visitor to the memorial explained, its effectiveness is beyond question:

Is there anyone who has ever visited this memorial without being deeply moved? I sincerely doubt it, just as I doubt that 100 years from now, when the conflicting passions of this war have faded almost beyond recall, visitors to the memorial will not be profoundly affected by the experience. (Forgey, 1984, p. 8)

#### REFERENCES

- Berleant, A. (1970). *The aesthetic field: A phenomenology of aesthetic experience*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1968). *Counter-statement*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1931).
- Clarke, J. (1983, May 22). Visitors vent their sorrow at Vietnam memorial. *Denver Post*, sec. T, p. 5.
- De Vaull, D. (1982, July 17). Vietnam memorial: Drawing the line [Letter to the editor]. *Washington Post*, sec. A, p. 22.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York: Capricorn.
- Ditmer, J. (1983, July 3). Designer recalls controversy: Vietnam memorial project changed woman's life. *Denver Post*, sec. B, p. 8.
- Ehninger, D. (1972). *Contemporary rhetoric: A reader's coursebook*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Forgey, B. (1984, November 10). The statue & the wall. *Washington Post*, sec. D, pp. 1, 8.
- Hentoff, N. (1969). Them and us: Are peace protests self-therapy? In W. Anderson (Ed.), *The age of protest* (pp. 254–261). Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear.
- Hess, E. (1983). A tale of two memorials. *Art in America*, 71, 121–126.
- Kaelin, E. F. (1970). *Art and existence: A phenomenological aesthetics*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- McCarthy, C. (1982, July 25). Misplaced memorials. *Washington Post*, sec. H, p. 5.
- McCombs, P. (1982, January 3). Maya Lin and the great call of China. *Washington Post*, sec. F, pp. 1, 9, 10, 11, 12.
- McCombs, P. (1982, March 27). Reconciliation: Ground broken for shrine to Vietnam War veterans. *Washington Post*, sec. A, pp. 1, 14.
- McGrory, M. (1982, November 13). Names are memorial's silent legacy. *Denver Post*, sec. B, p. 2.
- Mumford, L. (1968). Symbol and function in architecture. In L. Jacobus (Ed.), *Aesthetics and the arts* (pp. 265–278). New York: McCraw-Hill.
- Nemerov, H. (1980). On poetry and painting, with a thought of music. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *The language of images* (pp. 9–13). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schmidt, A. (1982, November 17). Vietnam Veterans Memorial isn't a glorification of combat. *Denver Post*, sec. B, p. 3.

- Searle, J. R. (1980). *Las Meninas* and the paradoxes of pictorial representation. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *The language of images* (pp. 247-258). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shannon, D. (1982, October 14). Viet memorial additions ok'd. *Denver Post*, sec. A, p. 3.
- Stolnitz, J. (1960). *Aesthetics and philosophy of art criticism: A critical introduction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Thornton, R. (1982, November 21). Visit to "The Wall" to find 4 names left him in tears. *Denver Post*, sec. B, p. 8.
- Vietnam vets honor dead of bitter war. (1982, November 12). *Denver Post*, sec. A, pp. 1, 3.
- Vietnam Veterans Memorial Bill. (1982). In *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter 1980-81*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 2, 1268-1271.
- Wolfe, T. (1982, November 7). The wrong stuff. *Denver Post*, sec. B, pp. 11, 13.