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‘HOMOMONUMENT SOUNDS LIKE A POEM’


Martin Zebracki

Prelude

The Homomonument (Figure 18.1), inaugurated at Westermarkt square in central Amsterdam on 5 September 1987, is widely regarded as the world’s first commissioned monument devoted to, and empowering, the lives and rights movement of gay men and lesbian women. Many LGBT monuments around the world followed in the footsteps of the Homomonument, such as the Gay Liberation Monument in New York (see Zebracki, 2019) and monuments to homosexuals persecuted under Nazism in Berlin and Sydney (see inventory in Orangias et al., 2018). Over recent decades, the monument’s underpinning Homomonument Foundation, co-founded by local gay activist Bob van Schijndel, along with annual on-site events – primarily comprising commemorations and festivities around key Dutch public holidays and special dates including Pride Amsterdam – have aimed to also embrace bisexual and transgender people (i.e. LGBT) as part of the monument’s mental map and its public uses. This has been resonating with international advocacy for the inclusion of a much wider diversity of sexual and gender characteristics (LGBT+) and allied identity forces (e.g. ‘Gay–Straight Alliances) (see, e.g. Ferentinos, 2014). Sometimes ‘queer’ is added to the LGBT acronym, which some construe as an identity category. As adopted in this account, queer can rather be rendered as a stance to question, or ‘que(e)ry,’ sexual and gender identity categories altogether and the social norms that underpin them (notably white heteropatriarchy), whilst unravelling the critical intersections between social identities and identity expressions (see, e.g. Zebracki, 2020a, 2020b).

The story of engaging a monument for and through sexual and gender minorities should be seen as a grounded practice (Zebracki, 2019). Such engagement is in constant flux and involves an amalgamation of collaborative or opposed actors, ranging from policymakers to members of public communities. This implicates a politics of inclusion around identity, which ‘makes’ places inclusive for some but at the same time perhaps not for others (see, e.g. Ghaziani, 2011; Gieseking, 2016). As such, queer placemaking wants to problematise ambiguous processes revolving around sexual and gender inclusivity and the (trans)formation of accompanying place
identities. In Thijs Bartels, author of *Dancing on the Homomonument* (2003), I found an obvious interlocutor for debating this matter for the monument in question.

Thijs Bartels (born in Maastricht, 1960) studied Dutch language and literature and philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. In 1988, he pursued his career as editor at Bert Bakker Publishers. Subsequently, from 1993 to 2006, he acted as freelancer for various literary publishing houses and other institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Concertgebouw, and the Rijksmuseum. Since 2006, he has worked as a non-fiction editor at Meulenhoff-Boekerij Publishers. In 2011–12, Bartels was a guest lecturer in the Media, Information, and Communication department at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Bartels edited with Jos Versteegen the *Homo-encyclopedie van Nederland* (Gay Encyclopaedia of the Netherlands), issued by Ambo/Anthos Publishers in 2005. Central to the conversational dialogue in hand is Bartels’ monograph *Dansen op het Homomonument*, issued by Schorer Boeken Publishers along with the translated edition of *Dancing on the Homomonument*, an accessibly written and evocative key resource about the genesis and social values of this monument.

On 5 July 2019, I entered into an in-depth conversation with Bartels to explore the idea of inclusive placemaking through the lens of the *Homomonument*. This monument consists of three pink granite equilateral triangles (Figure 18.1). Together, these triangles form a larger triangle, which in the conception of the designer, Karin Daan, reflect the past, present, and future –
which I interpreted in an earlier piece as ‘a spatial commemorative constellation’ (Zebracki, 2017, p. 346). The ‘sunken’ triangle with seating steps along the canal, almost situated in the water’s daily stream, symbolizes the present. The elevated triangle, used as seating furniture and event podium, expresses uplifting values associated with the future. And, finally, the triangle at street level embodies the past, resembling a kind of tombstone with the inscription of Jacob Israël de Haan’s verse ‘such an endless desire for friendship’ [translated from the Dutch] (see Bartels, 2003; Zebracki, 2017). During the interview, Bartels and myself sat on the steps of the monument’s ‘sunken’ triangle – or in the conceived present, whilst we reflected on the past and ruminated about the future.

The Homomonument’s tripartite triangle-shaped design is carried through in Bartels’ monograph Dancing on the Homomonument, subdivided into three parts. The first part engages the past, that is, the monument’s provenance. It documents the rationale for establishing the Homomonument to primarily remember the discrimination, persecution, and eradication of homosexuals by the Nazis. The monument’s triangular form makes visual reference to the pink concentration camp badge that homosexual inmates were identified with, which after WWII turned into a symbol of queer pride. The book’s second part is about the importance of LGBT visibility and recognition (e.g. Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2016) and the social value of the Homomonument in its present-day context (at the time when the book was published). In the present, as Bartels (2003) conveyed, the Homomonument holds the equivocal identity as a place to celebrate and a place to remember – or even a ‘site of pilgrimage’, Binnie (1995, p. 175) observed. Drawing from the LGBT rights and emancipation movement, the book’s third part is a projection onto the future, where we have arrived now, including the challenges of a transcultural society, as Bartels highlighted.

As networked through the past and the path ahead of us, what place does the Homomonument take and ‘make’ today? As Bartels concluded his monograph, LGBT discrimination is not over, still warranting the fight for an LGBT-inclusive society. A ‘sleeping or petrified monument’ does not help here (Bartels, 2003, p. 100); the book’s back cover text reminds the reader, therefore, that ‘the Homomonument is a call for constant vigilance’.

The three-part setup of the Homomonument is also extrapolated in the conversational Acts on the pages of the account in hand. The subsequent Acts question how the Homomonument, about 30 years on, has opened up the space for putting LGBT minorities in place, pursuing inclusivity beyond symbology, and imagining inclusive alternatives. The dialogical narrative hereinafter reveals queer placemaking through the questioning, or ‘que(e)ring,’ of the monument’s ‘stone matter’ in contexts of ‘lived matter’: memories of past and present experience of inclusionary vis-à-vis exclusionary processes and realities.

### Act I: Past – Placing encounters

**Martin Zebracki (MZ):** While we are sitting here at the Homomonument, could you briefly tell me something about your background and motivation for writing your book Dancing on the Homomonument?

[NB: This conversational dialogue has been translated from the Dutch. Typeface in bold signifies the start of a conversational thread.]

**Thijs Bartels (TB):** Well, the reason for the book is quite simple. I knew, or I still know, Richard Keldoulis, through a gay swimming club. He established the info kiosk ‘Pink Point,’ and he was very involved in the Homomonument and the whole [LGBT] scene. My profession is edi-
tor, I studied Dutch, and he asked me to make a leaflet and then … he suddenly said, ‘there ought to be a book. Would you be willing to do that?’ he asked. The leaflet actually never came out how we wanted it, but then it became a book.

**MZ: Back then, was it clear what the book should be about?**

**TB:** It had to be about the *Homomonument* itself. It has been translated [from Dutch] into English. It needed to be very informative, aimed at a very wide public, so it’s in simple language, simple layout, and it was published by Schorer Boeken, which at that time was, let’s say, a lesbian and gay publisher. The book includes photographs and illustrations. I divided it up in three parts: the past, present, and future [see Prelude].

**MZ: How would you describe the *Homomonument* in three key words?**

**TB:** I think it’s very beautiful. It’s a living monument, that’s really the case for me, or what I discovered throughout writing the book. I think this is the most beautiful part about the monument, and the most successful thing. Just look around you, people are sitting on it, they have a party, all kinds of things happen here, demonstrations … while it’s actually a kind of memorial monument. It doesn’t often happen with monuments that people dance on it and throw parties, and everyone – tourists and foreigners – pass by it … [It stands for] gays, lesbians, transgenders and you can list the whole caboodle, and that’s the beautiful thing about the monument.

**MZ: To summarise your answer: the *Homomonument* is beautiful, a living monument, and what’s the third key word?**

*[NB: One of the founding members of the Homomonument Foundation, Pieter Koenders, also conceived of the Homomonument as ‘living monument,’ in lieu of a kind of ‘misery on a pedestal’ (Koenders, 1987, p. 29).]*

**TB:** I think that it’s well thought-out … It has become a piece of Amsterdam, it’s part of the city. That’s also one of the good things about it.

**MZ: How often do you come here?**

**TB:** Not very often … I used to come here more often, but … you no longer feel like it, you get a bit older. My work was based here along one of the canals and then I would cycle past it twice a day … And then I’d see that there were always flowers put on it … but other than that, I live in Amsterdam-West now, so you just don’t come as often. And my work is in Amsterdam-Oost at present, so I don’t get to be in the city [centre] that much … In the past I used to go to demonstrations on 4 May [i.e. WWII Remembrance Day] and 5 May [i.e. Liberation Day]. Once I made a speech. At a certain moment I had enough. So, I don’t come as often now … It has nothing to do with the monument itself. Not at all, because I still like to keep up to date about it. If something happens, I think, great, it’s going well. No, I think it’s a good thing that there is a new generation that is taking over the helm. Also, I know nothing about the music of today, so why should I come [to the music party events] here?

**MZ: Who is that new generation then?**

**TB:** I don’t know, but they do have a very beautiful place [i.e. *Homomonument*], and they’re a group of people who take that on … The threat remains the same, the suffering, the discrimination.

**MZ: What feeling do you get at the *Homomonument*?**

**TB:** Um, I think it’s great it exists. That’s just it for me. That it [i.e. being LGBT] is possible and that it’s allowed … For that, I think it’s an important monument.

**MZ: Can you remember the first time you saw the *Homomonument*, if you dig for your first memories of it in 1987?**
TB: Well … I did think it meant some kind of acceptance, which was there already of course, at least for me, you do get that feeling. People see you, you become visible. I had nothing like, oh what an ugly monument, I thought it was great from the start. I do have memories like that. What I do remember is that there was a lot of moaning about it [i.e. the granite] not being pink enough … And I did think that myself in the beginning, I thought it didn’t stand out very much. I thought it could stand out a lot more … At the opening [the media asked] what is that poo-brown coloured thing? … The granite had to come from Italy and there were lots of problems with it. Later at the Rokin [i.e. canal and major street in Amsterdam’s city centre], there came a building of the stock exchange [which is no longer in existence] and that was really pink marble … They had been saying that it [the Homomonument] couldn’t be pinker, and then you got this really pink building. But perhaps the monument was a different type, more porous, and it is of course granite and not marble.

MZ: Was there any further commotion when the monument came into existence?

TB: The papers were full of that it shouldn’t be allowed, not possible, and lots of letters were sent in. Why should gays have their own monument? Well, you will be familiar with the arguments that come then. Financing was very difficult, it was really pushing and pulling, and there were fundraising concerts.

MZ: What role has the Homomonument been playing for the local LGBT community?

TB: Look, I think it has changed a lot. Of course, when it came it was a big celebration. The acceptance of the monument by the municipality, the authorities, that was all very important at that time. At a certain moment, I wrote, I compiled, a gay encyclopaedia [see Prelude]. About the time that was published, people had something like, we can relax now, it’ll all be alright, we are almost there. That feeling. At least that was one of the voices that also emerged. And now with [religious] conservatism and shifts to the right … it’s all necessary again to ask for attention … You [i.e. LGBT people] always remain a minority and that means you always have to fight, in any case. All of us.

MZ: Has the Homomonument provided some educational encounters? I mean, what role could it play in sexual education, school visits, etcetera?

TB: I do find that a quite difficult question, you know. Let’s say, if anything occurs with gays, put a stop to it, or talk about it. You could create special lessons about it [i.e. the Homomonument and its values], but you cannot put all the social issues on the shoulders of teachers. Visibility on TV, in film, art, and so on are also very important.

MZ: In what way do you think the Homomonument has played an important role in the city of Amsterdam?

TB: It’s about visibility on its own. I was once chairman of a swimming club … There were people that didn’t come for the swimming alone, but just because they wanted to feel accepted. And that’s the same for such a monument. People come here and say what a wonderful monument we have here. And everyone can see it and be part of it. I think that’s very important, also for people from abroad, for people from oppressed countries … let’s say, yes, I think it’s very important … This is a monument that makes you think.

Act II: Present – Placing beyond inclusive symbolism

MZ: In terms of events, design, and location, do you think the Homomonument reaches its inclusive potential?
TB: Yes, yes. Do you know why? Because you can sit on it, and because you can dance on it. If there had been a kind of pink triangle on sticks, then all of this wouldn’t have happened. Or at least, um, it would have probably been less living than it would be now. You have three things [i.e. granite triangles] to sit on, to be able to walk around, to organise parties around, including commemorations, and you can put a wreath down … and you don’t have all that with a statue. What’s also interesting is that you have to explain the triangle [i.e. Nazi reference; see Prelude] … In the past you didn’t have a rainbow flag, you just didn’t have that [as LGBT symbol]. So, when it [the Homomonument] was designed, that rainbow flag didn’t exist – I mean it wasn’t quite visible here as yet.

MZ: Speaking of the rainbow flag, often visible at LGBT celebrations at the Homomonument, how do you read its message of inclusivity?

TB: Let everybody just join in, that’s great. Look, everyone wants different things, and you’ll have to compromise. You have to let people do what they want to do. I do think that you are stronger together. With the swimming club you always had that lesbians wanted different things than the [male] gays, but, in the meantime, together you form a swimming club. And you ensure that people are accepted. I think that’s the most important thing.

MZ: Do you think that the Homomonument is open to everyone?

TB: I do hope so, I mean, well, of course. It’s the same as with swimming. The swimming club is meant for gays, and we go to gay tournaments but also to regular ones … Heterosexuals could come and swim, they could become members, that’s no problem … And, yes certainly, there were a number doing that … As a gay person I can join a heterosexual club, so the heterosexuals can also join a gay club. And what about all the mothers and fathers, they have to be accepting as well … they’re there, and they’re all heterosexuals, or well, nowadays, a bit less.

MZ: These days you hear the word ‘queer’ quite often as a kind of all-embracing term. What does ‘queer’ mean to you?

TB: You know, for me it means ‘gay.’ I am a bit old-fashioned. Regarding gays, lesbians, and the rest, I always say … LGBQT [sic] … I always stumble over that term.

MZ: ‘Q’ in this acronym often refers to ‘queer.’ I find that an interesting one. In the way I see it, queer challenges the whole idea of using identity labels, so then it’s perhaps a bit problematic when it appears in such an acronym. Some would see the ‘Q’ referring to ‘questionables,’ those exploring or questioning their sexual orientation and sexual or gender identity. For me, ‘queer’ means ‘to query,’ or ‘to question,’ to ask questions about norms and to challenge forms of exclusion and systematic oppression in the grander scheme of things [see also Prelude].

TB: Yes, a wider view, embracing all differences.

MZ: Indeed, and ‘queer’ is also relevant to memorialising the Homomonument. Also, I appreciate that memorial is not a Dutch word, but how do you see the difference between a monument and memorial? – as I think this is relevant here.

TB: If you were to make a difference, I think that ‘memorial’ means that you have to keep it alive – think of a statue reminding us of the Second World War. What does that add? As we should, wreaths are laid on the Dam on the 4th of May, and then we, as ordinary citizens, just carry on with our lives again.

MZ: If I understand this correctly, you see a monument as a kind of stone creation, a statue for example, and a memorial more as a process, as memorialising [i.e. gerundial use of the word] or a happening, which brings the monument to life.
TB: Yes, okay, if you look at it that way … The *Homomonument*, for me, is a living monument. The memorialising part is more something that is done on the 4th of May, when we reflect on the past [i.e. WWII], and on 5 May [i.e. Liberation Day] we are thinking about totally different things again. That’s approximately what I mean … But that difference [i.e. between monument and memorial] doesn’t exist for me in Dutch at all … You see, remembering without a future is no use at all. That’s kind of what I mean. It doesn’t have to involve something fanatical like campaign, campaign, campaign, but something has to stay in our minds.

MZ: How do you feel about the rainbow-coloured zebra crossings that appear in so many cities these days, such as on the footbridge at the train station of Sloterdijk? [i.e. city district of Amsterdam]

TB: Very good, isn’t it? It’s about what I said: being visible, again being visible, everything helps. It’s playful and funny, as long as everyone understands that it’s a zebra crossing.

MZ: Relatedly, what do you feel about the Pride? Then, everything is about the rainbow, you know, do you think that’s just playful and fun also?

TB: No, no … Again, I’d like to bring up the swimming club.

MZ: Yes, the swimming club keeps popping up.

TB: Yeah, but I was way more active in the past … We wanted to join the [Amsterdam Pride] parade, and the problem for us was that participation was so expensive … And then all those companies came with large boats which had really nothing to do with LGBT, that was embarrassing … All of a sudden, the ABN Bank came by on a boat, well that’s just too much! That’s a marketing tool, it has nothing to do at all with discrimination, liberation, and with acceptance. It’s marketing.

MZ: Whom do you think the *Homomonument* is intended for?

TB: For all the gays, lesbians, the whole community, the LG … well you know what I mean: the rest … And Amsterdam, it’s an Amsterdam monument.

MZ: Is it inclusive?

TB: What do you mean by that? I think that’s such an awful word.

MZ: Let me ‘unpack’ it: I mean, does this monument speak to people other than ‘homo’? So not only gays and lesbians but also bisexuals, transgenders and intersections with people of colour, older and younger generations, people living with disabilities, the whole spectrum.

TB: Yes, well, if you put it like that. I do think it goes a long way. You have to roll up your sleeves, do something, and it will happen. If people join in who want to commit, then I can’t imagine that anyone would say that something wouldn’t be okay. I can’t imagine that. What I can imagine is that they [i.e. organisers of events at the monument’s site] are all volunteers, who all have their own ideas. If there’s no volunteer who is black, for example, then they don’t feature high on the agenda. If there’s no elderly person, with any clear idea, then nothing is done for the elderly. I do think you have to roll up your sleeves … We have all been there. We weren’t allowed to marry, because we were gay … Now we’re all allowed to marry, but we had to do something for that, and put ourselves in a certain kind of fear, or embarrassment. If you don’t take the outstretched hand, then you shouldn’t complain … I am not that much of an activist. My contribution was my book about the *Homomonument* – and the gay encyclopaedia. That’s where my strength lies. And, yes, it’s the same with swimming, people have to take turns and now it’s my turn. I wanted to join in, and they wanted me to do it and I said fine … My gay club isn’t that impressive, but you’re there, you are visible,
you defend your club and you take decisions in the interest of a gay club. Well, this is
how you ought to become inclusive.

MZ: The Homomonument apparently has a lot of personal associations and mem-
ories for you. As of today, how has the importance of this monument as an
inclusive place changed for you?

TB: Well, the [social and political] scene has changed … It has all shifted to the right.
That’s really not good, you know, for gays. And the whole idea now with the internet
is openness, but coming out there has also become a lot harder for a lot of people.
That’s not pleasant.

MZ: When you’re here, how do you relate to the Homomonument? Do you feel it’s
an inclusive atmosphere?

TB: When I come here, I do feel I know a lot about this place. I researched it fully, so
that’s kind of funny … I’m always pleased that there’re flowers on the monument, so
it’s being used, it has helped somebody, and it offers recognition … At the same time,
you know what’s also happening, my husband, or my partner, and myself, we actually
no longer hold hands in Amsterdam that readily these days. We used to do that, which
was quite normal back in the days, but now we no longer do that … Well, you don’t
see it at all anymore.

MZ: Why is that?

TB: Everyone gets back in the closet … There’s something going on here, but look, I
didn’t do research into that. There is conservatism and the shift to the political right
… Now, when there are boobs, they are covered up. In the past you didn’t have that.

MZ: You’ve written a lot about the Homomonument – have you also captured this place by
any photographs yourself perhaps, which may give a visual impression of the atmos-
phere?

TB: I did take photographs but not that I was very pleased with them … Nowadays eve-
rything can be found on the internet, so you can easily find beautiful photographs
there … Well, with parties I did take photos, also when Job Cohen [former mayor of
Amsterdam] was interviewed here on the monument. I took photos of those kind of
things here, also of friends sitting on the monument.

MZ: As an experiment I brought this ‘old school’ disposable camera. Imagine that you’d
like to show the Homomonument to someone who hasn’t been here before, and that
you’re allowed to only one photo with this camera? What would you take a picture
of as a postcard? There you go! (Figure 18.2).

MZ: Do you get to talk with people around you about what the Homomonument
means to them? They might know that you have authored a book about it
– how does the monument come up in conversations with them?

TB: I’ve not been really asked about it, but it does come up occasionally indeed.

MZ: In what sense?

TB: Well, recently, someone said to me, which was not about the Homomonument though,
do you know that homosexuality appears in a lot of animal species? And then I had
something like, why are you telling me this? How come? Have I got the word ‘gay’
written on my forehead? I find this interesting, very bizarre actually … Regarding
the Homomonument; no, people haven’t directly asked about it. But if they talk about
Amsterdam, they may well mention that they’ve been there, and then it’s talked about.

MZ: Relatedly, is the Homomonument a kind of tourist attraction, as it were? Do people
specifically go there like ‘I’m in Amsterdam and I must go and see’?
TB: Yes, I do believe there’re people like that. Sometimes you do see people on the monument who are very emotional.

MZ: What does that mean to you then?

TB: I’m very pleased to observe that. But for myself, like what I said already when you asked me for this, I’m no longer part of it in the same way as in the past.

Act III: Future – Placing inclusive changes?

MZ: Suppose you’d have all the power in the world, how would you change the Homomonument?

TB: To change it?

MZ: Yes, it can be as subtle or as rigorous as you want it to be.

TB: What an awkward question!

MZ: Simple answer please!

TB: [laughing loudly] What else could be done here? You know what I would really like … There used to be a gay library in Amsterdam-West, which was later added [as IHLIA LGBT Heritage archive] to the public library [OBA, the Netherlands’ largest library nearby Amsterdam Central Station]. It would be great to bring together the gay library and the gay museum, well everything, and then preferably here around the corner near the Homomonument.

MZ: What is your view on the name of the Homomonument? – perhaps ‘homo’ might sound ‘gay-exclusive’ or it may have a negative connotation (see also Zebracki, 2017). In other words, does the name ‘Homomonument’ need to be changed?
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**TB:** No … why would you suddenly now have to change a monument that was called that? Perhaps you can give it an English subtitle, think of ‘Gay Memorial.’ But it’s locally so well-known as *Homomonument* and it has become such an Amsterdam word, that you shouldn’t change it … I think it’s too much part of Amsterdam.

**MZ:** Should it include the full acronym LGBT?

**TB:** I am too much of an editor and work with language … I feel LGBT monument doesn’t sound good, does it? *Homomonument* sounds like a poem. *Homomonument*, that just easily slips off the tongue.

**Coda**

People make places, monuments in themselves probably don’t. But monuments might evoke memories of people and places, as they are intertwined with our lived experiences across different walks of life. Monuments may have the power to lend visibility to those living on the margins of society, who have been chronically subjected to the exclusive forces of oppression, prejudice, bigotry, and systematic discrimination in the here and there. The dialogical narrative presented in this account should be, by no means, taken as representative of the possible complexity of community engagement with the *Homomonument* as well as of the generations of writings and embodied knowledges thereof. I also realise that much social justice work remains to be done to address, and redress, structural exclusions and inequalities. Queer, in theory and practice, I think holds strong potential in inclusive placemaking. It thus manifests a stronghold that demands activism and solidarity beyond sexual and gender identity alone to shed light on, and deconstruct, multi-layered privileges (see, e.g. Zebracki, 2020b). LGBT struggle should therefore not be at the expense of any other minorities across ethnicities, classes, ages, abilities, creed, and so on. Queer placemaking, as such, entails an extensive intersectional commitment and investment of hope in a perpetual social justice project. More than a name or ‘poem’ alone, my journey has prompted me to envisage the *Homomonument* as an activist project: a potential action space for pursuing such intersectional solidarity in placemaking practice.

**Acknowledgements**

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**References**


Further reading in this volume

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Jeremy Liu
Chapter 8: Queer placemaking, settler colonial time, and the desert imaginary in Palm Springs
Xander Lenc
Chapter 20: Displacemaking 2015 and 2020
Catherine Fennell and Daniel Tucker
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