

**MOURNING, MEMORY AND LIFE  
ITSELF**

**WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

*A History of Art Therapy in the United States*  
(With Paige Asawa)

*Creative Realities, the Search for Meanings*

*Architects of Art Therapy, Memoirs and Life Stories*  
(Edited with Harriet Wadeson)

*Mourning, Memory and Life Itself: Essays By an Art Therapist*

# MOURNING, MEMORY AND LIFE ITSELF

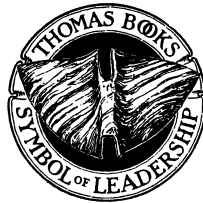
Essays by an Art Therapist

*By*

MAXINE BOROWSKY JUNG

*With a Foreword by*

Helen B. Landgarten



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*In memory of Robert Ault.  
And for my grandson Henry Petrie who is the future.*



## FOREWORD

Helen B. Landgarten, DAT, MFT, ATR, HLM

**M**axine Borowsky Junge's curiosity about art and issues related to it, led her to explore numerous thought-provoking subjects. The amalgamation of new material and previously published works make this book impressive.

The author establishes ART as a basic prism. Its reflective facets encompass: "Psychology of Art," "Creativity," "Social Action," "The Profession of Art Therapy," and "Clinical Applications of Art Therapy."

Many chapters are written from a feminist point of view. Junge's interest in female artists and art therapists is revealed time and again. Factual contents are flavored with her own opinions.

The author's willingness to expose herself through personal material is a bold step in art therapy literature. In the past, art therapists tended to record their clinical work and sometimes included how they were affected by their clients and the outcome of cases. This was an appropriate model for education. Nevertheless, there is room in art therapy and mental health for a more personal type of writing. It helps to provide a place for empathy and the validation of feelings for students and colleagues.

As I read this book I found myself having an inner dialogue with Junge. At times I was in agreement; at other times I argued with some of her statements. This type of involvement with an author's thinking process is a major asset for readers. It encourages silent readers to become engaged. The value of this book is the author's extraordinary talent to make us think!

Art therapists, artists, mental health practitioners and the general public will find *Mourning, Memory and Life Itself, Essays by an Art Therapist*, fascinating and a worthwhile book to read.

Helen B. Landgarten is Professor Emerita, Loyola Marymount University and formerly Senior Staff Member, Thalians Community Mental Health Center, Cedars Sinai Hospital. She is the author of many art therapy books.





## INTRODUCTION

The room where I write is up seven stairs in my house on Whidbey Island north of Seattle. It is the only second story room in my house and feels a bit like a tree house. Sitting at my computer and looking out the windows, I see very little built architecture, but there is a stand of evergreen trees taller than the house, and these autumn days I see trees with leaves turning orange and yellow. This morning on my way out through the courtyard to my red Suburu to take my Golden Retriever Moka to the dog park, I noticed that the deep maroon leaves of the flowering plum are starting to fall and cover the ground. In a few months the tree will be winter bare, brown-black branches instead of the plump round of leaves I can see from my window now. When it rains as it is today, I hear soft and hard fingertips of sound pounding and playing on my roof and through the windows I can see sheets of rain coming down.

Inside, my work room is cozy. Occasionally, my beloved dog climbs the stairs to sleep near me curled on the oriental rug while I work. She is here now. There is the blue Victorian love seat with a Georgia O’Keeffe pillow, in black and white, I bought in a museum shop in Milwaukee and another throw pillow, black with strong colorful abstract patterning of flowers and leaves, given me by an art therapist friend whom I treasure. There are overflowing bookshelves and my mother’s teak desk, with the desktop barely seen through the mass of papers (I have found that putting away something where I can’t see it, means it no longer exists for me and therefore, doesn’t get attended to—so I leave stuff out and the stack grows ever higher). On the wall in front of me, is a quilt made by my students at Loyola Marymount University and presented to me at my retirement. Above the blue couch is a John Marin-like watercolor of New York City by my father and a story framed by my daughter from an old *Life* magazine about “Pride of the Marines” a movie written by my Dad. Folk art, a long-lasting love affair of mine, stands on ledges of my writing room—some figures—acrobats, largely—are from Cirque de Soleil, and there are figures from a crocheted nativity scene, including donkey, lambs and Baby Jesus in a crocheted manger made

by an elderly woman on Whidbey Island. I see photographs of my son Ben on the wall, one on a bluff in Ireland and one of him sitting in a replica of the Oval Office on the set of "The West Wing" which he visited when my daughter was writing for the series. There is a framed poster from a musical "Galileo" written by my daughter Alexa when she was in her early 20s and a bulletin board with drawings and sayings: "I'll be a post-feminist in post-patriarchy," "To create one's own world in any of the arts takes courage," (Georgia O'Keeffe), "The strongest drive is not love or hate. It is one person's need to modify, revise, alter, change, rewrite, amend, chop to pieces another's copy," and "Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving with a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out and loudly proclaiming, WOW! What a ride!" I have no memory of who said this, or who sent it to me, but think it might have been my mentor for my doctoral work, who died recently.

My filing system is evidenced by the stacks of papers and books strewn about the floor of my workroom. From my constant and comfortable seat at the computer, I can see books about Arbus, O'Keeffe, Kahlo, Henry Darger, a pile of books of essays including those by Kinsolver, Rodriquez and Page Smith, with Arnheim's *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* on top. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* are on the couch. With the familiar pleasures and safety of family and friends around me, I have written this book.

Many of the essays here were originally published in art therapy journals. I consider them old friends of many years returning for a family reunion. Their sometimes scattered and often inconspicuous appearances, "briefly flowering and recycled tomorrow," in Barbara Kingsolver's words, did not cause me to love them any less and their return has been cause for a tender celebration. Since their first debuts, all have been substantially altered for this book and brought up to date. Reading them in their original forms, I was often saddened to discover that 30 years after a first publication, times have not changed as much as I could wish. There are six new essays for this collection. Writing these has enabled me to think about ideas that have been assaulting my brain and consciousness—some for a long time. I have reproduced patient artwork.

A few years back, a student of mine said that she thought I was opinionated. I said that at my "advanced" age, surely she didn't expect me not to have opinions. She didn't mean her comment as a complement. What she meant was if I held strong opinions, she feared I might be judgmental of her if she differed. I DO hold strong opinions, but I would like to believe I frame them as hypotheses and that I am open enough to change my mind. I love to discuss disparate ideas with people I respect as thinkers and often find a wealth of wisdom that might bump up enough against my own to change my

opinions. I discovered long ago that most psychotherapy theories and ideas, persistent though they may be, are anecdotal at best and cannot be “proved” to work. This is one reason the nature/nurture pendulum of etiology and child development has swung to the *nature* end, with most serious mental health disorders now being defined as “diseases” amenable to medication. It is one reason why these days the field and managed care are commonly afflicted with behaviorism, cognitivism and their offspring. I support attempts to improve psychotherapy and counseling and to make them more accountable, but this switch to nature is presumably based on our increasing knowledge of brain chemistry. Although I believe in historical progress, I was married to a brain researcher who was possibly more of a skeptic even than I am, and he taught me to watch for the huge changes in brain research which are not necessarily improvements, and that what we think we know in that area changes about every ten years. So I will reserve judgment.

It isn’t hard to understand that the complexities of the human condition do not make any of this easy. I have spoken out to the art therapy profession to gather its “self esteem” together, to ask it to *define itself* instead of following and attempting to adapt to the trends, and they *are* trends, in mental health—not “truth,” (e.g., I was trained before there *was* a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, and consider it mostly a political document, sometimes useful, but certainly not to be employed, as many therapists today do, as information given by God (or Godly psychiatrists) and not to be ignored or used in concert with therapeutic experience and common sense).

Many writers salute the libraries and librarians that first provided a home for them and their imagination. Like them, I remember the pleasure when I was an adolescent and bored to tears in school, of picking books off the library shelf to take home and read, to return them and choose more. I didn’t follow any list of great books, nor gather anyone’s opinion of what to read. I simply read what interested me. I would read the first few pages and if they held me, I took the book home. I remember the tenth grade English teacher, Mrs. Bruce who told us we were going to read *Arrowsmith*. The only reason she gave us was that she liked it. I loved it! And it set me off to reading everything Sinclair Lewis ever wrote and all the biographies of him I could find.

From my library treasures, I got a broad if eccentric and eclectic education and have been a reader all my life. Over my years as a mental health practitioner and as a teacher, I have read much of the psychology and psychotherapy literature which I have found generally wanting. I believe that art, music, theater and literature tell us more about human life and how it is lived and should be lived.

Since I discovered him in adolescence and found someone who believed what I did, I have always been interested in John Dewey’s innovation of pro-

gressive education, learning from experience. I have discovered that I learn that way myself. While I have had a few great teachers whom I revere, mostly, with their tender guidance, I have taught myself. I call myself “a skeptic who will try anything” and that is primarily true. The various ideas and theories I hold are framed as *hypotheses* to be tested in the real world with real human beings, and perhaps altered or changed entirely. Nevertheless, I have been in the psychotherapy and art therapy fields for almost 40 years now and there are certain assumptions that have been tested and seem to work so far and which provide the often tacit bedrock on which my work exists and expands—some might call them “biases.” These assumptions will be found in my essays, but I want to frankly acknowledge them here for the reader:

- *My major theory is systems.* It seems to me a shame that after all these years and with the global network increasing in complexity and influence and national boundaries becoming more permeable, most art therapy and psychotherapy training programs in the United States are still individually conceived and taught. Individualistic America in which a John Wayne type conquers the western territory by molding it to his will is still a prevailing paradigm in most psychotherapy and art therapy thought and practice. Once integrally trained in individual ideas, it is very tough for a therapist to change directions to become a systems thinker, though not impossible. It is one of the main reasons that mental health is all too often about social control.

I believe:

- In the *unconscious*. I have never seen it and do not know exactly how it works, but I believe it exists and must be considered in any concept of change, large or small. Not too many years ago, I was around a number of bright people attempting to be change agents in their businesses and organizations. That the organization probably had an “unconscious” seemed obvious to me, but was a new idea to many of these people.

I believe that:

- A person’s *history* is important and is played out in their adult life. I think that the first five years of life are extraordinarily important and that a human being develops and grows through a lifetime. Although I certainly wouldn’t call myself any kind of Freudian, I am primarily a psychodynamist. I believe Freud’s ideas still prevail in American culture for better or worse: Every time we hear a parent asking a young child “why did you do that?” we are hearing the cause and effect *ideas* of Freud.

I believe:

- *The relationship* is the essential element of change.

I believe:

- *We cannot predict, nor control the future, nor even much the present.* This means to me that while a person's history may have been horribly damaging, there are too many mysteries about human life and culture to predict outcome with any certainty.

I was born in Los Angeles and lived there most of my life—long enough to see it covered over with buildings and cement. My early years were influenced by The Great Depression's web on my parents and World War II. I have lived through many things: the Civil Rights Movement, The Women's Movement, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the beginnings of the Peace Corps, Vista, Head Start, Legal Services for the Poor, the massacre at Kent State and the Vietnam War. It was a time of rioting in ghettos and barrios in over 100 United States cities (some call the riots "revolutions"). Stonewall and AIDS are of my time and I watched on TV as an astronaut landed on the moon; I witnessed *Roe v. Wade*, the turbulent revolution of the '60s, the resignation of a president and the impeachment of another. It was the time of the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King within a few years of each other. I have been around to see 9/11 and its ramifications. All have influenced and formed me and I have noticed that life keeps bobbing up and getting in the way of plans. I consider the term "planned change" an oxymoron. There are always surprises.

I believe:

- *Education can be transforming of individuals and cultures*, but usually isn't.

I believe:

- *Humor* is essential—in life, teaching and in therapy. Almost anything can be said, if it is done with humor. And it helps if the person feels *understood*. Humor is a virtually unstudied but tremendously important asset of human life.
- I am passionate about *art therapy*. Because it is innovative, magical, mysterious and because the created image is always surprising and sometimes life changing. Art and the creative process are as important to life as breathing.

And I believe:

- *Hope* is the cauldron in which most change occurs.

In many ways, this book of essays *Mourning, Memory and Life Itself*, includes my life's work. While it may not contain all, it certainly represents ideas that have been most fascinating and important to me and reflects the variety of interests that have startled and provoked me over time. When I look at the essays as a whole, that certain themes unaccountably persist over my almost 40 years as an art therapist surprised me. Many go way back and are the very same themes that intrigued me as a child and as an adolescent. Although sometimes disguised or couched in different terms, they are the very same themes that plague and interest me now. Themes here appear as topic headings for the essays. They are: Psychology of Art, Creativity, Social Action, Clinical Applications of Art Therapy, and Art Therapy as a Profession.

As I wrote this book of essays, I hoped I would be able to discover something different than that written by the sometimes wonderful multidisciplinary writers and theoreticians about art and creativity, art historians, educators, mental health practitioners or even philosophers. I am satisfied and pleased that this book is clearly the work of an art psychotherapist who while including ideas from disparate sources, hopes to conceptualize and "see" within her own idiosyncratic focus. *Mourning, Memory and Life Itself* is first for my art therapy colleagues and students. In addition, it is for other mental health professionals who I hope will find some of their questions echoed here. It is also a book for people interested in the psychology of art and for those who love wondering about the combination of art and people, as I always have and as I do now.

Now it is almost spring on Whidbey Island. The winter tree's bare branches are covered with buds which will be bursting into fabulous pink in another week or so. The leaves from bulbs in my garden—tulips and daffodils—have come up, fanned by the little sun we have had, with their abundant flowers not far behind. This morning it rained, but in the afternoon sun appeared for awhile.

Maxine Borowsky Junge  
Whidbey Island, Washington  
April 2008

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, my profound thanks go to Helen B. Landgarten, my art therapy mentor, colleague and friend, who wrote the Foreword for this book at a time I know, was very difficult for her.

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My son, Benjamin Junge, was my “computer consultant.” When I couldn’t make the computer behave, he knew how to straighten out my messes. With his cheerful demeanor, Ben was always there when I needed him. Even when he was up to his ears in work as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at SUNY, he never turned me down. In addition, he designed the graphics for this book. I am very grateful.

Jason Calk efficiently and effectively transposed onto CD the images for this book, easily rescued me from a huge computer glitch and has been invaluable as a backup person. He deserves my thanks as does David Wilder who took photos of my art for the cover. A number of friends gave me valued feedback and support on parts of the manuscripts—in particular Wendy Lambeth. They know who they are, but I want them to know how enriching their help has been to me.

I owe thanks to Bob Ault who died before this book was completed and to whom this book is dedicated along with my grandson Henry Petrie. Bob was a great art therapy friend for over 30 years. He called art therapy a “movement,” and meant it and he worked tirelessly for it over its history. He was a prime mover in the formation of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) and was its second President. With Bob’s encouragement and support, I was spurred on to spend nine years writing *A History of Art Therapy in the United States*. His pioneering work as an art therapist at the Menninger

Foundation in Topeka, Kansas and his founding of the art therapy Masters program at Emporia State University inspired us all. I loved that he collected jokes and would tell me his latest so we could both chortle over them. (They were usually bad, powerful and extremely funny.) But it was his enduring and remarkable friendship over the years and that of his wife Marilyn which meant and mean a great deal to me. I owe them a lot.

And to Jim, thanks for the pen.

I am deeply indebted to those who have granted permission to print some of the material in this book. Their names are listed below:

*Art Therapy, Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* in a different form published "An inquiry into women and creativity including two cases studies of the artists Frida Kahlo and Diane Arbus," "The book about daddy dying: A preventive art therapy technique to help families deal with the death of a family member," "Door at Abiquiu," "Guest editorial for stories of art therapists of color," "The art therapist as social activist," and "Themes and reflections on the stories of art therapists of color"

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Elsevier Press *The Arts in Psychotherapy* in a different form published "The perception of doors: A sociodynamic investigation of doors in 20th century painting," "Mourning, memory and life itself: The Vietnam Wall and the AIDS Quilt," and "Feminine imagery and a young woman's search for identity." In addition, they gave permission to print a quote from Golub's "Symbolic expression in post-traumatic stress disorder: Vietnam combat veterans in art therapy"

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**MOURNING, MEMORY AND LIFE  
ITSELF**

*Art is personal; it makes people think about their secret lives.*  
—Joan Acocella

*The reward of writing is learning.*  
—Fritz Stern

**Part I**  
**PSYCHOLOGY OF ART**





## Chapter 1

### MOURNING, MEMORY AND LIFE ITSELF: THE AIDS QUILT AND THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the AIDS Quilt represented our most profound cultural yearnings of memory and forgetting at the end of the twentieth century. In this essay, I attempt to make connections between these memorials' artistic meaning-making at the individual level as it springs from and expands into remarkable and powerful societal concerns about healing. Along with the Women's Movement, the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic are the distinguishing events of the latter half of the twentieth century. They represent two markers of what America meant at this unique historical moment.

Artwork and other articles of remembrance have been left by visitors to the Wall since its inauguration. These "offerings" are collected by the National Park Service, taken to a secret<sup>2</sup> warehouse, catalogued and stored. Some years ago, a student of mine as her thesis project, studied the artifacts left at the Wall. As I accompanied my student through her thesis exploration, I grew fascinated that people at the Wall created and brought their own offerings to the dead. (We have observed this phenomenon again with the spontaneous offerings left after Princess Diana's death and, increasingly, at the sites of accidents and deaths across the United States.) The AIDS Quilt is another

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1. This essay is printed with changes from "The AIDS Quilt and the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall" (1999). *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 26, 195–203. Used with permission.

2. "Secret" because the was is still controversial.

important memorial first created in the United States during the last decades of the twentieth century as a response to the pandemic of AIDS.

As I thought and read about these phenomena, I came to believe that the mourning process as it is expressed and enacted, and the mourning objects of individual and collective memory, can be thought of as metaphors for art therapy processes because, as with art therapy, these memorials embody our deepest sufferings juxtaposed with an intrinsic impulse toward creativity, existing paradoxically and simultaneously within the bounded container of the therapeutic relationship.

The art therapist provides art materials, a listening heart and mind—and a surround in which suffering exists but simultaneously can be contained. Created artwork, its particular intent or direction notwithstanding, represents the dark and the light, the known and the unknown, consciousness and unconsciousness. And it represents the creator's reinterpretation of *memory*. Within the boundaries of art materials, the concrete and imagined art product expresses safety and continuity. It represents and stands for a life lived and one still living. It echoes a voice of continuity in the face of loss and death.

### ART THERAPY LITERATURE

Much art therapy literature has dealt with loss, grief and trauma, but these studies seem to fall into two major categories: First, are the individual or group case histories of clients undergoing grief from loss, trauma or post-traumatic stress syndrome who through their involvement in art therapy with a sensitive art therapist (often in a workshop setting) are able to alleviate suffering and lift depression (e.g., Case, 1987; Kornreich, 1993; McIntyre, 1990; Speert, 1992; Stronach-Buschel, 1990; Zambelli, Clark & Heegaard, 1989).

The second category is art therapy literature on trauma at the societal level (e.g., Berkowitz, 1990; Felber, 1993; Golub, 1985; Jones, 1997; McDougall, 1992; Roje, 1994). In her paper, Berkowitz (1990) wrote about art therapy treatment with returning veterans of the Vietnam War. Golub (1985,) also working with this population, stated that art therapy was a natural form of expression for “the devastating anguish surrounding visual memories . . . because there are no works

to describe such extreme situations.” In 1991 in “Art Therapy in a War Zone,” Sherebrin described her work with Israeli children whose homes were destroyed in SCUD missile attacks during the Gulf War. Felber (1993) wrote about art therapy as a way to ease psychological trauma in Tijuana, Mexico after giant floods. Her study concerned an art therapy group with mental health workers on the front lines after the tragedy. McDougall (1992) worked with children who survived the Andover, Kansas tornado, and Roje (1994) described art therapy with children after the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake. Jones (1997) discussed art therapy with Oklahoma City bombing survivors; Franklin (1993) described the AIDS crisis and its art imagery and persuasively argued the connection between AIDS art and its social context. For an interesting story of the making of a Quilt panel within the context of art therapy, see Kerewsky’s (1997) “The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Personal and Therapeutic Uses.”

A third category of literature is the art therapy response to urban violence. A precursor of this ilk was published by Landgarten, Tasem, Junge and Watson (1978) in “Art Therapy as a Modality for Crisis Intervention” in which a team from a community mental health clinic conducted art therapy sessions in a public school after the Symbionese Liberation Army’s kidnapping of Patti Hearst and the burning of people and houses in the student’s neighborhood in Los Angeles. I was a member of this team.

My own writing in these areas has taken me from clinical work into the social arena. In 1985, I published “The Book About Daddy Dying: A Preventive Art Therapy Technique to Help a Family Deal with the Death of a Family Member” (Junge, 1985, Chapter 13 in this book). I described the making of a book in which all the family participates and which gives expression and concreteness to the dead person as still, part of the family. I spoke of the book as a ritual memory object. In 1989, in “Social Applications of the Arts” (Ault, Barlow, Junge & Moon), I wrote of the “sweeping power of the arts for change.” “The Art Therapist as Social Activist” (Junge, Alvarez, Kellogg & Volker, 1993, Chapter 7 in this book) describes a clinical project in which art therapists worked with Nicaraguan refugees and one art therapist’s experience of being a union organizer and striking against her clinic management.

Relevant to my essay here is Kaufman’s 1996 paper “Art in Boxes: An Exploration of Meanings.” Through artmaking, Kaufman, a tal-

ented art therapist, explores the relationship of art and suffering through research based on the loss of her child to AIDS. By making a sculpture the author confronts her own sense of loss and separateness and transforms it through art and meaning-making. Kaufman's work is very close to the exploration of meaning in this paper of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the AIDS Quilt: She sees art as a response to suffering and a container for feelings. She establishes art as having the potential both to memorialize and to transform.

### **HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL AND THE AIDS QUILT**

After World War I, allied forces determined that every fallen soldier should be commemorated individually. Major architects of the time put names on gravestones, or incised them on a monument. In 1924, Sir Edward Luyten constructed arches at Thiepval in France containing 73,367 names to memorialize those who had died at the battle of the Somme. On the Mennen gate which leads out of Ypres in north-west Belgium, there are 54,896 names.<sup>3</sup>

A Vietnam veteran, Jan Scruggs, initiated the Vietnam design competition through grassroots efforts to build a memorial to honor and remember those who served in that conflictual war. Criteria for designs were that the future monument be nonpolitical and that it include *all* who were killed or missing in action from 1959 to 1975. An eminent jury of eight art experts judged the submissions.

Maya Lin, a Chinese-American, who grew up in Athens, Ohio was an undergraduate architecture student at Yale University at the time. She became fascinated with monuments commemorating the ordinary lives of fallen soldiers. As a senior design student, together with each member of her design seminar, in 1980 she submitted a design to the Vietnam Veterans competition—a design shaped by her study of World War I cemeteries. Lin designed a simple V-shaped panel with roughly 58,000 names inscribed in 140 panels. The names, themselves, she decided, would be the memorial.

Lin's design contrasted with and functions in opposition to the established methods of remembrance on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

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3. This history of memorials has been culled from a variety of sources including Hawkins, (1993), Ruskin, Heron & Zemke, (1988), Sturken, (1997), and The NAMES Project, (1996).

where the Vietnam memorial would be placed. Previous memorials were of white marble, often contained realistic figures and included towering shapes, such as the neighboring Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument. Lin's wall of names was a minimalist sculpture, an earthwork cut into the sloping earth. Made of highly polished black granite, the Wall in effect acts as a mirror: Here the living see themselves superimposed upon the names of the dead. The names on the Wall are represented chronologically instead of alphabetically as was typical; they are like a Greek epic, representing the continuing chronicle of the war.

Although the jury was unanimous in its selection of Lin's design, a firestorm of controversy was ignited. At first, the focus of the controversy was on the modernist character of the monument itself. But when Lin's identity became known—she was not only young (21 years old) and uncredentialed, she was Chinese-American and female—she was defined not as American, but as “other.” The jury's selection of someone with “marginal” cultural status as the primary interpreter of a controversial war inevitably complicated matters. Lin's design was characterized as passive and female. The aesthetic was seen as Asian and therefore not appropriate for an American memorial. In addition, Lin's refusal to glorify war led her to an aesthetic statement of pacifism, not a very popular stance then or now in America.

Maya Lin's design reflects war's violence as the Wall cuts into the earth. Despite its initial deep flaying for the construction of the Wall, the land itself remains constant and endures. Although the still-visible cut is part of Lin's design, grass has grown back around it. Later, a more traditional monument depicting soldiers was added to the Mall area and recently a monument to women of the Vietnam War has been established. Both face the Wall.

What was unexpected was the stream of reverent visitors filing past the black granite wall, often in tears. Soon after the inauguration of the Memorial, the controversy fell away attesting to the Wall's aesthetic power. Since its dedication, people have been unable to keep from touching it. They look for names familiar to them, and touch them as if tenderly caressing skin. Often they leave behind teddy bears, flowers, model cars, letters, photographs, and dog tags. Even women's underpants and a Harley Davidson motorcycle have been left at the Wall or pushed into a seam near a name.

Lin believed that the names themselves would be the memorial.