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***“Monuments to those one has never heard of – not a class it is easy to become fervently interested in.” (Harbison, 54)***

Some of the most effective memorials are those that sneak up behind a person and transform an object or space they thought they knew. In the basement of Steinert Center, Brown University’s music practice facility, are sixteen dark and gloomy cubicles, each equipped with one or two pianos. One of these pianos, a Kawai baby grand, is a monument in disguise, a subtle memorial. With the addition of a small plaque, “In Memory of Hsu Hwa Chao”, the piano is at once a site of memory, yet still just a piano.



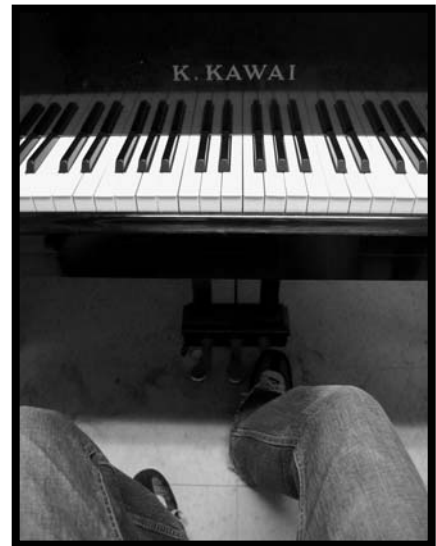
The Kawai baby grand with the inscription has been in its lonely cubicle for so long that its intended position as a “site of memory” seems to have deteriorated (judging from the serial



number, the piano was produced and purchased at some point in the early 1990s). Whoever Hsu Hwa Chao was, he as a person became memory long before the days of ubiquitous virtual documentation. He is listed nowhere deep in the depths of the Brown University website, and no newspaper article detailing the tragic death of a promising young music student includes such a name.

Whoever Hsu Hwa Chao was, the Kawai piano has become a site of memory, in Pierre Nora's sense, only for those who know what his story was. Yet for those who happen to notice the inconspicuous plaque, the piano becomes a site of speculative memory.

Contrary to Harbison's comment (though he seems to change his mind just a few sentences later), an ambiguous memory-less memorial is almost more effective than one that has a direct connection – we are invited to make our own connections, to pause and think about someone we had lost and forgotten, to take a break from practicing our f minor scales to reflect. The memorial to Chao thus becomes a memorial to whatever the person who notices the plaque takes it to be. Though originally dedicated to a now-unknown individual, the ambiguity of the memorial makes it all the more applicable and relevant.



***“Lieux de mémoire only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.” (Nora, 19)***

The most frequent visitors to the memorial are not those paying their respects to the individual it memorializes or seeking concretization of a tragic memory. They are instead musicians simply looking to the piano to further their craft, or students looking for a way to unwind after a long day of work. But for those who notice the dedication, tucked away after the rarely-used low notes of the instrument, the plaque at least affords them a momentary pause to wonder exactly what happened to Chao and who he was. For those who fail to even notice the plaque, the piano is no different than the Yamaha in cubicle ten (right, following page) besides the fact that Chao's memorial has an out-of-tune D and the Yamaha is unusually loud.

This changing character of the piano is, according to Nora, exactly what makes it a “place of memory”. For those who originally donated the piano and placed the inscription, we assume that the piano was probably a way of commemorating the tragic death



of a loved one, to provide an instrument so that others could enjoy the craft that he loved and which he can no longer enjoy. But in an environment as transitory as a four-year university, the collective memory of the group constantly changes and certain events become forgotten. As Chao gradually leaked out of the collective memory, the piano’s status as a monument was gradually reduced to its current status as a sort of mystery monument. We know that the piano commemorates someone and is a site of memory for those who knew him, but our collective memory has no recollection of the individual or his story.

***“Lieux de mémoire are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional.” (Nora, 18)***

Abstract monuments are at once made more universal by that fact that the number of connections that a person can make to it becomes almost infinite. But at the same time, an abstract monument can run the risk of becoming too general, or of failing to make a connection to the intended audience. For example Holocaust survivors criticized Peter Eisenman’s “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin,



declaring that “we weren’t tortured and our families weren’t murdered in the abstract...it was real” (Young, 9). In the case of the piano dedicated to Hsu Hwa Chao, however, abstraction can be unintentional. When a monument is erected in or dedicated to the memory of an event or person that few people outside of the group can relate to, the memorial becomes a clean palette for musings, remembering and “abstract elaboration”, no matter how thin the connection to the originally memorialized person may be.

The “In Memory of Hsu Hwa Chao” piano is no doubt “simple and ambiguous” – the plaque could not be less ostentatious, yet the connections to it are boundless. The memorial is functional in the simplest sense of the world – to most of its audience, the plaque goes unnoticed; the piano is just a piano. It is material in that we can grasp it – for those who notice the memorial aspect of the instrument, the piano becomes an anchor for whatever memories may be drawn out. Symbolically, it symbolizes the memory of Hsu Hwa Chao and the fluidity of collective memory. By becoming a memorial to something forgotten, the piano has become a potential memorial to anything and everything.



## **Bibliography**

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