The Atlantic

How Will the Future Remember COVID-19?

By: Ian Bogost
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Unlike a war, a pandemic is invisible and diffuse. It's everywhere and nowhere. Its death toll is ultimately unknowable. That makes a virus difficult to mark with physical tributes. Few memorials mark the 1918 Spanish flu; one is a modest granite bench built in Vermont two years ago, underwritten by a local restaurant also marking its own centennial.

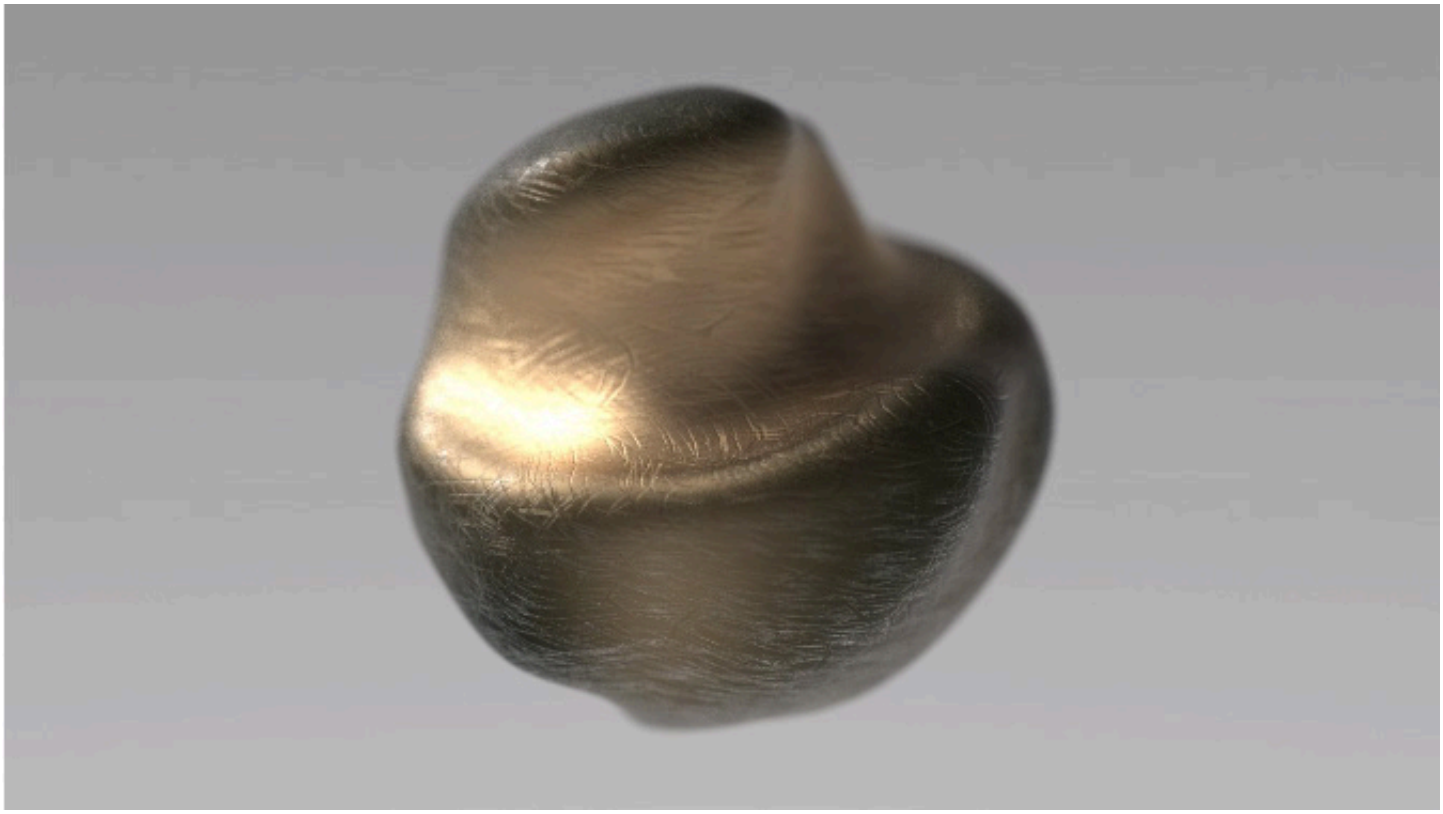
The coronavirus pandemic is not over, either. Not even close. A third wave of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths is lashing the nation from coast to coast. More than 12 million Americans have contracted COVID-19, and more than 250,000 of them have died. Early vaccine tests are promising, but a broad rollout is months away at minimum. Even after it wanes, the long-term effects of the virus could continue to debilitate people who have "recovered."

So this might seem like a strange time to imagine memorializing the pandemic in a formal way. A premature time. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial was conceived in 1981, six years after the United States had withdrawn from the conflict. Michael Arad and Peter Walker's 9/11 memorial broke ground at the site of the World Trade Center in 2006, almost five years after the attacks.

But there are downsides to waiting. A traumatic event is an author of its own memorial; as a famous anecdote attests, when a Nazi soldier asked Pablo Picasso if he had made Guernica, the famous painting the artist created during the month following the Luftwaffe's bombing of its Basque namesake in 1937, Picasso replied, "No, you did." The feelings, facts, and ideas available during a calamity dissipate as it ebbs. The temptation arises to contain tragedy in a tidy box, closing the book on its history.

Rather than await a design competition for a real memorial, we wanted to see, in the brutal heaviness of the moment, how some of the nation's most exciting designers might memorialize this time. We commissioned three pieces from artists who straddle the lines between art and architecture, design and social justice, technology and manufacturing to speculate on the question What might a COVID-19 memorial be? These are the results.

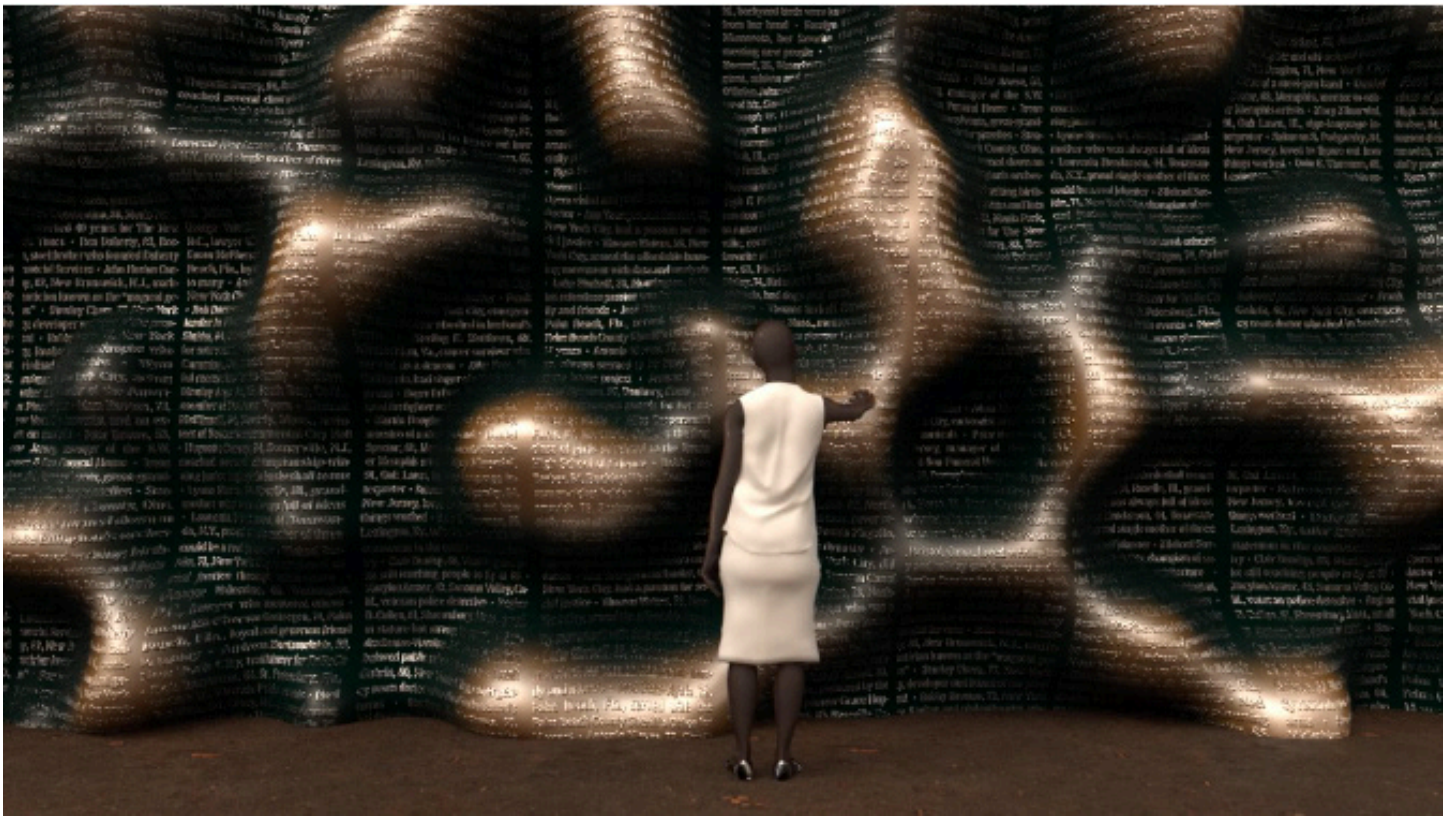
Rael San Fratello – 29CuCV-19



Ronald Rael distinctly remembers the smell of copper pennies, back when they were still made out of copper. “I later discovered that it’s not the smell of the metal itself,” he told me, “but of all the bodies that have touched the penny.” It’s disgusting, he admitted, but also alluring. You can’t help but touch it, smell it—even become tempted to taste it.

Rael San Fratello, the studio he and fellow artist and architect Virginia San Fratello started, thrives on repurposing such ordinary materials. In 2019, the pair installed three pink teeter-totters across the gaps in the border wall, offering Americans and Mexicans a literal fulcrum on which to balance their common humanity. Through their fabrication studio, the two also bring together novel and historical materials and construction practices, such as robot-extruded mud structures. “When we 3D print with coffee, chardonnay or curry, the objects we make are incredibly fragrant,” San Fratello says. “The scent of these otherwise ubiquitous designs gives them meaning.”

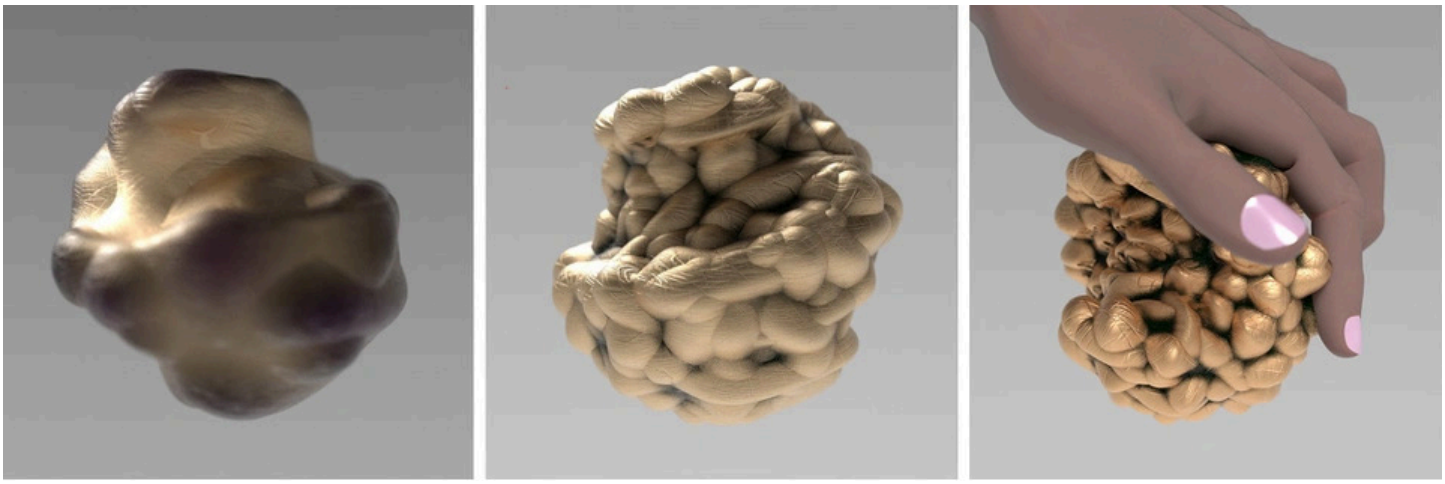
Quarantine has limited our ability to use smell and touch for communion, so she and Rael became interested in finding a way to replicate the experience. That’s where pennies come in: Copper is an antiviral—a quality with obvious symbolism in the moment—and one that evolves over time, developing a patina as it interacts with water and air.



So the pair latched on to it as a material. Rael San Fratello's first idea was a pragmatic one: a traditional memorial made of copper molded into a bulbous, organic wall. The copper material would invite the touch lost to quarantine. Outdoors, it could develop a green or purple patina. "If touched constantly," San Fratello said, "the patina might never occur, and the memorial will remain shiny."

Even so, a wall etched with names feels like a mismatch for COVID-19. Whom, exactly, would such a monument include? "I feel like it's too conventional," Rael told me. It's a symptom of memorialism more broadly. Memorials and monuments have to lure visitors, draw attention, inspire photographs, structure space. Unless they don't. Perhaps, Rael and San Fratello concluded, a memorial could be distributed to the people instead. A thing that you could touch all around the world, in every city or town, given that each one will have been touched by the pandemic. "It could be something as simple as a doorknob or a balustrade—something mundane," Rael said. "Something anyone would touch and recall this moment."

But Rael couldn't shake the idea of the copper penny. So personal and portable. He recalled a hundred-year-old wooden nickel his grandmother had kept, a token for a church anniversary. He had also recently started smelting down aluminum cans, and he found that friends were inexplicably drawn to the resulting ingots, many asking if they could take one home as a keepsake of nothing in particular. "What if all we need is a copper ball?" he wondered. A keepsake that anyone—that everyone—could have. One that might act as a proxy for the touches and smells that the virus prohibits, too. But how do you distribute a copper object to everyone on Earth? The logistics seem impossible. They also correspond exactly with the coordination needed to distribute a vaccine that would successfully inoculate the planet's population. Perhaps the cure could come with the token that might preserve its own memory, like a talisman. People have an attachment to the objects they make and use.



Three renderings of possible copper memorial talismans. Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael imagine that 3-D printing could allow each person's object to be unique to them. (Rael San Fratello)

They embed memories and carry them forward too. This one would conform to the shape of the human hand, both begging for touch and changing in response to it. "Every memorial would become completely unique and individualized over time," San Fratello said. "Each memorial would be personal." Such an expanded spirit of memorialization would include many more people than just the dead—the families, the friends, the caregivers, and the healthy, whose persistence will, hopefully, outlive the virus. Could the vessel that delivers the vaccine itself become the memorial? Rael wondered aloud to me. "It's the one thing that would touch everybody but not touch anyone else."