

Knep

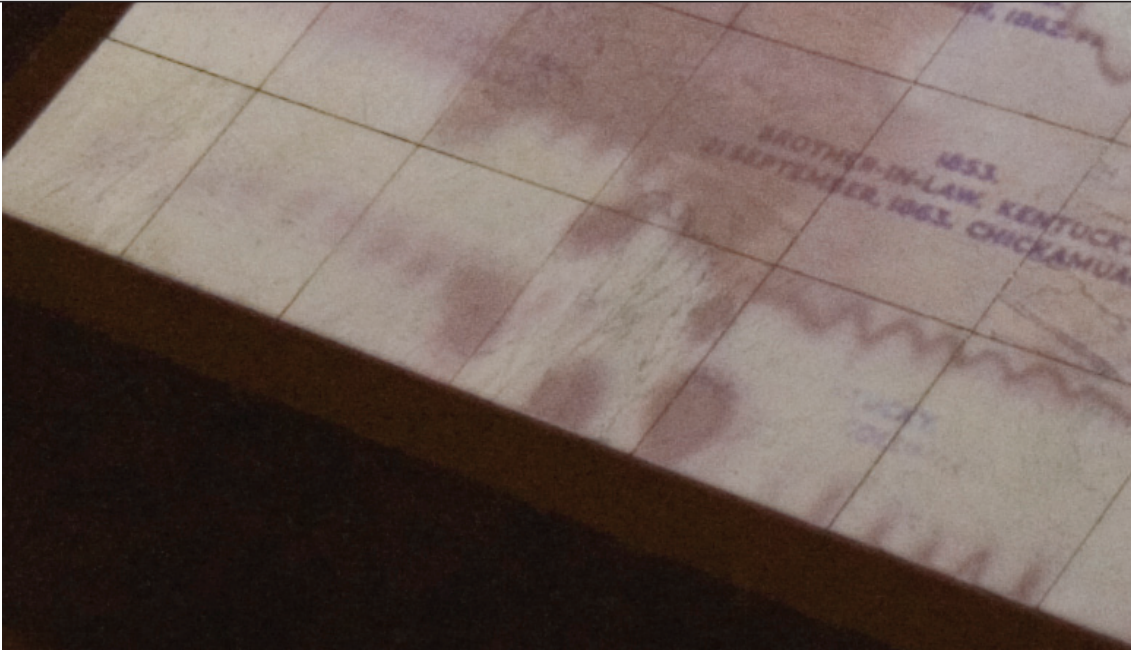


Brian Knep: Deep Wounds

July 15, 2012, to February 24, 2013

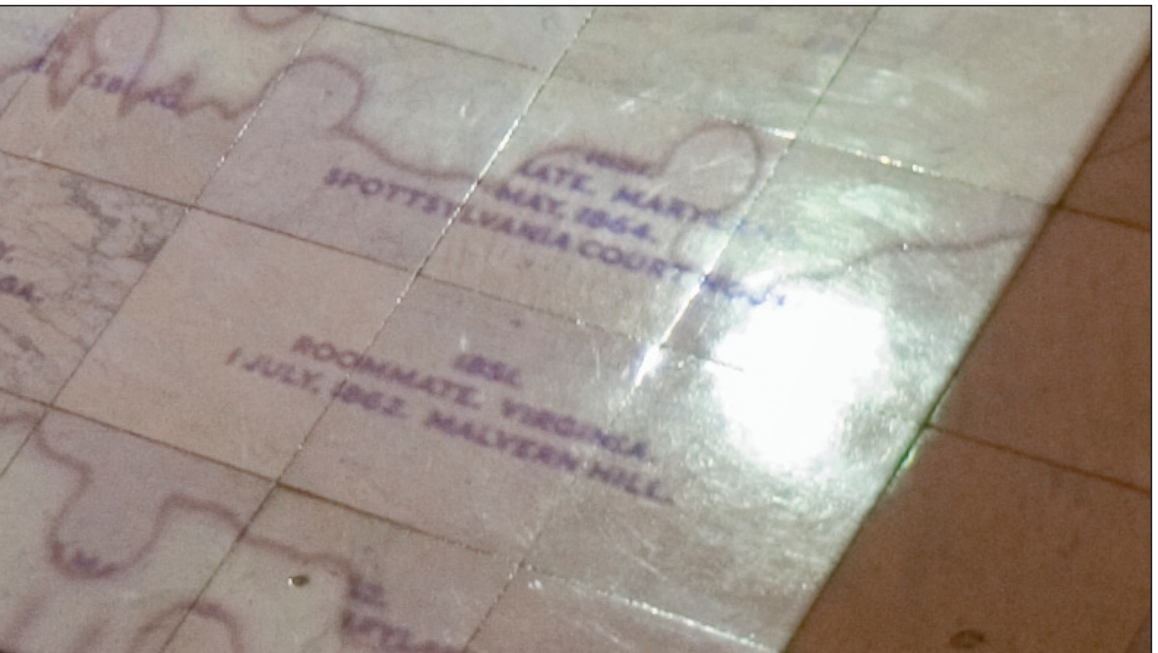
The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Brian Knep



In 2005 Brian Knep began an artist residency at the Harvard University Medical School. Soon after his arrival the Office of the Arts, together with the Department of Systems Biology, invited him to propose a temporary public project for the campus. The assumption was that he would create something for the Science Center, a natural choice as the subject of his work to that point had been the development of software that mimics the algorithms that govern growth, change, and healing in organic life. Walking around the Harvard campus he became fixated on Memorial Hall, an imposing building in the High Victorian Gothic style whose cornerstone was laid in 1870. Memorial Hall was erected as a monument to the Harvard graduates who fought and died for the Union during the Civil War, with the names of the 136 individuals who perished fighting for the North inscribed on the walls in the Hall's central corridor. Initially, Knep's interest in the building as a site was based on the spectacular stained glass in its windows and how video projection could relate visually to their spectral nature. But as the artist looked into the history of the building—and eventually the Civil War itself—his interest in the formal qualities of the edifice began to fade and the profound legacy of the war itself became his subject matter.

Having been born in South Africa, Knep had always felt that he was an outsider in the United States, even though he has lived here since early childhood. “I’ve never really felt that I belong in this country,” he has commented, “I’m disconnected from American history; events like the Civil War, Vietnam, etc., are outside my cultural legacy. This position as an outsider has given me, however, a certain perspective on this country that I’ve found to be helpful.”¹ As Knep investigated the situation surrounding Memorial Hall, he began to think that the core of his project would be about reconciliation and healing, a position that was reinforced by the facts: When the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War's end came in 1915, efforts were made to include the names of Harvard's 71 Confederate dead, but the interest led nowhere.² When the subject



Deep Wounds, 2006
Installation view (detail), Memorial Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

was again raised at various points in the twentieth century, it was swept under the rug for a host of reasons, including the fear that listing the names of those who fought for the Confederacy would look like support for slavery and shine a light on a potentially more explosive situation: the complicity of Harvard (and other institutions in the North) in the economy of the South, and by extension, slavery itself. The war is still the United States's most costly conflict in terms of human life, with an estimated 750,000 Americans dying over the course of four years. The US population was 31 million in 1860, and it is around 310 million today; if the war's death toll were translated by percentage of the total population to the present, the result would be the staggering loss of 7.5 million American lives.³ The severe upheaval caused by the war is still a wound on the fabric of this country, with the schism reflected to the present day in the Red State/Blue State divide that informs both American politics and cultural life. The situation at Memorial Hall gave Knep a basis for expanding his interest in healing from the microcosm of biological systems to the macrocosm of human society. The work that Knep eventually created for Memorial Hall, entitled *Deep Wounds*, engages not just the legacy of the Civil War, but also the difficult processes of reconciliation that exist following all human conflict.

Deep Wounds, as reconfigured for The Aldrich, consists of two large white marble tile rectangles on the floor, lit by video projections from above. On first encountering the illuminated rectangles, they seem to be covered with a milky "skin" that contains faint traces of blue text. As the viewer moves closer and then steps onto their surfaces, the person's shadow is detected by video cameras, with this information transmitted to a computer. The program designed by Knep is "conscious" of the moving shadows, reacting by breaking apart the skin in a manner that appears organic: the skin retracts like viscous protoplasm, revealing text that was formerly obscured. The text, now clearly readable, is a listing of the Harvard graduates who perished fighting for the Confederacy, noted not by name, but rather by their year of



graduation, human relationship (“father,” “classmate,” “son,” “brother,” “husband”), their state of birth, the final battle and date of their death. As the viewer’s shadow moves on, the disrupted skin slowly congeals, knitting itself together using an algorithm that was developed to mimic the firing patterns of neurons: the impulse conducting cells of the nervous system. As Knep has stated, “I primarily use this algorithm because it does, indeed, look like healing, but I also like the connection to the nervous system. It adds weight to the idea that Harvard, and by extension our culture, are complicit in covering up the names. It’s a willful process.”⁴

It should be noted that originally Knep wanted to list the actual names of the dead, but the University’s Office of the Arts thought it would be too controversial,⁵ particularly because the terms of the initial trust that endowed Memorial Hall’s construction stated that the names of the alumni who fought and died for the South must never be enshrined there. Deleting the names, combined with the facts that the piece was temporary (exhibited for only three weeks) and the reference to the Confederacy was rendered via ephemeral projections (and thus seemingly less offensive), allowed the project to move forward. Knep realized during the process of negotiation that not having the specific names of the dead revealed would actually make the work more expansive by divorcing itself from the personal and turning towards the universal, thus becoming a memorial to the larger situation instead of focusing on individual tragedy. This approach also reflects the artist’s background in science: the human relationships in the work are charted sociologically, and reflect the larger, complex organism of human interaction.

This exhibition of *Deep Wounds* at The Aldrich is taking place in the middle of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, with 2012 and 2013 being the 150th anniversary of the

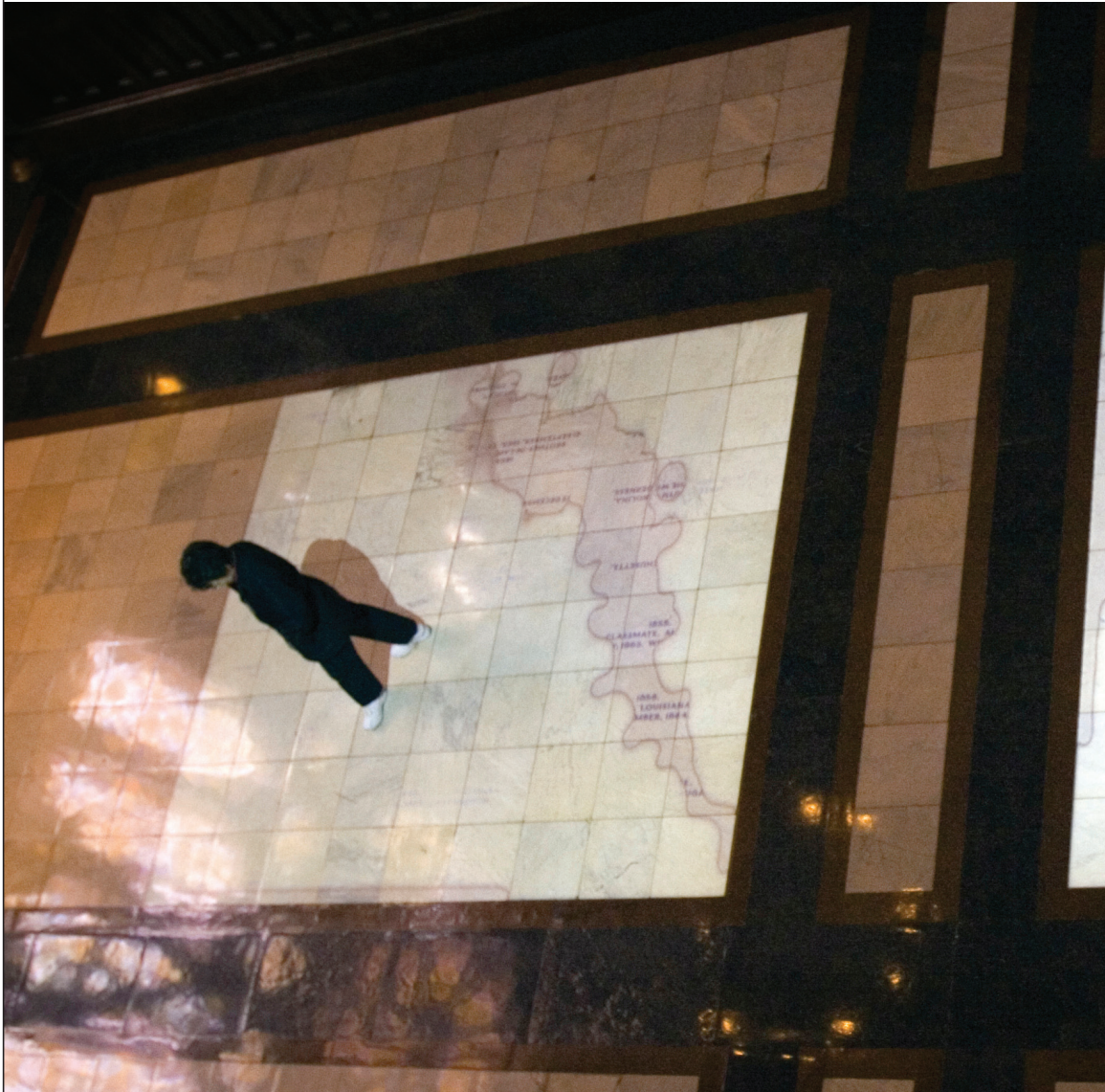
majority of the deadliest battles of the conflict, including Gettysburg, Chancellorsville, Shiloh, Antietam, and the Second Battle of Bull Run. For most of us in the North (myself included), the details of the war are distant historical facts, while for many in the South the “Lost Cause” is still painfully apparent. As historian David Goldfield has written, “In the meantime, southerners continue to flight the Civil War. Even for those not actively engaged in the struggle, the war may still tug at their hearts; it is embedded in their blood, and rationality has little to do with it.” Goldfield goes on to quote Hodding Carter III, whom no one would mistake for an unreconstructed southerner, acknowledging that opponents of the rebel flag are right, but confessing, “It still grabs me... Right or wrong, our ancestors fought, suffered, retreated, died, and were overcome while sustained by those same symbols.” We are also in the midst of a presidential campaign season, with the country as deeply divided as it’s been in several generations. Interestingly, both the Republican and Democratic candidates are Harvard graduates, reflecting the University’s continuing central role in American leadership.

Knep, however, never intended *Deep Wounds* to be either implicit or explicit criticism of Harvard University and its policies, but rather for the piece to be a meditation on the static situation found in Memorial Hall and how the dialogue created by its presence could hopefully move both the University’s community and the outside world towards reconciliation. The process of societal healing after trauma is clearly difficult, but not impossible, with notable efforts including Ireland’s National Day of Commemoration, an annual tribute to all the Irish people who have died in the conflicts, including members of the IRA and citizens who fought with the British Army. Since *Deep Wounds* was presented in 2006, there has been renewed interest at Harvard in acknowledging graduates who fought for the South, but to date nothing concrete has transpired.

Reconciliation is active, not passive, and Knep’s use of interactive technology to deal with the legacy of the Civil War creates a situation where the viewer of *Deep Wounds* must act decisively to reveal the substance of the piece. To read the record of Harvard’s Confederate dead, the viewer’s shadow must fall across the surface of the marble, a material that has been used to construct countless memorials and carve innumerable gravestones. Perhaps when the veil covering the dead has been disrupted, the text noting a soldier who died on the 21st of September 1863, at the battle of Chickamauga, Georgia, will be revealed. His name was Ben Hardin Helm from Kentucky, and he was Abraham Lincoln’s brother-in-law. In America’s War Between the States, as in all civil wars, “us” vs. “them” translated itself into brother fighting brother, or father fighting son. Recovery and forgiveness from war in a family—or within a nation itself—is a more difficult proposition than that between the family of nations. As Lincoln stated, a little more than a month before the end of the war and his assassination, “With malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Richard Klein, exhibitions director

An accounting by name of all of the Harvard Graduates who fought and died in the Civil War—both Union and Confederate—is available. Please ask a gallery attendant or inquire at the Museum’s reception desk.



1 From a conversation with the artist in May 2012.

2 For a fascinating discussion of the history of Memorial Hall and the debate concerning the acknowledgment of Harvard's Confederate dead, see Caitlin Hopkins's blog *Vast Public Indifference*: <http://www.vastpublicindifference.com/2011/05/confederates-in-harvards-memorial-hall.html>

3 J. David Hacker, *Professor: Civil War Death Toll May Be Really Off*, National Public Radio, May 29, 2012: <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/29/153937334/professor-civil-war-death-toll-may-be-really-off>

4 From an email from the artist in June 2012.

5 Geoff Edgers, "Is There An Artist in the House?: At Harvard Medical School, The Answer is Yes. Now Brian Knep is About to Reveal 'Deep Wounds,' The Work he Created During a Yearlong Residency," *Boston Globe*, April 7, 2006.

6 David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), p. 318.

7 Journalist and politician, best known for his role as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs in the administration of President Jimmy Carter.

8 Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.



Deep Wounds, 2006
Installation view, Memorial Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Works in the Exhibition

Deep Wounds, 2006

Interactive video installation

Video projectors, computers, custom software, video cameras, marble tiles

Dimensions variable

Deep Wounds Documentary, 2006

Video, color, sound; 4:20 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

All photographs: Kris Snibbe

look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Brian Knep: Deep Wounds is part of *united states*, a semester of solo exhibitions and artist's projects that approach both the nature of the United States as a country and "united states" as the notion of uniting separate forms, entities, or conditions of being. Timed to coincide with the 2012 American election season, *united states* also includes solo exhibitions by Pedro Barbeito, Jonathan Brand, Brody Condon, Brad Kahlhamer, Erik Parker, and Hank Willis Thomas, and projects by Jane Benson, Alison Crocetta, Celeste Fichter, Erika Harrsch, Nina Katchadourian, Matthew Northridge, Risa Puno, John Stoney, Sui Jianguo, Frances Trombly, Rosemary Williams, and Jenny Yurshansky.

Installation view, Memorial Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Deep Wounds, 2006



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