The Ephemerality of Digital Monuments: Swedish Public Art at the Turn of the Millennium, the case of “Tidsdokumentet”

In December 1999, the Swedish national memorial, celebrating the turn of the millennium, was inaugurated. The monument was erected on behalf of the Millennium Committee, set up by the Swedish government and the result became "Tidsdokumentet", an interactive monument downtown Gothenburg. However, due to unclear administrative responsibilities concerning the maintenance of the technology, the monument was deconstructed shortly afterwards. Thus, within a few years the monument that was supposed to epitomize visions of technological and scientific progress had turned into a ruin of technology.

Tidsdokumentet illustrates a new kind of public art that emerged during the mid 1990’s and this paper introduces the concept “digital monuments” to characterize it. Digital monuments consist of digital technology, are located in public places and symbolize technological and scientific progress. Despite the intention to become enduring, digital monuments are surprisingly transitory. Digital monuments are huge, lavish ventures involving the industry, the state as well as local authorities. On the other hand, digital technology is constantly changing at a very high rate. Thus, the technology, which initially was used with the intention to symbolize technological
progress, becomes out-of-date with an accelerated speed.

In this paper, I argue that digital monuments encompass this paradox. Thus, although digital monuments are intended to be part of the future, they literally turn into a part of the passed. By examining the rhetoric of "Tidsdokumentet", its sociocultural, economic and material conditions as well as its role, this paper aims at raising questions concerning preservation of digital art in public spaces.