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German Memory of the Holocaust: The Emergence of Counter-Memorials

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Germany faces what would seem like an insuperable difficulty in attempting to memorialize the Holocaust; how can the nation that perpetrated the largest and most systematic mass murder in modern history a mere sixty years ago honor the dead, and at the same time publicly assume the burden of guilt without disrupting all the conventions of public memorials. What exactly is such a state to commemorate, and how do present day German artists show the answer to that question in the aesthetic and ethical gestures of their memorial forms? Stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of remembering, renouncing, regretting, and redeeming, the artists, statesmen, and citizens of today's Germany lack even a first-hand memory on which they might draw to express both their shame and their wish to purge it. Haunted by the crimes of their not so distant forebears, Germans have been struggling for the past sixty years to depict this ghost, to show the weight of its burden on them, and to show as well their deep remorse for crimes they themselves did not commit but by which they feel tainted, and through which the world often views them.

Whether in the form of national remembrance days, museums, or monuments, there is no dearth of Holocaust remembrance in modern day Germany. This paper will focus mainly on monuments. However, the forms of remembrance have changed dramatically since the post-war years. Immediately following the war and up to the 1970s, Holocaust memorializing typically took the form of plaques and markers to indicate the locations of former synagogues, neighborhoods, cemeteries and other Jewishly identified sites eradicated by the Nazis. In order to mark time as well as space, the post-war years also saw the revival and new meaning of the People's Day

of Mourning, originally established for World War One victims. To show the nation's determination not to forget, either despite or because of the pain of remembering, the state began building memorial sites on the grounds of former concentration camps. Although minor compared to the current plethora of public monuments, these marks on the German cultural landscape do not dramatize the conflicts and contradictions that are so centrally staged by the forms of today's memorials.

From the Jewish Museum of Berlin to the smaller-scale negative-form monument in the city of Kassel, there has been a surge in German memory-work in the past twenty-five years. These modern monuments, many of which are now grouped under the rubric, "counter-monument", can serve to illuminate some central themes in German collective memory of the Holocaust. In their non- or anti-presentational character, as well as the non-hierarchical, anti-authoritative relationship that they seek to establish with the viewer, counter-monuments carve out a new niche in memory work. They frankly acknowledge the impossible but necessary task that they undertake, that of representing the un-representable, and they embody this acknowledgement in their challenge to every aspect of traditional monument culture. It is these modern monuments that I am interested in exploring. I will first consider the emergence of these new, abstract, and sometimes self-consuming or self-negating works in light of the problems associated with the history of conventional monuments in general, and more to the point, in Third Reich Germany. I will then examine some notable examples of counter-monuments in Germany. And last, I study the surge in counter-monuments for the insight it might provide into the German psyche of today; specifically, what can we learn from these new kinds of strategies for negotiating memory of the Holocaust. To point my direction, let me propose that one major reason for the predominance of the counter-monument in today's Germany is the strong association between the 19th and 20th century German nation-state – the hysteria over which fueled the Holocaust – and monumental public forms of representation. Further, I will suggest that any aesthetic based on representation can be seen as contaminated by

the Nazis' very deliberate use of propaganda to vilify and degrade the Jew. Although the counter-monument might be said to fail in certain respects, the counter-monument ultimately succeeds in displaying and claiming its failure as a moral necessity and embodying the ambivalence that today's Germans feel toward memory of the Holocaust.

The term "monument" recalls several key features, shared by the majority of public commemoration throughout the Western world. Consider for example two of the most powerful and conspicuous U.S. monuments, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Both are immense, made of marble (a durable and expensive material), didactic in that they recall the viewer to the mighty thoughts and acts of its founding fathers, and in their purity of shape as well as in their central placement within the nation's capital, reminiscent of holy icons. These monuments do not demand of the spectator active engagement, but rather serve to remind the viewer of the nation's canonical history, and to inspire her to identify with a proud national past. In the presence of such monuments, the viewer is dwarfed by the enormity of the structure, and as such is a passive observer of an artist's vision instead of an active participant shaping an historical legacy. In the frequency and popularity of such monuments throughout the world, we can judge this genre successful in its attempt to preserve and cultivate memory of an historical moment that figures in the nation's idealized self-presentation. "Monumentality as a key feature of national symbolism" is a theme that has played out in cultures across history.¹ However, it is when we consider the implications of remembering a national travesty that we run into the inherent inadequacy of a conventional monument.

Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial provides an American example of an attempt to publicly represent a divisive and contentious issue. In the case of Germany, however, representation of the Holocaust has posed more and greater challenges than even those that are the legacy of the bitterly contested Vietnam War. First, rather than celebrating a national character or sense of pride in the nation-state, Holocaust memorials must do the opposite. They must contend with the inescapable causal link between the ascendance of Germany as

an all-powerful modern nation-state and the mass murder of the Jews. The monument, conceived as an expression of collective pride in a nation's strength, cannot do the kind of work appropriate to the circumstances of this particular memory. Indeed, to present such a monument would look like a repetition of the self-vaunting arrogance of the nation that sought to purify itself of all foreign elements. Another reason why conventional monuments have been rejected in the last thirty years is the connection between monumentality and fascism. Finally, the Nazi use of propaganda, in the form of caricatured public representation of the Jews, images used to incite the virulent anti-Semitism that would culminate in the ovens of Auschwitz, contaminates the very concept of representation, making the only acceptable form of Holocaust remembrance an anti-representation, a "counter-monument".

Monuments have long played an integral role in the development of national unity and a strong collective identity. Dating back to the Ancient Greeks, "[n]ational mythologies and symbols [have been] cultivated to encourage identification with the state and reinforce its continuity and ubiquity."² This theme runs through the histories of most nation-states for reasons that are easily understood. The monument as manifestation of the collective character of a nation is essential in understanding the difficulty German artists have faced in representing the Holocaust. That collective character and fierce national identity is what had created the conditions and led directly to the mass extermination of the Jews. The form is felt to be doubly inappropriate when one considers the particularly German affinity for monuments. Although monument building is and has been widespread practice over time and space, over the course of its history Germany in particular has consistently relied upon grandiose national monuments to attain a sense of national cohesion and cement a German identity.³ So, not only are national monuments as a whole meant to both mobilize and represent a certain national character, making these memorial forms problematic for Holocaust representation, but also Germany's historical affinity with monumentalizing conjures up negative connotations when attempting to memorialize the Holocaust.



*The Hermann Monument (1841-1875). Ernst von Bandel
Grotenburg, Germany*

We can look back to the nineteenth century to improve our understanding of the singular importance that monuments have played in Germany's national self-conception and state-worship and thus the inappropriateness of using monuments to memorialize the Holocaust. The nineteenth century, which saw the rise of the German state simultaneously witnessed a pummeling to that image of national unity due to Germany's repeated losses to the French as well as the repercussions of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which culminated in political disunity. In spite of these negative conditions, or perhaps because of them, the German masses undertook the great project of nationalization, and turned that process into an "aesthetics of politics" that can be seen as a clear precursor to the Third Reich.⁴ Referencing an "objectification in art and architecture", George Mosse identifies a "continuity that extends from the struggle for national liberation against Napoleon to the political liturgy of the Third Reich."⁵ The term "liturgy" is apt here in that it marks the inherent connection between these nationalist movements and the "secularized religion" that both embody.⁶

Every religion needs myths and symbols in order to draw the people "into active participation in the national mystique" and Mosse argues that those aspects of the earlier nationalization movement gave "fascism a base from which to work."⁷ A good example of this phenomenon can be seen in the Hermann Monument in North Rhine Westphalia, on which construction began in 1841 and lasted through 1871. This commemorative statue of a military leader in a battle with Roman forces in 9 A.D. is inscribed as follows: "German unity is my strength – My strength is Germany's might". Desperate for physical manifestations of their budding nationalism, Germans oriented themselves towards an idealized their past to attain a sense of national identity.⁸ This is one example that reveals the usage of monumentality to rally Germans around a nationalist agenda in the nineteenth century. That connection between monumentality and the "secularized religion" of the state has definite parallels with Hitler's exploitation of national monuments and symbols to mobilize the German people towards his agenda. With this long history of associating monumentality and fiery nationalism, we can understand why

German artists have rejected the traditional monument as a form through which to represent the Holocaust.

This argument is especially potent when one examines the period following victory in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 and the emergence of an ardent state-worship that has a great deal of common ground with the Third Reich. The unification of Germany and the creation of the German Empire was a deeply symbolic moment for a nation in which nationalism and state identity had been growing but unable to coalesce around a bounded territory. This period saw the erection of monuments all over Germany that exhibited grandiosity, size, and intent different from monuments in the past.⁹ The Hermann monument is one such example of this trend, only reaching completion under the burst of nationalism that the war ignited. By the turn of the century, monuments in Germany numbered over one thousand, and not only that but they exemplified a distinct monumentality. That is to say, for the most part they were “massive edifices...suggest[ing] the need to use the past not to inform but to overwhelm or intimidate.”¹⁰ An apt example is the Leipzig monument, weighing in at 500,000 tons and reaching ninety-one meters in height.¹¹ We can look at German national monuments of the nineteenth century in general terms as part of a broader “effort to sublimate and transform the effects of a rich but ultimately chaotic preunification past.”¹² The emergence of the unified German Empire from previously disparate peoples prompted the need for national monuments to both represent a sense of collective identity that was lacking and provide a physical manifestation around which Germans could congregate and worship the “secularized religion” of the state that Mosse identified. This clear connection between monumentalizing and state worship is seen in countless cultures, but is exceptionally potent in Germany, It led German artists to largely reject the traditional form of the monument in their memorializing of a catastrophe brought on by a similar mass movement of state worship.

Hitler and the National Socialists succeeded in building on this monumental tradition and in rallying the German people around their ideology just as if it were a religion. To this end, they presided over

and micro-managed a high level of architectural construction and monument building, all meant to cement a national identity firmly grounded in the Nazi vision. Nazi monuments played a key role in the creation of a German national identity not just for their symbolism of national strength but also in their usage as public meeting sites and festival locales. A 1934 text states that “[t]he space which urges us to join the community of the Volk is of greater importance than the figure which is meant to represent the fatherland.”¹³ Hitler could not alone rally the nation; he needed national monuments to act as “the binding force which lifts us above individualism.”¹⁴ One such example of a Nazi monument is the Tannenberg Memorial constructed in 1927. The design for this monument was based on Stonehenge and it exemplifies that same sense of mysterious monumentality – so mighty as to seem inevitable and beyond question. It is made up of eight huge towers of stone, each of which houses a particular element of German culture, from a tomb of Hindenburg to the memory of Bismarck.¹⁵ The Tannenberg Memorial is one manifestation of the fact that the Nazis considered “national monuments and sacred spaces as an integral part of [their] new political style.”¹⁶ They not only served to reflect back onto the people their own collective identity but also acted as religious sites where Germans could come together en masse and worship Nazi ideology. The persistent usage of monuments to further and embody the Nazi agenda can be seen to have ignited “a deep distrust of monumental forms” in Germans today.¹⁷ The convergence of these ideas of fervent nationalism, state-worship and monumentality led many Germans, in considering how best to represent the Holocaust, to draw the conclusion that the conventional monument itself had been tainted. As James Young recently says, Germans have largely deemed it unethical to “commemorate the victims of totalitarianism...[using] the forms of totalitarianism.”¹⁸

Another reason for the emergence of counter-monuments can be seen in the connection between monumentality and fascism. Not only did the Nazis employ national monuments to rally the Germans around an ardent nationalism but their ideology also reflected a sense of monumentality. That is to say, fascist concepts of grandiosity,

permanence, didacticism and authority permeate traditional monuments. Similarly, these properties permeate Nazi architecture. Brett Ashley Kaplan refers to the “aesthetic pollution” that the Nazis produced through their widespread erection of monumental architecture. Although Kaplan debunks the myth that all fascist architecture was monumental, the fact is that the Nazis “constantly stressed the ideological significance of Nazi architecture,” and they made it “achieve unprecedented political significance in the Nazi state.”¹⁹

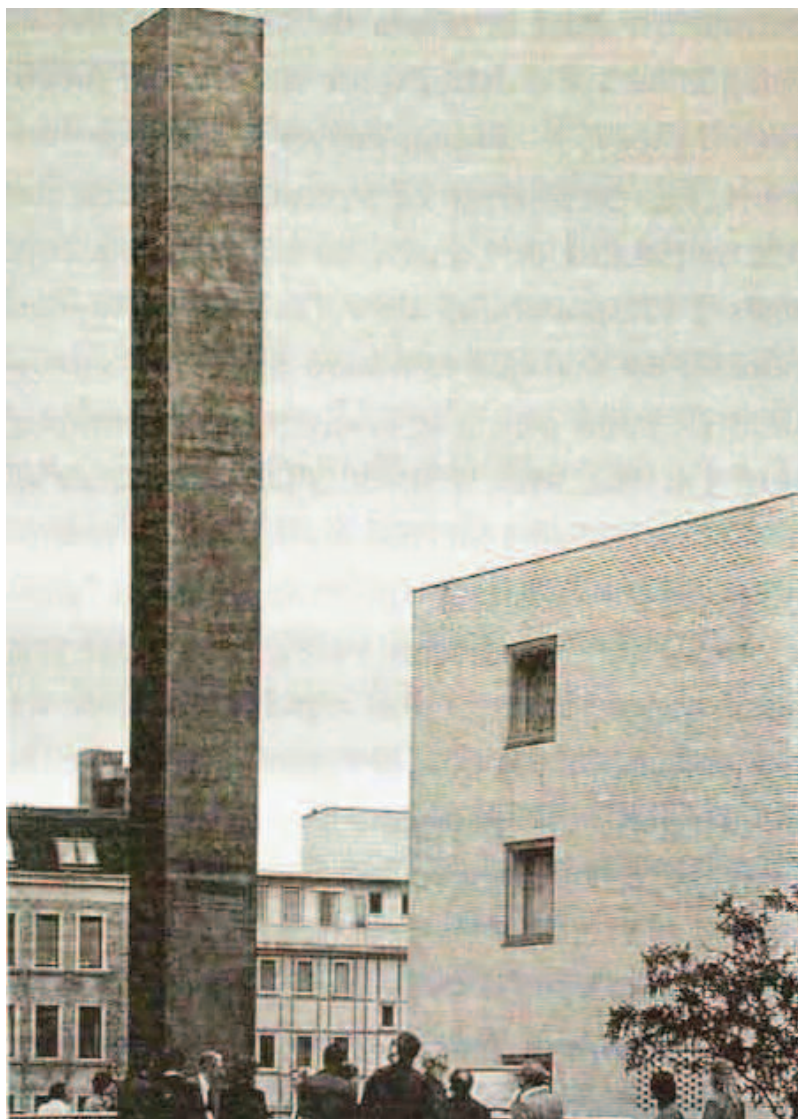
The convergence of the aesthetic with the political is a hallmark of National Socialism and it has succeeded in tainting the whole concept of monumental architecture and national monuments. Kaplan cites a newspaper editorial that, referencing the reconstruction of the center of Berlin, states that: “So onerous has been the burden of the Nazi past that anything even vaguely hinting at fascist architecture has been strenuously shunned throughout the rebuilding of Berlin.”²⁰ That thought process has governed architecture outside of Germany since the end of the war, as well. If non-commemorative architecture still remains so fearful of using anything remotely close to a monumental form, then it is clear why Holocaust memorial sites are especially concerned with not “be[ing] monumental because in replicating the monumentality of fascist architecture they would reproduce the politics of fascism, hence polluting their aesthetic composition with traces of unacceptable political histories.”²¹

The final element I want to explore in terms of the rejection of the conventional monument to memorialize the Holocaust is the vexed relationship between Jews and representation in the Third Reich. Throughout Hitler’s reign of terror, Jews were spoken for and spoken through by all of the media of the public sphere, a sphere taken over by official state government. As is widely known, the propaganda of the Third Reich was a central part of the government machinery and an innovation in world politics. Such manipulation of the means of communication had never been seen before, all harnessed towards the demonic representation of European Jewry. Hans Steinbach, Press Chief in the Reichsfilmkammer, said in 1937 “there can be no art but that which has firm roots in our ideology.”²² Every arm of the media used its wares to disseminate a virulent anti-Semi-

tism, from magazine publications to films to children's books.

In the film *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal/Wandering Jew) from 1940, one of hundreds of similar such examples, the Jew was represented as a subhuman parasite on the human race, leading the post-war Allied Commission to conclude that it was “[o]ne of the most striking examples of direct Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda...ever made for popular consumption by the masses.”²³ The catalogue of ways in which the Jew was allowed no voice of her own in Nazi Germany is enormous, from films like *Der ewige Jude* to the newspaper *Der Stürmer* that relied on a steady stream of Jewish caricatures to supply the cartoon section.²⁴ The inability of Jews to speak for themselves in Nazi Germany problematizes the entire concept of Holocaust representation. , Holocaust memorials make Jews the object of public discourse instead of the subject of their own discourse, although this time in a pitying light, just as the Nazis did during the Third Reich. The centrality that representation had to the Third Reich, from their propaganda, goose-stepping, salutes, symbols, and monuments, is one of the reasons why people say the Holocaust is “beyond representation”. It is an event that ethically requires representation but in the same stroke makes it impossible and even complicit, demonstrating the guilt inherent in representation.

The aforementioned reasons for the widespread rejection of conventional monuments to publicly commemorate the Holocaust led to the emergence of a new form in the 1980s, namely, the counter-monument. James Young, the foremost scholar of this phenomenon, describes the counter-monument as “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being.”²⁵ These are the antitheses of conventional monuments — not permanent, didactic, grandiose or celebratory. Rather, they turn on its head the hierarchical relationship between artist and viewer, forcing the spectator to be an active participant in the formation and transmission of memory. The counter-monument, often consisting of an inverted form or non-site, conveys more than just the passive absence of the victims. It embodies “the rupture or wound as [victims] were torn from the social and cultural fabric.”²⁶ These calls to



*Monument Against Fascism (1986). Jochen & Esther Gerz.
Hamburg-Harburg, Germany.*

ethical self-awareness do not carry an educational agenda per se, nor do they scold and condemn. They are in a very precise way anti-didactic, demanding of the onlooker that she decide for herself what meaning it holds for her personally. They insist on an interaction and in doing so often “invite [their] own violation and desanctification.”²⁷ Above all, the counter-monument seeks to reverse the usual process whereby a monument “seal[s] memory off from awareness altogether,” relieving the spectator of the onus of painful memories and allowing her the comfort and ease of knowing the monument exists, doing the memory-work for her.²⁸ Returning this burden of memory to the spectator is a crucial characteristic of a counter-monument.²⁹

Over the course of the past thirty or so years, counter-monuments have become the predominant form through which Germans publicly commemorate the Holocaust. Having reviewed the impulses from which they originated, I will examine four significant instances of this phenomenon and the ongoing controversy that surrounds them. Specifically, I will consider counter-monuments in Harburg, Kassel and Berlin. First I will look at Jochen and Esther Gerz’s disappearing monument in Harburg. The Gerzes felt strongly the inappropriateness of a traditional monument for some of the reasons mentioned above. They especially recoiled from the “demagogical rigidity [that] recalled too closely traits they associated with fascism itself.”³⁰ Their answer to the dilemma is one of the most thought provoking and controversial counter-monuments in Germany today. A tall, blank, hollow tower covered with a layer of soft, easily inscribed lead and located in the midst of an urban strip mall rather than official government ground, the Gerzes monument quite literally turned the spectator into a participant by inviting visitors to write their names on it. What they got was much more than names; the people of Harburg wrote everything from love notes to swastikas on the monument, attracting a great deal of negative press in the process.³¹ This aspect of the work is especially counter-monumental. It is impossible to imagine a similar process occurring at a hallowed national monument like the Lincoln Memorial, which onlookers are afraid even to touch. Although the Gerzes did not intend to invite the

variety of inscriptions their tower received, they defended this controversial element of their work because they felt it had succeeded in engaging visitors, in the most immediate and emotional way, with memory of the Holocaust – even if, as painful as it may be, that memory involved the resurgence of Nazi ideology. Although the graffiti seems to stand in contrast to conventional monuments, and it does in its de-sanctification, its intended goal is the same: to “reflect back to the people...their own memorial projections and preoccupations.”³² The memorial becomes a kind of screen in which viewers must confront their own doubts, drives, and conflicts.

Perhaps the most interesting component of the tower is that it is perpetually vanishing, in fact today only a plaque on the ground. As sections of a certain size were “covered with memorial graffiti” the tower would sink into an underground chamber, eventually disappearing altogether, invisible but continuing to exist underground.³³ The transience of this monument refers explicitly to the vanishing of the Jews as well as serves to emphasize the spectator’s active role in the memory-work. When the monument is gone and no longer physically standing up against fascism “it calls upon us to rise up literally in its stead.”³⁴ Although Young heaps praise on this counter-monument, Kaplan argues, “the Gerzs’ paradoxical ‘solution’ to the replication of fascist architecture creates a form whose anti-monumentality eradicates the memory site.”³⁵ He further connects this contention to his theory of “aesthetic pollution”, stating that it was a fear of this process that led to the ultimate compromising of their work.³⁶ Kaplan’s point is valid but fails to take into account the importance of the fanfare, publicity and debate surrounding the creation and defacing of the counter-monument as well as the occasions when it was lowered into the ground. Although the monument is no longer visible, the memory of the heated dialogue surrounding it remains, as do the texts of that dialogue and that self-aware participation in memory-work is what counter-monuments are all about.

The public discourse surrounding this work is an essential aspect of the piece that must be examined. Each time the monument was lowered into the ground there was a town-wide spectacle, complete

with newspaper coverage, politicians and a gleeful public. The Gerzes found these reactions pitch perfect. The excitement of the townspeople at getting rid of this stain on their city illuminates the “Germans’ urge to strike back at such memory, to sever it from the national body like a wounded limb.”³⁷ This work hits on an essential component of Holocaust memory-work in Germany, which is the “essential paradox in any people’s attempt to commemorate its own misdeeds.”³⁸ The tension between such ambivalent Holocaust memory and the perpetual need to remember lives in the German national identity is a main factor in the emergence of counter-monuments. Stuck between a “secret desire that these monuments just hurry up and disappear” and an endless obligation to physically represent their guilt, Germans endlessly struggle with the question of how best to acknowledge and expiate their Nazi past.³⁹

A second example of a counter-monument that I am interested in discussing is Horst Hoheisel’s “Negative-Form” monument in the city of Kassel. Hoheisel, a leader in counter-monumental architecture, created one of his most well-known and meaningful pieces in Kassel on the site of the destroyed Aschrott fountain. This fountain had been funded by a Jewish entrepreneur and as such was “condemned by the Nazis as the ‘Jews’ Fountain’ and so demolished.”⁴⁰ Hoheisel strongly felt the immorality of representing such an absence with a positive form monument, and recreated the original fountain and then inverted it into the ground where it once stood with a constant flow of water running into its seemingly endless abyss. In his words, he intended to “rescue the history of this place as wound and as an open question.”⁴¹ Just as in the case of the Gerzes’ counter-monument, Hoheisel’s attracted a great deal of negative attention from the townspeople of Kassel. They petitioned for a regular monument, a recreation of the Ashcrott Fountain in a nearby park. In the same way the Gerzes fought against the tide of public pressure, Hoheisel defended his design. He solicited of the viewer the same kind of memory-practice as that encouraged by the Gerzes, wherein “the passerby becomes the monument.”⁴²

Although the form is novel, the narrative it creates is not. It has clear metaphorical resonance to the Holocaust. Stating that “[w]ith

the running water, our thoughts can be drawn into the depths of history, and there perhaps we will encounter feelings of loss, of a disturbed place, of lost form,” Hoheisel emphasizes the usual Holocaust discourse simply in a new physicality.⁴³ Noam Lupu stresses the near cliché of the image of depth, referencing a newspaper article from the time which stated “[o]ne can gaze into the depth— and so also into the depth of one’s own history.”⁴⁴ In spite of its perhaps tired connotations, Hoheisel’s inverted fountain does speak to the aforementioned “ir-representability” of the Holocaust. This counter-memorial non-site, which Young sees “as illusory as memory itself,” is not an attempt at representation but rather an anti-representation.⁴⁵ Perhaps recognizing the aforementioned vexed relationship between Jews and representation in Nazi Germany, Hoheisel’s work instead attempts to “evoke an affective memory response in the spectator.”⁴⁶ He thus works from the same desire that the Gerzes did to re-impose the burden of memory-work on the spectator. Hoheisel describes the sunken fountain as the opposite of a memorial; he calls it “an invitation to passersby...to search for the memorial in their own heads. For only there is the memorial to be found.”⁴⁷

Despite the valiant efforts of the two counter-monuments that I have discussed to reconfigure the German memory landscape, it is debatable whether or not they have achieved their goals. Both projects elicited negative responses from the public and the press, at least revealing an interest and concern on the part of the townspeople. The reaction to the Gerzs’ work has been exceptionally poor. Consistently referred to as “the column of disgrace,” this work has been condemned time and again by the citizens of Harburg. One local newspaper reported a poll in which a majority of 300 citizens “voiced criticism or rejection of the monument,” instead preferring “more ‘passive’ testimonials.”⁴⁸ Harburgians felt they were being disgraced and even victimized by the monument and thus rallied against it. Furthermore, a majority of incensed townspeople argued that the memorial was in fact *not* a counter-monument but rather a conventional monument attempting to disguise itself. It had been built with public funding and had been massively politicized and publicized, as is evident by the fanfare surrounding the sinking of the column and



The Aschott Fountain Memorial (1987). Horst Hoheisel. Kassel, Germany

the politicians involved in the process.⁴⁹ It was also criticized as a metaphor for fascism rather than a post-fascist, countermemorial aberration, with one local even referring to it as reminiscent of a crematorium chimney.⁵⁰

In terms of its attempt to critique the didacticism of traditional monuments, scholars have argued that the Gerzes monument failed. Specifically, Irit Rogoff contends that this work neither eliminates the didactic element nor replaces it with a new dynamic; rather, he maintains that the “dialectic of presence/absence” still exists.⁵¹ According to Rogoff, the fact that “eliciting a response from the viewer hinges on the existence of some form of presence which triggers off re-memory,” even if that presence is self-destructive and eventually an absence, makes the work “within a trajectory of presence/absence.”⁵² The Gerzes may not have escaped that narrative and instead built a conventional monument in a more abstract way. According to this explanation, Hoheisel’s monument may be more successful. But, scholars have argued that it fails in other ways. As I mentioned, many felt that this work acts as a tired metaphor for the depth, loss and darkness inherent in the German consciousness after the Holocaust. Further, the intended challenge to the distant relationship between spectator and monument did not occur; rather, the people of Kassel “understood it as a ‘sacred space,’ a monument from which the spectator is distanced precisely because of its ‘irrepresentable’ referent, a place for ‘pious genuflection.’”⁵³ That sanctification is precisely what the counter-monument attempts to negate. Furthermore, the inverted fountain has been turned into a symbol, both figuratively and literally. Figuratively in the form of “a ‘Symbol of Remembrance’” as Hans Eichel, former mayor of Kassel declared, and literally in that its blueprint has been used as the official emblem for the “Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation.”⁵⁴ Thus, there are many ways in which these two counter-monuments can be seen as not fulfilling their lofty goals and in fact being simply more abstracted versions of conventional monuments.

The last two counter-monuments that I want to examine are on a much larger scale. First, I will discuss the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. This museum, opened to the

public in 2001, attempts to catalogue two millennia of Jewish history in Germany. Clearly this history cannot be told, much less understood, without a persistent consideration of the massive absence created by the state's attempt to eradicate that Jewish history in the Holocaust. Furthermore, the entire concept of "a Jewish museum in a capital city of a nation that voided itself of Jews is *unheimlich* (uncanny)," and, in recognizing this problematic reality, a traditional museum was deemed inappropriate.⁵⁵ Libeskind based his design for the museum upon this fundamental tension; he sought to "perpetuate this sense of the *unheimlich*, without which Jewish history would be falsely naturalised (made at home)."⁵⁶ Thus, he created a museum with an enormous void cutting linearly through the entire building, at once serving to illuminate the discontinuity of German Jewish history and "the absence of Berlin's Jews, most of whom perished in the Holocaust."⁵⁷ Ironically, the void is the sole continuous element in the museum.⁵⁸ Here Crownshaw's description of a counter-monument as the "architectural articulation of the wound," is very apt.⁵⁹

The void is only one aspect of the general non-linearity of the museum. There is the blank space of a "Missing Exhibit" and a set of stairs that lead to a white wall. In addition, the "exhibition halls themselves are spacious but so irregular in their shapes, cut through by enclosed voids and concrete trusses, that one never gains a sense of continuous passage."⁶⁰ These counter-monumental aspects, especially the heavy use of the void, are essential in attempting to represent such an irregular, discontinuous, and problematic history. But, regardless of the praise it has received and as in the case of both the Gerz's and Hoheisel's works, the design of this extension has not escaped criticism. Before gaining approval, the design was questioned by an area mayor who expressed that "a design was expected that would relate to the proportions of the existing building, fit in inconspicuously into the green ribbon, and leave space for the mundane needs of the local people for green spaces and playgrounds."⁶¹ Instead, the result was an inassimilable object, highlighting its difference from the surroundings, not its capacity to blend in. Some scholars reacted to a perceived sense of monumentality in the void.

Huyssen notes “Libeskind’s building may not ultimately avoid the reproach of architecturally aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void.”⁶² But, he continues to state that in the inability of a spectator to fully visualize the void and to “experience it as a whole,” Libeskind was aware of the dangers of monumentalizing and pushed back against it, instead creating an “antimonumental monumentality.”⁶³ This is especially poignant when one examines the usage of voids through the museological norm of including “all there is to see, all that there ever was” as pertains to the given collection.⁶⁴ These voids clearly point to the fact that “what you see...is actually only a mask for all that is missing,” and thus can serve as elements of a counter-monumentality.⁶⁵

The last monument I want to discuss is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The design of this memorial was controversial from the start, as is evident in the sixteen years it took from the Bundestag’s 1989 resolution in support of it to completion in 2005. The committee shied away from a completely counter-monumental representation like the one that Hoheisel submitted. He sought to “blow up the Brandenburger Tor, grind its stone into dust, sprinkle the remains over its former site, and cover the entire memorial area with granite plates.”⁶⁶ Although Young was initially in favor of a counter-monument for this work, indeed postulating what better way to “remember a destroyed people than by a destroyed monument?” in the end as a juror on the committee he voted against it. Instead the committee approved Peter Eisenman’s design that has been hailed as at once monumental and counter-monumental. Concrete slabs of varying size cover almost five acres on the former no-mans-land between East and West Berlin in this enormous commemoration to the Holocaust. Originally intended to be solely this massive arrangement of stones, an underground information center has since been added “because of an insistence that the site be anchored pedagogically.”⁶⁷ In addition to the complete abstraction of the work, it is considered counter-monumental due to its lack of narrative. As one walks through the seemingly endless labyrinth of stones, feelings of inescapability and disorientation abound and, with the dearth of pictures and words (save for the information center



*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (2005).
Peter Eisenman. Berlin, Germany*

text), one is left with one's own reflections, forced to take on the onus of memory-work oneself, a key tenet in counter-monuments. In her detailed exploration of the memorial, Karen Till notes that once entering "[i]ndividuals are asked to interpret a field that moves and changes in relation to the human body, rather than be told how to mourn for the past through a centrally placed sculptural form atop a pedestal."⁶⁸

This memorial has also been condemned as exceedingly monumental in its use of massive slabs of concrete and in its location as well. Till insists that this element cannot be denied, saying that the memorial works "within a monumental memorial culture of admonishment located in a highly visible public space."⁶⁹ Also, by solely identifying the Jews as victims of the Holocaust, this memorial does serve a didactic function. It has its own narrative that it imposes on spectators. Crownshaw contends, "the historical context of conception, inception and reception registers a historical master narrative of exclusion."⁷⁰ The memorial's gargantuan form and identity as *the* national memorial also potentially take away from the landscape of existing monuments, memorials and museums. Regardless of the perceived intent of this memorial, perhaps its existence and occupation of such a large and politically charged portion of Berlin as well as its convergence of monumentality and counter-monumentality can point to a nascent consciousness and nation-wide coming to terms with public Holocaust representation. Berliners, who are unable to escape their past, and who day after day traverse a city that is veritably haunted by the memories of the Third Reich, have ultimately embraced the memorial culture and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in particular. It certainly defines their city in new terms, as part of a "memory district [that] will be the first cultural space internationally that publicly acknowledges national guilt, commemorates the suffering of victims, and represents the history of the perpetrators in a national capital."⁷¹ Thus, the importance of the central location and size of the memorial in Berlin cannot be overestimated.

This concept of the "first cultural space" that Till hits on is essential in examining German memory-work as relating to the Holo-

caust. We must consider that what Germans are attempting to do in memorializing the Holocaust is completely novel; never before has a modern nation-state had to negotiate the tension between accepting culpability for a systematic genocide of such a huge scale and attempting to become an equal member in Western democratic culture. Berlin, at once capital of Germany and a graveyard of Jewish culture, has embraced the counter-monument, or at least certain aspects of it, as a means through which to contend with this tension. Larger Germany, too, has consistently relied on this form over the course of the past thirty years to represent the Holocaust. The counter-monument has succeeded in many ways and failed in others. What is special about it is its binary opposition to the monumentality that is associated not only with fascist architecture but also with a pride in and identification with a powerful nation-state, two unethical and unwanted correlations. But, as is clear with the earlier discussions of the Gerzs' and Hoheisel's works, it does not always upend the didacticism that permeates conventional monuments.

Regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of this form, its widespread usage can illuminate certain aspects of German engagement with Holocaust memory and guilt. In one sense, the surge in counter-monuments represents a dawning awareness of the way in which the roots of the Third Reich were not simply in a party or in the particular class relations or the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles, but rather had some congenital relationship with the rise of the nation-state itself. Germans have perhaps identified the Holocaust as an exaggeration of what happens in all liberal democratic societies that need an Other in order to consolidate their sense of identity. The very concept of nationalism (and also of its racial basis, central tenet of Nazi ideology in particular), requires that marginalizing dynamic in order to define and sustain itself. The rejection of the conventional monument, tried and true form through which to celebrate and glorify the communal identity of the nation-state, points to these conclusions.

Another inference we can make from the surge in German counter-monuments is the ambivalence Germans feel about Holocaust memorializing. The memory of the genocide is so painful and

cuts so to the heart of German identity that the wish to remember the dead is an ambivalent one. The counter-monument reveals this deep anxiety about the humiliation inherent in Holocaust commemorating. In one sense it is a sophisticated grasp of the relationship between the creation and furnishing of public space and National Socialism. In another, these artists are literally offering with one hand what they are taking away with the other with monuments that are self-destructive and self-abnegating. This has to do with a final conclusion we can come to about the guilt that Germans associate with representation insofar as it is both an aesthetic and political practice. I mentioned this earlier in terms of the large-scale harnessing of public representation to demonize the Jews throughout the Third Reich. A counter-monument does not purport to represent anything; rather, it serves as an anti-representation, in many cases simply an absence.

The emergence of counter-monuments as the primary form through which Germans have publicly memorialized the Holocaust in the past thirty years is fascinating and deserving of examination. Although they have received their fair share of criticism, we can see the dialogue that surrounds them as part of their allure. James Young, among many other scholars and artists, has argued that “only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory” and make sure that the torturous recollection of the Holocaust never stops haunting Germany.⁷² He contends that “better a thousand years of Holocaust memorial competitions in Germany than any single ‘final solution’ to Germany’s memorial problem.”⁷³ We cannot know whether the shift towards counter-monuments will stick or if the perpetual debate over Holocaust memorializing will remain a part of Germany’s cultural fabric. But, if the past thirty years is any guide, Germans today are more aware than ever before of their uneasy relationship with a past that at this point most of them only know second-hand. Negotiating this terrible legacy is no easy feat but the embrace of the counter-monument reveals a certain courage on the part of Germans to confront this past and continue to reinterpret it as the years progress and the rawness of the Holocaust recedes into the past.

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- ¹ Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.), 31.
- ² Brian Osborne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place," *Canadian Journal of Ethnic Studies* (2001): 8.
- ³ Koshar, 32.
- ⁴ George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: Howard Fertig Inc., 1975), 19.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 19.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 2.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 4.
- ⁸ Koshar, 36.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 30.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 34.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 34.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 79.
- ¹³ Mosse, 68.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 69.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 69.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 72.
- ¹⁷ James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 27.
- ¹⁸ Shoah Resource Center "An Interview with Prof. James E. Young," Yad Vashem, http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203852.pdf.
- ¹⁹ Brett Ashley Kaplan, "Aesthetic Pollution," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2 (2003): 5.
- ²⁰ Kaplan, 1.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 1.
- ²² David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 1983), 263.
- ²³ Welch, 252.
- ²⁴ US Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Nazi Propaganda," Holocaust Encyclopedia, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005202>.
- ²⁵ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 27.

²⁶ Richard Crownshaw, "The German Counter-monument: Conceptual Indeterminacies and the Retheorisation of the Arts of Vicarious Memory," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44 (2008): 213.

²⁷ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid*, 35.

³² Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 36.

³³ *Ibid*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

³⁵ Kaplan, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

³⁷ James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 34.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴² Noam Lupu, "Memory Vanished, Absent, and Confined," *History and Memory*, 15 (2003): 149.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 150.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 151.

⁴⁵ Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 45.

⁴⁶ Lupu, 150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 150.

⁴⁸ Lupu, 141.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 142.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁵² *Ibid*, 143.

⁵³ Lupu, 151.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 152.

⁵⁵ Crownshaw, 217.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 217.

⁵⁷ Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin" *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1997): 78.

- ⁵⁸ James Young, "Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin" *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2000): 16.
- ⁵⁹ Crownshaw, 217.
- ⁶⁰ Young, "Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin," 16.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, 13.
- ⁶² Huyssen, 80.
- ⁶³ *Ibid*, 80.
- ⁶⁴ Young, "Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin," 17.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 18.
- ⁶⁶ James Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2000): 90.
- ⁶⁷ Crownshaw, 215.
- ⁶⁸ Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 168.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 187.
- ⁷⁰ Crownshaw, 216.
- ⁷¹ Till, 197.
- ⁷² Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 92.
- ⁷³ *Ibid*, 92.