
The Power of Remembrance

Memorials and the Holocaust

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We see memorials and monuments almost everywhere we go and, in their presence, often stop and reflect on the horrors and losses of wars and atrocities. They serve as reminders both of loss and of survival, of defeat and of victory, of oppression and of freedom. They involve us in an often passive process of consideration and remembrance. But how do we go about creating memorials and monuments? Who are the creators and how do they figure out the right way to memorialize a war or an atrocity? Often, memorials and monuments present just one side of the story: it is common for a nation to celebrate its soldiers' heroism in battle, but not very common to recognize the other side's heroism, the other side's deaths and sacrifices, the other side's losses. It is still more uncommon for a nation to memorialize the victims of war crimes and atrocities of which it was the perpetrator, which was exactly the situation in Germany after WWII. In this essay, I would like to consider one particular memorial in Germany and the German reaction to it, which will demonstrate the complexity both of Germany's memorialization of the Holocaust and the concept of memorialization in general. How could Germans, in the wake of the Holocaust and a war in which they lost so many, memorialize the victims? How could the Holocaust even be memorialized at all?

In recent years, there has been a wave of Holocaust memorials—the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Jewish Museum in Berlin, just to name a few. However, there has been a drawn-out debate in Germany, tied up with the idea of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (specifically, Germany’s process of coming to terms with its past), that has continued to generate controversy within the country.

Designed and created by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz in 1986, the Harburg monument against “Fascism, War, and Violence” was intended to be a counter-monument in response to West Germany’s *Denkmal-Arbeit* (memorial activity) of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At this time, West Germans sought to reclaim an identity for themselves through a general victimization narrative, in which Jews and Germans alike were victims of fascism. The Gerzs’ monument against fascism, in opposition to the *Denkmal-Arbeit*, aimed to jar the citizenry out of its acceptance of the all-inclusive victimization narrative. The monument sought to force the public to participate in the ongoing process of WWII and Holocaust memorialization and to introduce guilt to the German people. The Harburg monument was designed to represent metaphorically the complex idea of memorialization in Germany after WWII. How could the Holocaust be memorialized at all? Who would force the perpetrators to memorialize their own crimes? What kind of memorial would fulfill the traditional expectations of a monument, yet not also simultaneously link itself with the traditional monumentalism of Nazism and fascism?

The Harburg monument was intended to be the answer to all of these questions and also to represent metaphorically and physically the complex situation of memorialization in Germany. Jochen and Esther Gerzs intended to create a monument that would stand in opposition to the idea that WWII and the Holocaust—or, indeed, any war at all—could be memorialized in the traditional fashion and a memorial that would, simultaneously, involve the general public in a unique, ongoing process of (re)memory formation. Yet the

Harburg monument against fascism is undermined by its sheer ambiguity, its multi-interpretability, and by the fact that WWII and the Holocaust can be and are memorialized in monumental form without compromising or even ameliorating the memory of the Holocaust.

Jochen and Esther Gerz designed their monument at the invitation of the city of Hamburg. Initially, Hamburg provided space in a park for the monument; however, the Gerzs refused to put their monument in a place where monuments were conventionally situated. Their reasoning was that a park was too serene a venue for passersby to approach a monument that connected them to a guilty past. The Gerzs instead preferred to put their monument in the outskirts of the city, in a blue-collar neighborhood called Harburg. They wanted their monument to stand in confrontation to the public: a bleak reminder of guilt, not simply a benign reminder that fascism, war, and violence were bad. Therefore, they picked a location that was busy, crowded, and almost dirty—a place that was already bleak to begin with, to which the monument would be yet another eyesore. First and foremost, however, the Gerzs wanted to create a monument that would not merely run counter to monumentality—which, for them, was inextricably connected with fascism and Nazism—but that would also *undermine* monumentality. They wanted to achieve this goal by having the monument initially don the mask of monumentality, then progressively become more and more anti-monumental and eventually disappear altogether.

The monument itself consisted of a twelve-meter high, one-meter square pillar made of hollow aluminum. It was covered with a soft layer of lead on which passersby could engrave their names with provided steel pencils. The Gerzs therefore invited graffiti (and also, perhaps unintentionally, vandalism and nonsense), legalized it, embraced it. At the base of the monument lay a temporary plaque with an inscription in German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkish, which read:

We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-meter tall lead

column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will disappear completely, and the site of the Harburg Monument against Fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.¹

They envisioned the monument not merely as something physically imposing (both in the sense that the monument itself was indeed of traditional monumental proportion and in the sense that it actually impeded pedestrian traffic, thereby forcing its bare image on the public), but also as something mentally imposing, since it relied upon an ongoing participatory process with the public. After each two meters of the pillar was covered with engravings, the monument would be lowered two meters into the ground, providing a blank slate for more engravings. Eventually, after a certain number of lowerings, which would occur at a publicly determined pace, the entire monument would be completely underground. The monument would therefore become neutralized, anti-monumental, while its presence would still remain in the minds of those who participated in the memory formation process: *Denkmal-Arbeit* in its truest form. The monument was lowered eight times from November 10, 1986 to November 10, 1993. All that exists today is the original plaque on top of the pillar.

Situated within the context of the *Denkmal-Arbeit* and the memorialization of the Holocaust of the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany, the Harburg monument against fascism seems all too common. Among the many others built, there are Sol Lewitt's *Black Form* sculpture dedicated to the missing Jews in Münster, Horst Hoheisel's "Negative Form" monument of the Aschrott-Brunnen Fountain in Kassel, and another of Jochen and Esther Gerz's monuments in Saarbrücken called *Platz des Unsichtbaren Mahnmals* ("Square of the Invisible Memorial"). On November 14, 1993, the *Neue Wache* on Unter den Linden—a monument with a history that spans back to 1786 and that had traditionally been perceived in Germany as *the* national war monument—was named the "Central Commemorative Site of the Federal Republic of Germany," and was dedicated to the victims of war and tyranny. According



Fig. a. Fourth Lowering in Feb. 1990



Fig. b. Name Engraving



Fig. c. Seventh Lowering in Nov. 1992

to Henry W. Pickford in his essay, “Conflict and Commemoration: Two Berlin Memorials,” the decision to rechristen the *Neue Wache* as the national monument had set off “acrimonious controversy,”³ which led to the decision to balance the memorial situation in Berlin by erecting Peter Eisenmann’s “Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe” near the Brandenburg Gate in order to counter the monumentalism of the *Neue Wache*. Therefore, all of these counter-monuments have sprung ostensibly from both the inability to memorialize the Holocaust with traditional monumental forms and also a vague, perceived threat from traditional monumentalism; as if the presence of traditional monuments somehow figuratively and physically overshadowed Holocaust memorialization (especially as in the case of the *Neue Wache*). But what is it exactly that makes traditional monumental forms seem so inadequate, contradictory, or unsuitable?

There are a number of explanations for why traditional monumentalism has been shunned by modern memorialists. In his essay, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” James E. Young argues that the “new generation of artists in Germany may only be acting out a critique of ‘memory places’ already formulated by cultural and art historians long skeptical of the memorial’s traditional function.”⁴ Young quotes Lewis Mumford as saying, “The notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms...If it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.”⁵ However, one need only look at some of the monumental projects today to see that traditional monumentalism has not disappeared. The American National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 2004, can in no way be considered counter-monumental; it fits well within the context of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument (even if the Vietnam War Memorial exists in seeming stylistic opposition to it). Furthermore, the plans for the September 11 Memorial Freedom Tower are no less monumental: the tower is designed to be 1,776 feet tall, making it not only the tallest building in the United States, but also ensuring that its height

is founded upon the defining event in American history—the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Admittedly, WWII and September 11 are not remembered as ambiguous in the collective memory; to the general public, they do not suggest much morally wrong with America, only something generally heroic or tragic. In fact, many have suggested that memorials differ from monuments in that, as Marita Sturken claims in *Tangled Memories*, “Monuments are not generally built to commemorate defeats; the defeated dead are remembered in memorials. Whereas a monument most often signifies victory, a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values.”⁶ However, whichever term one uses, it is important to understand that terms are linguistic facts of a particular language—it just so happens that two English words for similar objects have come to be used in opposition. In German, there is no such division—*Denkmal*, *Gedenkstätte*, *Mahnmal* are neutral terms that can be used to describe either a memorial or a monument. The difference, therefore, that Sturken suggests, may merely represent a division that is only present in American culture.

In the same way that traditional monumentalism is not specific to any war or kind of war in particular, the notion of counter-monumentalism is likewise not specific to WWII and the Holocaust. The United States’ involvement and loss in the Vietnam War is characterized all too often by its sheer ambiguity. Indeed, Marita Sturken claims: “A singular, sanctioned history of the Vietnam War has not yet coalesced...The history of the Vietnam War is still being composed from many conflicting histories.”⁷ Therefore, when it came time to memorialize the Vietnam War, there was no clear idea of how it should be represented: how does a nation memorialize a war that was lost, a war that polarized the American public and was seen by many as a senseless, bloody extension of the Cold War? In a memorial design competition for the Vietnam War, it was no surprise that a counter-monument—that had seemingly little to say in terms of politics—was selected as the design. Although the selected design by a then-Yale University undergraduate, Maya Lin, set off heated controversy

among veterans as soon as it was unveiled, it eventually became a national landmark and a successful war memorial. However, interestingly enough, the presence of this counter-monument led some to demand that there be an additional unambiguous, traditional Vietnam War monument to counter the nicknamed “black gash of shame and sorrow.”⁸ Maya Lin’s counter-monument led to the installment of a traditional monument—Frederick Hart’s Vietnam Veterans Statue. This situation is similar (although in the opposite manner) to the situation in West Germany where the traditionally monumental *Neue Wache* in Berlin was countered by Eisenmann’s “Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe.” Therefore, even if the notion of counter-monumentalism dates back to before WWII and even if it has been successfully applied historically to memorialize other wars, the avoidance of traditional monumentalism by the West Germans must be explained in a wholly different manner.

In her essay, “‘Aesthetic Pollution’: The Paradox of Remembering and Forgetting in Three Holocaust Commemorative Sites,” Brett Ashley Kaplan claims,

[T]he fear that commemorative sites dedicated to the Holocaust have been aesthetically polluted by fascist monumentality has forced the architects and designers of some sites to diminish the emotional and political impact of many monuments, museums, and memorials by altering their original designs so that they are not perceived as ‘fascist’ . . . What underlies this fear is not often made clear but I suspect it has to do with the vague sense that certain architectural forms carry within them the implied violence of the politics with which they are loosely—and often erroneously—associated.⁹

Kaplan goes on to elaborate on the “erroneous” connections made between Nazism and monumentalism, explaining that “the fascist architecture that we might imagine as monolithically monumental draws not only on diverse styles but is also influenced by the radical artists whom the Nazis purged.”¹⁰ Therefore, the counter-monumentalist distrust of monumental forms is based on a groundless association. Furthermore, beside this unfounded connection

between fascism and monumentalism, there also exists a counter-monumentalist distrust in didacticism, in the inculcation of politics into artwork—which the Nazis tried to achieve not only in their architecture, but also in every sphere of public life. Any attempts at memorializing in the traditional monumentalist fashion would therefore seemingly bring monuments closer to a general fascist aesthetic. In Susan Sontag’s influential essay, “Fascinating Fascism” in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, she argues that there is a unique fascist aesthetic:

[Fascist aesthetics] flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain...The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets...Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death.¹¹

Fascist art therefore was necessarily imbued with fascist politics, which created a situation where art and politics became inseparable. This didacticism of fascist art is the notion from which the Gerzs intended to distance their monument; however, the Gerzs put themselves in an untenable situation by instilling their monument with a sentiment that can only be called didacticism.

As a result, the counter-monumentalism of the Harburg monument against “Fascism, War, and Violence” possesses an inherent, inescapable, paradoxical flaw: though it attempts to distance itself from Nazi monumentalism, the monument ends up embodying it. Jochen and Esther Shalev-Gerz imbued their monument with the ungrounded assumption that monumentalism could not possibly fulfill the true obligations of a memorial—namely, to confront the public, force it to consider its awful history of loss and make that history part of the public’s identity. The Gerzs erected a tall, imposing, and ugly monument that represents the monumentalism of the Nazis at its worst. They hoped to undermine all of its fascist and Nazi associations by cutting it down over time, thereby involving the public in the destruction of monumentalism, in the almost fascist purging of memorialization. They embrace monumentalism in order to show why monumentalism does not do the Holocaust justice; however, this notion of counter-monumentalism is merely part of their own

politics. What is the difference between the Nazis' blending of art and politics and counter-monumentalism? Although not politicized with fascist politics, counter-monumentalism is inculcated with didacticism of another kind. After all, Jochen Gerz himself claimed in an interview, "What we did not want was an enormous pedestal with something on it presuming to tell people what they ought to think."¹² Kaplan argues that, "the Gerzs' paradoxical 'solution' to the replication of fascist architecture creates a form whose anti-monumentality eradicates the memory site. Thus, the fear of aesthetic pollution [of fascist monumentalism and fascist politics] compromises the excellent aims of the Gerzs' monument."¹³ In the Gerzs' attempt to define their project in terms of what it wasn't, the monument ultimately ends up mirroring that which it is supposed to confront and, indeed, vilify. After all, a large part of the Nazi self-definition was founded on an unstable and mythical idea of German purity, an identity which sought to purge itself of all the components viewed as Jewish, communist, and non-Aryan (however problematic and contradictory this kind of purge would be). However, this apparent collapse in ideologies—of Holocaust memorialization with fascism—in no way equates these ideologies; rather, it only showcases West Germany's inability, on the one hand, to memorialize its guilty past and, on the other hand, to come to terms with its past.

However one looks at the situation, the Gerzs' monument is ultimately didactic. Young, speaking generally about the goal of counter-monuments, claimed that they aimed "to jar viewers from [their] complacency, to challenge and denaturalize the viewers' assumptions."¹⁴ Therefore, counter-monuments are designed specifically to create a dynamic relationship with the public, one that perhaps does not exist between the traditional monuments and their theoretical lack of interpretability. In his essay, "Memory Vanished, Absent, and Confined: The Countermemorial Project in 1980s and 1990s Germany," Noam Lupu claims,

While surely all monuments are subject to audience reception and interpretation, countermonuments depend almost entirely on their audience to interpret their intent, making the artist a sort of prisoner

of his/her audience. Their reliance on social interaction, their stated objective to bridge the distance between spectator and object, makes their public reception vital to their successful social implementation. In this context, the received understanding of the countermemorial project is therefore far more socially and historically significant than is the initial conception by the artists.¹⁵

This idea puts counter-monuments in a unique position regarding their goals: they must be not only conceptually founded upon (seemingly) opposing principles, but they must also rely to a greater extent on the public's perception of them as being based on those opposing principles. This puts a large burden on the counter-monumentalists: their monuments are only successful if the public dismisses them if it feels victimized by the monuments' inherent arrogance, that the public will not question why traditional monuments cannot fill the basic goal of memorialization, and, perhaps most importantly, that the public will be able to understand these monuments' fundamental nature in opposition to fascism and traditional monuments.

Therefore, if one wishes to comment on the Harburg monument's success, one must consider the public reaction to the Harburg monument, of which there is much documentation. Generally, and predictably too, the public reaction of the monument was mostly negative. On the one hand, as Lupu notes,

[T]he citizens of Harburg—be they supporters or critics—responded to the monument as a traditional representation of the experience of fascism, not as a countermonument. I will show that this reception illustrates a failure of the countermemorial project, the inability of the countermonument to escape the bounds of traditional discourses on the representation of Nazism.¹⁶

Even though the monument attempts as a counter-monument to escape what Kaplan termed "aesthetic pollution," the Harburg monument failed in this basic regard. On the other hand, disgruntled critics of the monument pointed repeatedly to the monument's cost and they treated it as just another construction

site; they equated the construction of the monument with any other kind of construction.¹⁷ Furthermore, in a bizarre, ironic twisting of the artists' intent, the lowerings of the monument became extremely politicized and ceremonious—it was almost as if the public enjoyed destroying the monument. The conception of the monument, although repeatedly and painstakingly described in newspapers and by the artists themselves, was not well understood by the general public, as evidenced by one passerby who asked, “What kind of monument disappears?”¹⁸

The monument also ironically provided the public with an open forum: a utensil with which to deface the monument. As mentioned in the beginning, the Gerzs' intent was that passersby would write their names on the monument, engrave them into the soft layer of lead with a steel pen, and thereby be involved in true *Denkmal-Arbeit*. Though, to some degree, the public did just that, many vandalized the monument or wrote “senseless scrawl[s],”¹⁹ such as “Jürgen loves Kirsten.”²⁰ The public that had to look on this monument every day reacted to its disgraceful, graffiti-covered appearance as if it were any graffiti-covered wall: they began to call it the “*Schandsäule*” (“Pillar of Shame”).²¹ The idea that the public felt victimized by the monument did not help the situation either. Furthermore, the monument against fascism ironically seemed to attract many swastikas and pro-fascist graffiti. It is arguable that the public reaction, whether positive *or* extremely negative, was valid in any case; pro-fascist statements showed up only because they existed in the public's consciousness. In this way, the monument could function as a sort of mirror to the general public that reacted negatively to its own ideas and emotions. This, however, seems too easy a way out of the problem. Even Jochen Gerz was hurt by the public's reaction to the monument: “The scrawling hurts...We are not satisfied with this public.”²² It seems that the controversy of the monument in all of its failures simply provides a unique view into the German consciousness.

At the last lowering of the monument on November 10, 1993, the public celebrated the monument's total disappearance. Although, as intended by the Gerzs', the monument can still be viewed in the minds of the Harburg

public, the monument's temporal constraint limits its effectiveness; after all, it could only have affected those who lived from 1986 to 1993. Therefore, even though it was conceptually extremely clever and well intentioned, the Harburg monument against "Fascism, War, and Violence," failed in its attempt to differentiate itself from traditional monuments. In trying to distance itself from the perceived threat of Nazi and fascist monumentalism and didacticism, it became just that: in attempting to jar the public into a fruitful engagement with its guilty past, it only inspired anger and annoyance. In its attempt to embrace all forms of public reaction—even turning vandalism into a valid form of expression—the monument opened itself to fascist interpretations.

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Notes

1. Pickford, Henry W. "Conflict and Commemoration: Two Berlin Memorials." *Modernity* 12 no. 1. (2005): 133-173.
2. Figs. 1 – 3: *Harburg Anti-Fascist Memorial*. Color photographs. Posting Date Unknown. Hamburg University. 14 Dec. 2006. <<http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//antifascist.html>>
3. Pickford, 134.
4. Young, James E. "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today." *Critical Inquiry* 18 vol. 2. (1992): 272, 267-296.
5. Ibid.
6. Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
7. Ibid, 44-45.
8. Ibid, 51.
9. Kaplan, Brett Ashley. "Aesthetic Pollution": The Paradox of Remembering and Forgetting in Three Holocaust Commemorative Sites." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2 vol. 1 (2003): 1, 1-18.
10. Ibid, 5.
11. Sontag, Susan. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York : Farrar, Straus & Giroux,

1980.

12. Young, 274.
13. Kaplan, 11.
14. Pickford, 162.
15. Lupu, Noam. "Memory Vanished, Absent, and Confined: The Counter Memorial Project In 1980s and 1990s Germany." *History & Memory* 15 vol. 2 (2003): 132, 134-164.
16. Ibid, 136.
17. Ibid, 137 – 138.
18. Ibid, 140.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid, 141.
22. Ibid, 146.