The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today

Author(s): James E. Young

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Winter, 1992, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter, 1992), pp. 267-296

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343784

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James E. Young

1. Introduction

As part of Germany's "Skulptur Projekte 87," the American geometric minimalist Sol Lewitt installed a large block of black stones smack in the middle of the plaza in front of the Münster Palace and dedicated it to "the missing Jews" of Münster.[1] It sat like an abandoned black coffin amidst soaring mock-baroque facades and gas lamps, a black blight squatting in the center of a sunny and graceful university square. In time, *Black Form* was covered by graffiti-scrawls and political slogans, which further heightened the contrast between it and its elegant surroundings. Chauffeurs for

This essay is an expanded version of a paper delivered at a conference on "Objective, Subjective, Intersubjective Time" sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 20-22 April 1990. I am grateful to Paul Hernadi, the organizer of the conference, for inviting me, and to the other participants as well (Marianna Torgovnick, Charles Altieri, and Somer Bodribb in particular) for the rich exchange of ideas that led to this more fully developed thesis on memory and time. In addition, I would like to thank Jochen Gerz, Esther Shalev-Gerz, and Horst Hoheisel for so graciously providing me with documentary materials surrounding the construction of their memorials. Karl Weber at the Kulturbehörde in Hamburg was generous with both his wide knowledge of new German memorials and his extensive archival resources as was Ralf Busch at the Hamburger Museum für Archäologie. Finally, I thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for the fellowship that made this writing possible.

1. For documentation of this and other memorials in "Skulptur Projekte 87," see Volker Plagemann, *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum: Anstosse der 80er Jahre* (Cologne, 1989), pp. 140–42.

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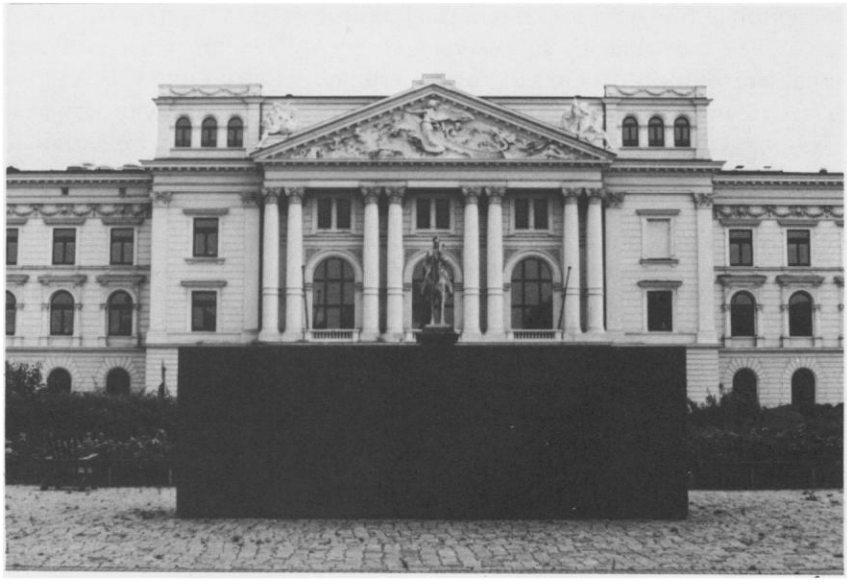
university administrators complained that it left them no room to turn their limousines around after dropping off their charges; other citizens objected to the way it spoiled the aesthetic integrity of an expensive new plaza. Despite angry protests by the installation curator and anguished pleas from the artist, a jackhammer crew from the university demolished *Black Form* in March 1988. An absent people would now be commemorated by an absent monument.

Memory of the monument remained strong in the community's mind, however. Eight months later, during commemorations of Kristallnacht, the city council asked the artist to reconstruct what they called a new "wall work" (*Mauerstücke*). Still faithful to his geometric medium, Lewitt agreed to remake his *Black Form,* a bleak reminder, he said, that without Jewish children in town, the monument would mark the end of generations. Within days, the threat of its reappearance reignited the debate over how to commemorate the Holocaust without seeming to violate contemporary spaces. A seminar was planned, with philosophers and art historians invited to reflect on the exhibition background, the nexus between seeing and thinking. Only the Green party dissented from the process, not because its members weren't in sympathy with the monument but because they feared that the controversy, meetings, aesthetic debates, and bureaucratic wrangling had all but displaced study of the period itself. Commemoration of events leading to Kristallnacht and the Holocaust would be lost in a sea of controversy, they said: no history here, just the unseemly haggling over the forms now taken by historical memory.[2]

But perhaps no single emblem better represents the conflicted, self-abnegating motives for memory in Germany today than the vanishing monument. On the one hand, no one takes their memorials more seriously than the Germans. Competitions are held almost monthly across the "fatherland" for new memorials against war and fascism, or for peace; or

2. When Münster's city council voted finally not to reerect Lewitt's sculpture in that city, Hamburg's Kulturbehörde (Cultural Authority) invited the artist to build in Hamburg any version of the form he wished. On 9 November 1989, the same day the Berlin Wall was breached, a larger version of Lewitt's *Black Form* was dedicated in the Platz der Republik, opposite the town hall in Hamburg-Altona.

James E. Young is assistant professor of English and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (1988) and *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning in Europe, Israel, and America* (forthcoming), from which this essay is drawn. He is also the curator of "The Art of Memory," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum of New York (forthcoming).



Sol Lewitt, ***Black Form (Dedicated to the Missing Jews)***, Platz der Republik, Hamburg-Altona, Germany. Photo: Kulturbehörde Hamburg.

to mark a site of destruction, deportation, or a missing synagogue; or to remember a lost Jewish community. Students devote their summers to concentration camp archaeology at Neuengamme, excavating artifacts from another, crueler age. Or they take hammer and nails to rebuild a synagogue in Essen, or to build a monument at the site of Dachau's former satellite camp at Landsberg. Brigades of young Germans once again report dutifully to Auschwitz, where they now repair delapidated exhibition halls, tend shrubs around the barracks, and hoe weeds from the no-man's-land strip between formerly electrified fences. No less industrious than the generations preceding them, German teenagers now work as hard at constructing memorials as their parents did in rebuilding the country after the war, as their grandparents did in building the Third Reich itself.

Nonetheless, Holocaust memorial-work in Germany today remains a tortured, self-reflective, even paralyzing preoccupation. Every monument, at every turn, is endlessly scrutinized, explicated, and debated. Artistic, ethical, and historical questions occupy design juries to an extent unknown in other countries. In a Sisyphian replay, memory is strenuously rolled nearly to the top of consciousness only to clatter back down in arguments and political bickering, whence it starts the climb all over again. Germany's ongoing *Denkmal-Arbeit* simultaneously displaces and constitutes the object of memory. Though some, like the Greens, might see such

absorption in the process of memorial building as an evasion of memory, it may also be true that the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution. In fact, the best German memorial to the Fascist era and its victims may not be a single memorial at all, but simply the never to be resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end. Instead of a fixed figure for memory, the debate itself—perpetually unresolved amid ever-changing conditions—might be enshrined.

Given the state-sponsored monument's traditional function as self-aggrandizing locus for national memory, the essential, nearly paralyzing ambiguity of German memory comes as no surprise. After all, while the victors of history have long erected monuments to remember their triumphs, and victims have built memorials to recall their martyrdom, only rarely does a nation call on itself to remember the victims of crimes it has perpetrated. Where are the national monuments to the genocide of American Indians, to the millions of Africans enslaved and murdered, to the kulaks and peasants starved to death by the millions?[3]

Traditionally, state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election. The matrix of a nation's monuments traditionally emplots the story of ennobling events, of triumphs over barbarism, and recalls the martyrdom of those who gave their lives in the struggle for national existence—who, in the martyrological refrain, died so that a country might live. In suggesting themselves as the indigenous, even geological outcrops in a national landscape, monuments tend to naturalize the values, ideals, and laws of the land itself. To do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, of the state's seemingly natural right to exist.

What then of Germany, a nation justly forced to remember the suffering and devastation it once caused in the name of its people? How does a state incorporate its crimes against others into its national memorial landscape? How does a state recite, much less commemorate, the litany of its misdeeds, making them part of its reason for being? Under what memorial aegis, whose rules, does a nation remember its own barbarity? Where is the tradition for mea(morial) culpa, when combined remem-

3. In the rare event when a state does commemorate its crimes, it is nearly always at the behest of formerly victimized citizens. The memorial unveiled 30 October 1990 in Moscow, for example, dedicated to "the millions of victims of a totalitarian regime," was instigated by a group calling itself "Memorial," composed of scholars, cultural figures, dissidents, and former victims of Stalin's terror. Likewise, a monument to the civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama—inscribed with the names of those who died for the cause—was commissioned and constructed by the Southern Poverty Law Center there, which had chronicled and prosecuted civil rights cases. In neither the Soviet nor American case did the government initiate the monument, but in both instances representatives of the state later endorsed these memorials—a move by which both current governments sought to create an official distance between themselves and past, guilty regimes.

brance and self-indictment seem so hopelessly at odds? Unlike state-sponsored memorials built by victimized nations and peoples to themselves in Poland, France, Holland, or Israel, those in Germany are necessarily those of the persecutor remembering its victims. In the face of this necessary breach in the conventional "memorial code," it is little wonder that German national memory remains so torn and convoluted: it is that of a nation tortured by its conflicted desire to build a new and just state on the bedrock memory of its horrendous crimes.

One of the contemporary results of Germany's memorial conundrum is the rise of its "counter-monuments": brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being. On the former site of Hamburg's greatest synagogue, at Bornplatz, Margrit Kahl has assembled an intricate mosaic tracing the complex lines of the synagogue's roof construction: a palimpsest for a building and community that no longer exist. Norbert Radermacher bathes a guilty landscape in Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood with the inscribed light of its past. Alfred Hrdlicka began (but never finished) a monument in Hamburg to counter—and thereby neutralize—an indestructible Nazi monument nearby. In a suburb of Hamburg, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz have erected a black pillar against fascism and for peace designed to disappear altogether over time. The very heart of Berlin, former site of the gestapo headquarters, remains a great, gaping wound as politicians, artists, and various committees forever debate the most appropriate memorial for this site.[4]

Ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms, a new generation of contemporary artists and monument makers in Germany is probing the limits of both their artistic media and the very notion of a memorial. They are heirs to a double-edged postwar legacy: a deep distrust of monumental forms in light of their systematic exploitation by the Nazis and a profound desire to distinguish their generation from that of the killers through memory.[5] At home in an era of earthworks, conceptual and self-destructive art, these young artists explore both the necessity of memory and their incapacity to recall events they never experienced directly. To their minds, neither literal nor figurative references suggesting anything more than their own abstract link to the Holocaust will suffice. Instead of seeking to capture the memory of events, therefore, they

4. The long-burning debate surrounding projected memorials, to the *Gestapo-Gelände* in particular, continues to exemplify both the German memorial conundrum and the state's painstaking attempts to articulate it. For an excellent documentation of the process, see *Topographie des Terrors: Gestapo, SS und Reichssicherheitshauptamt auf dem "Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände,"* ed. Reinhard Rürup (Berlin, 1987). For a shorter account, see James E. Young, "The Topography of German Memory," *The Journal of Art* 1 (Mar. 1991): 30.

5. For an elaboration of this theme, see Matthias Winzen, "The Need for Public Representation and the Burden of the German Past," *Art Journal* 48 (Winter 1989): 309–14.

remember only their own relationship to events: the great gulf of *time* between themselves and the Holocaust.

For young German artists and sculptors like the Gerzes, Norbert Radermacher, and Horst Hoheisel, the possibility that memory of events so grave might be reduced to exhibitions of public craftsmanship or cheap pathos remains intolerable. They contemptuously reject the traditional forms and reasons for public memorial art, those spaces that either console viewers or redeem such tragic events, or indulge in a facile kind of *Wiedergutmachung* or purport to mend the memory of a murdered people. Instead of searing memory into public consciousness, they fear, conventional memorials seal memory off from awareness altogether. For these artists such an evasion would be the ultimate abuse of art, whose primary function, to their mind, is to jar viewers from complacency and to challenge and denaturalize the viewers' assumptions. In the following case studies of three contemporary counter-monuments, we explore the process whereby artists renegotiate the tenets of their memory-work, whereby monuments are born resisting the very possibility of their birth.

2. *The Counter-Monument*

To some extent, this new generation of artists in Germany may only be enacting a critique of "memory places" already formulated by cultural and art historians long skeptical of the memorial's traditional function. It is more than fifty years, for example, since Lewis Mumford pronounced the death of the monument in its hopeless incompatibility with his sense of modern architectural forms. "The notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms," he wrote. "If it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument." In Mumford's view, the monument defied the very essence of modern urban civilization: the capacity for renewal and rejuvenation. Where modern architecture invites the perpetuation of life itself, encourages renewal and change, and scorns the illusion of permanence, Mumford wrote, "stone gives a false sense of continuity, and a deceptive assurance of life."[6]

More recently, German historian Martin Broszat has suggested that in their references to the fascist era, monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations. As cultural reifications, in this view, monuments reduce or, using Broszat's term, "coarsen" historical understanding as much as they generate it.[7] In another vein, art historian Rosalind Krauss finds that

6. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), pp. 438, 435.

7. For the full, much more complex context of Broszat's remarks, see the exchange of letters between him and Saul Friedländer in Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, "Um die

the modernist period produces monuments unable to refer to anything beyond themselves as pure marker or base.[8] After Krauss we might ask, in fact, whether an abstract, self-referential monument can ever commemorate events outside of itself. Or must it motion endlessly to its own gesture to the past, a commemoration of its essence as dislocated sign, forever trying to remember events it never actually knew?

Still others have argued that rather than embodying memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community's memory-work with its own material form. "The less memory is experienced from the inside," Pierre Nora warns, "the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs."[9] If the obverse of this is true as well, then perhaps the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally. In this age of mass memory production and consumption, in fact, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden.

As Nora concludes here, "memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive [*lieu de mémoire*] the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin" ("BMH," p. 13). As a result, the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives. Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.

In response to these seemingly generic liabilities in monuments, con-

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'Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus': Ein Briefwechsel," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 36 (Apr. 1988): 339–72; trans. under the title, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism," *Yad Vashem Studies,* no. 19 (1988): 1–47, and *New German Critique* 44 (Spring/Summer 1988): 85–126. The exchange was sparked by Friedländer's response to Broszat's "Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," *Merkur* 39 (May 1985): 373–85. Broszat's specific reference to monuments comes near the end of the first letter in his comments on "mythical memory," which he distinguishes from "scientific insight" (p. 90).

8. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 280.

9. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de mémoire,*" trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations,* no. 26 (Spring 1989): 13; hereafter abbreviated "BMH"; "this text constitutes the theoretical introduction to a vast collaborative work on the national memory of France that I titled *Les Lieux de mémoire*" (p. 25).

ceptual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz have designed what they call a *Gegendenkmal*—built at the City of Hamburg's invitation to create a "Monument against Fascism, War and Violence—and for Peace and Human Rights." The artists' first concern was how to commemorate such worthy sentiments without ameliorating memory altogether. That is, how would their monument emplace such memory without usurping the community's will to remember? Their second reservation was how to build an antifascist monument without resorting to what they regarded as the fascist tendencies in all monuments. "What we did not want," Jochen Gerz declared, "was an enormous pedestal with something on it presuming to tell people what they ought to think."[10] To their minds, the didactic logic of monuments, their demagogical rigidity, recalled too closely traits they associated with fascism itself. Their monument against fascism, therefore, would amount to a monument against itself: against the traditionally didactic function of monuments, against their tendency to displace the past they would have us contemplate—and finally, against the authoritarian propensity in all art that reduces viewers to passive spectators.

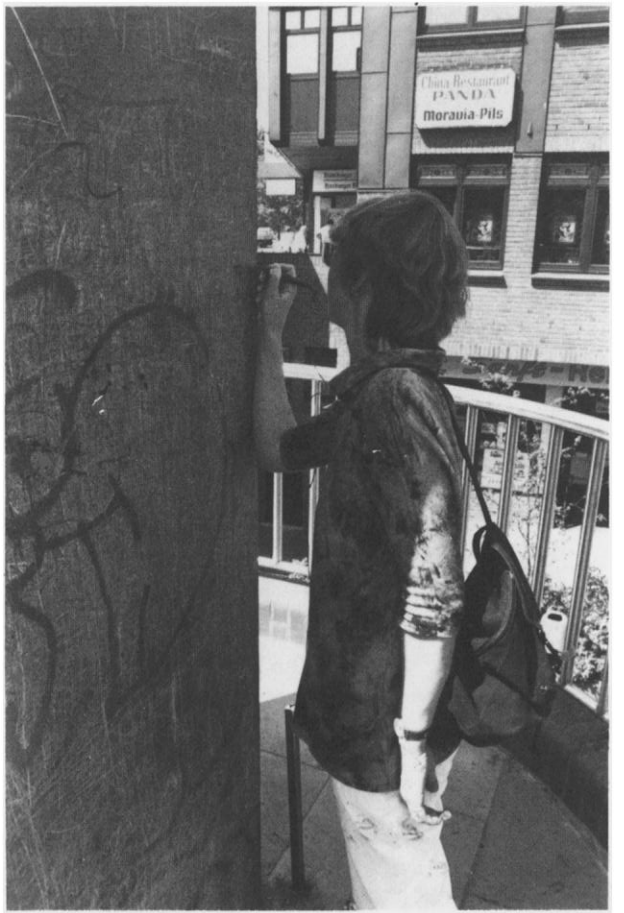
With these conditions in mind, the artists decided that theirs would be a self-abnegating monument. So when the city of Hamburg offered them a sun-dappled park setting, they rejected it in favor of what they termed a "normal, uglyish place." Their counter-monument would not be refuge in memory, tucked away from the hard edges of urban life, but one more eyesore among others on a blighted cityscape. They chose the commercial center of Harburg, a somewhat dingy suburb of Hamburg, located across the river, thirty minutes from the city center, just beyond a dioxin dump. It is populated with a mix of Turkish *Gastarbeiter* and German blue-collar families. Set in a pedestrian shopping mall, their counter-monument would rise sullenly amidst red brick and glass shop windows: package-laden shoppers could like it or hate it, but they could not avoid it.

Unveiled in Harburg in 1986, this twelve-meter high, one-meter square pillar is made of hollow aluminum, plated with a thin layer of soft, dark lead. A temporary inscription near its base reads—and thereby creates constituencies—in German, French, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, and English:

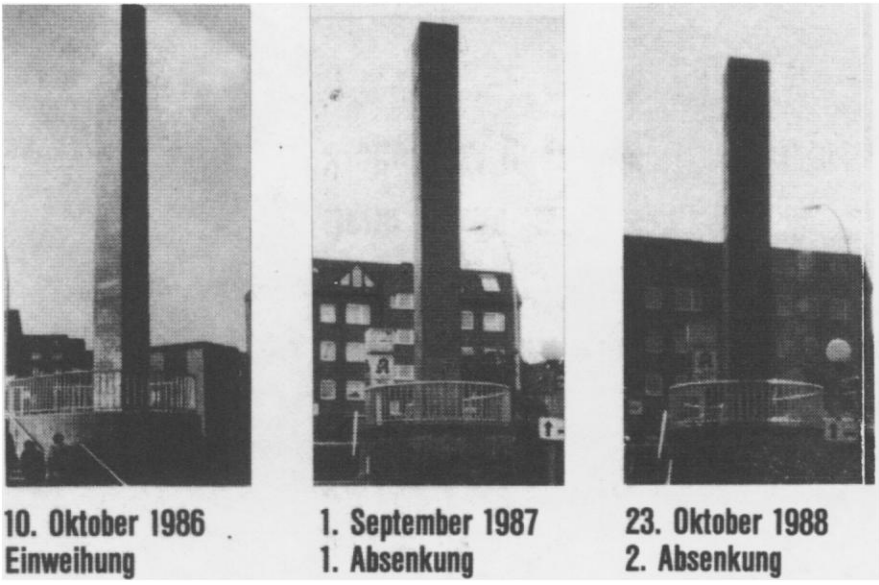
> We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Harburg monument

10. Quoted in Claude Gintz, "'L'Anti-Monument' de Jochen et Esther Gerz," *Galeries Magazine* 19 (June–July 1987): 87.

Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, *Harburg Monument against Fascism,* June 1989.



A local woman makes her contribution to the Harburg monument. Photos: James E. Young.

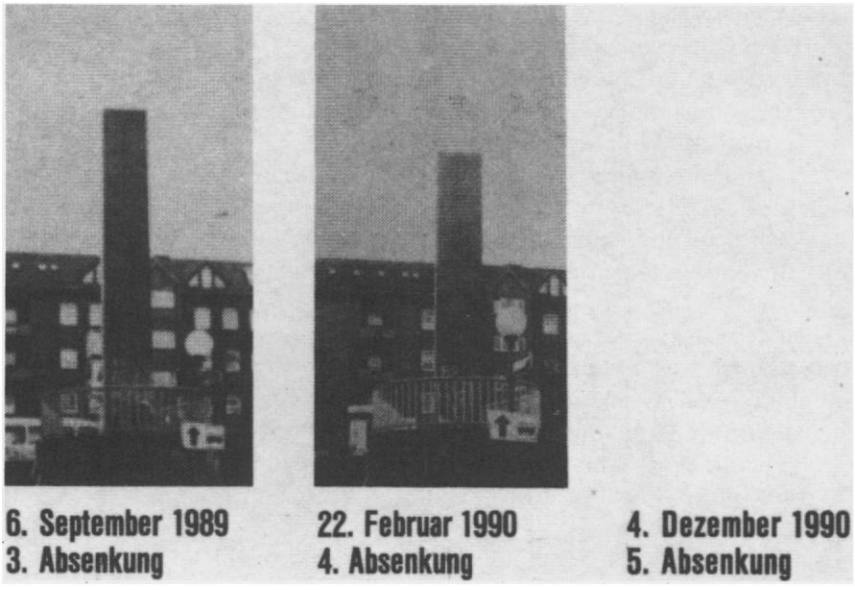


The unveiling and first four sinkings of the *Harburg Monument against Fascism.* From the invitation to the ceremony commemorating the fifth sinking, courtesy Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz.

> against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.

A steel-pointed stylus with which to score the soft lead is attached at each corner by a length of cable. As one-and-a-half-meter sections are covered with memorial graffiti, the monument is lowered into the ground, into a chamber as deep as the column is high. The more actively visitors participate, the faster they cover each section with their names, the sooner the monument will disappear. After several lowerings over the course of four or five years, nothing will be left but the top surface of the monument, which will be covered with a burial stone inscribed to "Harburg's Monument against Fascism." In effect, the vanishing monument will have returned the burden of memory to visitors: one day, the only thing left standing here will be the memory-tourists, forced to rise and to remember for themselves.

With audacious simplicity, the counter-monument thus flouts any



number of cherished memorial conventions: its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet. By defining itself in opposition to the traditional memorial's task, the counter-monument illustrates concisely the possibilities and limitations of all memorials everywhere. In this way, it functions as a valuable "counter-index" to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site.

In Germany today, not only does the monument vanish, but so too do the traditional notions of the monument's performance. How better to remember forever a vanished people than by the perpetually unfinished, ever-vanishing monument? As if in mocking homage to national forebears who had planned the Holocaust as a self-consuming set of events—that is, intended to destroy all traces of itself, all memory of its victims—the

Gerzes have designed a self-consuming memorial that leaves behind only the rememberer and the memory of a memorial. As the self-destroying sculpture of Jean Tinguely and others challenged the very notion of sculpture, the vanishing monument similarly challenges the idea of monumentality and its implied corollary, permanence.

Indeed, after nearly three decades of self-destroying sculpture, the advent of a self-consuming monument might have been expected. But while self-consuming sculpture and monuments share a few of the same aesthetic and political motivations, each also has its own reasons for vanishing. Artists like Tinguely created self-destroying sculpture in order to preempt the work's automatic commodification by a voracious art market. At the same time, and by extension, these artists hoped such works would thereby remain purely public and that by vanishing, would leave the public in a position to examine itself as part of the piece's performance. "The viewer, in effect, [becomes] the subject of the work," as Douglas Crimp has observed. Or, in Michael North's elaboration of this principle, "the public *becomes* the sculpture."[11]

The Gerzes' counter-monument takes this insight several steps further. "Art, in its conspicuousness, in its recognizability, is an indication of failure," Jochen Gerz has said. "If it were truly consumed, no longer visible or conspicuous, if there were only a few manifestations of art left, it would actually be where it belongs—that is, *within* the people for whom it was created."[12] The counter-monument is direct heir to Gerz's thesis on art and being, his ambivalence toward art's objecthood. For Gerz, it seems, once the art object stimulates in the viewer a particular complex of ideas, emotions, and responses that then come to exist in the viewer independently of further contact with the piece of art, it can wither away, its task accomplished. By extension, once the monument moves its viewers to memory, it also becomes unnecessary and so may disappear. As a result, Gerz suggests, "we will one day reach the point where anti-Fascist memorials will no longer be necessary, when vigilance will be kept alive by the invisible pictures of remembrance."[13] "Invisible pictures," in this case, would correspond to our internalized images of the memorial itself, now locked into the mind's eye as a source of perpetual memory. All that

11. Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity," in *Richard Serra/Sculpture,* ed. Krauss (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 27 Feb.–13 May 1986), p. 43; Michael North, "The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Summer 1990): 861. As North shows, such an impulse has a long history in its own right. For further discussion of these dimensions of contemporary sculpture, see Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago, 1989); Lucy R. Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York, 1971), esp. pp. 261–64; and Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture."

12. Quoted in Doris von Drateln, "Jochen Gerz's Visual Poetry," trans. Ingeborg von Zitzewitz, *Contemporanea* 2 (Sept. 1989): 47.

13. Ibid.

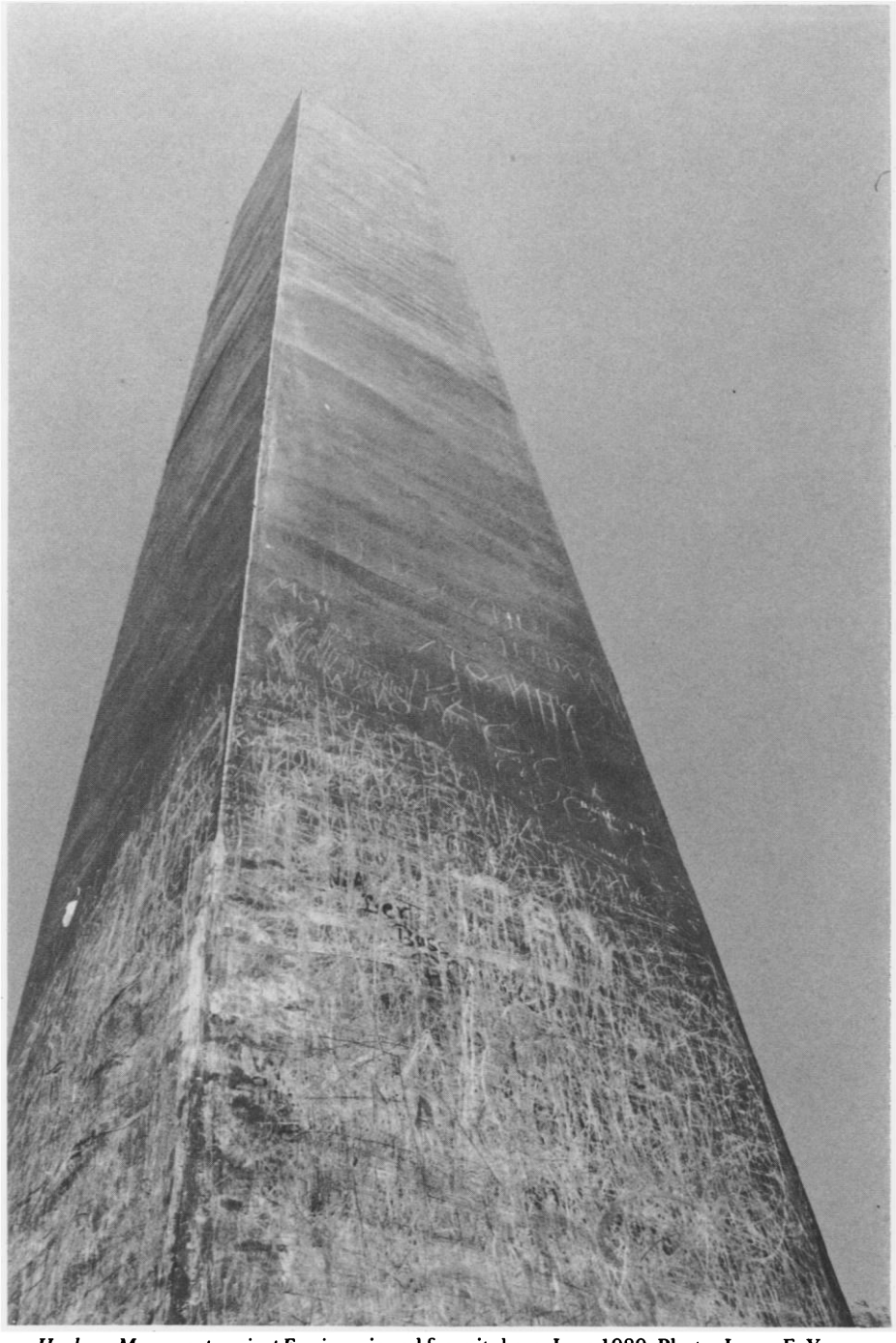
remains, then, is the memory of the monument, an afterimage projected onto the landscape by the rememberer. The best monument, in Gerz's view, may be no monument at all, but only the memory of an absent monument.

The Gerzes are highly regarded in Europe as poets and photographers, and as conceptual and performance artists. In fact, much of their conceptual art conflates photographs and poetry, overlaying image with word. In their performances, they aspire simultaneously to be "the painter, medium, paintbrush, and not just witness to a work."[14] In their counter-monument, the artists have attempted a "performative piece" that initiates a dynamic relationship between artists, work, and viewer, in which none emerges singularly dominant. In its egalitarian conception, the counter-monument would not just commemorate the antifascist impulse but enact it, breaking down the hierarchical relationship between art object and its audience. By inviting its own violation, the monument humbles itself in the eyes of beholders accustomed to maintaining a respectful, decorous distance. It forces viewers to desanctify the memorial, demystify it, and become its equal. The counter-monument denaturalizes what the Gerzes feel is an artificial distance between artist and public generated by the holy glorification of art. Ultimately, such a monument undermines its own authority by inviting and then incorporating the *author*ity of passersby.

In fact, in this exchange between artist, art object, and viewer, the sense of a single authority, a single signatory, dissolves altogether: that the work was never really self-possessing and autonomous is now made palpable to viewers. The artist provides the screen, passersby add their names and graffiti to it, which causes the artist to sink the monument into the ground and open up space for a fresh exchange. It is a progressive relationship, which eventually consumes itself, leaving only the unobjectified memory of such an exchange. In its abstract form, this monument claims not to prescribe—the artists might say dictate—a specific object of memory. Rather, it more passively accommodates all memory and response, as the blank-sided obelisk always has. It remains the obligation of passersby to enter into the art: it makes artist-rememberers and self-memorializers out of every signatory. By inviting viewers to commemorate themselves, the counter-monument reminds them that to some extent all any monument can do is provide a trace of its makers, not of the memory itself.

The Gerzes' monument is intended to be a visual pun. As the monument would rise up symbolically against fascism before disappearing, it calls on us to rise up literally in its stead. It reminds us that all monuments can ever do is rise up symbolically against injustice, that the practical outcome of any artist's hard work is dissipated in its symbolic gesture. The Gerzes suggest here that it is precisely this impotence of the symbolic

14. Quoted in Gintz, "'L'Anti-Monument' de Jochen et Esther Gerz," p. 80.



Harburg Monument against Fascism, viewed from its base, June 1989. Photo: James E. Young.

stand that they abhor in art, the invitation to vicarious resistance, the sublimation of response in a fossilized object. In contrast, they hope that the counter-monument will incite viewers, move them beyond vicarious response to the actual, beyond symbolic gesture to action.

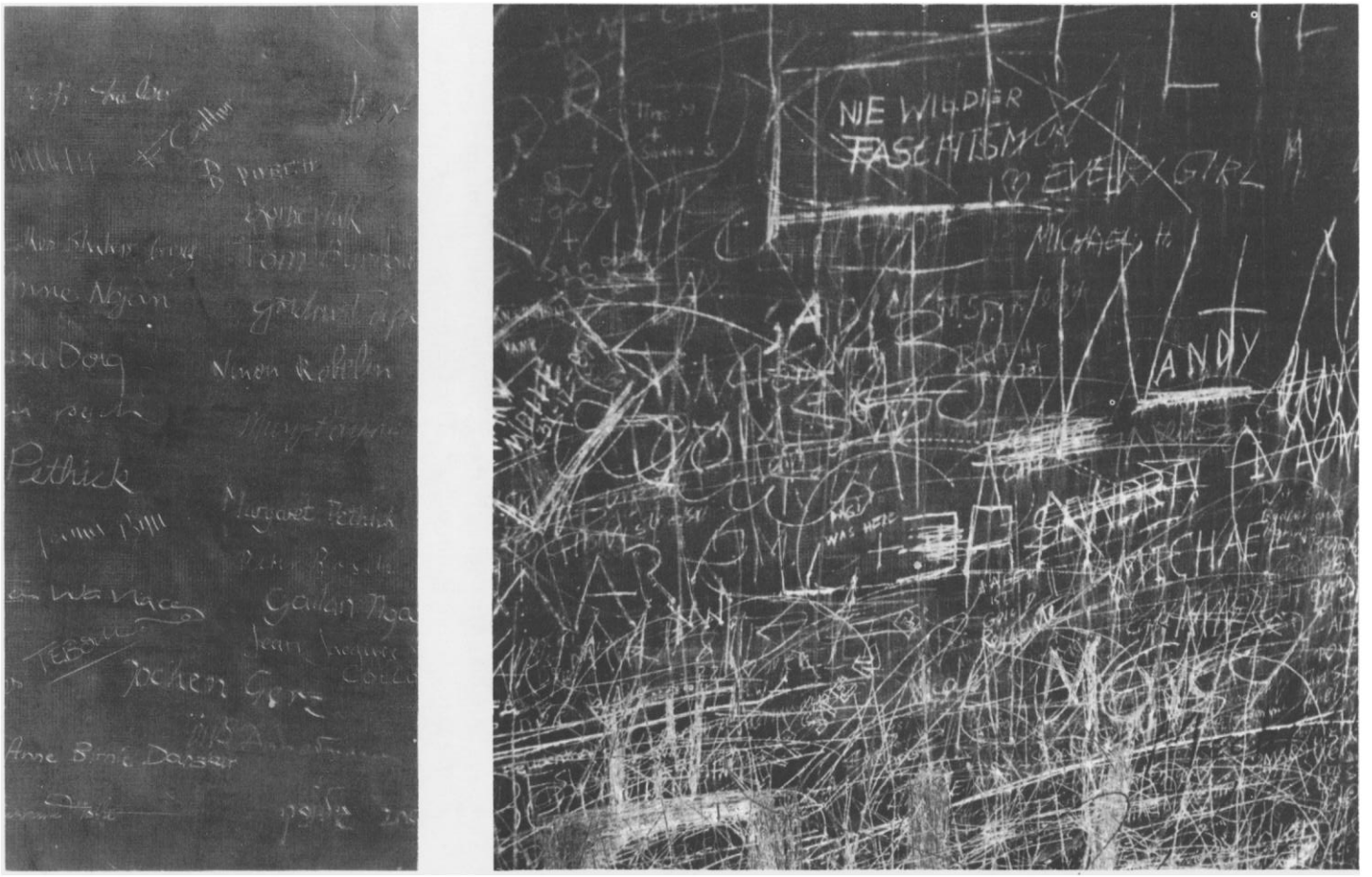
From the beginning, the artists had intended this monument to torment—not reassure—its neighbors. They have likened it, for example, to a great black knife in the back of Germany, slowly being plunged in, each thrust solemnly commemorated by the community, a self-mutilation, a kind of topographical hara-kiri.[15] The counter-monument objectifies for the artists not only the Germans' secret desire that all these monuments just hurry up and disappear but also the urge to strike back at such memory, to sever it from the national body like a wounded limb. In particular, the Gerzes take mischievous, gleeful delight in the spectacle of a German city's ritual burial of an antifascist monument it just spent $144,000 to make—enough, in the words of Hamburg's disgruntled mayor, to repave ninety-seven yards of Autobahn. Indeed, the fanfare and celebration of its 1986 unveiling are repeated in all subsequent lowerings, each attended by eager city politicians, invited dignitaries, and local media. That so many Germans would turn out in such good faith to cheer the destruction of a monument against fascism exemplifies, in the artists' eyes, the essential paradox in any people's attempt to commemorate its own misdeeds.

At every sinking, the artists attempt to divine a little more of the local reaction. "What kind of monument disappears?" some citizens demand to know. "Is it art when we write all over it?" ask teenagers. At one point, the Gerzes went from shop to shop to gather impressions, which varied from satisfaction at the attention it had generated in their commercial district to other, less encouraging responses. "They ought to blow it up," said one. Another chimed in, "It's not so bad as far as chimneys go, but there ought to be some smoke coming out of it."[16] The Gerzes found that even resentment is a form of memory.

In their original conception, the Gerzes had hoped for row upon row of neatly inscribed names, a visual echo of the war memorials of another age. This black column of self-inscribed names might thus remind all

15. The Gerzes made a public presentation on the *Gegendenkmal* at a conference on "Kunst und Holocaust" at the Evangelischen Akademie-Loccum, West Germany, 20 May 1989. Speaking in German to a German audience, Berlin-born Jochen Gerz was making an obvious, if ironic, allusion to the Nazis' own, notoriously literal-minded reference to being "stabbed in the back" by enemies internal, external, and imagined. Appropriating the Nazis' language in this way was clearly intended both as a provocation and as an ironic self-identification by the Gerzes as "enemies of the Reich." See *Kunst und Holocaust: Bildliche Zeugen von Ende der Westlichen Kultur,* ed. Detlef Hoffmann and Karl Ermert (Rehburg-Loccum, Germany, 1990).

16. Quoted in Michael Gibson, "Hamburg: Sinking Feelings," *ARTnews* 86 (Summer 1987): 106–7; hereafter abbreviated "H."



Harburg Monument against Fascism, details of graffiti. On the left, the names first inscribed on the monument, including the artists'. On the right, graffiti on the monument between the fourth and fifth sinkings. Photos: Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz.

visitors of their own mortality, not to mention the monument's. Execution did not follow design, however, and even the artists were taken aback by what they found after a couple of months: an illegible scribble of names scratched over names, all covered over in a spaghetti scrawl, what Jochen likened to a painting by Mark Tobey. People had come at night to scrape over all the names, even to pry the lead plating off its base. There were hearts with "Jürgen liebt Kirsten" written inside, stars of David, and funny faces daubed in paint and marker pen. Inevitably, swastikas also began to appear: how better to remember what happened than by the Nazis' own sign? After all, Jochen insists, "a swastika is also a signature." In fact, when city authorities warned of the possibility of vandalism, "why not give that phenomenon free rein, [the Gerzes] suggested, and allow the monument to document the social temperament in that way?" ("H," p. 106).

The town's citizens were not as philosophical, however, and began to condemn the monument as a trap for graffiti. It was almost as if the monument, covered over in this scrawl, taunted visitors in its ugliness. But what repels critics more is not clear. Is it the monument's unsightly form or the grotesque sentiments it captures and then reflects back to the community? As a social mirror, it becomes doubly troubling in that it reminds the community of what happened then and, even worse, how they now respond to the memory of this past. To those members of the community who deplore the ease with which this work is violated, the local newspaper answered succinctly: "The filth brings us closer to the truth than would any list of well-meaning signatures. The inscriptions, a conglomerate of approval, hatred, anger and stupidity, are like a fingerprint of our city applied to the column" (quoted in "H," p. 107). The counter-monument accomplishes what all monuments must: it reflects back to the people—and thus codifies—their own memorial projections and preoccupations.

Its irreverence notwithstanding, the memorial quality to most graffiti is legendary: we know Kilroy was here, that he existed, by the inscribed trace he left behind. As wall and subway graffiti came to be valued as aesthetic expressions of protest, however, they were also appropriated commercially by galleries and museums, which absorbed such graffiti as a way of naturalizing—hence neutralizing—it (how else does one violate a graffiti-covered wall? By cleaning it?). In its gestures to both graffiti artists and to the *Mauerkunst* of the Berlin Wall, the counter-monument points guiltily at its own official appropriation of guerrilla art, even as it redeems itself in its eventual self-destruction.

In addition to demonstrating the impulse toward self-memorialization and the violation of public space, some of these graffiti also betray the more repressed xenophobia of current visitors. Inscriptions like "*Ausländer raus*" echo an antipathy toward more recent national "guests," as well as the defilement of Jewish cemeteries and other memorials in Germany. By retaining these words, the counter-monument acknowledges that all monuments ultimately make such emendations part of their

Harburg Monument against Fascism, **almost gone, August 1991. Photo: James E. Young.**

memorial texts. That is, the monument records the response of today's visitors for the benefit of tomorrow's, thus reminding all of their shared responsibility in that the recorded responses of previous visitors at a memorial site become part of one's own memory.

Finally, part of the community's mixed reaction to the counter-monument may also have been its discomfort with this monument's very liveliness. Like other forms of art, the monument is most benign when static: there when you face it, gone when you turn your back. But when it begins to come to life, to grow, shrink, or change form, the monument may become threatening. No longer at the mercy of the viewer's will, it seems to have a will of its own, to beckon us at inopportune moments. Such monuments become a little like Frankenstein's monster, a golem out of the maker's control.

3. The Disruption of Public Space

Before the citizens of Hamburg bury their counter-monument for the last time, another conceptual memorial will be "unveiled" in the Neukölln district of Berlin—the former site of a forced labor camp and one of Sachsenhausen's satellite camps. Though Norbert Radermacher's memorial in Neukölln will bear little formal resemblance to the Gerzes' counter-monument, both its concept and spirit promise to make it a kindred soul. Like its Hamburg cousin, Radermacher's memorial at

Neukölln integrates written text and disappears. Unlike the permanently vanished column, however, Radermacher's memorial then reappears with the entry of every new passerby into its space.

In Radermacher's design, pedestrians strolling along the Sonnenallee, next to the sports fields (former site of the *KZ-Aussenlager* [satellite concentration camp]), trip a light-beam trigger that in turn flicks on a high-intensity slide projection of a written text relating the historical details of this site's now-invisible past. From a slide projector mounted atop a five-meter-high pole, in the artist's words,

> the lettering from this text is beamed first onto the crowns of the trees, where one can see the text but cannot quite read it. Slowly, it moves down to the wire fence [surrounding the sports ground and perimeter of the former camp] until the words become more clear and legible. The text is then projected onto the sidewalk, where we can read it quite clearly. It remains for one minute before slowly fading out.[17]

In effect, by overlaying the nearby trees, houses, fence, and pavement in this way, the high-intensity beam literally bathes an otherwise forgetful site in the light of its own past—a spotlight from which neither the site nor pedestrians can hide.

As innovative as it is, no installation could also be truer to the artist's previous work. For years, Radermacher has made public spaces his primary canvas, creating installation texts precisely in the minimal disruption of public spaces. His aim has not been to remake these spaces, but to add to them in ways that cause the public to see and experience them anew. In the most unlikely settings he installs small, unexpected objects that disrupt the space on the one hand, but remain so unobtrusive as to be almost absorbed: a white, foot-high stone obelisk beneath an overpass in Berlin; a round, cakelike white stone under another bridge in Düsseldorf; small seashells affixed to the stone balustrade of a Parisian cathedral. A palm-sized, square mirror attached to a long brick wall reflects sky and trees in Paris; a small concrete gyrocompass lies on its side, lost amidst the cobblestones of an immense square in Düsseldorf.[18] Each of these causes pedestrians to pause, if only momentarily, on realizing they have accidentally entered an artist's installation, a space they had previously regarded as banal. What is it? they ask. Who made it? And why is it here? Radermacher delights in such questions, of course, and knows that by their public

17. Norbert Radermacher, quoted in *Gedenkstätte KZ–Aussenlager Sonnenallee Berlin-Neukölln: Bericht der Vorprüfung* (Berlin, 1989), p. 20; my translation. I am indebted to Jochen Spielmann, coordinator of this competition, for so generously providing me with all of its documentation.

18. See Radermacher, *Stücke für Stadt,* catalog from the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin, 1985).

nature, these installations are irreproducible in the museum or gallery—thereby resisting commodification as well.

Like the Gerzes' monument, the memorial installation at Neukölln is meant to be ever-changing. According to Radermacher, the total message of his memorial text will never repeat itself: various times of the day, climate, seasons, and bystanders will ensure that no two showings are exactly alike. By day, the landscape will appear to be speckled with text, while by night distinct words will assume the very shapes of the objects over which they are draped. In a night rain, the droplet-filled air itself will become the medium for a message that cannot be washed away. Once the landscape has been overlaid with its memorial inscription, it retains an afterimage in visitors' minds—and is therefore never innocent of memory again.

In addition, the artist has invited schoolchildren to continue researching the history of the area before adding their own slide texts to his. By integrating the children's messages, the artist hopes to illustrate both the capacity in his memorial to absorb new meanings in new times and the essentially participatory nature of all memorials. In effect, Radermacher would remind us that all such sites depend for their memory on the passersby who initiate it—however involuntarily. He also suggests that the site alone cannot remember, that it is the projection of memory by visitors into a space that makes it a memorial. The site catches visitors unaware, but is no longer passive and intrudes itself into the pedestrians' thoughts. Of course, such memory can also be avoided by simply crossing the street or ducking under the light-beam trigger. But even this would be a memorial act of sorts, if only in opposition. For to avoid the memorial here, we would first have to conjure the memory to be avoided: that is, we would have to remember what it is we want to forget.

Until the installation of this mechanism sometime in 1992—a memory implant, as it were—there will be no sign that this site was ever anything other than what it appears to be: sports fields and an empty lot. The particular slice of history to be projected begins in 1941 when the German branch of the National Cash Register Company, an American firm, bought the property occupying 181–189 Sonnenallee as part of its wartime expansion. Having waxed and waned during the First World War, the depression, and the era of inflation, business at NCR began to boom in 1941 with the addition of its munitions plant at Neukölln. As part of its expansion, the company built a factory at one end of the site and barracks for slave labor at the other end, called NCR Colony, one of dozens of forced labor camps in Berlin alone.

Between 1942 and 1944, the number of foreign, mostly female slave laborers from Poland, the Soviet Union, and France fluctuated between 400 and 863. Then, in August 1944, the barracks were cleared for another kind of occupant: some 500 Jewish women from the Lodz ghetto. Having survived transports from the ghetto to Auschwitz during the early

summer of 1944, and then from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen that fall, these women were shipped into Neukölln as slave laborers at NCR's munitions plant. From September 1944 to April 1945, the camp at Neukölln was thus turned into one of Sachsenhausen's many satellite camps. Bombings forced the women into shelters during much of the early spring in 1945, and, as the Red Army approached in April, the SS shipped these women back to Sachsenhausen, whence they were transported to Ravensbrück, the women's concentration camp. In the last days of the war, most of this group was taken by train to Sweden in Aktion Bernadotte, a rescue operation supervised by the Swedish Red Cross. The rest of the women escaped from a forced march to Lübeck, along with other survivors of Ravensbrück.

By May 1945 little remained of the *Lager* itself or the NCR factory next door, which had been dismantled by the Red Army and shipped back to the Soviet Union. Over the next few years, the cash register factory was rebuilt and, despite its low priority among American investors, flourished for awhile during the 1950s, when it exported its machines around the world. By the 1960s, however, bad management led to its closing; the factory was demolished and sports fields were put into its cleared space. The three-meter fence now surrounding the fields is said to be exactly as high as that once enclosing the forced labor and satellite camps here—the lone physical reference to the site's past.

Other than the projected text, Radermacher prefers to leave the site unaltered, a reminder of absence and the effacement of memory—and of the deliberate effort it takes to remember. Though the precise text to be projected has not been decided at this writing, early drafts included these details:

> On the site of the Sonnenallee 181–189, between fall 1942 and summer 1944, there was a *Lager* for forced labor. After that it was an *Aussenlager* for KZ-Sachsenhausen, in which 500 women were imprisoned, most of them Polish Jews. These women were forced to work in the National Cash Register Company factory when it was converted into a weapons production plant.[19]

The site-disruption, in this case, is the equivalent of a memorial inscription, reinvesting an otherwise unremarkable site with its altogether remarkable past. In fact, by leaving the site physically unaltered, the artist allows the site to retain a facade of innocence only so that he might betray more forcefully its actual historical past. Radermacher's memorial thus reminds us that the history of this site also includes its own forgetfulness, its own memory lapse.

19. Ibid., p. 7.

4. The Negative-Form Monument

When the city of Kassel invited artists to consider ways to rescue one of its destroyed historical monuments—the Aschrott-Brunnen—local artist Horst Hoheisel decided that neither a preservation of its remnants nor its mere reconstruction would do. For Hoheisel, even the fragment was a decorative lie, suggesting itself as the remnant of a destruction no one knew very much about. Its pure reconstruction would have been no less offensive: not only would self-congratulatory overtones of *Wiedergutmachung* betray an irreparable violence, but the artist feared that a reconstructed fountain would only encourage the public to forget what had happened to the original.

In the best tradition of the counter-monument, therefore, Hoheisel proposed a "negative-form" monument to mark what had once been the Aschrott Fountain in Kassel's City Hall Square. Originally this had been a twelve-meter-high, neo-Gothic pyramid fountain, surrounded by a reflecting pool set in the main town square in 1908. It was designed by the City Hall architect, Karl Roth, and funded by a Jewish entrepreneur from Kassel, Sigmund Aschrott, whose name it bore. But as a gift from a Jew to the city, it was condemned by the Nazis as the "Jews' Fountain" and so demolished during the night of 8 April 1939 by Nazi activists, its pieces carted away by city work crews over the next few days. Within weeks, all but the sandstone base had been cleared away, leaving only a great, empty basin in the center of the square. Two years later, the first transport of 463 Kassel Jews departed from the Hauptbahnhof to Riga, followed in the next year by another 3,000, all murdered. In 1943, the city filled in the fountain's basin with soil and planted flowers; local burghers then dubbed it "Aschrott's Grave."

During the growing prosperity of the 1960s, the town turned Aschrott's Grave back into a fountain, *sans* pyramid. But by then only a few of the city's oldtimers could recall that its name had ever been Aschrott's anything. When asked what had happened to the original fountain, they replied that to their best recollection it had been destroyed by English bombers during the war. In response to this kind of fading memory, the "Society for the Rescue of Historical Monuments" (if not history itself) proposed in 1984 that some form of the fountain and its history be restored—and that it recall all the founders of the city, especially Sigmund Aschrott.

On being awarded the project, Hoheisel described both the concept and form underlying his negative-form monument:

> I have designed the new fountain as a mirror image of the old one, sunk beneath the old place, in order to rescue the history of this place as a wound and as an open question, to penetrate the consciousness of the Kassel citizens—so that such things never happen again.

Original Aschrott-Brunnen, Kassel, Germany, ca. 1930. Photo: Kassel Kulturamt.

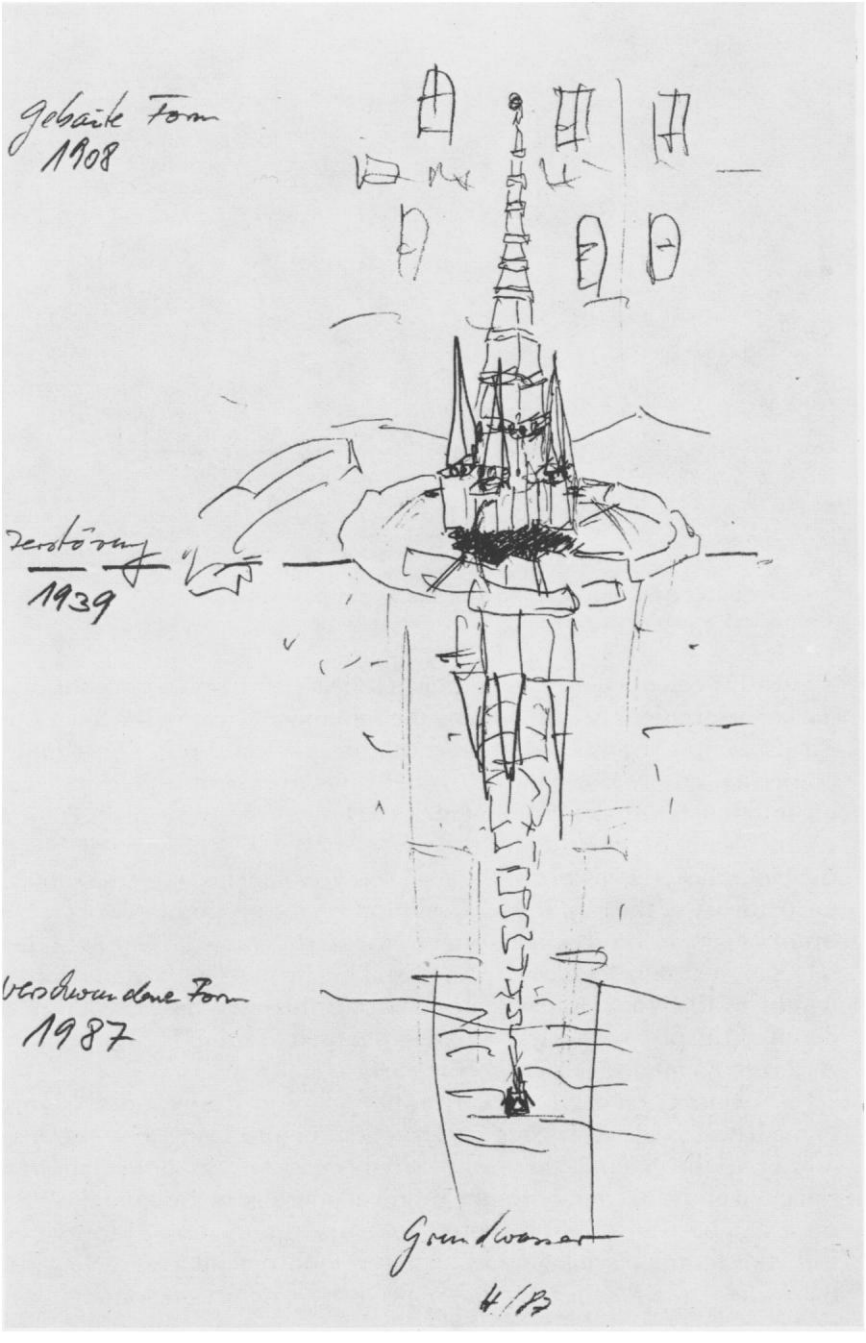
Reflecting pool of the original Aschrott-Brunnen after "Aschrott's Grave" was turned back into a fountain, *sans* pyramid, Kassel, ca. 1966. Photo: Kassel Kulturamt.

> That's why I rebuilt the fountain sculpture as a hollow concrete form after the old plans and for a few weeks displayed it as a resurrected shape at City Hall Square before sinking it, mirror-like, 12 meters deep into the ground water.
>
> The pyramid will be turned into a funnel into whose darkness water runs down. From the "architektonischen Spielerei," as City Hall architect Karl Roth called his fountain, a hole emerges which deep down in the water creates an image reflecting back the entire shape of the fountain.[20]

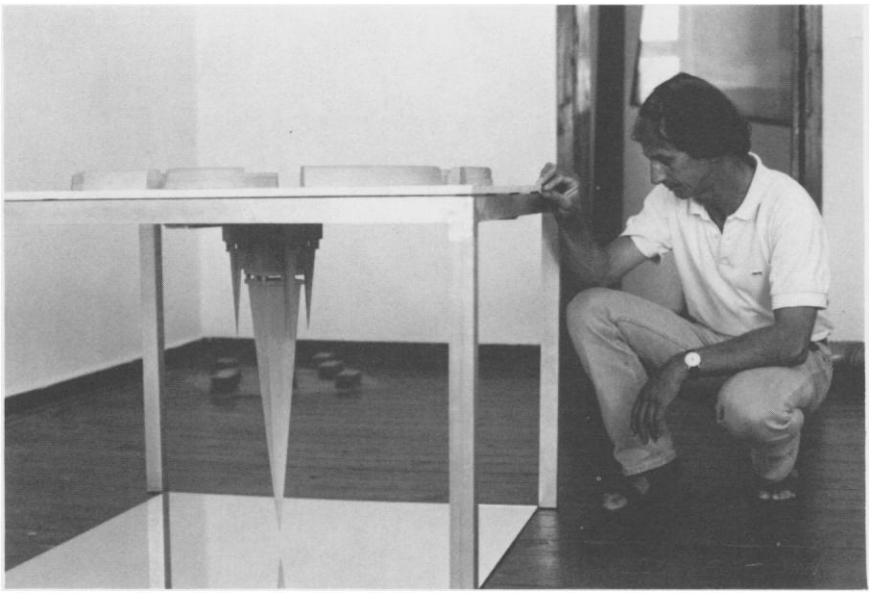
How does one remember an absence? In this case, by reproducing it. Quite literally, the negative space of the absent monument will now constitute its phantom shape in the ground. The very absence of the monument will now be preserved in its precisely duplicated negative space. In this way, the monument's reconstruction remains as illusory as memory itself, a reflection on dark waters, a phantasmagoric play of light and image. Taken a step further, Hoheisel's inverted pyramid might also combine with the remembered shape of its predecessor to form the two interlocking triangles of the Jewish star—present only in the memory of its absence.[21]

20. Horst Hoheisel, "Rathaus-Platz-Wunde," in *Aschrott-Brunnen: Offene Wunde der Stadtgeschichte* (Kassel, 1989), p. [7]; my translation; hereafter abbreviated "RPW."

21. For this imaginative step I thank Gary Smith who suggested it to me in conversation.



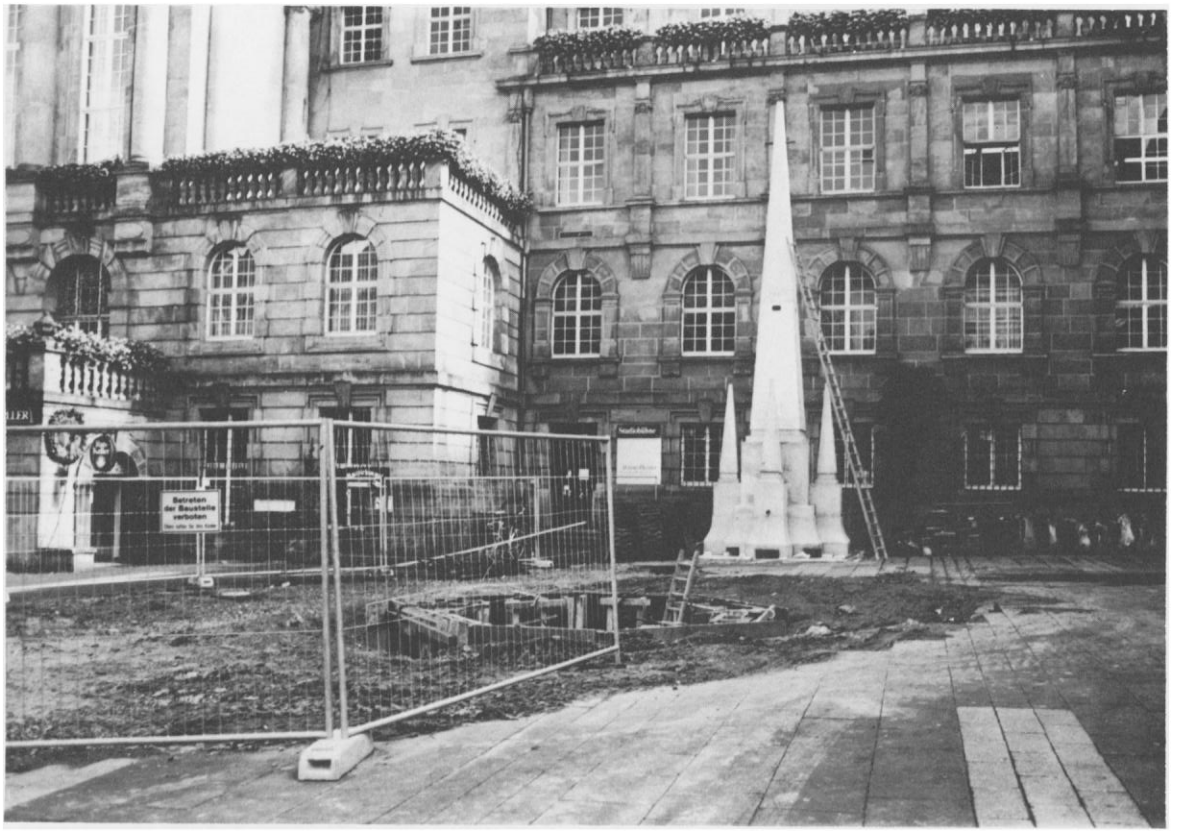
Horst Hoheisel's conceptual sketch of his negative-form monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen. Photo: *Aschrott-Brunnen: Offene Wunde der Stadtgeschichte* (Kassel, 1989), p. [7].



Horst Hoheisel with his model of the negative-form monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen. Photo: James E. Young.

In his conceptual formulations, Hoheisel invokes the play of other, darker associations as well, linking the monument to both the town's Jewish past and a traditional anti-Semitic libel. "The tip of the sculpture points like a thorn down into the water," the artist writes. "Through coming into touch with the ground water, the history of the Aschrott Fountain continues not over but under the city" ("RPW," p. [7]). As an emblem of the Holocaust, the history of the Aschrott Fountain becomes the subterranean history of the city. In Hoheisel's figure, the groundwater of German history may well be poisoned—not by the Jews, but by the Germans themselves in their murder of the Jews. By sinking his inverted pyramid into the depths in this way, Hoheisel means to tap this very history. "From the depth of the place," he says, "I have attempted to bring the history of the Aschrott Fountain back up to the surface" ("RPW," p. [8]).

Of course, on a visit to City Hall Square in Kassel, none of this is immediately evident. During construction, before being lowered upside down into the ground, the starkly white negative-form sat upright in the square, a ghostly reminder of the original, now-absent monument. Where there had been an almost-forgotten fountain, there is now a bronze tablet with the fountain's image and an inscription detailing what had been there and why it was lost. On our approach, we detect the sound of water rushing into a great underground hollow, which grows louder and louder until we finally stand over the Aschrott-Brunnen. Only this sound suggests the depth of an otherwise invisible memorial, an inverted palimpsest



The negative-form monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen, phantomlike in its whiteness, shown here before being inverted and lowered into the ground. Photo: Horst Hoheisel.

that demands the visitor's reflection. Through an iron grate and thick glass windows we peer into the depths. "With the running water," Hoheisel suggests, "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." In fact, as the only standing figures on this flat square, our thoughts rooted in the rushing fountain beneath our feet, we realize that we have become the memorial. "The sunken fountain is not the memorial at all," Hoheisel says. "It is only history turned into a pedestal, an invitation to passersby who stand upon it to search for the memorial in their own heads. For only there is the memorial to be found" ("RPW," p. [8]). As have the Gerzes in Hamburg and Radermacher in Berlin, Hoheisel has left nothing but the visitors themselves standing in remembrance, left to look inward for memory.

5. *Conclusion*

On the surface, time and memory seem to operate to irreconcilably disparate ends: where time might be described, in Aristotle's terms, as that which "disperses subsistence,"[22] memory can be regarded as recollective in its work, an operation that concentrates the past in the figurative space of a present moment. The counter-monument would turn this over: it forces the memorial to disperse—not gather—memory, even as it gathers the literal effects of time in one place. In dissipating itself over time, the counter-monument would mimic time's own dispersion, become more like time than like memory. It would remind us that the very notion of linear time assumes memory of a past moment: time as the perpetually measured distance between this moment and the next, between this instant and a past remembered. In this sense, the counter-monument asks us to recognize that time and memory are interdependent, in dialectical flux.

The material of a conventional monument is normally chosen to withstand the physical ravages of time, the assumption being that its memory will remain as everlasting as its form. But as Mumford has already suggested, the actual consequence of a memorial's unyielding fixedness in space is also its death over time: a fixed image created in one time and carried over into a new time suddenly appears archaic, strange, or irrelevant altogether. For in its linear progression, time drags old meaning into new contexts, estranging a monument's memory from both past and present, holding past truths up to ridicule in present moments. Time mocks the rigidity of monuments, the presumptuous claim that in its materiality, a monument can be regarded as eternally true, a fixed star in the constellation of collective memory.

22. Aristotle, *Physics* 221b2, quoted in Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), p. 181.

By formalizing its impermanence and even celebrating its changing form over time and in space, the counter-monument refutes this self-defeating premise of the traditional monument. It seeks to stimulate memory no less than the everlasting memorial, but by pointing explicitly at its own changing face, it re-marks also the inevitable—even essential—evolution of memory itself over time. In its conceptual self-destruction, the counter-monument refers not only to its own physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning and memory—especially that embodied in a form that insists on its eternal fixity. As such, the counter-monument suggests itself as a skeptical antidote to the illusion that the seeming permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of a memorial idea attached to it.

By negating its form, however, the counter-monument need not so negate memory. And by challenging its premises for being, neither does it challenge the call for memory itself. Rather, it negates only the illusion of permanence traditionally fostered in the monument. For in calling attention to its own fleeting presence, the counter-monument mocks the traditional monument's certainty of history: it scorns what Nietzsche has called "monumental history," his epithet for the petrified versions of history that bury the living.[23] In effect, it might even be said that the counter-monument negates the very basis for this epithet's central trope: after the counter-monument, the "monumental" need no longer be conceived merely as a figure for the stone dead. By resisting its own reason for being, the counter-monument paradoxically reinvigorates the very idea of the monument itself.

If the place of memory is "created by a play of memory and history," as Nora believes ("BMH," p. 19), then time may be the crucible for this interaction. Memory is thus sustained, not denied, by a sense of human temporality, deriving its nourishment from the very changes over time that would otherwise mock the static, "everlasting" memorial. Nora is most succinct here:

> If we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial . . . all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also clear that the *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications. ["BMH," p. 19]

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History,* trans. Adrian Collins (New York, 1985), p. 17.

Even so, the precise beauty of the counter-monument may not lie merely in its capacity for change, nor in its capacity to challenge a society's reasons for either memory or its own configuration of memory. For in addition, the counter-monument seeks its fulfillment in—not at cross-purposes with—historical time. It recognizes and affirms that the life of memory exists primarily in historical time: in the activity that brings monuments into being, in the ongoing exchange between people and their historical markers, and finally, in the concrete actions we take in light of a memorialized past.

Peering down into the negative-form monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen, Kassel. Photo: Horst Hoheisel.