Germany's vanishing Holocaust monuments

by James E. Young

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Without realizing it, perhaps, conceptual artist Jochen Gerz has recently recapitulated not only this missing gravestone syndrome but also the notion of the memorial as an interior space. I refer not to his and Esther Shalev-Gerz's vanishing monument in Harburg but to his newly dedicated, invisible monument in Saarbrucken, which takes the counter-monument to, shall we say, new depths.

Celebrated in Germany for his hand in Harburg's Gegen-Denkmal, Gerz was appointed last year as a guest professor at the School of Fine Arts in Saarbrucken. In a studio class he devoted to conceptual monuments, Gerz invited his students to participate in a clandestine memory-project, a sort of guerrilla memorial action. The class agreed enthusiastically, swore themselves to secrecy, and listened as Gerz described his plan: Under the cover of night, eight students would steal into the great cobblestone square leading to the Saarbrucken Schloss, former home of the Gestapo during Hitler's Reich. Carrying book bags laden with cobblestones removed from other parts of the city, the students would spread themselves across the square, sit in pairs, swill beer, and yell at each other in raucous voices, pretending to party. All the while, in fact, they would stealthily pry loose some 70 cobblestones from the square and replace them with the like-sized stones they had brought along,

each embedded underneath with a nail so that they could be located later with a metal detector. Within days, this part of the memorial-mission had been accomplished as planned.

Meanwhile, other members of the class had been assigned to research the names and locations of every former Jewish cemetery in Germany, over 2,000 of them, now abandoned or vanished. When their classmates returned from their beer-party, their bags heavy with cobblestones, all set to work engraving the names of missing Jewish cemeteries on the stones, one by one. The night after they finished, the memory-guerrillas returned the stones to their original places, each inscribed and dated. But in a twist wholly consistent with the Gerzes' previous counter-monument and conceptual performances, the stones were replaced face down, leaving no trace of the entire operation. The memorial would be invisible, itself only a memory, out of sight and therefore, Gerz hoped, in mind.

But as Gerz also realized, because the memorial was no longer visible, public memory would depend on knowledge of the memorial-action becoming public. Toward this end, Gerz wrote Oskar Lafontaine, minister-president of the Saarland and vice president of the German Social Democratic Party, apprising him of the deed and asking him for parliamentary assistance to continue the operation. Lafontaine responded with 10,000 DM from a special arts fund and a warning that the entire project was patently illegal. The public, however, had now become part of the memorial. For once the newspapers got wind of the project, a tremendous furor broke out over the reported vandalization of the square; editorials asked whether yet another monument like this was necessary; some even wondered whether or not the whole thing had been a conceptual hoax designed merely to provoke a memorial storm.

As visitors flocked to the square looking for the 70 stones out of over 8,000, they too began to wonder "where they stood" vis-a-vis the memorial stones: Were they standing on it? In it? Was it

really there at all? On searching for memory, Gerz hoped, they would realize that such memory was already in them. This would be an interior memorial: as the only standing forms in the square, the visitors would become the memorials for which they searched.

Where the politicians stood was less equivocal. As Jochen Gerz rose to address the Saarbrucken Stadtverband to explain his project, the entire CDU contingent stood up and walked out. The rest of the parliament remained and voted the memorial into public existence. Indeed, they even voted to rename the plaza "Square of the Invisible Monument," its name becoming the only visible sign of the memorial itself. Whether or not the operation had ever really taken place, the power of suggestion had already planted the memorial where it would do the most good: not in the center of town, but in the center of the public's mind. In effect, Jochen Gerz's "2,160 Stones: A Monument against Racism" returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it.

After such "anti-monuments," neither the idea of the public monument nor the visitors' approach to it can ever be quite the same. As contemporary monument-makers continue to challenge the very idea of the monument, to enliven the monument with the sense of its changes over time, we who visit these monuments might begin to rethink our own relationship to them and the memory they would embody. For public art in general, and Holocaust memorials in particular, tend to beg traditional art historical inquiry. Most discussions of Holocaust memorial spaces ignore the essentially public dimension of their performance, remaining either formally aestheticist or almost piously historical. But in fact, it may be precisely the public's interaction with the monument that finally constitutes its aesthetic life.

For by themselves, these memorials remain inert and amnesiac, dependent on visitors for whatever memory they finally produce.

As an inert piece of stone, the monument keeps its own past a tightly held secret, gesturing away from its history to the events and meanings we bring to it in our visits. Precisely because monuments seem to remember everything but their own past, their own creation, our critical aim might now be to reinvest the monument with memory of itself, of its own coming into being. By returning to the memorial some memory of its own genesis, we remind ourselves of the memorial's essential fragility, its dependence on others for its life--that it was made by human hands in human times and places, and it is no more a natural piece of the landscape than we are.

All of which is meant to expand the idea of these memorials to include not only their conception and execution amid historical realities, but also their current and changing lives, even their eventual destruction. In this vein, we might also begin to highlight the process of public art over its often static result, the ever-changing life of the monument over its seemingly frozen face in the landscape. For too often, a community's monuments assume the polished, finished veneer of a death mask, unreflective of current memory, unresponsive to contemporary issues. Instead of enshrining an already enshrined memory, such an approach might provide an instructive glimpse into the monument's inner life--the tempestuous social, political, and aesthetic forces--normally hidden by a monument's taciturn exterior.

In the end, however, it may not be enough to ask whether or not our memorials remember the Holocaust, or even how they remember it. We should also ask to what ends we have remembered. That is, how do we respond to the current moment--the current, ongoing persecutions--in light of our remembered past? In this question, we recognize that the shape of memory cannot be divorced from the actions taken in its behalf, and that memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction. For were we passively to remark only the contours of these memorials, were we to leave

unexplored their genesis, and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all.

NOTES

1. 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, 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 new monument by Maya Lin 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 State 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.

2. For elaboration of this theme, see Matthias Winzen, "The Need for Public Representation and the Burden of the German Past," Art Journal 48 (Winter 1989), pp. 309-14.

3. See James E. Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), from which this essay is adapted, and "The Counter-monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," Critical Inquiry 18 (Winter 1992): 267-96.

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