

Gdzie jest brat twój, Abel? / Where is Abel, thy brother?

Jochen Gerz

If we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the lieux 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.

Pierre Nora¹

Working with the “Negative Past” Since 1968, when first he started to do street actions, give performances, and publicly show his photo/texts, Jochen Gerz has dealt with one major theme: “My subject matter has never changed. My model has always been our culture.”² Towards his chosen model, which “faces” him every day, and with which he is also daily confronted, Gerz displays a critical artistic attitude that has never been tainted by sophisticated bitterness or fashionable cynicism. The spiritus movens of his artistic practice is his suspicion of any form of totalization or cultural sermonizing, of the politics of representation and of representations of politics as well. He distrusts the way in which, in western capitalist culture, cultural meanings are presented as “natural” and “common sensical”, and, employing an enigmatic, laconic and not readily transparent mode of artistic expression, he consciously opposes culture’s “amazing power to normalize (or ‘doxify’) signs and images, however disparate (or contesting) they may be.”³

Culture To take culture as a model, an artist has to establish and continually re-establish a shifting position, which Mikhail Bakhtin saw as an “outsideness” or “extralocality” of the self. “For my participatory consciousness it [the world] is an architectonic whole, and is arrayed around me as around the singular center from which issue my acts: it locates itself with respect to me to the extent that I go out of myself in my visualization-act, thought-act and deed-act.”⁴ According to this view, the artist is simultaneously an outsider (as a subject who regards his or her own culture as an “object”, or as an “other”) and an insider (as a subject who belongs to his or her own “subject matter”, and therefore is him- or herself an “other”). For Jochen Gerz this movement between his own “outsideness” and “insideness” – the interplay of being at once present and absent – is the condition for making art, and does not necessarily result in an artwork that embodies the cultural obsession with materiality, solidity and visibility. But when it does, the work – which is most often an intersection of a poetic image (a text or a poem) and a mimetic image (a photograph) – does not have any calming or harmonizing effects. As he sceptically noted in 1976: “Culture: to know, to understand, to consume. All three are tranquilizers.”⁵

In contrast to Joseph Kosuth, who conceives of himself as an “artist-anthropologist”, as one who “attempts to obtain fluency in his own culture”⁶, Gerz is only implicitly concerned with the construction of the artist’s subjectivity in the artistic apparatus. Nor is he, like Kosuth, exclusively engaged in analyzing the role of the artist and the “language of art” in the cultural network. Despite their common commitment to critically engaged art, Kosuth and Gerz diverge at a crucial point: for the former, an artist working with his own culture is an “engaged anthropologist” (as opposed to a scientist, who is, in Kosuth’s opinion, “dis-engaged”), for the latter, one need not be an artist to be an “anthropologist”.

According to Jochen Gerz, professionalization is not *conditio sine qua non* of making art. Since the late sixties, when he was associated with the Situationist International and shared their hostility to the “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debour), he has refused to accept the notion of art as a separate, specialized activity, as “fixation on creativity, *La Grande Différence*”.⁷ Even though he himself is an artistic autodidact, he does not share Beuys’ belief that everyone can be an artist. One could say that Gerz presumes – and this is the truly utopian aspect of his (artistic) engagement – that everyone who lives in our culture (or in any culture for that matter) can act as an “anthropologist”, although he stops short of dictating what an individual should do.

In refusing to appropriate the role of the artist as a “moral example” (myth-maker, messiah or shaman) he explicitly rejects the projected images of the artist as either a “salvation figure” or a leader. On the other hand, as much as Gerz resents any kind of ideological or cultural oppression, he is equally unwilling to endorse the view that individuals (be they artists or not) are the passive victims of a given sociocultural framework.

Having moved to Paris in 1966, Jochen Gerz might have witnessed the following dialogue, which took place at the Collège de France some months after the events of 1968: – The sociologist (Lucien Goldman): In May, monsieur, we saw the débâcle of structures and of structuralism! – The psychoanalyst (Jacques Lacan): In May, monsieur, the structures themselves came down to the street!⁸

The critique of institutions and cultural structures that followed in the next decade mobilized a generation of artists who, even when they did not aim their criticism at political power, the art market, or the “channels” through which art functions, nevertheless addressed the politics of visual representation and of art-as-an-object. Part of the radicals’ position was to opt to work in places outside the art system, and the street was an area where many artists, including Gerz, enthusiastically believed during and immediately after the ‘68 that they could act as “non-collaborators” in the cultural game.

“Culture after Culture” When Gerz turned his critical eye to a concrete cultural institution, it was not a museum of art but rather one of German history that he chose. In his *EXIT/The Dachau Project* (1972-74), as well as in his public monuments done in the eighties and the nineties, several layers of meaning were superimposed: the functioning of a museum that is not an abstract organism, but a man-made cultural mechanism where the past is institutionalized as history, the double-edged process of cultural remembrance of the past, in which the production of both collective memory and collective amnesia are interwoven (a theme to which he would return in a series of photo/texts made after German unification, in 1990, entitled *Erase: the Past*); his own responsibility to relate to his country’s past and to its guilty conscience about that past; and the attempt to memorize (and therefore accept) the past, which includes in itself a certain resentment of it. Christa Wolf in her *Patterns of Childhood* describes this problem very succinctly: “It’s so much easier... to invent the past than to remember it.”⁹

The Dachau Project was installed in Berlin in 1974, and consisted of twenty sets of simple wooden tables and chairs, over each of which was suspended a dim light bulb. On each table lay a folder containing photographs the artist had taken at the Dachau Museum in 1972. The room was filled with the sound of the heavy breathing of a running man, accompanied by that of two electric typewriters. In the folder with the black-and-white photographs, Gerz mimicked the Dachau Museum’s way of representing history, with the intention of undermining the “tranquilizing” effect of the institution. The photographs show only the texts from the Dachau Museum which could be found in any museum in the world, such as: inscriptions on doors, instructions for visitors; signs for the toilets, and the ticket office; the working hours; a request for silence, a hand-written message that “A catalogue of the documentation is in preparation”, etc. Referring in his photographs only to formal aspects of the institution, Gerz intentionally bypassed its “content”, the past once it has been “museumized”, has become a petrified artifact. The construction of history, undertaken by later generations, is an enterprise in which the past is always reconstructed *backwards*.¹⁰ Gerz was dealing not with the past itself, but with the process of facing the past – work that can only be done in the *present*. Thus, the book on his project documents the reactions of visitors and the press of his work, which manifest a certain breaking down of the “moral anesthesia” and resentment to perform the “labor of mourning” (Trauerarbeit) that afflicted Germans in the postwar period¹¹, and which was analyzed by Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich in their book *The Inability to Mourn (Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern, 1967)*.

In rethinking the German past, Jochen Gerz contradicts Adorno's frequently quoted dictum about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz: "I don't believe that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz, but I do believe that since then everything has become culture."¹² He cannot therefore sympathize with the "cynical" discourse of the Sloterdijk's "dadaist turn" either. In his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Peter Sloterdijk seems to strongly repudiate National Socialism: "All culture after Auschwitz, including the penetrating critique of it, is garbage."¹³ Coming back to the fact that, as Gerz laconically stated "Auschwitz is not an Indian problem", he contends: "To regard National Socialism as barbarism is conceivable, if not comfortable, to the extent that we are not this barbarism. Jean d'Ormesson has said that there have been two revolutions in the twentieth century, the Soviet and the National Socialist. I believe that that brings us closer to the nature of this 'barbarism'. I believe that National Socialism, like every revolution was a cultural revolt, and thus a cultural phenomenon. Culture after Auschwitz accordingly means culture after culture. The Third Reich, like all 'barbarism', must be explained culturally."¹⁴

"Negative Past" In *EXIT/The Dachau Project*, as in his later photo/texts, such as *It was Easy* (1988-92) and the body of work entitled *Life after Humanism*, begun in 1989, and particularly in the monumetns he built in Harburg and Saarbrücken, Jochen Gerz was working with the "negatively charged past".¹⁵ In the post-colonial discourses elaborated in recent Anglo-Saxon historiography and art that deconstruct the Eurocentric method of writing history in the name of the "other" (whose own history is thereby usually denied), and the post-communist rewriting of history that is taking place today in eastern and central Europe, we are again witnessing efforts to deal with a "negative past" that has been suppressed "swept under the rug". Germany's relationship towards its own "negative past", which has become even more complex and complicated since unification, has created a tense situation which is "seismographed" in Gerz's public works but also in the discussions that surround them.

Gerz's monuments, both of which were collaborations explore the ways in which culture represents itself to itself. Throughout our humanist history, monuments have been commissioned as *lieux de mémoire* where collective remembrance is reified and thereby "institutionalized" with the aim of glorifying the "positive past" and, as it were, burying the "negative" one. Aware of these cultural strategies, Gerz implements his own: none of his monuments has a direct historical correlative (a concrete event or person). Neither the German title of the Harburg monument nor that of the one that today occupies the "Square of the Invisible Monument" in Saarbrücken, uses the word *Denkmal* (memorial), but rather

Mahnmal (warning monument). The latter term emerged in Germany only after the Second World War, and Gerz has chosen it for its “disturbing quality”, since it does not praise the past but simply refers to the disquieting events or processes in a culture’s past as well as its present.

The Harburg Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights, a collaboration between Jochen Gerz and his wife Esther Shalev-Gerz, an Israel sculptor, is not isolated in a park – the usual, idealistic environment for memorials – but rather is located near a subway station in Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg. The monument consists of a hollow, 12-m-high column made of galvanized steel and a lead outer casting, with a base area of 1 m², providing 48 m² of leaded surface area. In two places, a text is reproduced in seven languages (German, English, French, Turkish, Russian, Arabic and Hebrew), inviting the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the town to leave their signatures on the monument. Each time a 1,40 m-section was filled with signatures or other tracings (drawings, love messages, obscenities, stars of David, and even swastikas), etched with one of the steel-pointed styluses attached to two corners of the monument, that section of pillar was lowered into the ground. Between October 10, 1986 and the November 10, 1993, when the eighth and final lowering took place, the monument (with 60.000 to 70.000 human tracings) effectively disappeared, the only visible trace of it remaining being a simple slab in the ground. Concerning the project, Gerz stated: “Faced with Germany’s past, a number of people of my age, even those too young to remember the events, or born after the war, have always been aware of not knowing exactly how to behave. They express a sort of sublime repression of the past. Hence my idea of repressing the work of art.”¹⁶

Absence The theme of absence is continually reflected in Gerz’s artistic practice. It is manifested in his performances, photo/texts, video works, and installations variously as distance between people, invisibility, sleep, separation, travel, disappearance, memory, or the leaving of vague traces of his own presence. The reason why he works with absence, lies partly in his rethinking of his own past: “Although I didn’t participate the war, I had to feel guilty about my country’s crimes. 1968 was somehow a relief for me, because I was really there. Sometimes the fact that ‘68 has given rise to no guilt makes me wonder if it happened at all. That is a doubt I could never have about the war, even though I was just a child at the time. Perhaps this explains why the notion of absence is so important in my life and work... But the most important factor in my life remains the war I didn’t fight... Clearly, not having experienced the war is my metaphor for the origin-as-absence.”¹⁷ In Harburg, the Gerzes built a monument which initially had the form of an obelisk, the phallic shape typical of monuments erected to cultural power. Our

culture's historical obsession with verticality (which extends to the notions of ascension, transcendence and resurrection) is here literally brought down to earth, while their column, covered with the tracings of human hands, is buried and "castrated". The horizontal – the "earthly dimension" – is the dimension of the human body, and it is elaborated in *2.146 Stones – A Monument Against Racism*. This monument, which cannot be grasped by sight, is located in Saarbrücken's main square, in front of the town's castle, which was used as a Gestapo headquarters and prison during the Second World War. It is also a collaborative work, this time between Gerz and eight of his students, done while he was a guest professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Saarbrücken.

The team outlined the concept in April 1990, and the work consisted of contacting all 66 Jewish communities currently existing in Germany in order to locate and ascertain the number of Jewish cemeteries that had existed in Germany up to 1993. Starting with a list of the 1.648 officially registered cemeteries, they ended up with a total of 2.146 names. The plan was to engrave the name and number of one of the cemeteries on the underside of one of the cobblestones paving the square. The work in the square began in January 1991, and was performed in secret, illegally, under cover of darkness, at a rate of between 12 and 16 stones per night. After one year of this clandestine work, Gerz decided to make the project public. After a heated parliamentary debate, it was finally decided to accept the *Monument Against Racism*. Eventually all 2.146 of the cobblestones that had been engraved and unearthed were randomly replaced among the 8.000 stones covering the square, which was re-named the "Square of the Invisible Monument" (Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmals) and was inaugurated in May 23, 1993.

Life Having deployed for decades "absence as strategy"¹⁸, Jochen Gerz exhibits a permanent renunciation of the representational. As the world represent primarily means to substitute something absent for something present, any pictorial representation is an absence of a presence, of something or someone which is no longer there. When an artist takes a photograph, he or she takes something away from life, in the attempt to preserve the lived experience as a picture. And this picture immediately enters the traffic of pictures circulating in the cultural sphere. Like Gerz, who himself does not claim to have "clean hands", since he also makes art and thus "betrays" life, Bakhtin also made an appeal for life. In his early theoretical work, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, derived from the Kantian tradition, "the world of culture" and "the world of life" are treated as unbridgeable. Life, Bakhtin wrote in the twenties, is "a responsive, risk-taking, open act-of-becoming. Only from within my act itself, and not from some abstract 'transcription' of that act, is there any access to the 'event of existence'."¹⁹

On many occasions, Gerz appears to oppose life and culture, or nature and culture, most explicitly in the series *Blue or real life* (1988), which is based on the intersection of his texts, "stories" and photographs of nature in which the mimetic (imitative) aspect of the picture is almost completely obscured. In the installation *News to News (Ashes to Ashes)*, 1995, where paths through which life is recycled (renewal by the fire) are placed in opposition to the world of technologically distributed "truth", the same antagonism seems to be present.

The notions of culture and life, as they are conveyed in his work, might be understood as a form of the "essentialist dualism" characteristic of the western (humanist) tradition of thinking, in which paired notions such as culture/nature, subject/object, spirit/matter, mind/body, and self/other, are brought into relations of antagonism or exclusion (or even extermination). Gerz, however, does not perpetuate the image of them as the "two" that should become "one"; he deconstructs the opposition by introducing a "third" which destabilizes the recognizable and easily manipulated "two".

The third "element" for Gerz is not art itself: "Where we can't succeed, art can't hope to either. There aren't any solutions for us in this situation. Art can only bring the challenge back to people."²⁰ The "third" is the individual, viewer, or casual passer-by, who discussed the project and left her or his signature, message, or even swastika on *The Harburg Monument against Fascism*. Without the citizen's or visitor's decision to leave a trace on or even to direct violence against the tabula rasa of the obelisk, the monument would still be above the ground. In dealing with both culture and life – and finally art – Jochen Gerz expects us to confront them with vigilance, to act in a space about which Michel de Certeau wrote: "Ethics is articulated through effective operations, and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do."²¹

Bojana Pejic
Berlin, March 1995

- ¹ Pierre Nora: *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, „Representations“ No. 6, Spring 1989, p. 19; Quoted after: James Young: *The Counter-Monument: Memory against itself in Germany Today*, in: J. T. Mitchel (ed.) *Art and the Public Space*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 77.
- ² Jochen Gerz, in: Jean-François Chevrier: *Jochen Gerz - Trafic d'origine et images de paix* (an interview), „Galleries Magazine“, No. 31, June/July 1989, p. 70.
- ³ Linda Hutcheon: *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London/New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 7.
- ⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Mathew Roberts: *Poetics Hermeneutics Dialogistics: Bakhtin and Paul de Man*, in: G. S. Morson, C. Emerson (eds.): *Rethinking Bakhtin*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1989, p. 122.
- ⁵ Jochen Gerz, in: *The Centaur's difficulty when dismounting the horse*, München, Kunstraum München, 1976, p. 90.
- ⁶ Joseph Kosuth: *The artist as anthropologist*, in: J. Kosuth: *Art After Philosophy and After*. (Collected Writings, 1966-1990), Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1991, p. 120.
- ⁷ Jochen Gerz: *On Art # 1*, in: *Von der Kunst/ De l'art*, Bielefeld, AQ Verlag Dudweiler, Texte Verlag Karl Kerber, 1985.
- ⁸ René Lourau: *Auto-dissolution des avant-gardes*, Paris, Edition Galilée, 1980, p. 15.
- ⁹ Christa Wolf: *Patterns of the Childhood*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1980, p. 153.
- ¹⁰ cf. Janet Abu-Lughod: *On the remaking of history: How to reinvent the past*, in: Barbara Kruger, Phil Mariani (eds.): *Remaking History*, Seattle, Bay Press/ Dia Art Foundation, 1989, p. 111-130.
- ¹¹ cf. Ian Buruma: *The Wages of Guilt (Memories of War in Germany and Japan)*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994.
- ¹² Jochen Gerz, in: Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalev-Gerz: *The Harburg Monument against Fascism*, Ostfildern, Hatje, 1994, p. 69.
- ¹³ Peter Sloterdijk: *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 87.
- ¹⁴ Jochen Gerz, in: *Bestellungen beim Ober (Kultur nach Auschwitz)*, Conference at the Adorno-Symposium, Berlin, November 5, 1989. Published in: *Das unerhört Moderne*, Lüneburg, zu Klampen Verlag, 1990, p. 237.
- ¹⁵ Jochen Gerz, in: Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Gerard Wajeman: *Jochen Gerz - Invisible Monument*, in: „Art Press“, April 1993, p. E3.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Jochen Gerz, in: Jean-François Chevrier, op. cit., p. 69.
- ¹⁸ cf. Bojana Pejić: *Art ex absentia - Human Absence in Art*, „Artforum“, vol. XXVII, No. 8, April 1990, p. 144-150.
- ¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin: *K filozofii postupka (Towards a Philosophy of the Act)*, in: *Filozofija i sociologija nauki i tehniki*, Moscow, Nauka, 1986, p.124. Quoted after: G. S. Morson and C. Emerson (eds.): *Rethinking Bakhtin*, op. cit., p. 121.
- ²⁰ Jochen Gerz, in: Jochen Gerz, Esther Shalev-Gerz: *The Harburg Monument against Fascism*, op. cit., p. 25.
- ²¹ Michel de Certeau: *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 199. Quoted after Edith Wyschogrod: *Saints and Postmodernism (Revisioning Moral Philosophy)*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 53.



Robert Rauschenberg: Works on Paper / The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation