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Discuss the evolution and role of the monument in the light of recent debate on history and memory in relation to Germany since the Second World War.

#### Introduction

For over fifty years cultural and art historians have been debating the function of the monument. Germany's unique post-war position has seen artists and monumentmakers convert aspects of these debates into works that challenge the very notion of traditional monuments while still working in the realms of memory and history. In this essay we will look at a selection of contemporary attitudes towards memory, particularly the relationship between personal memories and documented history. An outline of the journey from traditional monuments, with their initial role as reminders of national and personal heroism, to counter-monuments in Germany, will lead us to the on-going debate that challenges the adequacy of traditional monuments to deal with the questions of remembering and forgetting in the face of genocides on the scale of the Nazi Holocaust. Seeking new ways of transferring memory from the physical monument to the consciousness of the people themselves are artists such as Horst Hoheisel, Jochen & Esther Gerz, Norbert Radermacher, and Gunther Demnig. By looking at examples of their work I would like to explore the ideas behind counter-monuments and the complex and sensitive discussions they arouse.

## Memory

The interest in memory of the 1980s and '90s is not new, in fact the entanglement of memory and imagination has been a persistent theme of Western philosophy ever since the Greek philosophers. In the realm of Cultural Studies, recent work on memory has

identified a number of different definitions. Individual memory has never been disputed but back in the 1920s Maurice Halbwachs introduced the idea that memory is also a social phenomenon. This notion of a 'collective memory' disappeared with his death in 1945 but in the 1980s renewed interest raised it to become a fundamental part of memory studies both in Germany and internationally. Pierre Nora, a French historian and editor, took up Halbwach's legacy in his book 'Lieux de Memoire' (Sites of memory) and developed a broader concept of memory that embraced physical places, people, works of art, dates and events as tangible forms for collective memories. In 2001 a German equivalent to Nora's book came out – Deutsche Erinnerungsorte – which managed to portray Germany's story as a collection of diverse accounts rather than a single linear story.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1980s Jan and Aleida Assmann elaborated the ideas of collective memory to form what is today the dominant theory of memory in Germany. They divided collective memory into two further distinctions: 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory'<sup>2</sup>. Similar to the notion of 'embodied memory'<sup>3</sup>, communicative memory is formed by the recollections of individuals that are passed down in informal, oral conversations from generation to generation. Their lifespan is generally three generations before they disappear. Cultural memory or 'externalised'<sup>4</sup> memory on the other hand, hands down a collection of references to the past through images, monuments, days of remembrance, writings and other structures, which together create a shared memory for a whole society which in turn becomes the basis of history lessons and thereby forms a shared identity for a certain group. Cultural memory is now divided into two further categories –

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Jansen, J (2008)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jansen, J (2008)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Assmann, A. (2006)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Assmann, A. (2006)

'functional memory' and 'storage memory' - revealing one of the main problems that we are faced with today in trying to create accurate pictures of our pasts. Functional memory is the actively used part of the cultural memory - that which makes up a group's sense of their history. To Nietzsche this is largely "monumental history" based on the heroic achievements of that group and the creation of a sense of the enemy. However, it evokes only part of a bigger picture, for storage memory is the disordered data that has not yet been evaluated and whose meaning has not yet been determined or given a place in history. Once it emerges and finds a place in the present, it has the power potentially to change the way in which we perceive whole episodes of history, thus challenging the former view of history being a series of fixed events distanced from the present by linear time.

In his hugely important recent book 'Memory, History and Forgetting' the French author Paul Ricoeur questions why some events are remembered and others forgotten. Could it be that history "overly remembers" some events while excessively forgetting others? He looks closely at the "reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting, showing how it affects both the perception of historical experience and the production of historical narrative."8 In such cases as Germany's task of coming to terms with the Holocaust, Ricoeur introduces the idea of an 'appeased memory'9 which is linked to forgiveness, a balance perhaps between remembering and forgetting. For some people this would still be an unacceptable amnesty but Ricoeur reassures that "The appeased

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jansen, J. (2008)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Nietsche quoted in Young (1999) <sup>7</sup> Evans, M. (2005) p.81

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> University of Chicago Press (2004)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ricoeur quoted in Antohi, S. (2003) p.11

memory does not seek to forget the evil suffered or committed. It seeks rather to speak of it without anger."<sup>10</sup>

## Memorials: from monuments to counter-monuments in Germany

Traditionally monuments were erected by the victors in remembrance of the heroic deeds and achievements of a nation and its people. Crossing the realms of art, history and politics they were generally large, centrally-placed constructions designed to anchor positive aspects of history in material form for all generations to come. (See Fig. 1) They were a nation's sense of pride made manifest, like punctuation marks in its history, and they aimed to represent a collective view on historical events, dictating their meaning to viewers whose own personal reflection was not encouraged.



Fig. 1 Duke of Wellington's Memorial, Hyde Park, 1846

For post-war Germans, the scale of the Nazi genocide made any such memorial impossible to even contemplate. In the 1950s the initial focus was on physically re-

Antohi, Sorin. (2003) Memory, History, Forgiveness: A dialogue Between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi. Pg 9-11

building their broken land and for several decades the older generations of both perpetrators and victims couldn't speak about their experiences. Aleida Assmann describes how trauma defers memory creating a collective amnesia and indeed it wasn't until the 1980s that Holocaust victims were able to give voice to their painful memories and ordinary Germans reluctantly faced themselves to assess the degree of their own, or their parents', culpability for what had happened. In his best-selling study "Opa war kein Nazi" (Grandpa was no Nazi) (2002), Harald Welzer discovered that most Germans preferred to see themselves as victims or resistors of the Nazi regime, but while there was an argument for thoughtfully forgetting and moving on, the eyes of the world were on them, constantly reminding them of the crimes they had perpetrated and demanding an appropriate response.

One such response to deal with the recent past was Käthe Kollwitz's 1993 'Monument to the Victims of War and Tyranny' in the New Guard in Berlin. (See Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 Käthe Kollwitz: Monument to the Victims of War and Tyranny 1993. Bronze. Unter den Linden, Berlin.

With its familiar bulky, bronze forms of a mother holding her dead son while being shone or rained upon through a circular aperture in the ceiling, it is both beautiful and moving. Its aim was not to ennoble the suffering to the point of justifying it as with many previous war monuments, but to give expression to universal grief and reconciliation. However, it was criticised for evading the bigger, more specific and more painful issue of the genocide of millions of Jews and it fell into the category of traditional monument that the art historian Rosalind Krauss (1988) saw as motioning endlessly to itself, unable to refer to anything other than itself. Such monuments, instead of inspiring memory seem to seal memory off from awareness. Germany's 'Jewish question' became a general, two-fold memorial question. As James Young (1993), the American English and Judaic Studies scholar who coined the term 'counter-monument' in the 1990s, put it: "How does a nation of former persecutors mourn its victims? How does a nation like Germany rebuild itself as a new and just state on the bedrock memory of its crimes?"

Since the 1980s, a new generation of artists and monument makers has been rising to this challenge, questioning the very notion of a monument – its permanence, its offer of solace, its displaced memory and its failure to keep history alive. They criticize the basis of an "enormous pedestal with something on it presuming to tell people what they ought to think" and thereby turning viewers into passive spectators. While honouring their moral duty to remember, they show a deep distrust of traditional monument forms not only because such forms have associations with the Nazis but also because they seem to replace an individual's inner necessity to remember for him/herself by offering a place

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Young, J.E. 1999

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Young, J.E. 1993

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Young, J.E. 1992 p.274

of redemption where uncomfortable memories can exist without interfering with everyday life. This new generation asks whether the erection of a monument should be about recording interpreted, and often one-sided history or prompting ongoing reflection. In this way these artists are trying to create monuments that resist their very essence of monumentality.

# Examples of counter-memorials as artists' solutions to the German memorial problem

In 1987 the artist Sol Lewitt installed a large block of black stones in the middle of the plaza in front of the Münster Palace and dedicated it to "the missing Jews" of Münster. The following year, covered in graffiti and amidst complaints from citizens and university administrators whose parking was obstructed, *Black Form* was demolished leaving behind an absent monument commemorating an absent people. Eight months later, during commemorations of Kristallnacht, the city council asked Lewitt to re-make his piece. Word of this instantly rekindled the debate: How do you "commemorate the Holocaust without seeming to violate contemporary spaces?" (See Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 Sol Lewitt: Black Form: Memorial to the missing Jews. 1987

Now in Hamburg-Altona

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Young, J.E. (1992) p. 267-268

For some artists this question has become central to their work. Horst Hoheisel's work on absence and memory makes him one of the leading artists of the counter-monument movement. His bold proposal to "blow up the Brandenburg Gate, grind its stone to dust, sprinkle the remains over its former site and then cover the entire memorial area with granite plates" 15 illustrates the belief that an absent monument, a negative form, would recall the absent people better than the presence of any traditional memorial. The literal destruction of a landmark relating to Prussian might would create a space in which to remember the victims of such a might. This inversion of a nation's cultural memory was naturally rejected but it inspired the idea that the perpetual debate on the appropriate memorial was possibly the best way to keep it alive in the memory.

In 1987 the city of Kassel invited Hoheisel to create a piece to commemorate the destroyed fountain – Aschrott-Brunnen – in the City Hall Square. The original fountain (see Fig. 4), donated to the city in 1908 by the Jewish entrepreneur Sigmund Aschrott, had been condemned by the Nazis as the "Jew's Fountain" and demolished in 1938, leaving an empty basin as sole witness to its former existence. As people's memories of the fountain's fate began to fade, Hoheisel designed a "negative form monument" of that which had been. (see Fig. 4) In his own words:

"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." (See Fig. 5)

# He continues:

"The sunken fountain is not the memorial at all. 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 there is the memorial to be found"<sup>17</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Young, J.E. (1999) p.1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Hoheisel, quoted in Young, J.E. (1993) p.2 <sup>17</sup> Hoheisel, quoted in Young, J.E. (1999) p.5



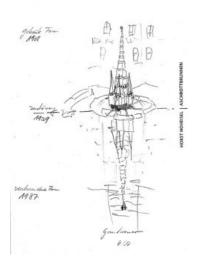




Fig. 4 The original Aschrottbrunnen Fountain in front of Kassel City Hall, 1908

Fig.5 Horst Hoheisel's drawing of inversion  $\,$  Fig.6 Installing the inverted fountain of fountain 1987



Fig. 7 Completion of installation of inverted fountain



Fig. 8 The completed counter-memorial

Hoheisel inverted the exact shape of the original fountain into the ground (see Figs. 6, 7 and 8) creating "a funnel into whose darkness water runs down." He suggests: "With the running water our thoughts can be drawn into the depths of history and there perhaps we will encounter feelings of loss, of a disturbed place, of lost form." For Hoheisel, the best way to remember an absence is by reproducing it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Hoheisel quoted in Young, J.E. (1993) p.2

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Hoheisel quoted in Young, J.E. (1999) p.5

For Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz the concept of a disappearing monument assures that the burden of a collective memory lies within the visitors rather than the monument. Their 1986-1993 Harburg Memorial has come to be one of the landmarks in contemporary memorial work and achieves all the aims underlying counter-monuments: not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored but to demand interaction. In response to the City of Hamburg's request for a "Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights" the two artists built a twelve meter high, one meter square stele made of hollow aluminium and plated with soft lead. Each year it was to be lowered 1.5m into the ground until it disappeared altogether. At its base a temporary inscription in seven languages read:

"We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end it is only we ourselves who can rise against injustice."



Fig. 9 a) 2nd Lowering, October 1988



b) 5<sup>th</sup> Lowering, December 1990



c) 7<sup>th</sup> Lowering, November 1992

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 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 20}$  J & E Gerz quoted in Young, J.E. (1992) p.274-6





d) A local resident adding her name

e) 8<sup>th</sup> and final Lowering, November 1993

This is indeed what happened (see Fig. 9a-e) but where the artists had hoped for rows and rows of neatly inscribed signatures, 60,000 visible marks were made on the surface ranging from signatures, illegible scribbles and love hearts to swastikas and xenophobic chants of "Ausländer raus!" directed at the contemporary foreign guests. The surface was seen to be a reflection of the mood in the city with the local newspaper reporting:

"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."<sup>21</sup>

The artists had deliberately created an eyesore, rejecting the city of Hamburg's offer of a park and instead choosing a "normal, uglyish place" as their preferred location. So what were people responding to? Was the defacement of the column revealing subconscious Nazi-sympathies or a natural reaction by already shamed people to the placement of an ugly design in an already dejected suburb? Were some of the marks also expressions of a sense of helplessness in trying to establish a new identity as Germans who either had no intention of repeating the past or who had not been

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Young, J.E. (1992) p.283

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> J & E Gerz quoted in Young, J.E. (1992) p.274

involved in it in the first place? And that leads to the very important questions: to what extent is it acceptable to insist on keeping the collective memory as perpetrator alive and open, particularly for younger generations, without offering the possibility of making restitution? And when do you consider Germany's "Vergangenheitsbewältigung"<sup>23</sup> (dealing with the past) complete or successful?

In a public speech in 1998 the prize-winning German novelist Martin Walser (1998), publically condemned Germany's "Holocaust industry" criticised "monumentalization" and "ceaseless presentation of our shame" noticing that the effect it had on him was to begin to look away. "Take all the towns in the world ... and check whether in any of these towns there is a memorial of national ignominy. I have never seen such."24 However, the prevalent attitude was captured by Bern Ulrich in Die Zeit magazine:

"Auschwitz was a singular, a German crime; Germany was liberated; the vounger generations must assume responsibility for the Holocaust; freedom lies for us not in suppression but in remembrance; and no one can step outside his own shadow."25

To Ulrich the danger no longer exists that the memory of Auschwitz will be suppressed, "but rather that one looks at it yet feels no pain ..." The Gerzes felt that the best way to avoid this happening was to deny art its physical body and instead to let the meaning of an artwork live on long after it has disappeared.

"Art, in its conspicuousness, in its recognisability, is an indication of failure. 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"27

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Freimüller, T. (2007)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Wikipedia: Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Hawel (2007)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Hawel (2007)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> J & E Gerz quoted in Young, J.E. (1993) p.278

Pierre Nora had said "The less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs" but James Young (1993) suggests that the obverse might also be true and "the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorised forms, the less it is experienced internally". All point to the danger of feeling ourselves relieved of the obligation to remember by the presence of a monument as a form of *Wiedergutmachung* (making good) without the effort involved in really remembering.

Pierre Nora's concept of *memory sites* is developed by Norbert Radermacher's memorial in the Neukölln district of Berlin where an unassuming sports ground is literally bathed in memories of its own past. Passers-by trigger a high-intensity slide projection of written text relaying details of the former concentration camp located there. At first illegible on the crowns of trees, it travels over the wire fence surrounding the former camp and finally onto the pavement where one can read it quite clearly. It remains for one minute then fades out and disappears.<sup>29</sup> (See Fig.10)

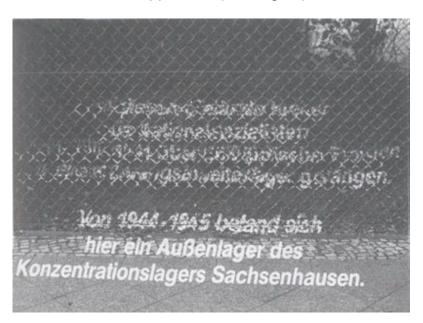


Fig. 10 Norbert Radermacher's counter-memorial conceived in 1989 and installed in the Neukolln district in Berlin, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Young, J.E. (1993) p.285

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Nora, quoted in Young, J.E. (1993) p.273

As an additional component of the work, Radermacher invited schoolchildren to research the area and add texts of their findings to the projections. This participatory aspect evokes the experience of a more personal, communicative memory. The site alone cannot remember. It is the projections of memory by the visitors into the space that make it a memorial, and even those who deliberately try to avoid triggering the projection first have to remember the very memory that they want to forget.

Gunter Demnig's "Stolpersteine" (Stumbling stones) – small  $10 \times 10 \text{ cm}$  brass plaques engraved with names and information relating to individual victims of the Nazi regime and inlaid into the pavements in front of buildings where these people last lived – have become one of the most popular ways for German towns to remember the victims of their Nazi past. (See Figs.11a-b)



Fig 11a Gunther Demnig. Stolpersteine, Cologne 2007



Fig11b

Hans Marcus lived here Born 1892 Deported 1941 Riga Fate unknown

School classes, church congregations, local history societies have started researching personal data and laying stones, with sponsors covering the €95 costs of each stone. By placing the plaques quite literally on modern doorsteps, Demnig creates a powerful relationship between ordinary people now and ordinary people then. Though tiny in

scale and intended to be trodden on, the Stolpersteine are by no means overlooked. The brass is kept polished by the act of people walking on them and thereby the memory is kept alive and visible. They glint in the sunlight and stop you in your tracks. To read the inscriptions, you have to bend over – almost an act of humility in tribute to the victims – and it is amazingly powerful to be transported out of your present into a past that suddenly feels extremely close. You get a sense of the neighbours that all these people once were and realise that the horror of the concentration camps began in the houses that now stand innocently concealing their tragic histories. Started in Cologne, this simple concept of Stolpersteine has spread across German cities and by 2008 Demnig had laid some 15,000 stones in 345 towns. And still the idea spreads, with people getting actively involved in cities throughout Europe.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

In its ever-changing form the counter-monument moves with time, reflecting the evolving nature of memory and refusing to become old, irrelevant and part of the very history it is trying to remember or avoid. History changes as our perception of it changes and counter-monuments, by interacting with contemporary life, offer viewers meaning and a connection to the past slumbering invisibly behind the facades of their present. Germany has taken its memorial work very seriously, despite a natural, albeit hidden, instinct to want to forget. In the process the personal losses, struggles and war-inflicted sufferings of the ordinary German people have been largely over-shadowed by the documented facts and figures of what could now be seen as a case of Ricoeur's overly-remembered history. As we have seen, perpetual irresolution is one way of assuring a process of remembering. However, with the emergence of a new generation of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Scheffer, I. (2007)

Germans with no direct communicative memories of the war, a new approach to the past will have to be developed. Ricoeur suggests forgiveness and an 'appeased memory' as a way forward. He is not talking about the forgiving of others but the asking of forgiveness as a personal not a juridical act. And in this way he is offering viewers of the many counter-monuments all over Germany and beyond the possibility of restitution that enables people to remember more fully.

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# **Illustrations**

Fig. 1 Duke of Wellington's Memorial, Hyde Park. [online] Available from: http://www.clash-of-steel.co.uk/gallery/pages/view entry.php?image number=228 [Accessed on 18 January 2009] Fig. 2 Käthe Kollwitz: Monument to the Victims of War and Tyranny (1993) Angela Findlay's photo archive Fig. 3 Sol Lewitt: Black Form – Dedicated to the missing Jews (1989) [online] Available from: http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//blackform.html [Accessed on 04 November 2008] Fig. 4 - 8Horst Hoheisel: Aschrottbrunnen, Kassel. (1987) Taken from James Young: Horst Hoheisel's Counter-memory of the Holocaust: The End of the Monument. [online] Available from: http://www.chqs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/zermahlene.html [Accessed on 23 January 2009] J & E Gerz: The Harburg Memorial, Hamburg (1986-1993) Fig. 9a – e Taken from Struan Robertson's *Harburg Anti-Fascist Memorial*. [online] Available from: <a href="http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//antifascist.html">http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//antifascist.html</a> [Accessed 04 November 2008] Fig. 10 Norbert Radermacher: Neukölln Memorial, Berlin (1994). [online] Available from: http://imaginarymuseum.org/MHV/PZImhv/YoungHolocaust1994.html [Accessed on 02 February 2009] Fig. 11 Gunther Demnig: Stolpersteine, Cologne (2004)

Angela Findlay's photo archive