**Experience and Remembrance at Berlin's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe***

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**Abstract:**
The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, unveiled in Berlin in 2005, is the first national monument to the Holocaust erected in Germany with the political and financial support of the State. A gigantic field of 2,711 rectangular stelae, the memorial is designed as a grid in which visitors wander, get lost, and experience a sense of uneasiness and oppression. The memorial is about feeling, not thinking; about today, not yesterday. As architect Peter Eisenman argues, "we can only know the past through its manifestation in the present."
The success of this memorial depends on engaging visitors in an experience of habitual traumatic memory through the mediation of their full active body. Felt memory in this case occurs through movement, sound, smell, temperature, touch, and breath, rather than through sight and cognition. At the same time, this memorial as a public and social place invites various performances and caters to multiple audiences, but also opens it up to unauthorized and inappropriate activities that are at odds with its central purpose of Holocaust remembrance.
This paper examines the performance of affective memory in relation to these and other issues, including architectural expressions of absence, embodied memorial practices, and thanotourism. I argue that by trying to do too many things in an environment whose protocols are unclear, this memorial fails to perform memory as effectively as it might.

**Essay:**
The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, designed by American architect Peter Eisenman and unveiled in Berlin in 2005, consists of a gigantic field of 2,711 rectangular stelae of different heights, and an underground Information Centre, which presents an exhibit about the Holocaust. It is the first national monument to the Holocaust erected in Germany with the political and financial support of the Federal State.

This memorial has been studied extensively, but with little attention to its life after completion. This article analyzes the monument as a site of embodied performances. The great potential of Eisenman's design was to engage visitors in Holocaust remembrance through somatic and kinesthetic experiences. By looking at the tensions between architecture, commemorative practices, political and economic agendas, and social behavior, I argue that the memorial fails to perform remembrance but succeeds as a public artwork. Unexpectedly, the modest and didactic Information Centre generates an emotional response from visitors, and involuntarily becomes the site of remembrance.

The immense scope of the Holocaust precludes any attempt to record each individual life in a single monument. The design does not shy away from being monumental, but does not attempt to individualize each death. The stelae are abstract, and do not bear a name or any reference to the Holocaust. To many critics, the arbitrary location of the memorial diminishes its commemorative power. The location is neither the site of Hitler's chancellery nor of its bunkers, but rather a former no-man's land in the old ministerial

gardens. What matters is the memorial's symbolic position and its integration in the urban landscape of Berlin. The first stelae, at ground level, look like a natural continuation of the sidewalk. There is no separation between the street and the memorial, which seems to grow from and recess into the asphalt. The fact that the field of stelae is not site-specific and that it lacks a focal point reflects the fact that perpetrators and victims are everywhere in the city; they are ambient.

Without a space dedicated to gatherings, the memorial prevents any ceremonial use. It is an 'anti-commemorative' memorial both for collective and individual purposes. Architecture blurs the lines. The slabs are similar to tombstones, and the accumulation of stelae mindful of a cemetery. Visitors are confused, and some act as if in a cemetery. They walk slowly until they find an evocative pillar and leave an object according to their spiritual tradition: red candles with engraved crosses, stones, or flowers. The presence of objects associated with mourning and remembrance, along with the silent and somber attitude of these visitors clearly identify the field of stelae as a memorial. However, the material traces they leave behind are quickly removed by the housekeeping staff; as if the stelae were to be admired as an artwork, but not to be used as a memorial. Traditionally, Western monuments have celebrated military heroes, and triumphs. However, dictatorships and crimes against civilians have challenged these architectural and political conventions. The Holocaust shifted commemorative practices, moving the focus from soldiers to civilians; memorial design turned to increased abstraction. Self-indicting monuments – monuments approved and funded by a state to commemorate the victims of a past regime – are a relatively new occurrence. After numerous attempts to memorialize the Holocaust and years of controversy over a national memorial, an international jury selected Peter Eisenman's project in 1998. On 25 June 1999, the Parliament narrowly passed a resolution that stated, 'The Federal Republic of Germany will erect a memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe'.[i]

What kind of memorial? The aftermath of the Holocaust has become paradigmatic of the difficulty of translating the memory of a tragedy into a memorial. This challenge has inspired new approaches to memorial architecture, such as the 'counter-monuments' in the 1980s. James Young describes their goal as '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 passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification'.[ii]

The Berlin Holocaust memorial focuses on the memorial process itself. Peter Eisenman states,

> The project suggests that when a supposedly rational and ordered system grows too large and out of proportion to its intended purpose, it in fact loses touch with human reason. It then begins to reveal the innate disturbances and potential for chaos in all systems of seeming order, the idea that all closed systems of a closed order are bound to fail.[iii]

In Eisenman's perspective, the memorial is a rendition of a rigid system that starts off with a purpose of law and order, but turns into a killing monster; as such, it resists all redemptory ideals. However, the field of stelae seems to point both to the perpetrators and the victims. While the grid refers to the Nazi regime and its systematized murder plan, the tombstone-like stelae conjure up the image of a cemetery and of innumerable victims. Seen from a distance, the field of stelae seems to be swallowing and spitting out people, as they penetrate the memorial, disappear in the unknown, only to reappear unexpectedly in a different corner. In contrast to other memorials dedicated either to Holocaust victims or to the crimes of the perpetrators, the field of stelae might attempt to bring both perpetrators and victims into the same space. In his design, Eisenman reinstates the agent that is missing in the name of the memorial.

Counter-monuments engage visitors in walking, touching and other embodied experiences, which Thomas Csordas describes as 'ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others'.[iv] Edward Casey applied the embodied perspective to the study of memory, and showed how the body was 'at once a transmitter of the inheritance of the external world and itself an inheritance for perception in the present'.[v] The architecture of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* is conducive to multi-sensory experiences that engage not only sight, but also movement, touch, body temperature, hearing, and smell in remembering the victims of a tragedy. Unfortunately, the great potential for a somatic experience of memory is simultaneously acknowledged and rejected by the architect himself.

Inside the field of stelae, the narrowness of the path, the angular architecture, the cold and gray stone along with the immensity of the site create a physical sensation of confinement, claustrophobia, threat, and disorientation. Through walking, the living bodies may experience the memory of the victims, both by somatically experiencing a sense of disorientation, discomfort and by feeling in their own bodies the absence created by the genocide. Eisenman's architecture does not aim at recreating the confined atmosphere of a concentration camp; rather, it invites visitors to experience the absence caused by the Holocaust and think about their role as carriers of memory. This memorial architecture engages them in both feeling the void and filling the void. However, the corporeal understanding of absence is ephemeral. Visitors are constantly interrupted in their peripatetic experience; they have to adjust their pace and breathing as the terrain slopes up and down, often steeply; the pavement can be wet, slippery, icy and requiring caution; visitors often have to stop at a stelae corner to avoid colliding with another visitor hidden by a high stela.

The aural architecture muffles all sounds coming from the surrounding traffic, creating an eerie atmosphere that adds to the discomfort. However, the quiet is constantly interrupted by shouts, laughter, and loud conversations. In contrast, an audible angst is palpable in the Information Centre, where sobs, sniffing and other non-verbal sounds can be heard throughout the exhibition, and especially in the room of names, the only room with sound. There, the recitation of names and short biographies of Holocaust victims is akin to other mourning rites during which names of the deceased are read. The room-filling volume and grave tone of the voices that list the dead create a solemn sonic experience

that gives a name and identity to a handful of Holocaust victims. The effect on visitors is immediately perceptible. One name calls for another name; many visitors are mesmerized by the voice that gives substance to a ghost or a statistic.

The Information Centre is deceptively powerful. The light is dim; replicas of children's letters, pictures and other personal testimonies of truncated lives are soberly and didactically displayed, but they seem to stimulate unexpected emotions. The exhibition, first rejected by Eisenman, was supposed to be as little intrusive as possible, so that visitors would experience the outdoors monument in its full power. Yet, the Information Centre fulfills the potential of embodied memory more than the field of stelae. In the confined underground space punctuated with stelae rising from the floor and coffered on the ceiling, discomfort is visible; some visitors express their distress through bodily reactions: they cry, cling to each other, and pause in silence. It is perhaps the part of the memorial in which the Holocaust is unequivocally present, and in which visitors respond emotionally to corporeal experiences, and lose their innocence about the reality of the Holocaust. In the field of stelae, they are not in a clearly identified space. As they walk down to the underground exhibit, they are confronted with a Holocaust museum and its explicit panels. The field of stelae and the Information Centre complete each other, they do not compete against each other. However, with all the emphasis put on the huge monument above ground, the impact of affective memory in the underground exhibit has been downplayed, if not ignored. In an unexpected reversal, the Information Centre is a site of Holocaust remembrance, while the field of stelae expresses the ephemeral and fragile nature of memory as it is experienced in the present.

The field of stelae evokes the remembrance process, a step removed from actual remembrance of the Holocaust itself. It stands in a different timeframe, as Peter Eisenman argues: 'In this monument […] there is no nostalgia, no memory of the past, only the living memory of the individual experience. Here we can only know the past through its manifestation in the present'.[vi] Eisenman means that the memorial is neither a mirror of Holocaust history, nor an embellished reminder of life before the catastrophe. As such, the field of stelae questions the remembrance process and its idealizing powers. Eisenman cannot ignore the past, but he looks at a raw past, a gut feeling still untouched by nostalgia and regret. The cemetery-like field of stelae generates an uncomfortable sentiment: are we in a cemetery with dead people under ground, or in an artistic construct? What is this uncanny feeling of disorientation in a grid that seems rationally mapped? Eisenman is less interested in the victims than in today's visitors as they relate to those victims; less in the past than in its fragile expression in the present.

The corporeal engagement with the memorial leads to contrasted experiences of memory; it also affects the behavior of visitors and the identity of the memorial. Are we still in a site of contemplation and meditation? Is this monument only a site of memory, or is it equally an artwork that can attract tourists and visitors looking for leisurely activities?

'The Holocaust memorial has become a tourist magnet', observed Uwe Neumärker, managing director of the memorial, in May 2006. One year after its opening, the memorial had attracted 3.5 million visitors. More accurately, throughout the years of

construction, tourism has been part of the memorial and everything from safety issues to gift shop, cloakroom, food stands, guided tours, bus parking, and earned income has been factored into consideration. Tourism is an industry usually dedicated to leisure, time out of time, and escape. Its goal is to market attractions and pleasurable experiences rather than moral uplift. Marketing a memorial requires a delicate negotiation between staying true to the serious purpose of the memorial and promoting it as an attractive destination that repairs the image of a country burdened with negative history. Memorial executives and tourism professionals target different market segments – visitors with a connection to the events the tragedy, and those without – and different kinds of tourism, in particular thanatourism.

A.V. Seaton defines thanatourism as 'travelling to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death'.[vii] Germany's challenge lies in the promotion of the memorial to tourists connected to the victims, tourists connected to the perpetrators, and tourists with no connection to the Holocaust at all.

How does the country of perpetrators attract descendants of victims to a memorial built on the victims' behalf? One example of a state-sponsored marketing tool is the brochure *Germany for the Jewish Traveler,* published in 1997 by the German National Tourist Office, and addressed to American Jews. It simultaneously promotes and sanitizes Holocaust memory in its effort to attract Jews who have a deep aversion to Germany, but who might be willing to make a Holocaust-themed trip. Jews participating in 'negative sightseeing tours of the sites of destruction of European Jewry'[viii] respond to the marketing by the German Tourism Office or by Jewish heritage travel agents who equally exploit the Holocaust; they both reaffirm the roles of victims and perpetrators, in a repeated performance of thanatourism.

The marketing effort for the memorial is different when it targets non-Jewish German tourists who account for the majority of visitors; it has to reconcile the leisure appeal and convenience of a tourist attraction with the self-indicting nature of the site. The centrality of the Holocaust memorial puts it directly in the tourist's path. In 2006, a building was added next to the memorial, providing a beer garden, an ice-cream parlor, and a souvenir store. This gift shop offers books, postcards, and posters that show aestheticized views of the empty field of stelae, such as close-ups, aerial views, by night, under the snow, from spectacular angles. Without people, these stelae look like artwork. Those few images that include people show everyday activities – a man with his briefcase, someone speaking on a cell phone – that clash with the reverence that is expected at memorial sites.

The memorial is marketed as an aesthetic object and a public space for leisure activities, with the field of stelae as the main focus of promotional efforts. Its size and location, its abstraction and artistic value, its mystery and novelty are exploited to add to its allure, and contribute to the attractiveness of the site as a tourism destination. Without the Information Centre and the guides, this monument would arguably not fulfill its mission as a Holocaust memorial. Rather, the effort to make the field of stelae a convenient and comfortable space help non-Jewish German visitors to disidentify with the perpetrators,

and offer them the same detached and neutral entry point as tourists who have no connection to the Holocaust at all.

Eisenman rejected all signs that would indicate the name, or purpose of the site. The architecture invites conflicting attitudes: visitors are torn between their knowledge and their spontaneous needs, between showing appropriate respect in a memorial and succumbing to the temptation of jumping on the stelae to experience a moment of pleasure. This goes against traditional thinking that memorials induce respect by their mere function. Eisenman's reaction to people jumping was positive; he praised the appropriation and daily use of the memorial by Berliners. There are rules of conduct, but the signs are easily overlooked and the guards often overwhelmed. The permissive attitude in the field of stelae is validated by the architect, the highest political authorities, and the management, who do not address how such behavior undermines efforts of coming to terms with Germany's Nazi past. Rather, it suggests political disengagement from memory or mature acknowledgement of past crimes. The fundamental contradiction between commemoration and play and freedom is at the heart of this memorial. As a public space and public artwork, the memorial may be ideally open for multiple interpretations, but visitor behavior indicates how the ambiguous design threatens the commemorative raison d'être of the memorial.

If only the field of stelae is experienced, visitors do not come to grips with the Holocaust. However, the Information Centre is relatively small and its access is not obvious. Together, the field of stelae and Information Centre offer an original and moving experience of Holocaust memory, but not separately. According to a survey[ix] conducted in 2006 among high school students, 43 percent said that they were moved by what they saw, and 66 percent were more impressed by the Information Centre than by the field of stelae.

The memorial tries to do many things, perhaps too many things. Even the best memorial can become a place to deposit memory, if the moral burden of remembering is delegated to the monument rather than an active engagement with memory in the present. It is for this reason that James Young argued that discussion about the memorial was in fact a memorial itself.[x] To this day, the memorial is a conversation topic: it intrigues and annoys; it generates misbehavior, pride, or embarrassment. Being so contingent, memorials depend for their success on sensitivity to their immediate and ramified contexts. They must address the relationship of past and present, perpetrators and victims, state and citizens, while never losing site of their core mission: commemoration.

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Notes

[i] See http://www.holocaust-mahnmal.de/en/thememorial/history/resolution

[ii] J. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993), p. 30.

[iii] P. Eisenman, 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', in *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin, 2005), pp. 10-13.

[iv] T. Csordas, 'Somatic Modes of Attention', *Cultural Anthropology* 8:2 (1993), 135-56.
[v] E.S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, 1987), p. 174.
[vi] Eisenman, 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', p. 12.
[vii] A.V. Seaton, 'Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2:4 (1996), pp. 234-244.
[viii] T. Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York, 1999), p. 117.
[ix] See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 January 2007.
[x] J. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, 2000), p. 191.