

Transnational Memory Culture and the Countermonument Today
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Abstract:

In the 1990s, James E. Young identified a style of Holocaust memorials that aimed “not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change... not to be ignored by passerby but to demand interaction...” (1993: 30). He termed these memorials “countermonuments.” By now, the countermonument has become an ubiquitous concept in the critical discourse, and the memorial style that Young identified as a hallmark of post-war German memorial artists has come to influence practices of memorialization transnationally. This paper questions, first, the countermonument’s suitability in representing diverse histories of political oppression; second, its visual vernacular and dominant visual tropes; and third, its political underpinnings and uses.

The formal qualities of the countermonument across far-flung locales are increasingly discussed in the language of “voids,” “absences,” and “blank screens,” and in terms of the evocation of bodily affects. The privileging of this memorial vernacular, in conjunction with the increasingly transnational dimensions of cultural memory (Huysen 2003), raise the troubling question of whether the countermonument and the traditions of minimalism on which it draws have come to represent a hegemonic style. I discuss examples of memorials from Berlin and New York to examine the ideological and political implications of the transnational spread of the countermonument.

Essay:

Since the 1980s, practitioners and theorists in the fields of art, architecture, and cultural memory have expressed increasing skepticism about the permanence and semiotic stability of memorials. The memorial as a mode of institutional critique has been most powerfully theorized by James E. Young, who developed the concept of the countermonument in a series of works starting in 1992. Young first employed this useful term to describe a series of provocative memorials built by a new generation of German artists working in the 1980s and early 1990s to mark and commemorate the violence of National Socialism and the murder of German and European Jews (Young 1993; see also 1992). The desire to avoid the perceived danger or (at best) irrelevance of traditional memorials—which often instantiate an authoritative version of the past, relieve the viewer of any memorial responsibility, and easily come to blend into the landscape—was of particular significance in the German case, suggests Young, since the nature of the crimes being commemorated was such that any consolatory memorial would only be an impossible attempt to “redeem” an unredeemable past (1993: 28). The “countermonument” thus describes a memorial, the aim of which 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 passerby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification...” (1993: 30). At its most basic, it is, as Young has suggested, a critique of institutional memory.

In Young’s account, the countermonument emerges in a specific national and historical context. However, the category of the countermonument is now ubiquitous in the discourse of cultural memory. Memorials that fit this description, and that sometimes even self-consciously identify themselves as countermonuments, can be found in diverse locations, commemorating histories and traumas not limited to the Holocaust.¹ As such, countermonuments and the debates on memorialization of which they are a part must be understood within the context of an increasingly transnational framework of cultural memory. While countermonuments do indeed destabilize memory in productive ways, this paper argues that we need to rethink and further nuance the concept.

My concerns are two-fold. First, while the dominant characteristic of the countermonument is its insistence on a mutable (rather than static) memory, the formal qualities of the countermonument across far-flung locales demonstrate a marked uniformity. They consistently both employ and evoke a descriptive language of “voids,” “absences,” and “blank screens.” The ascendance of a privileged memorial vernacular based on a language of formal abstraction indicates that the dominance of the countermonument may represent a homogenization of mnemonic representation across very different national and historical contexts. This, in turn, raises questions about the transnationalization of cultural memory.

Second, despite the formal similarities of these memorials, individual memorials do very different kinds of political work—a fact that can be obscured by the repetition of form. The countermonument in its original sense sprang from explicitly oppositional and progressive politics. Now, however, its characteristic forms appear in memorials that represent a range of political interests. Is the countermonument today defined by its formal qualities alone, or do we wish to insist on a definition in which a broad set of political aims and provocations remain inseparable from its visual

vernacular? To answer these questions, I will focus on the relationships between several memorials that share formal characteristics or the designation of “countermonuments,” and will pay particular attention to two relatively recent memorial sites in Berlin: Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum (which incorporates memorial elements in the museum space) and Peter Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. In particular, I want to trace the transnationalization of the category of the countermonument, and the transformation of the formal language of minimalism into a contemporary “vernacular” of memorialization.

Transnational Memory and Memorial Vernaculars

Briefly, I’d like to map some approaches to the cross-cutting migrations of memory across national boundaries, which Andreas Huyssen has described as the “globalization of memory works” and the “transnational movement of memory discourses” (13, 14). Two perspectives in particular are salient here. First, sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have formulated what they term “cosmopolitan memory” (2002; 2006). In this model, the Holocaust’s adoption and commemoration outside of Germany and Europe (for example, the phenomenon known as the Americanization of the Holocaust) serve as the basis for a global human rights culture, and as a node of consensus for progressive politics. Levy and Sznaider are interested in the global spread of Holocaust memory and history via the proliferation of Holocaust museums, and popular representations of the Holocaust in films and literary works. However, a second approach to transnational memory focuses on how tropes and rhetorical figures that may have initially emerged in Holocaust discourse migrate into *other* narratives of historical atrocity and oppression. Huyssen, in his work on Argentina, has examined how the Holocaust might work metaphorically or prismatically in debates about the recent Argentine past (98). In this latter sense, the Holocaust comes to function as an umbrella signifier.

I am suggesting that something of this latter and more allusive migration is discernable in the spread of countermonumental visual and formal strategies of memorialization, particularly via what art historian Erika Doss and *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman have convincingly identified as

the dominance of minimalism as a memorial strategy. Writing in 2002, Kimmelman notes that though “once considered the most obstinate kind of modernism, Minimalism has gradually, almost sub rosa, made its way into the public’s heart. And now those bare walls are *blank slates* onto which we project our deepest commonly held feelings” (Jan. 13, 2002, emphasis mine). Kimmelman identifies a genealogy of modernist memorials, including Constantin Brancusi’s 1938 memorial at Tirgu-Jiu, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Oklahoma City bombing memorial comprised of a “grid of chairs lined up like Donald Judd boxes,” and Peter Eisenman’s Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

Kimmelman is interested in the way these memorials reflect the viewing publics, literally as well as metaphorically. He is not alone in this. Cultural critic Marita Sturken notes of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that it “both shields and is projected upon; the black walls act as *screens* for innumerable projections of memory and history” (44, emphasis mine). Sturken’s description of the memorial walls as “screens” onto which we project, and Kimmelman’s very similar description of minimalist memorials as “blank slates,” are echoed in Young’s definition of the countermonument’s mutability and viewer-centric approach, suggesting the countermonument’s dependence on the formal traditions of minimalism.

Kimmelman argues that minimalism’s “allegorical pliancy” allows for the reflection of a changing sense of history, but he does not consider the possibility that the insistent repetition of this supposedly mutable style across a series of sites might in fact limit the range of permissible meanings available at each of them. In a 2005 presentation, Young himself offered an anecdote that effectively highlights the saliency of this issue. After choosing Michael Arad and Peter Walker’s memorial design “Reflecting Absence” in his capacity as a jury member for the World Trade Center memorial, Young received a phone call from a journalist: “Aren’t these plans [the Libeskind plan for the site and the Arad and Walker memorial] just Holocaust memorials?”, the caller asked. Now, the WTC memorial is obviously not a Holocaust memorial, but to the extent that its form and visual strategies echo those of

prominent Holocaust memorials, it invites us to ask about the repetition and recycling of a set of memorial strategies developed at some of those Holocaust memorials. Notably, Arad and Walker's design, which they describe as "[two] large voids, open and visible reminders of the absence," echoes the central voids of Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Each reference to "absence" or the "void" derives its significance in part from the extent to which it refers to a chain of other such "absences" or "voids," together creating an overwhelming and undifferentiated sense of generalized absence that may discourage conversation about the specific political stakes of any given loss.

In the same 2005 talk, Young noted that "irreparable loss" now appears in and haunts virtually all instances of contemporary memorialization, whether or not pertaining to the Holocaust. Young's relatively uncritical observations about the migration of these memorial forms do not adequately account for the risks and limitations. Addressing the over-use of the notion of absence, Dominick LaCapra has noted that "individuals and groups in Germany and South Africa (as well as other countries) face particular losses in distinct ways, and those losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence, including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations (698). Interestingly, LaCapra suggests that the conception of past-as-absence reflects a politics of consensus—a far cry from the politics of contestation that originally underpinned the countermonument's investment in the formal characteristics of blankness, screens, and voids.

Art historian Erika Doss, in her critique of minimalism in American memorials, notes that these memorials are not unmarked by ideology. Instead, she argues that the rejection of figuration comes out of the Cold War context, when figural representation and realism were perceived as propaganda, while abstract art suggested an (illusory) freedom from ideology precisely through its seeming blankness. Doss thus disturbs the uncritical embrace of minimalist memorial style as a value-free and neutral "blank screen" upon which to project, and as an empty space in which to access feeling and sentiment.

In the case that I am examining—the transnational migration of formal strategies deriving from a countermonumental tradition of German Holocaust commemoration—the ideological stakes are

particularly closely tied to contestations over the urban landscape and planning. While independent juries determine memorial competitions, the examples of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and the WTC memorial in New York demonstrate the extent to which memorials are produced, undermined, and “claimed” by the fierce involvement and investment of the state, various levels of government, private commercial and business interests, and the concerned lobbying of citizens. It’s hard to talk about “independent” juries when the construction of such large-scale memorials clearly touches on far-reaching issues of land use and urban planning. In Berlin, the state made its proprietary interest in the memorial site very obvious when it terminated the commission for the first memorial and instituted a second, and in New York, memorial plans have repeatedly been subjected to the notorious political wrangling over the WTC site and its meanings and uses.

With all of this in mind, we must ask what ideologies “fill up” these voids, or are palimpsestically inscribed on the “blank screens” or walls. Might not the very recourse to blankness or emptiness obfuscate these contested political histories, as if nothing were already inscribed in the site’s blankness, and as if blankness itself were not a meaningful category? And how does this tension complicate or undermine the critical goals of the countermonument, which aims to make each viewer contemplate and bring to consciousness his or her own relationship to the past?

The tensions and pitfalls I am trying to highlight are more apparent if we consider the discourse around specific memorials. The problematic use of absence, particularly as mapped onto the notion of the “void,” can be seen in the descriptions of Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin. Commenting on his own work, Libeskind notes that the void describes:

not the trauma of a singular catastrophe which can be overcome and healed, but a trauma which is structured both by the destruction of a community and by its real yet also virtual presence. This absence is structured in the city, in the topography of a country, and in the topography of Europe and the world. So I am very much interested in the cultural significance of the void—the void of public space, and the void of memory. What is the void’s cultural presence today? What is its form and repression? What might it have been historically? How does it look? How does one encounter it or how does one not encounter it? (2003: 44).

Libeskind's language here treats "the void" as something with specific characteristics, and as a bedrock or foundation. The suggestion of its emptiness or radical absence is countered by the evident desire to shape its form, or lend it presence. Similarly, Libeskind notes that "the Jewish Museum in Berlin, an urban space like Alexanderplatz or Tacheles, the museum of Osnabrück, the lands associated with the name 'Sachsenhausen': all of these projects are structured by a void and by trauma" (45). While he asserts the "structural" or foundational significance of the void, Libeskind does not address whether these traumas and absences are the same, or to what extent the local context and the site-specificity of each project determines and reflects specific losses.

Furthermore, what institutional imperatives determine the form of these voids? Caroline Wiedmer has noted, in respect to the Jewish Museum, that it makes a difference whether the memorial represents a Polish-Jewish experience of the Holocaust, or a German one: "if a second-generation survivor illustrates artistically the devastating loss of the murdered Jews, and the emptiness their destruction has left in the world, it means something other than does the same statement as appropriated by a German institution to signify the emptiness and loss created in its own society" (138). There is thus a significant tension between the blankness of the minimalist memorial and the question of what institutional narratives are subtly inscribed there. Though Libeskind criticizes the Berlin Senate for encouraging artists to treat Alexanderplatz as "a tabula rasa"—that is, without adequately considering the history of the site—I wonder about the relationship between this problematic "tabula rasa" and what I am arguing is the equally troubling language of "blank slates," "blank screens," and structuring voids in the minimalist memorial.

Like the Jewish Museum, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is also embedded in a visual vernacular of minimalism, and is similarly located in a countermonumental genealogy. Eisenman's design—comprised of a field of stelae—echoes Libeskind's Garden of Exile at the nearby Jewish Museum, while the grid pattern of the stelae echoes the grid of chairs in Oklahoma City. The ground beneath the memorial is uneven, sloping as one nears the center. Thus, more subtly,

the memorial also echoes the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation on Ile de la Cité in Paris, which, in an early incarnation of recent designs, leads the viewer into a sunken, enclosed space or abyss.

The memorial—Germany’s official state-sponsored Holocaust memorial—stands in the center of unified Berlin’s new governmental district. While it doesn’t commemorate a particular *site*, it does derive significance from its location. The memorial’s direct proximity to the most important institutions of the nation, including the Reichstag, serves as effective shorthand to convey the centrality the German state accords the Holocaust in the nation’s history and contemporary political life. However, despite its obvious centrality, the memorial’s location also indicates a certain ambiguity. While commentators have noted that the land on which the memorial stands is prime real estate in the transformed map of a unified Berlin, Levy and Sznajder suggest that one of the hallmarks of cosmopolitan memory is the “de-territorialization” of memory (2002: 100). During the Cold War, this land was part of the no-man’s land between East and West Berlin. As such, this territorial space was effectively outside of the construction of the urban geography of both East and West—desolate land that effectively belonged to, and was identified with, no one. In part, it is because of the former emptiness of the space, and the particularly disjointed geography of a reunified Berlin, that the space can be given over to memorialization in this fashion.

Discussing his own design in an interview, Eisenman has stressed that there is nothing of the land or soil in the memorial, since “the soil was for the Germans.” While he is of course correct to critique the notion of spirit of place so crucial to Nazi ideology, this design strategy amplifies the deterritorialization of a memorial that is already in a former no-man’s land. One possible reading is that such a deterritorialized memorial effectively critiques the idea of a limited, national ownership of a given history. Certainly, this memorial—which, with its proximity to the Reichstag, Potsdamer Platz, the Brandenburger Tor and Tiergarten, sits at the center of Berlin’s tourist matrix—seeks to perform national memory for the world outside Germany’s borders. Read more cynically, however, such a deterritorialization may also represent a desire to disavow responsibility, and to leave the past

unclaimed. Read specifically in light of the argument I have been making about the transnational migration of memorial styles, this architectural strategy effectively serves to decouple the history to which the memorial refers from the place where it stands: “I could be anywhere,” the memorial seems to point to itself and say. Examined purely on the level of style, it could be—an impression heightened by the fact that the memorial bears no signage and that the information center is buried underground.

However, despite the visual rhetoric of the memorial and its reluctance to differentiate itself from the series of other memorials I have described, in fact this memorial could *not* be built just anywhere, and its style should not convince us otherwise. Not least for economic reasons, its existence and placement are highly conditioned and specific. As Jennifer Jordan has argued in her work on memory and urbanism in Berlin, land use and ownership play an integral part in determining what kinds of memorials get built and where, and which sites are left unmemorialized and forgotten. As Jordan observes, building memorials is not just about engaging with a difficult history or a site of violence, but about determining “how to treat *real estate* with a difficult past” (2, emphasis mine). Such considerations are markedly absent in the art historical and architectural discourse on countermonuments, and what at times appears to be its infatuation with its own romanticizing language of voids and absence.

While the site of the Berlin Memorial may indeed be prime real estate, there is no question that building such an expansive memorial in Berlin (with its sprawling urban geography, relatively sparse population, and underused and under-occupied urban infrastructure) is on a different order, economically and politically speaking, than building similarly “empty spaces” in New York. One need only compare the nature of the political squabbles in New York (where private interests and capital seek to limit the space afforded to memorialization at the WTC site), to the debate in Berlin (where the scope of the land use was determined relatively quickly, and long years of debate were primarily devoted to the design.)

Such distinctions, which are perhaps under-addressed not only because they are incongruous with the metaphysical language of radical absence, but also because they threaten the general sacralization of memory discourse, are not unmeaningful. At the very least, they remind us that memorialization and memory are institutionally conditioned and never transcendent, and also temper claims about the free range of individual emotion and response at the memorial site. Crucial to the argument I am advancing here, these considerations also underscore that while memorials at various sites might look remarkably similar, their relationship to entrenched local and national interests is necessarily very different, and therefore so too is the extent of their institutional critique.

In addition to considering to what degree a dominant countermonumental style obscures these relations, I want to suggest that some of the tropes of this style also represent a troubling authorization and regulation of *space*, at the same time that its proponents tout its liberation and deauthorization of *memory*. While the visitor is meant to engage critically with the contemporary countermonument, the unit in which these memorials understand their visitors is almost always at the individual level. In these voided spaces, and at these wounded and disfigured landscapes, the architectural and visual tropes encourage—even demand—that the visitor turn inward. When the door swings shut behind one in the empty, dark Holocaust Tower at the Jewish Museum Berlin, or when one enters the imposing maze of stelae at the Memorial, the appropriate behavior is contemplative inwardness and silence.

In particular, the field of stelae that comprises the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe disallows the possibility that the memorial can ever be a site of activism, and while its rhetoric encourages the viewer to engage with the “blank walls” of the memorial and with their own emotions, it discourages a dialogical encounter with other visitors. Interrupted as it is by closely and continuously placed stelae, the memorial field self-consciously disperses its visitors throughout the field, attempts to disorient and isolate them, and allows no site at which groups can convene. Indeed, in the original design, the stelae were to be placed close enough together that only one person could pass through them at a time.

Doss has underscored the extent to which these minimalist memorials depend on creating “experiences” for the visitor. However, the types of permissible experience are strictly limited. These experiences evoke powerful moods and bodily affects, creating what Libeskind and Eisenman have described as sensations of “disorientation,” dizziness” and the feeling of being cut-off from the world, as well as a feeling of “danger (Young 2000: 207). The emphasis of the experience is on thinking and feeling, and not on doing, especially not doing collectively—there is literally no space for it.²

In this context, it is worth remembering that work on Holocaust memory in Germany comes in large part from the period of left and student activism in the 1960s, and that memorial work in Germany has long been characterized by decentralized, localized memorial practices (Young 2000), often mobilized by the ethos of “*Grabe wo du stehst*” (excavate where you stand) (Wiedmer 104). If the construction and consecration of the Holocaust memorial in central Berlin in some sense represents an official cap to more than a quarter-century of intensely political memorial activity, and gradually works to close down such debates (though it is by no means clear that the latter is necessarily the case), then it is perhaps telling that this memorial bookend is a well-regulated site with discrete parameters. For all its rhetoric of being a disorienting labyrinth, it is a highly monitored space: at its periphery it can be patrolled, and within the field itself, visitors are atomized and dispersed. While visitors descend along the sloping floors towards the center of the field and lose sight of the outside as the height of the stelae increases, the field itself can be surveyed from the blinking, glittering Reichstag dome next door.

The architectural and visual characteristics of this series of memorials thus suggest not only narrative and ideological constraints, but physical ones as well. While their proponents capitalize on this latter dimension, stressing the emotional insight that one achieves by feeling trapped, enclosed etc., we need to consider more carefully the dependence of this series of memorials on constraining spaces.³ The vast and overweening emptiness of supposedly liberating voids only achieve their effect with high walls. Such spaces—the sunken void, the field of stelae—are difficult to traverse freely. While I recognize that romanticizing the plaza or the agora is as problematic as romanticizing voids and emptiness, gesturing to

the possible correlation between claustrophobic public space and a delimited political discourse does not, I hope, render my point too literal.

The language of voids and blankness and the evocation of a deeply individual memory serve to replace a counter-discursive political narrative with de-politicized memory and unanchored affect. As minimalist memorials with an experiential dimension continue to proliferate across borders, we need to reconsider the claim that countermonuments generate political contestation by their unconventional approaches to memory, and instead ask whether the increasingly common visual and architectural tropes of such memorials, if not closing down public space, at least work to close down critical space.

Notes

¹ Several artists have adapted their countermonumental visual strategies to address both German or European Holocaust memory as well as other types of memory. Shimon Attie's work in Denmark combines commemoration of the Holocaust with a reflection on contemporary Danish refugee and immigration policy and builds on his image projections in Berlin (see Young 2000); while Rachel Whiteread has utilized her method of casting the negative space around objects and sites to great effect not only in the Holocaust Memorial in Vienna, but also in her controversial casting of an abandoned house in London, and in her sculpture for Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth—an inverted resin cast of the plinth itself (see Young 2000; Vidler; Comay; Scribner). In the United States, Krzysztof Wodiczko's proposed projections from the early 1980s, which resignify traditional memorials to deal with issues such as homelessness and urban renewal, are exemplary countermonuments (see Deutsche; Wodiczko).

² My argument here is influenced by Eva Mackey's point about discourses of multiculturalism in elite cultural institutions, where multiculturalism can readily become only an object of thinking and intellectual activity, rather than a practice (425).

³ In contrast, Alison Landsberg has suggested that such experiential strategies and the "sensuous" experience of history (20) can create what she terms "prosthetic memories." According to Landsberg, there is a progressive political power in these types of identifications, which may generate new political identities and alliances.

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