

Holocaust Monuments And Counter-Monuments

Excerpt from interview with Professor James E. Young

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Q- Any monument that commemorates the Shoah has an intrinsic paradox. On the one hand, like any other monument, it tries to gain authority over memory, or even to control it; on the other hand, a monument to the Shoah, or one against the Nazis, opposes such an authoritarian way of thinking. In your research, where do you find sensitivity towards this problem?

Y- You are right. There's a post-WWII generation that sees the monument as an essentially totalitarian form of art or architecture. Its a big rock telling people what to think; its a big form that pretends to have a meaning, that sustains itself for eternity, that never changes over time, never evolves – it fixes history, it embalms or somehow stultifies it. And since totalitarian regimes, like the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, especially loved monuments, they built whole cultures around monumentality. Which is not to say that American democracy hasn't built a culture around monuments, as Greek democracy did. But once the monument has been used as the Nazis or Stalin did, it becomes a very suspicious form in the eyes of a generation that would like to commemorate the victims of totalitarianism, and are handed the forms of totalitarianism to do it.

For young German artists and architects in particular, there is an essential contradiction here. So they have begun to turn to forms which they believe challenge the idea of monumentality, and have arrived at something I'd call the "counter-monumental," or the "counter-memorial" – the monument that disappears instead of standing for all time; that is built into the ground instead of above it; and that returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it.

Q- Is this specific to Shoah memorials and to Germany?

Y- I've found that these memorial forms actually tend to rise in cultures that just are beginning to remember events in their history with which they have a great ambivalent relationship. In America, of course, the greatest counter-memorial would be Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In a city of tall, white, phallic monuments that celebrate democracy, she has designed, if you will, a feminine form – built into the earth, black, a negative form, in which you descend, rather than rise, to remember. This is a place where veterans come to remember their own, on the one hand. Where Americans can begin to remember their own very tortured relationship, both to those boys (59,000 Americans who died in Vietnam) and to the way that they received the veterans when they came back from Vietnam – very poorly. This was a war that America, in effect, lost; that Americans wanted to stop fighting for the last five or six years of its duration; that divided American society, probably irreparably; and that negatively affected the way in which America would fight wars thereafter. Maya Lin, in her genius, has made a form that reflects just this ambivalence, and this is why the monument has been so well embraced by everybody who visits it – both soldiers and the next generation.

The Germans had the same problem: how to reunite Berlin, say, on the bedrock memory of Germany's crimes. How does a nation of former perpetrators mourn its victims? These are two essential paradoxes that can't really be resolved in the monument. One of the results is that they've generated a counter-memorial architecture, a counter-memorial monumental art that questions the premise of the monument, and doubts whether the monument could provide stable, eternal answers to memory. This suggests that maybe Germany's relationship to Holocaust memory is so tortured, that it is really the relationship of a people that would like this memory to go away.

So how do you make a form that reflects this essential ambivalence toward the memory of your own crimes? The result is this generation of the

Disappearing Monument in Harburg, the invisible monument in Saarbruecken, the photo installations of Berlin by the American artist Shimon Attie, and perhaps Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin will be the longest-lived example of counter-memorial architecture, in which he's designed a museum with voids built into it – six voids built into an architecture to remind everybody who enters that no matter what they see of Jewish history (as exhibited in this museum), its going to be disrupted, interrupted by the memory of the Holocaust. There's no such thing as telling a coherent story of German Jewish life anymore, but you're always going to have to build incoherence and disruption into this narrative. Its ongoing right now, and its a fascinating form. I've spent a lot of time reflecting on it, and to me its a very satisfying form.

Q- I recently visited Buchenwald, and I found it disturbing, in a way, to see that the artists or the people working there are more preoccupied with memory and commemoration than with the place itself and its history.

Y- Buchenwald used to be a site during East-German days, where they said it was only about Buchenwald. But even when they said it was only about what happened at Buchenwald, it was also about how the East-German government appropriated the history of Buchenwald for its own political ends. Now that Germany is reunited, Buchenwald is a place that's so self-conscious of its potential for being appropriated for political ends that it neutralizes itself – by calling attention to itself as a memory site, and not as a history site.

We can tell you what happened at Buchenwald by showing you the permanent exhibition of the events here between certain years, and telling you why, and who did what to whom. But before you begin to remember and to instrumentalize, we want to warn you against that, at the same time. So its a paralyzing self-consciousness, and maybe, especially at Buchenwald, it might be appropriate. I'm also a little troubled by a place that becomes so self-reflective that both memory and history are paralyzed. But for the time being, I think Buchenwald is going to have to work through this period of reunification. What does it mean now to remember not just what happened there between

1933 and 1945 (Buchenwald, I think, was the second concentration camp established, after Dachau), but what happened there just after the war – what did the Red Army and the Soviets do to former Socialists, even former Nazis, in and around Buchenwald? The history of Buchenwald as a site in Germany will now be told in continuum, and these years will not be isolated years only. And for better or for worse, the memory of this site during the Communist era will now become an object of fascination by the West once it has reunited itself with Buchenwald.

Q- I think that what Adi finds disturbing is that signifiers of memory become imprisoned in themselves and cannot represent or reflect history – which gets forgotten.

Y- I agree with you that its a matter of memory being so self-conscious that it actually blocks history, or somehow occludes or forgets it. The ideal memorial at Buchenwald might make the continuum between what happened and how it gets remembered very clear; its an access between history and memory. To make this access as clear as possible might be the museum directors aim. At this point, they're still quite obsessed with the ways that all memorial forms – even the exhibition – block out some history. Any memorial has to forget as much of history as it remembers, and probably forgets much more. I would also be troubled.

I haven't seen the new exhibition of Buchenwald. I know there are all kinds of memorial work, and artists working there to create memorials to the memorials; I understand there's even a memorial to the first memorial built there by the prisoners at the time, by Horst Hoheisel. This is something we can always raise with them. In this case, there's a very smart director of Buchenwald. It's a very difficult political job, and I think he's trying to establish memory's role in getting back to history. Maybe he has to begin with memory, and eventually will work his way back to the events between 1933-1945.

Q- There's something very optimistic about counter-monuments, for example,

the Disappearing Monument in Harburg where people of all opinions – even the most extreme opinion – are invited to express themselves on the monument and to be part of it. The assumption is that the dialogue, which will eventually emerge, will lead to a more humane and more anti-fascist society. But the fear exists of its leading to exactly the opposite.

Y- The fact is that the memorial has gone. And Jochen Gerz, the artist, does, in a way, want to kill the monument. He would like every memorial to return memory to those who come looking for it, which is a very optimistic point of view. But he honestly believes that memory is something that has to go on inside every individual, and can't pretend to go on in stones – in rocks, or even in concentration-camp sites. He would say (and I would agree) that in themselves, these sites are amnesiac. But then, when these sites are wiped out, or when the memorial itself disappears, to what extent is memory actually transferred back to those who come to remember, and to what extent is it blighted, is it blotted out altogether? This question Gerz would sustain, because he believes it's an important one for the next generation. But practically, if we want them to look at the landscape, a landscape of invisible monuments will also be one that demands people who know something. The question is if we will always know enough to bring our memory and history back to these sites. In 50 years, or in 100 years, I think this is doubtful.

Q- Do you see this kind of sensitivity in the United States and in Israel as well? In Boston, for example, you describe – in your book – a very interesting process leading to the erection of the monument.

Y- Yes, this is true. I think that the memorial process in Boston is finally more enlightening, if you will, and more effective as a memory act than the result. The survivors in Boston, and the visitors, are quite happy with the six glass pillars. I think they reflect very well, overall, the work of the architect, Saitowitz. They provide a certain architectural mediation between the glass office buildings on the one side and the old brick colonial buildings on the other. I personally would rather not see something that seems so literally to

refer to chimneys or the number 6. But the public is instructed.

In Boston, they've also created a very clear narrative on what happened. The monument is located on the Freedom Trail. So the Boston lesson is this: "Here on the Freedom Trail, remember the consequences of a time when there was no freedom." So, again, it's a way of understanding American history, and understanding what happens when the principles we take for granted in America are absent.

The processes are always more interesting, finally, but communities are not convinced of this. It looks like a lot of dirty laundry is getting aired. In Los Angeles, there were bitter fights between the two museums there: the Jewish Community Center (the Federation Museum, that is, the Martyrs Memorial Museum) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In San Francisco, the debate over the George Segal Monument was quite bitter. In New York, the debate over the Kahn Memorial, the Rapoport Memorial in 1964, and even the new museum in Battery Park has been quite bitter. Survivors are obviously quite embarrassed that this would become not a point of unification, but of division. And in Denver to this day, the Holocaust memorial they built there, the Babi Yar Memorial, has caused so much bitter divisiveness that the community can't bring itself to go back there at all. So the process, healthy as it might be, if too difficult, can in fact take the place of memory altogether.

Q- I'd like you to reflect on Germany, Israel, and America. Whoever dealt with memory assumes that, apart from its role in perpetuation, it has a role to play in forgetting. Within the framework of collective memory, what is forgotten in these three countries?

Y- Country by country, it is interesting. If America remembers the Holocaust through an American prism (that is, through the American soldiers liberation of a handful of camps), Americans, on the whole, tend to forget the ghettoization process, the deportations, even the killing process; the image of the emaciated victims at the end of the war becomes all that they know. This

comes to represent the entire Holocaust: The destruction of a culture, of a people, is somehow forgotten and pushed aside. The museum in America [in Washington] does briefly recall both America's refusal to bomb Auschwitz, and America's quota on Jewish refugees; it does remember, in some ways, America's limited role in somehow assisting the Germans in this way. But what is mostly forgotten are the 1,000 years of Jewish history, and the destruction process itself.

In Israel, for years, what was forgotten, really, was the martyrdom. This is what is mostly remembered nowadays, and the heroism has been slightly pushed aside. But for years, this was understandable: Those who proposed memorials and memorial days were often members of the former fighting organizations. When they went to remember the Jews of the Galut [literally, the Diaspora], they wanted to remember those who had resisted. I believe that, even in 1951, the first proposed name for Israel's Day of Remembrance was Yom Mered ha-Ghettaot – Day of the Ghettos Uprising. I think it was only Mered (and not Uprisings), but a single uprising for all the ghettos, as if it happened on a single day. Only later was the addition of the Martyrs made, and eventually the day became known as the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism, together.

Only after the Eichmann Trial was the experience of the victims really brought into public consciousness. What is also forgotten in the Israeli narrative is that these events may be so terrible as not to be redeemable, and it's understandable that Israel, in establishing itself on the memory of the victims, suggests itself as a redemption, as a rebirth, of this terrible martyrdom. But it also suggests that in some ways, therefore, the Holocaust has been redeemed, that things have turned out okay, that the Holocaust had almost a "happy ending" because of the founding of the state. The birth of the State of Israel is, on the one hand, related to the Holocaust, but you don't want to make it a "happy ending".

I would say that the Holocaust is irredeemable. Its easier to say, in establishing the Day of Remembrance of Israel's fallen soldiers [Yom ha-Zikaron] on the 4th of Iyar, the day before Independence Day, that the state is telling the parents of these soldiers, "Look, we put these days together so that you can mourn one moment and celebrate the next, so that you know why your sons have died. They have died so that Israel could be born, so that Israel exists, and as a government, that's really our job, to make that clear."

But in the case of the Holocaust, do we want to make that link so explicit? It is implied in the narrative between Passover and Yom ha-Atzmaut: God's deliverance of the Jews, leading to the Jews deliverance of the Jews in the State of Israel, with Remembrance of Heroism and Martyrdom and the Remembrance of Israel's fallen soldiers, linking them, bound together. What gets forgotten is that there may be no ultimate transcendent meaning out of the Holocaust. It is made meaningful almost automatically in the calendar. But now in Israel, all of these parties are being remembered in very complex ways; I'm not too worried.

In Germany, there's a real threat that the Holocaust, once commemorated on a national level, will in some ways be laid to rest. I fear that, in Germany's National Memorial process, the government's main reason for creating a National Memorial to Europe's murdered Jews in Berlin is to put a great gravestone over the 20th century – so that Germany can move on to the 21st century unencumbered by its terrible past. If that were the truth, I'd rather not see a single memorial. And being involved with it now, actually, I have lots of questions to ask of the government in the process.

The Germans also tend to forget, in their memory of the Holocaust, just how Jewish was Germany, and German culture, before the war. With the advent of the Jewish Museum, this will now be returned to them. But in remembering the Holocaust only, they do tend to forget the great contributions, and that German culture essentially has Jewish components that have been completely wiped out.

Q- What about the Poles?

Y- They are still coming to terms with things. The question of Poland is probably more complicated than anywhere else. Poland has always seen itself, in Polish terms, as the “Christ among the nations,” and no matter what happens in Europe, it gets hit from all sides, from all directions; it is always squeezed. The Poles see themselves as the great martyred nation in Europe, and for good reason. And being part of a Catholic culture, they have a very good vocabulary for talking about themselves as the “Calvary of European culture.” When you take the ultimate martyr – even in Christian eyes – the Jewish people (which also obviously sees itself as the martyr of all the nations in Europe), and you put them together, they do tend to be “competing narratives”.

Until recently, not too many Poles actually knew the Jewish narrative of the Shoah there. They were told by the government what had happened to Poles in places like Auschwitz, Chelmno, Belzec – but that people died there as Poles and as Jews. But as Poles, they remembered them as Poles. Only recently has the Jewish story of the Holocaust entered Polish consciousness, and it’s being done very deliberately. Polish guides and historians are going to Israel, to America, to learn the Jewish story.

Conversely, we as Jews need to learn the Polish story, so that when we go back to places like Auschwitz, we don’t transform the guides there into SS operatives. The Poles are not our captors, they’re not keeping us there now, but are trying to tell us the story. But I sometimes see Jewish tourist groups from America and from Israel going to Poland and venting great resentment against the Polish guides there. Somehow, in their minds, these camps are in Poland because the Poles established them, or because of Polish antisemitism, and not because the Germans put them there near large Jewish population concentrations. So these stories need to be told.

Actually, as much gets forgotten among Jewish tourists at Auschwitz as among Polish tourists. We somehow have to tell these stories on parallel tracks – so that we can understand the role Auschwitz plays in Polish consciousness, and the Poles can understand just what role the Jewish population of prewar Poland (10 or 11 percent) played in Polish culture, a figure which greatly surprises many Poles.

Source: The Multimedia CD ‘Eclipse Of Humanity’, Yad Vashem ,Jerusalem 2000.