One of the contemporary results of Germany's memorial conundrum is the rise of its "counter-monuments": brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being. On the former site of Hamburg's greatest synagogue, at Bornplatz, Margrit Kahl has assembled an intricate mosaic tracing the complex lines of the synagogue's roof construction: a palimpsest for a building and community that no longer exist. Norbert Radermacher bathes a guilty landscape in Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood with the inscribed light of its past. Alfred Hrdlicka began (but never finished) a monument in Hamburg to counter—and thereby neutralize—an indestructible Nazi monument nearby. In a suburb of Hamburg, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz have erected a black pillar against fascism and for peace designed to disappear altogether over time. The very heart of Berlin, former site of the gestapo headquarters, remains a great, gaping wound as politicians, artists, and various committees forever debate the most appropriate memorial for this site.1

Ethically certain of their duty to remember, but aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms, a new generation of contemporary artists and monument makers in Germany is probing the limits of both

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1 The long-burning debate surrounding projected memorials, to the Gestapo-Gelände in particular, continues to exemplify both the German memorial conundrum and the state's painstaking attempts to articulate it. For an excellent documentation of the process, see Topographie des Terrors: Gestapo, SS und Reichssicherheitshauptamt auf dem “Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände,” ed. Reinhard Rürup (Berlin, 1987). For a shorter account, see James E. Young, "The Topography of German Memory," The Journal of Art 1 (Mar. 1991): 30.
their artistic media and the very notion of a memorial. They are heirs to a double-edged postwar legacy: a deep distrust of monumental forms in light of their systematic exploitation by the Nazis and a profound desire to distinguish their generation from that of the killers through memory. At home in an era of earthworks, conceptual and self-destructive art, these young artists explore both the necessity of memory and their incapacity to recall events they never experienced directly. To their minds, neither literal nor figurative references suggesting anything more than their own abstract link to the Holocaust will suffice. Instead of seeking to capture the memory of events, therefore, they remember only their own relationship to events: the great gulf of time between themselves and the Holocaust.

For young German artists and sculptors like the Gerzes, Norbert Radermacher, and Horst Hoheisel, the possibility that memory of events so grave might be reduced to exhibitions of public craftsmanship or cheap pathos remains intolerable. They contemptuously reject the traditional forms and reasons for public memorial art, those spaces that either console viewers or redeem such tragic events, or indulge in a facile kind of Wiedergutmachung or purport to mend the memory of a murdered people. Instead of searing memory into public consciousness, they fear, conventional memorials seal memory off from awareness altogether. For these artists such an evasion would be the ultimate abuse of art, whose primary function, to their mind, is to jar viewers from complacency and to challenge and denaturalize the viewers' assumptions….  

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To some extent, this new generation of artists in Germany may only be enacting a critique of "memory places" already formulated by cultural and art historians long skeptical of the memorial's traditional function. It is more than fifty years, for example, since Lewis Mumford pronounced the death of the monument in its hopeless incompatibility with his sense of modern architectural forms. "The notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms," he wrote. "If it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument." In Mumford's view, the monument defied the very essence of modern urban civilization: the capacity for renewal and rejuvenation. Where modern architecture invites the perpetuation of life itself, encourages renewal and change, and scorns the illusion of permanence, Mumford wrote, "stone gives a false sense of continuity, and a deceptive assurance of life."³

More recently, German historian Martin Broszat has suggested that in their references to the fascist era, monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations. As cultural reifications, in this view, monuments reduce or, using Broszat's term, "coarsen" historical understanding as much as they generate it.⁴ In another vein, art historian Rosalind Krauss finds that the modernist period produces monuments unable to refer to

anything beyond themselves as pure marker or base.\textsuperscript{5} After Krauss we might ask, in fact, whether an abstract, self-referential monument can ever commemorate events outside of itself. Or must it motion endlessly to its own gesture to the past, a commemoration of its essence as dislocated sign, forever trying to remember events it never actually knew?

Still others have argued that rather than embodying memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community's memory-work with its own material form. "The less memory is experienced from the inside," Pierre Nora warns, "the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs."\textsuperscript{6} If the obverse of this is true as well, then perhaps the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally. In this age of mass memory production and consumption, in fact, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden.

As Nora concludes here, "memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive [lieu de mémoire] the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin" ("BMH," p. 13). As a result, the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives. Under the illusion that our memorial

\textsuperscript{6} Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire," trans. Marc Roudebush, Representations, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 13; hereafter abbreviated "BMH"; "this text constitutes the theoretical introduction to a vast collaborative work on the national memory of France that I titled Les Lieux de mémoire" (p. 25).
edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.

In response to these seemingly generic liabilities in monuments, conceptual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz have designed what they call a *Gegendenkmal*—built at the City of Hamburg's invitation to create a "Monument against Fascism, War and Violence-and for Peace and Human Rights."…

Unveiled in Harburg in 1986, this twelve-meter high, one-meter square pillar is made of hollow aluminum, plated with a thin layer of soft, dark lead. A temporary inscription near its base reads-and thereby creates constituencies-in German, French, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, and English:

> 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 lead 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 up against injustice.

A steel-pointed stylus with which to score the soft lead is attached at each corner by a length of cable. As one-and-a-half-meter sections are covered with memorial graffiti, the
monument is lowered into the ground, into a chamber as deep as the column is high. The more actively visitors participate, the faster they cover each section with their names, the sooner the monument will disappear. After several lowerings over the course of four or five years, nothing will be left but the top surface of the monument, which will be covered with a burial stone inscribed to "Harburg's Monument against Fascism." In effect, the vanishing monument will have returned the burden of memory to visitors: one day, the only thing left standing here will be the memory-tourists, forced to rise and to remember for themselves.

With audacious simplicity, the counter-monument thus flouts any number of cherished memorial conventions: its aim 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 its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet. By defining itself in opposition to the traditional memorial's task, the counter-monument illustrates concisely the possibilities and limitations of all memorials everywhere. In this way, it functions as a valuable "counter-index" to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site.

In Germany today, not only does the monument vanish, but so too do the traditional notions of the monument's performance. How better to remember forever a vanished people than by the perpetually unfinished, ever-vanishing monument? As if in mocking homage to national forebears who had planned the Holocaust as a self-consuming set of events—that is, intended to destroy all traces of itself, all memory of its victims—the Gerzes have designed a self-consuming memorial that leaves behind
only the rememberer and the memory of a memorial. As the self-destroying sculpture of Jean Tinguely and others challenged the very notion of sculpture, the vanishing monument similarly challenges the idea of monumentality and its implied corollary, permanence.

Indeed, after nearly three decades of self-destroying sculpture, the advent of a self-consuming monument might have been expected. But while self-consuming sculpture and monuments share a few of the same aesthetic and political motivations, each also has its own reasons for vanishing. Artists like Tinguely created self-destroying sculpture in order to preempt the work's automatic commodification by a voracious art market. At the same time, and by extension, these artists hoped such works would thereby remain purely public and that by vanishing, would leave the public in a position to examine itself as part of the piece's performance. "The viewer, in effect, [becomes] the subject of the work," as Douglas Crimp has observed. Or, in Michael North's elaboration of this principle, "the public becomes the sculpture."⁷…

…In its egalitarian conception, the counter-monument would not just commemorate the antifascist impulse but enact it, breaking down the hierarchical relationship between art object and its audience. By inviting its own violation, the monument humbles itself in

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the eyes of beholders accustomed to maintaining a respectful, decorous distance. It forces viewers to desanctify the memorial, demystify it, and become its equal. The counter-monument denaturalizes what the Gerzes feel is an artificial distance between artist and public generated by the holy glorification of art. Ultimately, such a monument undermines its own authority by inviting and then incorporating the authority of passersby.

In fact, in this exchange between artist, art object, and viewer, the sense of a single authority, a single signatory, dissolves altogether: that the work was never really self-possessing and autonomous is now made palpable to viewers. The artist provides the screen, passersby add their names and graffiti to it, which causes the artist to sink the monument into the ground and open up space for a fresh exchange. It is a progressive relationship, which eventually consumes itself, leaving only the unobjectified memory of such an exchange. In its abstract form, this monument claims not to prescribe—the artists might say dictate—a specific object of memory. Rather, it more passively accommodates all memory and response, as the blank-sided obelisk always has. It remains the obligation of passersby to enter into the art: it makes artist-rememberers and self-memorializers out of every signatory. By inviting viewers to commemorate themselves, the counter-monument reminds them that to some extent all any monument can do is provide a trace of its makers, not of the memory itself….

On the surface, time and memory seem to operate to irreconcilably disparate ends: where time might be described, in Aristotle's terms, as that which "disperses
subsistence, memory can be regarded as recollective in its work, an operation that concentrates the past in the figurative space of a present moment. The counter-monument would turn this over: it forces the memorial to disperse—not gather—memory, even as it gathers the literal effects of time in one place. In dissipating itself over time, the counter-monument would mimic time's own dispersion, become more like time than like memory. It would remind us that the very notion of linear time assumes memory of a past moment: time as the perpetually measured distance between this moment and the next, between this instant and a past remembered. In this sense, the counter-monument asks us to recognize that time and memory are interdependent, in dialectical flux.

The material of a conventional monument is normally chosen to withstand the physical ravages of time, the assumption being that its memory will remain as everlasting as its form. But as Mumford has already suggested, the actual consequence of a memorial's unyielding fixedness in space is also its death over time: a fixed image created in one time and carried over into a new time suddenly appears archaic, strange, or irrelevant altogether. For in its linear progression, time drags old meaning into new contexts, estranging a monument's memory from both past and present, holding past truths up to ridicule in present moments. Time mocks the rigidity of monuments, the presumptuous claim that in its materiality, a monument can be regarded as eternally true, a fixed star in the constellation of collective memory.

By formalizing its impermanence and even celebrating its changing form over time and in space, the counter-monument refutes this self-defeating premise of the traditional monument. It seeks to stimulate memory no less than the everlasting

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memorial, but by pointing explicitly at its own changing face, it re-marks also the inevitable—even essential evolution of memory itself over time. In its conceptual self-destruction, the counter-monument refers not only to its own physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning and memory—especially that embodied in a form that insists on its eternal fixity. As such, the counter-monument suggests itself as a skeptical antidote to the illusion that the seeming permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of a memorial idea attached to it.

By negating its form, however, the counter-monument need not so negate memory. And by challenging its premises for being, neither does it challenge the call for memory itself. Rather, it negates only the illusion of permanence traditionally fostered in the monument. For in calling attention to its own fleeting presence, the counter-monument mocks the traditional monument's certainty of history: it scorns what Nietzsche has called "monumental history," his epithet for the petrified versions of history that bury the living. ⁹ In effect, it might even be said that the counter-monument negates the very basis for this epithet's central trope: after the counter-monument, the "monumental" need no longer be conceived merely as a figure for the stone dead. By resisting its own reason for being, the counter-monument paradoxically reinvigorates the very idea of the monument itself….

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