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Esther Shalev-Gerz & Jochen Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*, 1986, permanent installation Hamburg-Harburg, Germany.

# Concepts for contemporary monuments

by **Rebecka Katz Thor**

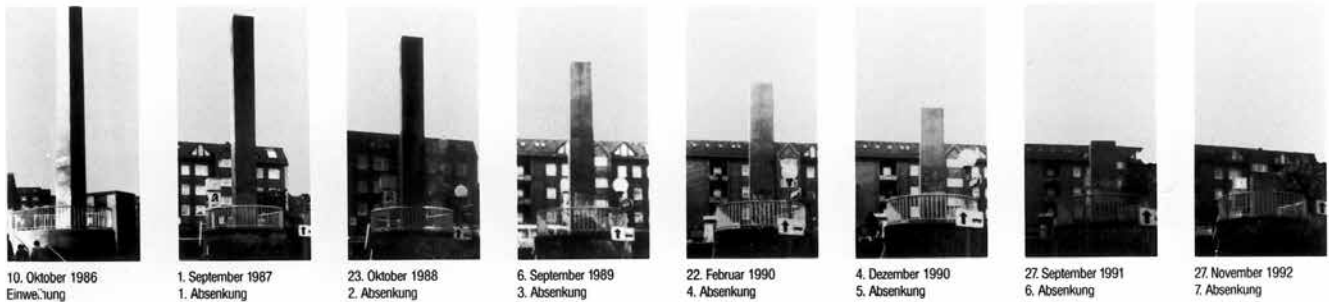
## abstract

What concepts can we apply to understand the current wave of new monuments? In this article I suggest labeling them post-monuments, related to the commissioning body's implied interest in what is commemorated, on the one hand, and the possibility of making amends, on the other. The concept builds on the one suggested by James Young in the early 1990's "counter-monuments" regarding the German memorial culture of the time. I address how post-monuments can be seen as a future-oriented rectification, repair, and response.

**KEYWORDS:** Monuments, memory, post-monuments, counter-monuments, repair.

"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-high 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 long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

*Jochen Gerz & Esther Shavel Gerz*



The images show how the *Monument Against Fascism* gradually was lowered into the ground.

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In 1979 the Harburg district of Hamburg initiated a process for a monument against fascism to counter the wave of Neo-Fascism in the city. Artist duo Esther Shavel Gerz and Jochen Gerz won the commission to create *The Monument Against Fascism*, and it was realized in 1986. A 12-meter-high column clad in lead with a one-meter-square perimeter was installed in a central square. The conceptual framework included an invitation to the residents of the city to engrave their names directly onto the surface of the monument with the metal pencil provided to ratify a common statement about fascism. When one surface was covered by inscriptions, the monument was progressively lowered into the ground, making new surfaces accessible. After seven years, only the top of the monument was visible; from the side of the structure, it was still also possible to glimpse the column. The monument is contextualized with a text giving the background to the project. Their idea sprung, according to their own account, from their first discussion about the competition when Jochen Gerz approached Esther Shavel Gerz with the proposal and she responded by asking why another monument was needed at all: “We have too many already. What we need is one that disappears.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, James Young coined the term “counter-monuments” regarding the German memorial culture of the time, in which the monument was doubted as an incitement of public memory.<sup>2</sup> Young describes a new type of memorial work, counter-monuments, which are in his words “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very promise of their being”.<sup>3</sup> Or as he frames it in another text: “Counter-monuments would be memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument – to be ephemeral rather than permanent, to deconstruct rather than to displace memory, to be antiredeemptive.”<sup>4</sup> The monument by the Gerzes is one of the most prominent examples of Young’s view: This monument “against” something gives way for a new conceptual understanding of what the monument both is and does.<sup>5</sup> It is an expression of what is considered important enough not only to remember, but also to make a mark against. Hence, it ad-

resses a wrongdoing of the past and articulates a societal refusal of such ideology in the present. The fascist past is literally buried in a sense, yet the processes were tainted by neo-Nazi slogans on the monument, which testify to the impossibility of burying the past in any sense.<sup>6</sup> This monument, and how it is understood by Young, has since then come to shape the debate on monuments which do not follow a conservative nation-building tradition.<sup>7</sup>

YOUNG’S NOTION of a vernacular memory and its expression as a negative form first appears with Maya Lin’s *Vietnam memorial* in Washington in 1981. Lin, at the time a 21-year-old architecture student, was commissioned through an open competition to create the monument, which turned out to be a decisive moment in the

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history of monuments. The memorial’s triangular shape cuts into the ground, instead of rising as most traditional monuments would. Another of Young’s prominent examples at the time is the memorial to the Nazi book burning, conceived by sculptor Micha Ullman in 1995. *The Empty Library*, or *Bibliothek*, take the negative form even further as it is a subterranean room lined with empty white bookshelves, beneath a glass plate in the pavement on the square where in 1933, the Nazis burned over 20 000 books by mainly Jewish and communist authors. The equivalent number of books would fit on the shelves of the memorial. Yet another, more contemporary example, that also show how the negative form has remained and developed, is Jonas Dahlberg’s unrealized monument, *Memory Wound*, intended to commemorate the victims of the far-right massacre on Utøya in Norway in 2011. Young has also written on this monument, but the affinity between Dahlberg’s proposal and Lin’s memorial are striking to anyone.

Dahlberg’s proposal caused strong reactions, and the project was eventually cancelled. The point of departure for an intense debate on the means of commemoration, and, above all, who needs to be confronted with this memory, was triggered by the design itself—a wound in the island. Dahlberg’s proposal involved physically taking a slice out of a peninsula facing the island, thus creating a gap separating two land masses from each



Esther Shalev-Gerz & Jochen Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*, 1986, permanent installation Hamburg-Harburg, Germany.

other. A material and metaphorical wound that would convey a symbolic violence in that it could never heal. Therein, perhaps, lies one reason for the immense opposition to the work among those who live in the area, but also its artistic strength.

IN LIGHT OF THE IDEA of counter-monuments, and the concept of post-monuments that I propose for a certain kind of contemporary monuments, I briefly want to return to the Latin origin of the word monument, *monumentum*. It literally translates as “something that reminds” and is one of the ways in which monuments have been used historically: as reminders or celebrations of a nation’s or a person’s deeds or glory. However, there are also other aspects at play in terms of figuration, symbolism, and space. Monuments are not to be equated to public sculpture, and one of the things that differentiate them is that the monument has a mission foreign to the essential openness of artworks. As I have discussed elsewhere, a monument performs something specific, while works of art can do infinitely many things.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the question of expectations regards both the monument’s function from the point of view of the one commissioning it, and how it comes to be interpreted in the public space. On the other hand, there is an underlying constant negotiation of what a monument is expected to do and what it does. The commission of a monument is often slightly different than that of a permanent public artwork in terms of a designated memorializing theme, which should also be reflected in the artistic expression.

In German there is a seemingly helpful distinction between *Denkmal* and *Manhmal*, where the former tends to refer to deeds and moments of glory, and the latter commemorates and memorializes victims of war and suffering. Yet in practice there is no such clear division. The monument for the Jewish victims in

the Holocaust, for example, is called *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*, but also there are colloquial terms such as the *Holocaust-Mahnmal*. Such a conceptual division does not exist in Swedish or English, even if several concepts are in flux, i.e. the English terms “monuments”, “memorials”, and “memory art”. The German *Gedenkstätte* or *Manhmal* implies a call to action, to remember rather than memorialize, and to mourn rather than to honor as the *Ehrenmal*. In Swedish there are concepts that translate as “memorial site” (*minnesplats*), “memorial mark” (*minnesmärke*), or “memory care” (*minnesvård*) with a similar implication of mourning, whereas “monument” remains an overarching category, spanning from statues of kings, commemorations of victims of natural disasters, to contemporary performative interventions labeled by artists or commissioners as “monuments”. To call a work of art a monument inscribes it in a certain (art)history and implies a claim of a mission and motif of memorializing.

The purpose of the concept I suggest is to understand the processes around contemporary monuments dedicated to what are often labelled as “difficult pasts” such as a fascist legacy or as present expressions of authoritarianism or racism. The post-monument concept aims to capture what is at stake in the commemorative processes and what differentiates these processes from other monuments. It is related to the commissioning body’s implied interest in what is commemorated, on the one hand, and the possibility of making amends on the other. This term is a tool or framework to analyze the monuments at hand and to capture similarities in their missions. Yet neither the concept nor the application does justice to the specific histories these monuments seek to commemorate. I reflect on how such monuments encompass a temporal continuation in the form of reparative work and might enhance a rupture, an end, and a

new beginning all at once.

As I argue in an article focusing on post-monuments, they are defined by a conflict of continuity and rupture, where they both entail historical violence of oppression and racism, and simultaneously a wish from the commissioner to recover and offer repair, even though that which it seeks to commemorate is also a present issue.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the specificity of such monuments resides in a structural condition of conflict between what they com-

**“[...] A MONUMENT PERFORMS SOMETHING SPECIFIC, WHILE WORKS OF ART CAN DO INFINITELY MANY THINGS.”**

memorate and who commissions them. That is, in the flows and power relations present between what is commemorated, who is doing the commemorating, and by which means and expressions, and the temporal status of both the memorialized and the monument. They differ from a general notion of monuments in what they commemorate and by their processes, since they commemorate violence and oppression that is associated with shame rather than a collective grief or pride. What is crucial in this discussion is that these monuments are defined by their processes as much as their motifs (the aim to memorialize).



Rendering for the LBTQI+monumentet *Gläntan* (*The Glade*) at Esperantoplatsen, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2022.

IMAGE: NEW ORDER ARKITEKTUR AND CONNY KARLSSON LUNDGREN

A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION of post-monuments could include three main factors:

1. They commemorate a difficult heritage, a structural wrongdoing in the past that society has not yet come to terms with.
2. They are commissioned, funded, initiated, or built by the same governing body that was structurally, legally, or symbolically responsible for the oppression or wrongdoing that it wishes to commemorate.
3. They are conceptualized in a framework of vulnerability and repair.

THE COMMISSIONING of post-monuments facilitates structures for commemoration of difficult heritages, violent pasts, or oppression. As such, they are processes ruled by what they seek to transmit (the subject matter that the monument should commemorate), the effect of the commission to that transmission (for example, when a city frames a form of oppression as something of the past rather than the present) and the transmissive shape or form (the possible success or failure of the aesthetic expression).

The core of “post” is a question of temporality, which in the context of monuments and commemorations is complex. Firstly, all monuments are ruled by a temporal structure that is at least three-sided: the time that they commemorate, the time that they are built, and the temporal instances when they are encountered and interpreted by a viewer. This is evident in relation to the demands to remove statues, for example. Secondly, monuments tend to be perceived as a form of closure, hence a rupture between a before and an after, an ethical and temporal coming to terms with and moving beyond. Thirdly, monuments “fix” an historical event in time, they monumentalize what they seek to commemorate and imply a non-forgetting, which is also both ethical and temporal.

THE NOTION OF “post” stems from Marianne Hirsch’s work on post-memory. Her term relates to how memory is intergenera-

tional and proposed in an era of many “posts”, as she herself recognizes, which we are no longer in. She first formulated the concept of post-memory in the early 1990s, and has developed it since. However, one can argue that “post” belong in the past context of “post-colony”, “post-secular”, “post-human” etc.,<sup>10</sup> whereas today it is more relevant to understand our era in terms of “de-” or “un-”, of “decoloniality”, and of “unlearning”, for example. Yet Hirsch insists that post-memory both shares features with other “posts” such as:

**their belatedness, aligning itself with the practice of citation and mediation that characterize them, marking a particular end-of-century/turn-of-century moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms and that it is not a mere method or idea but a “structure” of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience.<sup>11</sup>**

If monuments in a general sense are understood as simultaneously aimed toward both past and future, these monuments have a more complex temporal structure. Post-monuments might be understood as durational and/or open-ended. Further, as discussed above, the “post” does not demark a move from one thing to another but a relation between pasts and presents, which is negotiated in terms of continuity and ruptures. These monuments are also “post” in relation to the commissioning body, since many of these the initiatives do not come from “above” as in conventional processes of public monuments, but are formed by activists or civil society. The “post” should not be understood as designating a specific time (like post-Soviet, postwar, postmodern etc.) but as a state of contingency, of being defined by a past that one also wishes to take a stand against and be responsible for.

They are embedded in a framework of vulnerability and repair as an attempt of societies to respond to a violent past. This

framework is temporally based and holds unstable positions and acts. To take the notion of vulnerability seriously, a temporal negotiation and reevaluation must remain central. It is a situated knowledge, and the threshold allows for new or other situations. This ties into what contemporary monuments are expected to do, and to label them as post-monuments is an attempt to expose this *doing*. Hence, labeling a sort of contemporary monuments as “post” does not indicate primarily that they temporally succeed some other type of monument, but that they imply in their conceptual formulation that a particular episode of oppression or a violent past is now part of a history that calls for a response.

The concept above all addresses the history of monuments, their subject matter, and forms of aesthetic expression. Hence, not as after monuments, but monuments that are “post” in the sense discussed above. I suggest a “post” rather than “counter” or “para” against the backdrop of Young’s term countermonuments and the recent suggestion by Nora Sternfeld as she proposed another concept, the “para-monument”. She describes how her and Young’s concepts differ, since the para-monument does not address the idea of a monument negatively but appropriates the form and discourse of the powerful monuments in order to turn these properties against them – hence it is neither “against” the monument nor defined by it.<sup>12</sup> For her, a para-monument is dominated by the quality of being near, next to, and going along with, both spatially and temporally speaking. Thus, her concept is in stark contrast to Young’s memorial spaces which have a self-refuting quality embedded in them, both conceptually and aesthetically. The notion of post-monuments draws on and departs from these two notions in the sense that it is nor counter and nor going along with. However, all three concepts share a sort of foundational reflexivity.

**I CAME TO THIS** concept as a response to the wave of new monuments that can currently be observed in Sweden; both in what is being monumentalized, and in how it is being done. These monuments can be read against a backdrop of the past decade’s international debate on monuments, from the 2015 *Rhodes Must Fall* movement in South Africa, demanding the removal of statues of Apartheid leaders, to the toppling of statues in connection to *Black Lives Matter* in 2020. Although in Sweden similar demands never reached beyond the culture section of the daily press, these current monuments can be seen as directly linked to these movements; not only in what they memorialize, but also in terms of how the processes are considered and conceived. That is, how and by whom the monuments are initiated, commissioned, and potentially realized. The current manifold commissions of monuments in Sweden can thus be seen as a reaction upon the topics and demands raised and as a proactive act towards possible demands in the future. Among the monuments that are discussed, produced or recently inaugurated in Sweden are a monument over Swedish Colonialism (process between 2019–2021, discontinued), a LGBTQI+ monument in Gothenburg (inaugurated November 2023), an antiracist monument in Malmö (will be inaugurated 2025), a Seyfo memorial to the Assyrian genocide of 1915 (process between 2019–2022, discontinued),

several monuments to war veterans (from 2019-present), a handful of monuments honoring the Roma population (the most ambitious one inaugurated in Gothenburg 2020) and one celebrating 100 years of Swedish democracy (inaugurated June 2022).

**ALTHOUGH THE EXAMPLES** range from traditional monuments to experimental modes of remembrance in terms of theme, form, and conceptualization, they share a feature of shedding light on events and histories previously not present in public spaces. The oppressions and discriminations as thematized in these monuments should be considered on a structural level. The question of what it means to create such monuments must be reiterated. At the time of writing, it is one month before the dedication of the LGBTQI+ monument, *The Glade*, by Conny Karlsson Lundgren. It might pass mainly unnoticed and become part of the invisibility of an everyday public landscape or it might cause an intense debate, the two contrary poles ruling the discourse and faith of public art. But will it do something more? Will it offer some kind of apology for those who suffered under Swedish discriminatory laws or mark for contemporary citizens that such oppression is a matter of the past? Will it become a stage and a site to hang out as the design suggests? Hence, what I have aimed to show is that post-monuments like this should evoke a future-oriented rectification, repair, response or even a societal change. ✕

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