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## The Invisible and the “Matter” of Memory: A New Materialist Approach to Countermonumental Aesthetics

### Abstract

Taking a new materialist perspective, the article looks at the artistic installation entitled *2146 Stones Against Racism* (created in 1993 by Jochen Gerz in Saarbrücken, Germany) as an example of countermonumental project dedicated to the commemoration of the Shoah. The argumentation sheds light on how, by operating in material-semiotic ways and employing aesthetics of the invisible, the memorial triggers reflection on the complex processes of memory work in post-traumatic societies.

### Keywords

countermonument, Germany, Holocaust, new materialism, trauma

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### Aesthetics of memory: an introduction

Adopting different formats and subscribing to diverse discourses, practices of remembrance proliferate nowadays. Noticeably, in recent times the processes of memorialization are predominantly related to the commemoration of collective traumas: deaths, genocides, catastrophes, violence, or other atrocities. In this way, they are no longer about the celebration of historical deeds and triumphs. Rather, such events are often referred to in terms of a “difficult past,”<sup>1</sup> “undesirable heritage,”<sup>2</sup> “dissonant heritage,”<sup>3</sup> or “heritage

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<sup>1</sup> W. Logan, K. Reeves, “Introduction: Remembering Places of Pain and Shame”, [in:] *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with „Difficult Past”*, eds. W. Logan, K. Reeves, London 2009, pp. 1–14.

that hurts.”<sup>4</sup> These labels are meant to signal—in Sharon Macdonald’s words—“a heritage that the majority of the population would prefer not to have.”<sup>5</sup> Such sites constitute an important branch of the contemporary tourist industry. Although referring to sorrowful or shameful deeds, it is often both politically and culturally important to include discourses on these troubling events in public narratives and to integrate them with other historical stories, so that they constitute a part of the entire heritage of an ethnic group, regardless of their problematic nature. This phenomenon is connected to the necessity of inventing new modes of conveying knowledge about these experiences, thereby encouraging more individualized responses, alternative readings and interpretations. Such logic remains in concord with current aesthetics of memorialization, especially as far as countermonumental architectural forms and artistic structures are concerned.

Recently, a significant transformation in the ways in which memory sites are preconceived and arranged has become noticeable. Nowadays, such places tend to adopt a format that, as James E. Young suggests, invites multiple, contradictory meaning-making practices as well as inventive experiential uses.<sup>6</sup> This novel trend allows for the development and performance of different participatory practices by visitors, encouraging them to interact with the material/semiotic aspects of the site, to explore its physicality and socio-cultural context, and to experience it in singular ways. Such arrangements trigger diversified reactions and uses, offering space for individual readings and taking into account different contexts from which the visitors emerge and by which they are shaped. To put it another way, the transformation of contemporary sites of remembrance into spaces of negotiation or contestation of the institutionalized framings of historical events seems to offer visitors the possibility of a more particular response to the past as well as creating opportunities for personal “rewriting” of the taken-for-granted accounts of history. Importantly, the format that difficult heritage sites currently adopt is not intended to convey pre-determined and already widely-

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<sup>2</sup> S. Macdonald, “Undesirable Heritage: Fascist Material Culture and Historical Consciousness in Nuremberg”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2006, 12 (1), pp. 9–28.

<sup>3</sup> J. E. Tunbridge, G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage. The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester 1996.

<sup>4</sup> D. L. Uzzell, R. Ballantyne, “Heritage that Hurts: Interpretation in a Postmodern World”, [in:] *Contemporary Issues in Heritage and Environmental Interpretation*, eds. D. L. Uzzell, R. Ballantyne, London 1998, pp. 152–171.

<sup>5</sup> S. Macdonald, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven 1993.

-circulating meanings; instead, it enables and encourages a creative engagement, even though such interactions might often generate unpredictable consequences.

In order to do justice to the richness of such experiential commitments, in this article I propose to critically examine one example of countermonumental art created in the German context of the 1990s and honoring the memory of the community of German Jewry murdered by the Nazi regime. Adopting new materialist lenses, my aim is to approach the artistic installation entitled *2146 Stones Against Racism*, created by Jochen Gerz and his students in 1993, as a "material-semiotic"<sup>7</sup> or "material-discursive"<sup>8</sup> process. As such, not only does this work of art stimulate reflection on the traumatic past of the vanished ethnic group but also generates consideration of the tangled nature of memory—both collective and individual. Apart from that, a new materialist perspective allows us to capture the complicated character of the mnemonic processes, indicating the non-linearity of past, present, and future and shedding light on the complex procedures of remembering "difficult" past or integrating the "dissonant" heritage into the fabric of socio-cultural tissue.

### **New materialism and the entanglement of the semiotic and the material**

"New materialism"<sup>9</sup> has emerged as a "transversal"<sup>10</sup> philosophical tendency at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. It focuses on matter as active material, always "entangled"<sup>11</sup> with meaning with which it dynamically co-exists and which it co-forms, while being at the same time co-formed by it. New materialists define matter in terms of constant movement and productivity, or perpetual becoming. In her virtuoso attempt to figure out "how matter comes to matter," Karen Barad argues that matter and meaning are equally active and explains that "[d]iscursive practices and material phenomenon do

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<sup>7</sup> D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 14 (3), p. 593.

<sup>8</sup> K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham 2007, p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> M. DeLanda, "The Geology of Morals: A Neo-Materialist Interpretations", [online] <http://www.t0.or.at/delanda/geology.htm> [accessed: 20.09.2013].

<sup>10</sup> R. Dolphijn, I. van der Tuin, "The Transversality of New Materialism", *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2010, 21 (2), pp. 153–171.

<sup>11</sup> K. Barad, op. cit., p. 185.

not stand in a relationship of externality to each other.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, new materialism calls for a detailed examination of matter as lively and transformative and explores how material-semiotic complexity produces singular “events.” Unsatisfied with approaches developed within the so-called “linguistic turn,” new materialism points to the fact that matter is implicated in all (sometimes imperceptible) processes of meaning-making, hence the increased interest in its vibrant and continuous movements expressed recently by a significant number of scholars.<sup>13</sup> Importantly in the context of the argumentation that this article offers, the new materialist approach to art<sup>14</sup> focuses on the processes of the emergence of art as well as the handling of the material, the “material-semiotic” ontology of the work of art, and the experience of art (which is one of both matter and meaning, or materiality and context). It conceives of art in terms of aesthetic encounter triggering a profound, critical inquiry. In other words, new materialism fosters the idea of the agency of a work of art, emphasizing its material-semiotic processual unfolding.

Interestingly, new materialism also seems to remain in accordance with the recent findings on trauma and traumatic memory focusing more thoroughly on their bodily (material) and unspeakable (unrepresentable) nature.<sup>15</sup> It is often argued that memory (and especially traumatic memory) should be considered as embodied and corporeal, to a certain extent eluding processes of representational framing (that is, of meaning-making practices). This obviously translates into at least partial unspeakability or unrepresentability of traumatic experiences. Instead they should be considered as bodily-intellectual, affective-emotional, or material-semiotic. Such an understanding of trauma corresponds well with both new materialist assumptions and countermonumental aesthetics.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> See: B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, Durham 2002; *Material Feminisms*, eds. S. Alaimo, S. Hekman, Indianapolis 2008; *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. D. Coole, S. Frost, Durham 2010.

<sup>14</sup> New materialist works on art include: B. Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, New York–London 2004; idem, “Painting is Not a Representational Practice”, [in:] *Unframed: Practices and Politics of Women’s Contemporary Painting*, ed. R. Betteerton, New York–London 2004; S. O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect. Thinking Art Beyond Representation”, *Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2001, 6.3, pp. 125–135; idem, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thinking Beyond Representation*, London 2006.

<sup>15</sup> See: R. Leys, *Trauma. A Genealogy*, Chicago 2000.

However, the fact that the new materialist approach emerged as a critical reaction to the poststructuralist analytical framework does not mean that it disregards discourse theory and its meaningful achievements. Building on the accomplishments of the "linguistic turn," yet adding emphasis on materiality and matter, this philosophical ferment postulates that any study of the aesthetics of memory requires taking into consideration the context and how it shapes, and is shaped by, the material dimensions of the memorial space or event. Certainly, even though it might seem that the memory of the Shoah operates cross-culturally, it in fact functions and is used (and sometimes politically abused) in different ways related to the current cultural and social moods or challenges typical for specific geopolitical circumstances. In Germany the incorporation of the Holocaust into a public narrative is locked within the dilemma of remembering and forgetting, as it is both impossible to erase these events from the past and difficult to integrate this dissonant heritage within the accepted and widely disseminated popular discourses. Troubled by the record of World War II and the difficult times of division afterwards, German society has for many years struggled with the issue of how (if at all) to honor the victims of the Nazi regime and how to commemorate their deaths. Rather unsurprisingly, the horrendous crimes of the Third Reich have always resisted smooth incorporation into dominant public narratives, as they have tended to leave the society completely speechless, with no adequate response to such horrifying events. It would probably be easier to let these memories disappear into oblivion, yet it is not entirely feasible. Thus, as heirs to the legacy of their (grand)parents, contemporary Germans are still divided on the question of how to include the trauma experienced by Holocaust victims into the official public discourses of remembrance and how to position the deeds of perpetrators and bystanders. As such, the memorialization of these painful events in Germany, as James E. Young argues, "remains a tortured, self-reflective, even paralyzing preoccupation,"<sup>16</sup> albeit a necessary one if contemporary German society is to do justice to its shameful past.

Certainly, such a process demands careful consideration as well as requiring the adoption of adequate aesthetic means to fully embody the tangled nature of these difficult memories. This, however, poses a number of unanswerable questions. How should a nation remember the victims of the cruel and unthinkable crimes it has perpetrated? How should it acknowledge its own dreadful deeds? How should the void created after the expul-

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<sup>16</sup> J. E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today", *Critical Inquiry*, 1992, 18 (2), p. 269.

sion and extermination of German Jewry be represented? Since the shock of what was done to the victims dwells in memory as a relentless reproach that disquiets the perpetrators' descendants, Holocaust remembrance in the contemporary German context embodies intractable questions rather than delivering straightforward answers. This finds its meaningful reflection in the ways in which the Shoah is represented in contemporary memorial art, especially as far as countermonumental aesthetic strategies are concerned.

It is worth noticing that the work of memorializing these horrifying deeds has to be necessarily undertaken by those who were not part of these events themselves, and who only know them from historical accounts and testimonies, as well as from widely circulating popular (and postmemorial) discourses and narratives. Even though similar situations are also dealt with elsewhere, especially as the Holocaust gets more remote in time, in Germany the nature of this memory is radically different, as artists often face the dilemma of evoking the atrocities perpetrated by and on behalf of the same nation to which they now belong and with which they often identify. The Holocaust, consequently, remains an event inscribed forever into the heritage of the German nation, haunting its current culture and demanding adequate recognition. Therefore, whereas other societies primarily evoke discourses on victimhood and resistance as commemorative tropes, in this particular case the mnemonic strategies need to be of different character, referring to the convoluted nature of Germans' participation in World War II and addressing the intricate character of processes of remembering in a more general sense.

Apart from the struggle with challenges that the practices of recognizing the shameful past pose, German artists also face the problem of monumental aesthetics which is so typical for memorial architecture and art. Here such massive forms are loaded with fascist connotations, given the regime's well-known admiration for colossal formats and immense structures. As James E. Young reminds, "German memory-artists 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."<sup>17</sup> As such, the emergence of countermonumental aesthetics should come as no surprise. It seems that the best strategy to celebrate the fall of totalitarian regimes is to highlight the fall of their monuments<sup>18</sup> or the means of expression that their

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<sup>17</sup> Idem, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, New Haven–London 2000, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

supporters admired. Perhaps destruction itself should be perceived as the most adequate manner to commemorate destructive deeds. Or are there any other means available to those who want to evoke the genocidal events perpetrated on behalf of the whole nation? Some contemporary German memory-artists seem to struggle with finding answers to these difficult problems, pointing out that the vanishing or self-abnegating memorial sites and installations may serve as the most suitable vehicles for conveying the memory of a traumatic loss.

The indeterminate and vexed nature of the German memory of the Holocaust has translated into specific strategies of remembrance. The above-signaled shift towards "countermonumental" aesthetics<sup>19</sup> and the invention of ambiguous memorial formats count as important characteristics of this relatively recent memorial genre. Such installations often seem to reflect on the character of memory itself rather than offering narrativized interpretations of the specific events. Countermonumental aesthetics employed in the service of commemorating the Shoah in Germany seem to evoke non-existence and nothingness, or a void left after disappearance of a whole ethnic group. Such memorial spaces tend to fuel reflection on a number of difficult questions: How to represent immateriality and absence? How to do justice to erasure and loss? Is it possible for a nation to openly mourn its own victims and to dedicate space to them in the national memorial landscape? How to incorporate the guilt of an unimaginable crime into the collective memory of a nation? And, ultimately, how to embody the dreadful past in a work of art, especially considering the fact that deriving aesthetic pleasure from art evoking mass murder seems to be an ethically controversial issue?

Since remembrance and self-indictment appear to be completely at odds, countermonuments tend to avoid the certainty inscribed in monumental forms. Given the disturbing nature of the events to which they refer, such aesthetics resist the redemptory closure so typical of most standard memorial formats worldwide, which are aimed at "making sense" of past traumas or inaugurating the processes of necessary healing. Rather than offering already interpreted accounts or inviting predictable responses, countermonuments tend to ask questions and open public debates, triggering critical reflection and intense affective-emotional involvement. As such, they remain in contrast to the conventional memorial institutions (including museums and monuments) that seem to be entirely incapable of fulfilling the

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<sup>19</sup> See: idem, "The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today", op. cit.; idem, *The Texture of Memory...*, op. cit.; idem, *At Memory's Edge...*, op. cit.

needs of the tortured, angst-ridden nature of the memory of the Holocaust in Germany. “[B]razen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being”<sup>20</sup> serve as a means to both realize and express the difficult relations to the past and to stimulate consideration of the work of memory as well as how it shapes and is shaped by more contemporary contexts and circumstances. As I want to once more underline, a new materialist approach to both the analysis of these memorial sites/installations and the processes of remembering allows for a more thorough understanding of the complex material-semiotic nature of such memorial practices.

### **The invisible monument: 2146 Stones Against Racism (Jochen Gerz, 1993)**

Implementing the aesthetics of the invisible, the controversial memorial work created by Jochen Gerz and his students does not announce its presence by traditional visual forms, relying instead—in an unconventional fashion—on discreet, often unnoticeable verbal messages. Plaques reading “Place of the Invisible Memorial” (*Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmals*) are installed throughout the (memorial) space, informing passersby that there is something more to this site than what immediately meets the visitor’s eye. One needs to make an effort and find out information in order to participate in the memorial experience that offers itself to the visitors without visually manifesting the memorial’s presence. Typically for similar countermonumental installations in Germany, this space also appears to reflect on the nature of mnemonic processes, triggering serious consideration of their complex metamorphous nature. It also seems to exemplify the constant tension between the representable and the unrepresentable dimensions of traumatic memory and its material-semiotic character.

The invisible monument’s emergence was also untypical and violated a number of legal regulations and traditional rules that usually guide the process of erecting a public monument or memorial. It was neither a response to a contest nor a proposal for an official undertaking. Instead, the work of art was created clandestinely by Gerz in collaboration with art students from the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst Saar (Saar College of Visual Art) in Saarbrücken, where the artist served at that time as a visiting professor. It was an act of an uncommissioned artistic activity, performed in secret

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<sup>20</sup> Idem, “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today”, op. cit., p. 27.

and revealed to the public in an already finished (yet still invisible!) form. Given the circumstances of its creation, it could actually pass for an act of vandalism or a manifestation of resistance to the prevailing (that is, predominantly silenced or non-existent) discourses on historical shame.

Between April 1990 and May 1993 a group of students led by Jochen Gerz made an extended intervention in public space. The site for the project was carefully selected. The memorial, now called *2146 Stones Against Racism*, is situated in front of Schloss Saarbrücken, the building that in the past served as home for the Gestapo. It is located in the square where, on *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the Nazis brought and humiliated the local Jewish population. Later, in October 1940, the town's remaining Jews were deported from the same square to the South of France, and then subsequently to camps all over Europe to meet their horrendous fates. The artistic project was undertaken to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these events, as well as to do justice to the material memory of the site. The location of the "invisible memorial" is therefore undeniably tied to the painful history of the Jewish minority in Saarbrücken while its materiality bears imperceptible traces of these sorrowful events. Undertaken in secret, the artistic activity was initially completely unnoticed by anyone but those involved in this 3-year surreptitious, and in fact illegal, action. Consequently, what commenced in the private context of a classroom, as a concept for critical artistic reflection, soon turned into a successful guerrilla-style memorial project aimed at drawing meaningful connections between past, present, and future, thereby assuring evocation of the difficult past in the public space of the city. Somewhat paradoxically, the project operates in an invisible mode. The whole process, if looked at in a retrospective manner, seems to provoke reflection on how memory clandestinely dwells within the tissue of the society. It also raises questions about how the effects of memory may remain unnoticed for a long period of time while leaving inerasable traces on the socio-cultural fabric. Given its manifold character, the artistic enterprise was meant to trigger debate on German memory of the Shoah, but it also offered inspiration for the consideration of the complex nature of mnemonic processes in a more general sense: their relentless transformations and vagueness, their reliance on materiality (organic and inorganic), and their tangled material-semiotic character.

As for the artistic intervention, it emerged as an extended development combining the materiality of the space and the processing of the material with the symbolic structures and factual knowledge. It demanded a research work that had to necessarily precede the conclusion of the project and re-

quired a substantial amount of time to get finalized. At night or at opportune moments, avoiding disclosure of the complex task, one group of Gerz's students removed a great number of cobblestones from the Schloss Saarbrücken square and replaced them with temporary substitutes containing metal nails so that they could be easily found later with a metal detector. It was necessary to keep trace of the whole process so that, in a final stage of its realization, the original stones could be reinstalled in their initial locations. Another group of students was tasked with researching the names and locations of all Jewish cemeteries existing in Germany before the World War II. They were interested in identifying all the sites that were abandoned, vandalized, or destroyed during the Nazi regime with the aim of recovering memories about them. This part of the project was conducted with the generous help of Jewish communities in Germany and, eventually, a long list of 2146 sites was drawn up. Following this, the names of the cemeteries were engraved on the original cobblestones removed from the square. The historical objects were also inscribed with the date Gerz and his team had rediscovered information about the cemeteries,<sup>21</sup> so that the project offered another connection between the past and the present, that is, between the vanished sites and the recovered knowledge of their existence. Later on, the original—yet already engraved—stones were gradually, in tranches of ten-to-twenty, resituated in their previous location in front of the Saarbrücken Palace.<sup>22</sup> All the 2146 stones were, however, placed with the inscribed side facing the ground and therefore the inscriptions left on them by the group of artists remained completely invisible, as if nothing was actually changed in the original composition of the site. Thus, the artistic project stays permanently hidden from view, and exploration of the memorial character of the site is only possible for those who possess primary knowledge about the effectuated intervention. Such a strategy is completely antithetical to more conventional memorial aesthetics and points to the convoluted, and in fact subcutaneous, nature of remembering atrocities. Even though, in the course of the project's realization, the measure was made public, and the memorial was eventually approved by the state parliament and retrospectively commissioned, there is still nothing to be seen in Saarbrücken's square. Since—as a result of the approval of the memorial—the site was renamed *Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmals*, the site's official

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<sup>21</sup> See: A. Hapkemeyer, "On the Principle of Dialog in Jochen Gerz's Works for Public Spaces", [in:] *Jochen Gerz-Res Publica: Public Works 1968-99*, ed. A. Hapkemeyer, Ostfildern-New York 1999.

<sup>22</sup> The Palace currently serves as the seat of the state parliament.

designation is what signals to visitors that they are entering an unusual space. Still, they can only know the name of the site without seeing the scars the group of artists purposefully left on its deeply hidden materiality.

Although every single material trace of research performed for the fulfillment of this artistic project, the joint collaboration of artist and students, and the process of creating the memorial over a period of three years all remain concealed, the site attracts visitors by inviting them to engage in an individual memory exercise. This, however, demands certain preparation and some initial knowledge about the memorial character of the square, since, as Andrea Pinotti writes, the project is "an invisible work, a monument structurally kept out of sight in a structural sense of nonumentality."<sup>23</sup> It is hidden from view, buried underground. Yet it is still there and haunts the visitors with its non-evident and unimposing presence. Actually, the official designation of the site is the only technique used for making the invisible installation visible—the square's name announces the indiscernible presence of the memorial. Employing aesthetic strategies based on displaying nothingness, yet simultaneously leaving material traces on the stones-witnesses of the events of the Shoah, *2146 Stones Against Racism* constitutes an antithesis of more traditional memorials employing insolent monumental aesthetics. Similarly to museums or exhibitions, it draws on original objects (that is, the cobblestones) that "participated" in the commemorated dreadful events. It also inscribes them with symbolic meanings (by adding the names of the vanished cemeteries). Yet—in contrast to most memorial institutions—it keeps these material-semiotic traces discreet and hidden, so that in a sense they simultaneously are and are not there. Such an artistic format evokes disappearance itself. Moreover, and rather untypically for more conventional sites of remembrance, Gerz's work of art does not convey any straightforward message or narrative. Instead, it is a memorial site to be walked over, reflected upon, and negotiated individually by each passerby. As Mark Callaghan notices, "The conditions found in *The Place of the Invisible Monument* create this opportunity for personal imaginative authorship of one's own memory-work that, like Gerz's version, remains internal, concealed."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. Pinotti, *Mnemonsyne and Amnesia, Social Memory and the Paradoxes*, [in:] *Socioaesthetics: Ambiance—Imaginary*, eds. A. Michelsen, F. Tygstrup, Leiden–Boston 2015, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> M. Callaghan, "Speak Out: Invisible Past, Invisible Future: A German's Alternative response to the Holocaust", [online] [http://www.arttimesjournal.com/speakout/Nov\\_Dec\\_10\\_Callaghan%20/Nov\\_Dec\\_10\\_Callaghan.html](http://www.arttimesjournal.com/speakout/Nov_Dec_10_Callaghan%20/Nov_Dec_10_Callaghan.html) [accessed: 13.03.2016].

Importantly, the site also triggers reflection on the operations of memory itself, especially as it concerns a difficult heritage. This invisible, in fact subterranean, memorial space seems to embody the compound nature of the processes of remembering the traumatic, shameful past. It alludes to the complex entanglement of the unrepresentable and the representable, or the narrative and the bodily, that is, a mixture of procedures that form together a multidimensional set of information stored in the representational-corporeal memory, translating into a complex recollection of the traumatic event. The memorial character of the site is in fact inscribed into its deep and hidden materiality, which, nevertheless, cannot be accessed through visual means. It remains subcutaneous, enfleshed, etched in the materiality of the place, yet—in fact—its physical traces or material wounds could not be easily narrated in visual terms. There is not straightforward, unconstrained access to them, even for those who actually know what is hidden underground. Such an aesthetic strategy is likely to question the very possibility of building memorials to the atrocious events as well as testifying to the impossibility of expressing traumatic experiences, to making sense of them, and passing knowledge of them to others via representational means. At the same time, however, these traces, through the creation of the memorial, have been reintegrated back into the fabric of the everyday life of the city, invisibly documenting its history and bearing testimony to the merciless destruction of a great part of the legacy of German Jewish culture. Seemingly erased from the tissue of the local community, they remain present in a subterranean manner, engraved forever in the material texture of the site. In other words, the inscribed cobblestones constitute a vanishing monument to vanished people, signaling an irreparable loss, a disappearance of a whole ethnic group. It seems that this great loss left an incurable wound in the composition of the city's population—one that is present and absent at once.

Employing a new materialist approach, it may be argued that the memorial exemplifies a compound entanglement of the material and the semiotic. The existence of the invisible memorial discreetly announces itself through the appellation of the place and activates visitors' "becoming." The meaningful name, encountered visually, prompts an always-singular process of memory work, shaped by the individual contexts of the passersby. In this way, the scarred materiality of the square's cobblestones is transformed into representational meanings, conveying a sense of the irrevocable ephemerality of constant material-semiotic unfolding, or of metamorphous transformation that never leaves the affecting/affected bodies completely unaltered. Certainly, the carefully selected information on cemeteries was "artificially"

added to their historical materiality, but in fact they—as witnesses—“remember” the commemorated traumatic events anyway. It seems that the artistic intervention into their materiality was meant to make visitors aware of the constant becoming of materiality that keeps record of the passing events. These traces, however, remain invisible to observers (as much as those effectuated by Gerz’s team). By adding the representational, yet invisible, layer to the site, the artist seems to refer to the imperceptible marks left by any encounter on the surfaces of the involved bodies (both organic and inorganic), testifying to their complex histories and trajectories. The realization of these processes encourages reflection on how to think about these tangled memories in times of postmemory, where contemporary relations to such traumatic events exist solely in the ways their histories and details have been passed to subsequent generations.<sup>25</sup> This procedure makes them necessarily mediated and infused with widely circulating codes and meanings, which never do justice to their complex character. It seems to suggest that trauma cannot be captured within any purely narrative structure but that it is destined to remain partly hidden, engraved deeply in the texture of the affected bodily materiality, as a trace that shapes the body, yet never fully actualizes on a purely representational level.

## Conclusion

Concealed underground and embodying a trajectory of disappearance as well as the vagueness of memory, this buried monument seems to “commemorate absence” and its own “passing in oblivion.”<sup>26</sup> Through counter-monumental means, the commemorated loss gets discreetly smuggled into the here and now. Memorial’s representational dimension is reduced to a concise form of modest narration, which activates a material-semiotic process of memorial work. Realized through “the artistic choice of physical disappearance of the visual image from the viewers’ field of perception,”<sup>27</sup> Gerz’s work exemplifies a self-thematizing memorial that debates the diffi-

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<sup>25</sup> See: M. Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, *Poetics Today*, 2008, 29 (1), pp. 103–128.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kear, “Spectres of the Past, Inhabitations of the Present: Jochen Gerz and the Problem of Commemoration”, [in:] *Memories and Representations of War: The Case of World War I and World War II*, eds. E. Lamberti, V. Fortunati, Amsterdam–New York 2009, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> L. Aceti, “The War Shaped Identities: Destruction as Cultural Inheritance”, [in:] *Transition: Cultural Identities in the Age of Transnational and Transcultural Flux*, ed. H. Black, Ekaterinburg 2008, p. 31.

culties inherent in public commemoration. Such self-abnegating formats, in Henry Pickford's words, "do not provide a convenient closure of universal reconciliation, [but] do provide another kind of closure, that of historical causality and agency,"<sup>28</sup> pointing to the transience of the ever-incomplete task of remembrance, especially when a difficult, traumatic past is concerned. *2146 Stones Against Racism* embodies the dynamics of remembering embedded in the narrative-corporeal memory. Combining the intimate (the material) and the monumental (the semiotic), it is a memorial about memory itself. By finding means for speaking against the imposition of a single code of remembrance, Gerz puts the established meanings at risk, favoring a format that stimulates discussion about memory work itself as well as the troubled processes of incorporating Germany's difficult heritage into the consciousness of contemporary socio-cultural life.

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