A visitor to Harburg (a suburb of Hamburg) seeking the Mahnmal gegen Faschismus (Monument Against Fascism) by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev Gerz will find no more than an informative plaque – a text explaining the project and nine small images of its realisation. The plaque is situated next to a shaft, into which the monument, a column faced with lead sheeting, was progressively sunk in eight stages during the six years of its realisation between 10th October 1986 and 10th November 1993. Above, there is an empty plaza. This is not so much an absence in place of a monument, but more an empty place as monument, corresponding to the lack of place which this history – the history of fascism – had in German post-war public discourse. The column itself is as buried in its shaft, and will remain there, to recall the burying, so to speak, of the history it sought to represent. Today, as members of the generation which participated in fascism have for the most part died, memories of that period are more admissible to public debate. Distance in time allows renewed attention, safely beyond the scope of living memory, reliant on the excavation of the few texts written of the time, or of the material contained – buried, as it were – in such archives as survive.

The explicit subject-matter of the monument is fascism, as dominated Germany from 1933 to 1945. But the context of Hamburg is of particular interest for other reasons. It is a city undergoing redevelopment today, trading on an older history as a port in the Hanseatic League; and it was, in July 1943\(^1\), the site of area bombing, in which the old city centre was completely destroyed. Memories of fascism are inevitably inflected by this history of extreme destruction, and the ambivalence of responsibility and victim status implicit in its remembrance.

THE MONUMENT

The Monument Against Fascism was commissioned by the municipality of Harburg-Hamburg after lengthy debate and a public hearing at which the artists were selected.

It is sited near the S-Bahn station and a shopping precinct, hence in a site with a high level of public use. Such an intervention, with its uncomfortable historical references, might have been expected to arouse controversy. It takes the form of a twelve-metre high, one-metre square column, weighing seven (metric) tons, faced in lead sheeting. As well as the column, there were two styluses made in steel with which members of the public were invited to sign the monument, as endorsement of its purpose. The invitation stated:
"We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here next to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site will be empty. In the end it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."2

As an area was filled, the monument was lowered into its shaft to allow a clear space for further endorsement.

THE PASTS REFERENCED

To be clear, this is not a memorial to the victims of fascism; it is a monument against fascism, located in the present (the mid 1980s onwards) and not in the past to which it relates. That past is seen through the window of the present, of the moment in which the monument appeared – arousing controversy beyond the artists’ expectation. If the monument’s implied meaning is that fascism should not return and that such a return is prevented by agency of the publics endorsing the monument, still vigilant, in a Europe of migrations and contested urban identities and rights to space, this proved more problematic than at first imagined. Yet in seeking vigilance against the return of fascism the monument is inevitably a reminder of that history which a generation of Germans worked so hard mentally to forget, and which was replaced by the post-war rebuilding of the city.

It seems more difficult to find appropriate signs, or to issue appropriate invitations, for present vigilance than to mark the histories of victims. The latter tends to generalising abstraction but the former requires an uncomfortable recognition that many ordinary Germans were complicit, even active in, the rise of fascism in the 1930s, and in anti-semitism. As an industrialised machine for the annihilation of difference, the fascist state required management by an elite (often given to mysticism). It also required operation at all levels and on a daily basis; this included, for example, the drafting of schedules for trains to Auschwitz, provision of crews for such trains, normal signalling arrangements, and the use of normal tracks and stations along the route eastwards (and for the empty return westwards). Mass participation in fascism is the buried history to which the buried monument alludes. It was a real history which did not immediately go away after 1945.3 But it has little presence in German post-war literature. As W. G. Sebald writes on responses to his lectures on the bombing of German cities in the 1940s, “[…] if those born after the war were to rely solely on the testimony of writers, they would scarcely be able to form any idea of the extent, nature and consequences of the catastrophe […]”4 Sebald references area bombing, but argues that the lack of literature on it reflects not only an absence of precise accounts from refugees who were too traumatised to give them, but also on an ambivalence in as much as to remember the bombing is to remember the war in which it occurred, and the role of the fascist state in producing it. Sebald writes, “The quasi-natural reflex, engendered by feeling of shame and a wish
to defy the victors, was to keep quiet and look the other way.”5 Or, as Hans Erich Nossack writes, “Since we no longer believe in ourselves, what are we still? Hollowed out by a night of depravity. So let’s not speak of upright gait and creating!”6 Having said all this, it should be noted in context that Harburg, as a suburb, was bombed only once while the city centre was erased.7

The linked histories of fascism and the war are more easily investigated today, when, for instance, a person who was 20 when Hitler came to power in 1933 would be 97 (at the time of publication) or 90 when the monument in Harburg was completed by its disappearance underground. Present-day Germans are not responsible for the actions of their grandparents, and have realised they do not need to be. But a generational shift is not the only change in the conditions in which the monument is received. Another factor acts to draw a line under the pasts of destruction, war and fascism. The Berlin Wall was dismantled three years after the monument first appeared, to mark out the years from then on as distanced from those before, casting acts of non-remembering in a new light, overtaken by a narrative of German unification which could not be voiced between 1945 and 1989. As it happens, Deutschland was written on the West face of the Wall, in the early period of such graffiti.

There was, too, a shift in the genre of the monument. In the 1950s and 1960s, abstract sculptures in the West represented freedom, counter to Socialist Realism in the East bloc. Graffiti, too, was co-opted to the project – even commissioned for the West side of the Wall in the mid 1980s (from New York artist Keith Haring, for example). The West face of the Wall became almost a monument by other means, appropriated in the political framework of the West. Fragments of the Wall are now displayed in New York and Austin (Texas) as trophies of the Cold War.

Like the West face of the Wall, the Monument Against Fascism offers a blank space, a void in which to endorse or react otherwise to its appeal for a concept of freedom. The issues, however, are more complex than could be suggested by a simple dualism of a free West and an un-free East. In 1980s Germany, for instance, the presence of guest workers raised other concerns, and an uncomfortable resonance with buried histories of the 1930s. To evoke such resonances was not the stated aim of the artists, but, as I explain below, to encompass them in the performative reality of the monument in its six-year process of realisation was unavoidable. I want to dwell now on two specific and overlapping aspects of the monument in Harburg: the element of participation in its completion (its burial); and the (to me necessary) blankness of its surface, its non-contribution to representation of the histories it cites. I deal with these aspects together rather than concurrently because they seem intertwined.

Before that, I look to another project by Jochen Gerz, in Sarrbrücken. This also references the buried history of fascism in a (literally) buried form, but its production entailed a more limited form of participation.
While the Harburg monument was gradually being sunk into its shaft, in 1990, Gerz and a team of students from the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Saarbrücken began work on Steine-Mahnmal gegen Rassismus (2146 Stones: Monument Against Racism). The work began without funding or permission to use its city-centre public site, and took around a year to complete; after a further two years of bureaucratic process it was commissioned retrospectively by the city authorities. The work occupies the paving of the square outside Saarbrücker Schloss, now the seat of the provincial parliament but previously used as an assembly point for Jewish deportations in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a monument both against racism in general and, in view of its historically loaded site, against the racism which was a prelude to annihilation in the 1930s and 1940s.

Working with Jewish organizations, Gerz and his team collected data for inscription on the under-surface of 2146 stones, one for each Jewish cemetery in Germany prior to 1933. The stones were excavated, inscribed and replaced at night. Nothing is visible of the inscriptions (but their position is recorded). In most cases, little or nothing is visible of most of the cemeteries, either. Absence, or concealed traces, are the appropriate signs for a history of erasure taken here as a history of the consequences of racism as it occurred in a previous, specific history. But in this case there was no wider public participation as in Harburg, only that of students as guerrilla monument-makers. The victims by definition cannot participate, apart from the distance of years, and the need for secrecy in the absence of permissions prevented any wider appeal for volunteers. This monument can be read as complementing the column in Harburg, in context of other projects in which Gerz has worked with specific publics on memorial projects (for example, in Biron, France in 1995-1996). Following the monument’s retrospective authorisation by the city, the square was renamed Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmal (Square of the Invisible Monument).

The project in Harburg, in contrast, required participation; for the artists, it is through the vigilance of individuals that fascism will not return — in a Europe where the far Right has had several minor resurgences and the end of state socialism has released reactionary nationalisms. This raises a question as to how monuments function, in particular whether a monument against an excess of power can use (or must instead refuse) the traditional alignment of the form of the monument with the maintenance of power, as in the depiction of ruling elites in durable materials such as stone or bronze. Power uses narratives of selective pasts to which a present regime can be made to seem a natural successor. When such narratives are represented by members of a ruling elite, or by historical characters claimed as their antecedents, on plinths, then citizens are required literally to look up to them. The use of borrowed classicism, too, and a grandiose scale, lends monuments a supposedly timeless appearance, as if the narrative in question is outside time (which is the dimension of historical change). Against such static representation and the impression of permanence, the monument in Harburg is performative and ephemeral. It declines the framework of
a conventional public monument (or public art), to intervene instead in a realm of debate which is both public, in that it is shared, and private, in that what is shared begins in personal reflection on events. Helga Pakasaar writes, "In Gerz’s interactive works, notions of the private as a place of differences and of the public as a unified, homogenous sphere of privilege get turned upside down."9

The vocabulary of recollection runs out in the case of a monument against fascism – a history too excessive for representation by normal means. Similarly, there is no evident way to viably represent the Holocaust. The familiar photograph of the tracks leading to the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau has become a memorial by other means, as has the term Auschwitz itself when it stands for the whole and diverse history of annihilation. Sculptural monuments to the Holocaust, when attempted, often take the form of a blank slab of stone. The one overtly modernist attempt is the architectural practice BBPR Group’s Monument for the Victims of the Concentration Camps10 in Milan (1945-1955). A constructivist-style cubic grid stands on a base of stone in the shape of a Greek Cross; in the centre of the cross is an urn containing earth from the camp at Mauthausen, encircled by wire. It is a strange mix of styles and perhaps only adds to the argument that representation of the Holocaust is beyond the means of art. Yet it matters to keep memories alive lest it happen again.

Similarly, after the 1914-1918 war in Europe, described as the war to end all wars, the national monument to the dead, in Britain as in France, was defined as the tomb of an unknown soldier – a blank slab. At first a temporary commission made in wood, the Cenotaph designed by Edwin Lutyens for London was re-made in Portland Stone and permanently sited in Whitehall as the site of annual rites of remembrance.11 This non-figurative tradition contrasts with, and I think shows the banality of, continuing efforts at representation such as Felix de Weldon’s US Marine Corps Memorial Monument (1954) at Arlington Cemetery, Virginia, derived from Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of marines hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima in 1945. The photograph, actually, depicted a re-staging of the event for the

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Fig. 4. Jochen Gerz, Monument Against Fascism, Harburg. 1986. Photo of the site in 2010. Photo: the author
photographer's benefit, its second-hand quality reiterated in the naturalistic rendering of the (two-dimensional, black-and-white) image.

The history of fascism also defies representation. This is why, in the 1980s, a number of artists adopted buried forms for monuments to that history. In 1988, for example, Horst Hoheisel designed a buried fountain in Kassel to commemorate – in an inversely reiterated form – the earlier fountain donated by the Jewish Ashcroft family, destroyed by the Nazis in 1939. The new form was built, and displayed for a week, before being sunk into the ground. Hoheisel explains, “The pyramid will be turned into a funnel into whose darkness waters run down [...].”12

The difficulty remains that the history of German fascism is not one likely to produce an immediate or easy response when it is referenced in a public monument. To invert the form neatly alludes to a buried history, as said above, and offers an innovative way in which to seek engagement. As Gerz writes,

“Monuments against fascism [...] arouse no sense of identification among the broader public. The content [...] of a memorial – even when perceived as a provocation – [does not] derive from the free choice of the commissioner or the artist, [...] [but is] an echo of the human vitality of which the memorial is supposed to remind us. The inconceivability of the social developments of the twentieth century [...] stands in crass contrast to the memorials that refer to them. As opposed to the idea of the achievement of permanence [...] we deploy the idea of a different function [...] permanence is “sacrificed” [...] The population of Harburg [...] cause the monument to disappear. the visible becomes invisible, the memorial turns into memory [...]”13

Andreas Hapkemeyer writes that the monument in Harburg was Gerz’ first to use dialogue – defined as exchanges between equals – to hand over the authorship of a work, in search of resolution (rapprochement). The lead-lined stele became “locus of an animated and sometimes aggressive discussion [...] someone even fired bullets against it.”14

To accept the artists’ invitation to sign the monument in Harburg was to endorse its agency in making visible – inversely by invisibility – the need to remember fascism, thereby preventing its return. For Gerz, “Either the monument “works” – the initiative of the population renders it superfluous – or it remains a monument to its not having worked, as a meaningless ornament.”15 But an unforeseen effect was that the monument provoked racist graffiti. It worked in that its surface became obliterated. The issue, however, was not resolved in a dark reminder of the racism which was one element of German fascism. Neither the commissioners nor the artists had bargained for such an excess of participation. Gerz is cited elsewhere, “we will one day reach the point where anti-fascist memorials will no longer be necessary, when vigilance will be kept alive by the invisible pictures of remembrance.”16 Yet the monument drew out a new racism against guest workers, set within a long European tradition of distrust of foreigners and hatred of certain groups, since the first ghetto for strangers (including Jews) in Venice in the late medieval period.

For Hannah Arendt, isolation was for Jews in Germany in the 1930s preparation for their annihilation, while without the perceptions of others no mature sense of self is possible, and its lack is painful.17 There is no vocabulary in which to state this. It is not a matter of the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz – though Adorno’s remark on the subject in his essay Cultural Criticism and Society refers to literary criticism18 – but of the inability of art to convey this pain authentically. As Adorno writes of Paul Celan’s poetry,

“[His] poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings [...] The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning.”19

But, the Monument Against Fascism is not a vehicle of remembrance, but a real-time intervention which drew out racism and re-opened questions as to how a society forms and enacts its collective values, and
the contested senses of belonging involved in that. There were signatures as the artists had requested, and lovers’ names, anarchist signs, alongside the hate messages. James Young notes that the artists were initially shocked, and gives his own impression in a breathless prose:

“illegible scribble of name scratched over names, all covered over in a spaghetti scrawl […] People had come at night to scrape over all the names, even to try to pry the lead plating off the base […] swastikas also began to appear: how better to remember what happened than by the Nazi’s own sign?”

Gerz seeks to bring society’s conflict into visibility. Gerz adapts the form of a stele to offer people who disagree space in which to mark their discord. It is not like the tombs of unknown soldiers “saturated with ghostly national imaginings” which “[…] loom out of an immemorial past.” as Benedict Anderson describes them, but an undoing of the form of the monument to deny its heritage, to realise by unforeseen means an aim stated in the 1960s by Joseph Beuys:

“My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture […] They should provoke thoughts about
what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone.”

At Harburg the concept of sculpture merges into that of the monument (Mahnmal), to refuse the unity and historical trajectory which are the monument’s standard content. Instead, it reminds local people and visitors that fascism was produced by individuals at all social levels, and is not entirely encapsulated in the past.

Notes

3 The author had a conversation in 2003 with German artist Herman Prigan, who remembered as a child in Geselnkirchen in the Ruhr seeing his parents and friends secretly dressed in Nazi uniforms, singing the old songs.
5 Ibid., p. 30; Sebald cites the Swedish journalist Stig Dagerman, who rode by train through the ruins in 1946 – a journey of fifteen minutes – that no-one looked out of the windows, that “he was identified as a foreigner himself because he looked out.” Ibid., p. 31.
11 Ibid., pp. 77-92; Michalski notes that, in the 1920s, "hundreds of written messages" were left at the base of the Cenotaph, often without flowers or wreaths. He concludes, "it seems appropriate to reflect deeply on the cultic implications of nonfiguration." Ibid., p. 80.
13 Jochen Gerz, 1999, p. 34.
15 Ibid.
16 Gerz cited in James Young, 1993, p. 60.
20 James Young, 1993, p. 35.
23 Ibid., p. 11.

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Neįmanomas prisiminimas – *Harburgo antifašistinis monumentas* (Jochenas ir Esther Shalev Gerzai, 2009)

Reikšminiai žodžiai: monumentas, memorialas, fašizmas, rasizmas, graffiiti, viešoji atmintis.

Santrauka

Antifašistinis monumentas (Mahnmal gegen Faschismus), sukurtas Jochen Gerzo ir Esther Shalev Gerz Harburge (Hamburgo priemiestyje, Vokietijoje) 1986–1993 metais, tai 12 metrų švino puotę su pravdziojo kolona, susmedusi į tuščią plyšį po aikštele. Viskas, ką dabar galime matyti, tai tekstas, kuriame aškinamas projektas ir devyni atvaizdai, fiksuo-