

**“A monument cannot fight fascism. That is something we must do ourselves.”  
—Esther Shalev-Gerz**

How do we engage with history and memory? What forms can collective memory take? Is a visible, warning presence necessary for remembrance, or can empty spaces be even more powerful?

In 1986, Esther Shalev-Gerz (b. 1948) and Jochen Gerz (b. 1940) installed an unusual *Monument Against Fascism* in Hamburg-Harburg. Rather than asserting itself through an imposing presence, the monument became renowned for its radical use of absence, combined with participatory strategies.

The following text appeared on an invitation installed next to the monument:

“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 end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.”

Today, only the top of the stele remains visible; a partially glazed door in an underpass offers a glimpse of the underground portion of the monolith. The architectural housing of the monument has recently been restored and reintroduced into Hamburg’s public consciousness through a performance and a city walk in the presence of Esther Shalev-Gerz.

Anne Simone Kiesiel spoke with the artist about monuments, the potential of absence, and a different kind of memory.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: When we think of memorials, we usually expect monumental structures that inspire silent reverence. Your design for Hamburg, by contrast, is defined by its apparent physical absence. All that remains of the 12-meter stele is a square embedded in the ground. How did this transformation in form come about?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** When Jochen Gerz and I began discussing the commission for the Monument Against Fascism, I did not want to make a monument at all. I was born in Lithuania under Russian occupation and grew up surrounded by large, immobile monuments. Later, in Israel, heavy Holocaust memorials were part of my everyday landscape. My deep desire was for monuments to disappear, and we developed the project from that starting point.

We wanted to propose another way of creating a place for reflection and for experiencing the act against fascism. The Monument was designed to change through the participation of the public. Over eight years, it was gradually lowered into the ground until it completely disappeared, leaving the site empty.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: How can this different form of remembrance take shape?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** For me, it is primarily about participation. In the Hamburg Monument, people sign their names. Whatever they write, the act of signing creates a new, personal

memory. That new memory is the most important element. Even those who do not participate directly are prompted to think about the work.

In most of my projects, I invite people to participate in different ways, because through participation we create new memories together. I believe that today, participation is a new form of being—more significant than loyalty or belonging.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: How do you understand memory, then? Is it shaped more by the present than by the past? Are there other aspects than time that have an impact on memory ?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** Memory is the embodiment of absence—the representation of what is invisible, disappearing, fleeting. It is the construction of emptiness, the negative of presence.

When we speak of memory, we assume we know what we mean, but memory is deeply personal and also personal in time. What is happening in the world when we talk about memory? In many places, memory is not permitted in the way we conceive it.

Our unconscious, shaped by life and experience, plays a central role. Yet I believe we live in a constant present. Even distant experiences are activated in the now. It is the present that shapes what we call memory—how we engage with a subject and how it gains agency.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: And also public...**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** Yes. The text of the Monument Against Fascism invites people to sign in public space, meaning that the act is witnessed by others. Usually, when you sign a document, you are indoors and private. Here, discomfort and estrangement are important, because they create movement and dynamism.

Acting in public space requires trust—trust in the artwork and trust in oneself. Trust is essential in art. Inviting people to trust art encourages them to trust themselves. The Monument slowly disappears to convey a simple truth: a monument cannot fight fascism. Only people can.

This is the core idea—to engage people, to remind them that they have the power not only to create new memories, but perhaps to shape future ones. Without people acting, the Monument can do very little. Over eight years, around sixty thousand people touched the Monument in one way or another, making it vanish.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: Traditional monuments often commemorate something violent or tragic. Could the Monument Against Fascism also be understood as a monument *for* the public—for trust in people's own power?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** When dealing with violent subjects, the art is to confront violence without reenacting it in the representation. This is essential to my work. It allows for new forms for a monument that is created and activated with the public as it is done for the public. In this way, the monument does not carry the weight of passive memory.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: As in your video installation *Between Listening and Telling: Last Witnesses, Auschwitz 1945–2005*?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** Yes. In 2005, I worked with testimonies from sixty Holocaust survivors. They were filmed responding to questions : what did you do in the war, before the war and after ? Alongside these unedited testimonies, I presented a second video composed only of the silences —the pauses when they think and remember before formulating their words.

James E. Young wrote after watching the installation : “Shalev-Gerz shows us not only the profound space between listening and telling but also the untraversable space between a survivor’s memory and a verbal testimony. It is almost as if once verbalized such memory is no longer the survivor’s memory but now only our own.” I find this formulation very beautiful, because it captures what I seek in art: I want to make art that activates and expands the field of expression in the deepest meaning of it.

A transmission takes place in the empty space—between silence and speech, between the artwork and the viewer, between the artist and the public. This emptiness is full of intention, promise, and memory. Creating such spaces in art is difficult, but when they are offered, they become active.

Silence, in this sense, is not the absence of meaning. It is the moment in which lived experience—no longer just words—is transmitted as life itself.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: Nevertheless of the potential of the empty space did the people in Hamburg lose their memories. Nearly 30 years after the installation was the monument in a desolate state and people had to recover it. Is memory crumbling in the last decades? Or is it a sign of a city-politics, that does not take enough care of their cultural heritage?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** The maintenance of artworks in public space is always a complex issue, as there is rarely a single individual or authority truly responsible for these diverse and often fragile sites. In the case of the Monument Against Fascism, memory is primarily carried by each person who participated—by those who signed or wrote on its surface. Whether one actively took part or merely witnessed the act, this experience becomes part of one’s personal memory as a citizen.

I believe that the creation of the role of a city curator is a positive step. It allows the city to better understand the significance and quality of the monuments installed in public space, and to restore them in a way that is both historically and artistically sensitive. Such care is essential for maintaining these works into the future, especially in a city like Hamburg, which holds a remarkable and diverse collection of public artworks.

**Anne Simone Kiesiel: What could be done in the future to keep people activated by your monument?**

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** What is striking about this Monument, inaugurated in 1996, is that it continues to provoke interest among researchers, philosophers, urban planners, poets, and artists. I receive one or two requests every week for photographs of the Monument or for interviews about it. People continue to write about it because the idea itself keeps it alive.

The Monument proposes a different understanding of what a monument can be. It introduces movement, transformation, participation, and absence—elements that stimulate curiosity,

creativity, and thought. It is precisely these qualities that keep people engaged and allow the monument to remain active, even in its physical disappearance.