

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:        *THE WRAPPED REICHSTAG AND MEMORIAL FOR THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE: SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH CONTEMPORARY MONUMENTS IN POST-REUNIFICATION BERLIN*

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The proliferation of memory-sites following the reunification of Germany in 1990 was a testament to the great need of that nation for contextualizing and comprehending its recent traumatic histories. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag Project for Berlin*, and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jew of Europe* are two monuments whose visual forms and conceptual narratives offer answers to the question of how to represent, complicate, and perpetuate memory through monument forms. Yet an analysis of the public reception and comprehension of these two works and the dialogues constructed around their realizations shows that in many ways each of these monuments falls short of its conceptual goals. In this thesis I will question whether an effective and appropriate contemporary monument to Germany's traumatic past is even possible, suggesting that often those elements that make up a successful monument are also the ones that provide for its failings.

*THE WRAPPED REICHSTAG AND MEMORIAL FOR THE MURDERED JEWS OF  
EUROPE: SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH CONTEMPORARY MONUMENTS IN  
POST-REUNIFICATION BERLIN*

by

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In 1996, the French artist Sophie Calle walked around East Berlin photographing the empty areas that monuments had once occupied (Figure 1). She asked passersby to recount their memories about these missing monuments, and placed these stories alongside her images of the empty spaces. The compiled book of these excavations was titled “The Detachment/Die Entfernung: A Berlin Travel Guide,” and was the subject of Matthew Griffin’s review, “Undoing Memory.”<sup>1</sup> Griffin voices the thrust of Calle’s argument—one that will become familiar to the reader through the discussion of the two works in this thesis:

Calle’s book broaches concerns about memorials on two levels: how does Germany remember events it would rather forget, and how does it build a new and just state on the memory of its crimes? Sophie Calle’s provocative answer to these questions makes up her book’s allure: only the unfinished memorial can guarantee that these questions will continue to be asked.<sup>2</sup>

## **I. Introduction**

In his book *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, James Young discusses what he perceives to be some of the problems with monuments and their ability to actively reference the past. “On a more general level,” Young writes, “we might ask of all memorials what meanings are generated when the temporal realm is converted to material form, when time collapses into space, a trope by which it is then measured and grasped.”<sup>3</sup> According to Young, what often happens with is that the historical moments are frozen into stone symbols that call attention away from the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Griffin, “Undoing Memory,” review of *The Detachment/Die Entfernung: A Berlin Travel Guide* by Sophie Calle, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22 (May 2000): 168-170.

<sup>2</sup> Griffin, “Undoing Memory,” 170.

<sup>3</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 15.



multifaceted realities of history. Young wishes that “instead of allowing the past to rigidify in its monumental forms, we would vivify memory through the memory-work itself—whereby events, their recollection, and the role monuments play in our lives remain animate, never completed.”<sup>4</sup> In another, more recent of his books, Young discusses the potential danger of representing memory in static form: “The monument displaces [public memory] altogether, supplanting a community’s memory-work with its own material form. It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.”<sup>5</sup> But, in his book, Young also discusses several monuments that he believes to overcome the tendency towards stasis and forgetting. Given Young’s careful analysis of the problems plaguing contemporary monuments and memorials today, this thesis seeks to question whether successful monuments can truly exist.

Traditional monuments, as defined by Young, incorporate specific symbols or imagery, which do not allow for the complexities and fragments of memory and history.<sup>6</sup> The most pervasive example of the traditional monument would perhaps be the idealized depiction of a war hero on a horse. This type of monument gives the public only one way of remembering the memorialized figure: as heroic and deserving of praise, often to the exclusion of those who served with him or those he may have killed along the way. As

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 94.

<sup>6</sup> I am adopting Young’s categories of traditional and non-traditional monuments in order to impose a clearer structure on my thesis. By using Young’s definition of a traditional monument, I provide a rubric against which to measure the two monuments I discuss. This method unfortunately does not allow for the possibility that some traditional-type monuments may actually function in ways more like non-traditional monuments. Still the categories are useful here, to help present a clearer argument.

James Young suggests, we as a public are generally content to simplify our memory of the past through the calcified versions of history cultivated by our monuments. The traditional monument, then, is one that allows memory of the past to remain at rest within the monument's stone form, a form that is easily forgotten and dismissed.

Robert Musil has said, "There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention."<sup>7</sup> Young argues that,

This 'something' is the essential stiffness monuments share with all other images: as a likeness necessarily vitrifies its otherwise dynamic referent, a monument turns pliant memory to stone... For monuments at rest like this—in stasis—seem to present themselves as eternal parts of the landscape, as naturally arranged as nearby trees or rock formations.<sup>8</sup>

But the agitation of memory is particularly important when the untold and unremembered fragments of history are in large part what need to be revived. In order for a more truthful history to be remembered, it must be constantly revisited, and never consolidated. This idea was particularly important for a post-reunification Germany struggling to understand its past. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the coming to terms with—or as Steve Crawshaw suggests, a 'wrestling down of'—the Nazi or Cold War past has been an important concept since the reunification.<sup>9</sup> The ubiquity of the idea of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* suggests that Germany needed a different kind of memory-site—one that encouraged the public to struggle endlessly, rather than giving them a sole

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Musil, "Monuments," in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Hygiene, Colo., 1987), 61; quoted in James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Young, *Texture of Memory*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Crawshaw, *Easier Fatherland: Germany and the Twenty-First Century* (London: Continuum, 2004), 191. Crawshaw suggests this definition as a way of more fully incorporating the "hint of force" inherent in the etymology of the word.

viewpoint on which to rest their understanding of the past. This thesis concerns itself with the form and structure that those kinds of monuments have taken in two important cases: the *Wrapped Reichstag* and the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe*.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's and Peter Eisenman's works provoke questions concerning how to represent, complicate, and perpetuate memory through monument forms. Though their monuments address different specific topics, each provides a unique and thoughtful way to memorialize difficult pasts. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin* (Figure 2) addressed many periods of Germany's history including the Holocaust and the Cold War, and used the Reichstag building as a representative for national complicity during these times. Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Figure 3) deals specifically with the Holocaust, the remembrance of which is essential in order to keep history from repeating itself. These artists attempted to construct spaces through which the viewer was encouraged to vivify the past and make it an active part of the present.

In the 1995 realization of the *Wrapped Reichstag*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude completely enveloped Germany's Reichstag building in fabric. The artists used a metallic silver colored fabric that they draped over the building and held in place by a vibrant blue rope. In veiling the building Christo and Jeanne-Claude hoped to allow the viewers to see the realities of the past that had been ignored and pushed aside in favor of the building's nationalist symbolism. Thus they transformed this symbol of nationhood into a more complicated space of reflection and remembering. The Reichstag has always been important to the definition of Germany, but has also seen the Nazi rise to power, a Soviet occupation, and a vicious and bloody division of a nation. Christo and Jeanne-

Claude responded to the traumatic and violent history of the Reichstag by cloaking the building to force the public to interact with the fragmented memory of Germany's dark past.

In May 2005, Peter Eisenman realized his design for the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. The overall design of the memorial is a grid made of pillars of various heights. These pillars are hard and blank; they are simply gray slabs of smoothed concrete. Yet the hardness of the monument is subtly eased by the soft undulation of the ground. This wave-like visual quality is reflected in the patterning of the pillars themselves, when seen in an aerial view (Figure 3). In Eisenman's memorial the viewer is meant to experience the work phenomenologically by walking through the pillars. The reunification of Germany and the fall of the Berlin wall made available the space for the monument, which is located on the boundary line that once divided Berlin into two cities. The history of the site associates the memorial's meaning with the reunification of Germany, and its prior division. The site, then, connects the horrors of the residual consequences of the Third Reich to the Holocaust memorial, adding another layer to visitor's engagement with the past experienced while visiting the memorial.

These works represent quite different ways of approaching the non-traditional monument form. Perhaps this difference can be located in the far greater specificity of the German words for monument and memorial, *Denkmal* and *Mahnmal*. As scholar Christine Berberich notes,

While a *Denkmal* wishes to induce the onlookers to “*denk mal!*,” to think, the *Mahnmal* contains the word *mahnen*, to reprimand...A *Mahnmal* consequently acquires a dual function: it commemorates the victims, in the case of the Berlin Holocaust memorial [for] the murdered Jews of Europe.

But at the same time it also confronts the perpetrators, and their descendants, with a remembrance of their crimes.<sup>10</sup>

Both *Denkmal* and *Mahnmal* seem to require interaction from the viewer, but *Mahnmal* also carries with it an implication of guilt and the need to participate in the mourning of the war. Reading the *Wrapped Reichstag* as a *Denkmal*, and the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* as a *Mahnmal* can help to elucidate their meanings.<sup>11</sup> In particular, this reading gives greater clarity to the reasons behind some of the more striking differences between the works. The *Wrapped Reichstag*'s overt aesthetic qualities, as well as its ephemerality, for example, fits within the term *Denkmal* because the large-scale aesthetic presentation encourages the viewer to interact with the work, to think. The Holocaust Memorial's stark gray pillars and its permanence on the other hand, seem to visually express some of the qualities of mourning and reprimand found in the word *Mahnmal*. Further, *Mahnmal* assumes a continual reprimand, one that spans generations, which requires the more permanent form of Eisenman's memorial. The qualities of blank abstraction, ambiguity and temporality are present in both works, along with the refusal to resolve the past, though the difference in the reception and public understanding of these qualities perhaps relates to the works' framing as monument or memorial. Yet, whether *Denkmal* or *Mahnmal*, both of these works offer alternatives to the obsolete conventions of traditional monuments.

One of these alternatives is found in the artists' use of abstraction. An important quality to both of these artistic projects, abstraction provides a means through which the

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<sup>10</sup> Christine Berberich, "The Continued Presence of the Past: New Directions in Holocaust Writing?," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 3 (2006): 574.

<sup>11</sup> The issue of *Denkmal* and *Mahnmal* can be explored at much greater length than is done here. A more detailed and subtle comparison of these works under the rubrics of *Denkmal/Mahnmal* is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

difficult realities of Germany's past can be visualized. Mark Godfrey's book *Abstraction and the Holocaust* details many instances in which abstraction becomes an important tool for artists dealing with the Holocaust. Godfrey suggests that, "abstract works effectively recognize the difficulties of Holocaust representation, acknowledging the bankruptcy of former modes of commemoration, but never proposing fixed solutions to the task."<sup>12</sup> Godfrey is speaking specifically of works relating to the Holocaust, though his rubric for abstraction is apt for artistic engagement with any kind of traumatic or violent history, such as the violence enacted along the borders of East and West Berlin.

Godfrey argues that the quality of abstraction in art that deals with the Holocaust is essential in the creation of "appropriate" examples of Holocaust related artwork.<sup>13</sup> He maintains that, "the abstraction of an art or architectural work allows for meanings to be suggested by it, and interpretations to be formed by its viewers, while at the same time ensuring that such readings are never fixed, never asserted didactically, and that they remain fragile and contingent."<sup>14</sup> I use many of Godfrey's theoretical models for understanding and analyzing the importance of abstraction in these works.

In studying these two works I argue that they demonstrate the ways in which contemporary monuments can subvert the broken traditional forms and speak more to the German people's struggle to relate to the past. In their desire to create works that reach out to the complexity of the past, Christo and Jeanne-Claude and Peter Eisenman have

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 253.

<sup>13</sup> See Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*. Though the *Wrapped Reichstag* is not specifically and directly dealing with the Holocaust, the work does refer to the use of the Reichstag by the Nazi's. Further, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's negation of the traditional monument form of the Reichstag asks its viewer what it means to have a former Nazi stronghold be a great important symbol of the nation.

<sup>14</sup> Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, 252.

presented largely open-ended and ambiguous concepts. These monuments have brought out many questions about their purpose and meaning, and the search for answers has in many ways clarified how a contemporary monument can function within a post-reunification German society. For example, if Christo and Jeanne-Claude's and Peter Eisenman's messages were perfectly clear, would the public have to struggle to come to terms with the object's ambiguity and frustratingly unclear meaning? Is it not that very struggle that, if only for a moment, gives us our most honest and complex relationship with the past? It is when the visual forms of a successful monument are strange enough, or large scale enough, or weirdly ambiguous enough that they incite the viewer to wonder, and it is that engagement with the past that is perhaps the most any artist can hope to achieve. Through a careful analysis of the histories, forms, concepts, and receptions of the two works, we will come to a greater understanding of the function of the contemporary, non-traditional monument in German society, and closer to an answer to the question: is it possible to create a successful monument to Germany's difficult past?

## **II. *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin, 1971-1995***

On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1995, 1,076,000 square feet of silvery polypropylene fabric was unfurled over the surface of the Reichstag (Figure 4).<sup>15</sup> Displayed for only two weeks, the *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin*, (Figure 2), represented the final result of a work that had been in the planning stages for twenty-four years. In this work of public

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<sup>15</sup> Website of the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, "*Wrapped Reichstag*, Berlin 1971-95," <http://christojeanneclaude.net/>.

art, Christo and Jeanne-Claude created a contemporary monument that subverted traditional forms of monumentality.<sup>16</sup>

Wrapped in twice as much fabric as would have been necessary to cover the surface of the building snugly and shining in its new silvery metallic surface, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Reichstag had a blank reflective quality that allowed it to take on the shadows and colors of its surroundings (Figure 5). At sunset the fabric reflected oranges and pinks, the monument shimmered against the backdrop of a blue Berlin afternoon sky, and at night the fabric glowed somewhat eerily, reflecting the lights that shined brightly on the monument. Against this aluminum-coated fabric Christo and Jeanne-Claude placed deep blue ropes that were intended to secure the fabric into place, but which also created a harmonious color contrast. The visual qualities of the fabric created a bond between the natural outside world of weather, time, and viewer, and the constructed inner world of the Reichstag and its history. In interacting with its surroundings, the work sat more easily within the public space around it. At the end of the work's two-week exhibition its physical manifestation was lost forever, leaving only remnants of the project in memory and in written accounts and photographs.

Very few scholars have treated Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag* at length. Of those who have, few have recognized the work as a serious engagement with memory and history. Many have read the work as a purification rite for the Reichstag

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<sup>16</sup> Christo and Jeanne-Claude consider themselves both to be the artists of each of their projects. For works that Christo did prior to or in the beginning of his relationship with Jeanne-Claude, including the early, permanent works, "Christo," is the artist. Although Christo and Jeanne-Claude only publicly announced their collaboration in 1994, many earlier works originally credited only to Christo, were developed in part by Jeanne Claude. In this paper, I refer to all of the large-scale ephemeral works made after 1961 as joint projects. See, <http://christojeanneclaude.net/>.



building, or as a work that enacts a renewal of the German nation post-reunification. Notably, James Young has called it a “spectacular and necessary reconsecration of an otherwise defiled historical site.”<sup>17</sup> Andreas Huyssen maintains that even though the work allowed for a moment of reflection, ultimately the *Wrapped Reichstag* encouraged the public to celebrate German democratic culture.<sup>18</sup> Both of these scholars recognize the power of the project to change the public’s reading of the building, and the potential it had to enact a kind of renewal of a defiled or invisible site. But neither one addresses the work’s more complicated readings as a non-traditional monument that reflects the fragmented and ambiguous nature of memory and the past.

Much of the work on Christo and Jeanne-Claude more generally has focused on the aesthetic or dramatic qualities of their projects. Hal Foster, for example, has tended to see Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work as devoid of social meaning or relevance. Foster referred to the Gates Project as “an organizational feat at best, not an institutional critique,” and “a telling instance of high kitsch...a cross between the Yellow Brick Road and a grand opening where the packaging was literally all.”<sup>19</sup> Foster calls Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s works, “prettied up” public spaces, “empty of social consequence.”<sup>20</sup>

But in its clear engagement with a historic monument, the *Wrapped Reichstag* cannot be seen as a purely aesthetic work, or one empty of social or political meaning. Further, I would argue that the visual and conceptual qualities of the work suggest a

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<sup>17</sup> James E. Young, “A City’s Ritual of Renewal.” Waterfire Providence, <http://www.waterfire.org/impressions-waterfire/citys-ritual-renewal-james-e-young>

<sup>18</sup> See particularly, “Monumental Seduction” in Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Hal Foster, “In Central Park,” *London Review of Books* 27, n. 5 (March 2005): 1-4

<sup>20</sup> Foster, “In Central Park,” 4.

message far more complicated than a rite of purification for Germany's parliament building. But in order to truly understand the work's many complicated meanings, we must first turn to the long and often difficult history written into the walls of this important building.

### **The Reichstag: A History**

In 1871, Emperor Wilhelm I envisioned the idea of a new public building and home for parliament that he hoped would symbolize Germany's unification.<sup>21</sup> The grandiose, neoclassical building was designed by architect Paul Wallot and not completed until 1894, under Wilhelm II. To add to the already undeniable national symbolism of the Reichstag building, in 1916 the west portico was inscribed with the words "*Dem Deutschen Volke*" or "To the German People," crafted from the melted bronze cannons of the Napoleonic troops defeated in the 1813 Battle of Leipzig.

The Reichstag served Wilhelm II as the home of the Imperial Parliament until 1918 when he abdicated the throne, ushering in the new German Republic. A balcony of the Reichstag itself served as the location from which the first chancellor of the Weimar Republic, Philip Scheidemann, declared the end of Imperial rule. By invoking citizens' rule from the former site of imperial power, Scheidemann reinscribed the Reichstag building as important, not just as an imperial site, but as the center of political power in modern republican Germany.

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<sup>21</sup> The history of the building is laid out in a variety of different sources, but the most complete and concise source that I found is a book by the winner of the contest for the reconstruction of the Reichstag started in 1995: Norman Foster, *The Reichstag Graffiti/Die Reichstag-Graffiti* (Berlin: Jovis, 2003). See especially the chronology pages 122-125.

In 1933, the Reichstag was badly damaged by fire. Many scholars suspect that it was Hitler and his followers who set fire to the building. In either case, it is true that the Nazi party used the fire as an excuse to accuse and alienate several leading communist figures in Germany.<sup>22</sup> Hitler made protecting the state building tantamount to protecting the nation, thus securing himself a position of great political power by making their leadership imperative in the safeguarding of all German people. The Reichstag's perceived danger was essential in Hitler's rise to power, and proved essential to the continuation of his power: during Hitler's tenure the Reichstag was used as a propagandistic tool, housing exhibitions like "*Bolschewismus Ohne Maske*" ("*Bolshevism Unmasked*") in 1937, and "*Der Ewige Jude*" ("*The Eternal Jew*"), in 1938.

During World War II, the Allies, too, saw the Reichstag as a symbol of Nazi Germany. In a coup that proved far more symbolic than strategic, the Soviet forces captured the Reichstag in the 1945 Battle of Berlin and triumphantly raised the red flag of the Soviet Union over the building. The Soviet occupying forces left graffiti on the walls of the Reichstag, proclaiming Stalinist Russia victorious. Some of this graffiti was uncovered in the reconstruction of the 1990s and now serves as a constant reminder of this moment in the building's history.

The late 1950s and early 60s in Germany were marked by building projects, prompted by the urge to forget or cover over the events of the previous three decades. As a result of the 1954 discussions concerning the Reichstag building's future, the German government collapsed the Reichstag's war-torn glass and steel dome, destroying the one modern part of the otherwise imposing neo-classical building. A restoration in 1961,

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<sup>22</sup> Norman Foster, ed., *Rebuilding the Reichstag* (New York: Overlook Press, 2000), 36.

contemporaneous with the building of the Berlin wall, included a project to layer over the graffiti-covered walls, figuratively covering up the history that the graffiti represented. During the Cold War the Reichstag had the awkward position of residing in both East and West Germany, physically straddling the border between the two, but remaining on the West side of Berlin.<sup>23</sup> In this tenuous position the Reichstag served as a visual reminder of the division of the country.

Perhaps this is why the reunification of Germany officially took place on the steps of the Reichstag. After the reunification, Berlin was to be the new location of the government and the Reichstag the parliament's future home, implicating the building as a symbol of reunification and renewal. In this way, Germany's parliament attempted to symbolically erase the sordid history the building had witnessed, just as the 1961 restoration had both physically and symbolically covered the Soviet graffiti. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project was realized directly before the Reichstag's latest renovation, forever intertwining the wrapping of the Reichstag with the building's renovation (Figure 6).<sup>24</sup>

In relationship to the building's history, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project cannot be thought of as an aesthetic project solely concerned with artistic endeavor or pure spectacle. Indeed, the controversy and intense debate surrounding whether the

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<sup>23</sup> Once the Berlin wall was built, East Berliners were blocked from entering the Reichstag. "The East German Government built the Wall on the eastern flank of the Reichstag to stem the flow of East Germans to the West." Foster, ed., *Rebuilding the Reichstag*, 203.

<sup>24</sup> In fact the renovation began as soon as Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping came down. Figure 6 sums up the extent to which the *Wrapped Reichstag* and Norman Foster's renovation are connected; in fact, the caption of the image reads, "A collage from the 'Wrapped Reichstag' series by Christo and Jeanne-Claude hangs in the [new] roof-level restaurant, a reminder of one of the most poignant moments in the building's history." Foster, ed., *Rebuilding the Reichstag*, 226.

project would be accepted seems to deny that possibility entirely. Given this project's twenty-four year history and its three official rejections, it seems important to think about how the project's history could have fed into the public's discernment of its meaning once realized.

### ***The Wrapped Reichstag: A History***

Christo and Jeanne-Claude first conceived the *Wrapped Reichstag* in 1971, although as early as 1961, their prospectus *Project for a Wrapped Public Building* had listed a parliament building as a possible site. In reflecting more recently on his interest in a parliament building for this particular project, Christo noted,

I mentioned a parliament building basically because it is the most public building. A concert hall can belong to the concert society, and a museum to the museum society, but a parliament building belongs to the nation. It is the optimum, because it represents the truly public structure.<sup>25</sup>

In this 1986 interview, Christo revealed the importance of a national identity to his public building project, making the Reichstag an “optimum” choice.

Busy with the realization of several other projects, the artists began working in earnest on the *Wrapped Reichstag* only in February of 1976, when they went to Berlin for the first time to meet with politicians and to give a press conference about the project.<sup>26</sup> These early efforts were, however, in vain: in May of 1977, representatives from the legislative bodies of both East and West Berlin rejected the project.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Masahiko Yanagi, “Interview with Christo,” in *Christo: The Reichstag and Urban Projects* ed. Jacob Baal-Teshuva (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Michael S. Cullen, “Chronology of the Reichstag Project (1971-1993),” in *Christo: The Reichstag and Urban Projects* ed. Jacob Baal-Teshuva (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

At the time, with Berlin very much divided, the *Wrapped Reichstag* would have asked the viewer to consider the political situation of the country more carefully. Yet the work's ambiguous and unresolved qualities would also have forced the viewer to bring to the monument his or her own conceptions of memory, history, and nation to the national symbol. Critics in 1977 recognized the power of the potential project. One in particular, Tilmann Buddensieg, noted that,

From the very beginning, Christo has sought out a 'community experience' and 'tremendous political implications,' not in order to ridicule these with ropes and strips of cloth, but to enable the people themselves to understand this temporary artistic act as a stimulus for thought. It is an invitation to dance with the obscure concepts and static expectation of national symbolism, historical tradition, and political reality.<sup>28</sup>

As Buddensieg suggests, the project would have placed the onus on the public to consider their "political reality." Experienced simultaneously by East and West Berliners, the Reichstag wrapped would have called attention to the division of the nation, displaying the Reichstag's national symbolism in all of its inefficacy.<sup>29</sup>

Karl Carstens, then president of the Bundestag, felt that the project was too provocative, and that the Reichstag's symbolic importance and "its quality of symbolism for the continuing unity of the German nation," would be hurt by this artistic endeavor.<sup>30</sup> Carstens was concerned that the project would point out the absurdity of a building meant to have such important nationalistic symbolism even as it rested on the border of a divided nation.

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<sup>28</sup> Tilmann Buddensieg, "The Reichstag and Artists," in *Christo: The Reichstag and Urban Projects* ed. Jacob Baal-Teshuva (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 15-16.

<sup>29</sup> Having been emptied of actual government activity, save for an occasional meeting, the Reichstag housed a German history exhibit at this time.

<sup>30</sup> Buddensieg, "The Reichstag and Artists," 15.

After the first rejection, the *Wrapped Reichstag* project suffered from several more refusals from the German government, which cited similar reasons each time.<sup>31</sup> Two favorable events caused Christo and Jeanne-Claude to renew their efforts to have the project accepted: the 1988 election of a sympathetic president of the Bundestag, and Germany's reunification in 1990. The reunification also offered an opportunity for the artists to redevelop its conceptual framework.<sup>32</sup> According to Beatrice Hanssen, after Germany's reunification the artists viewed the wrapping of the Reichstag in part as a project to encourage "democratic openness and transparency," and they began to focus more on the need to recognize the past represented by the building.<sup>33</sup> Because the government wished to expunge the building's associations with Germany's Nazi past, the Cold War, and the horrors of a divided nation in favor of a newly revitalized symbol of national renewal, now, more than ever, the project had to bring memory of the past to the forefront.

Germany's reunification also gave the government a chance to frame the national discourse surrounding the future of the nation, starting with the once-divided capital city. Perhaps this is why some of the members of the Bundestag, such as Wolfgang Schäuble, were strongly opposed to the artists' going ahead with their project. Schäuble was

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<sup>31</sup> In 1979 Richard Stücklen became the Bundestag president, and soon thereafter acquiesced to the decision of his predecessor, Karl Carstens. Stücklen avoided even discussing the project with Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Philipp Jenninger became the Bundestag president in 1984, and made his opposition quite clear to the artists and to the supporters of the project, though "Jenninger state[d] that his approval would be conditional on Christo's keeping intact the...symbolic aspects of the Reichstag," an idea deeply in conflict with the project's concept. Michael Cullen, "Chronology of the Reichstag Project (1971-1993)."

<sup>32</sup> Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Verhüllter Reichstag/Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin 1971-1995: The Project Book* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1995), 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, "Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag*: Globalized Art in a National Context," *The Germanic Review* 73 (Fall 1998): 358.

uncomfortable with the idea that two non-German artists would be made central in the new definition of the Reichstag building, adding that the project could be seen as “engaging in an ironic attitude toward Germany’s history.” Further, he felt that “appropriating nationally political symbols for artistic purposes would forever desecrate their value. The artists’ action would amount to a pernicious tampering with a patriotic symbol, ridiculing German democracy on a global stage.”<sup>34</sup> This statement typifies a conservative point of view, that the Bundestag must maintain the use of the Reichstag as an unambiguous symbol of national unity. The reunification provided a chance to overcome the past rather than revisit it.

Many politicians, some with an equally nationalist agenda, saw the project as an opportunity to “cleanse” the building prior to its reconstruction. As Beatrice Hanssen points out, the debates surrounding the acceptance of the project provided many examples of these ideas:

...Many representatives enthusiastically predicted that the event would regenerate a divided country, overcome its divisions, and express a firm commitment to democratic unity accompanied by public discussion. One of the strategies for getting the artistic project accepted was to schedule it immediately before the building’s architectural reconstruction so that the wrapping would inaugurate the building’s democratic renewal and memorialize the unification’s radical rupture in German history.<sup>35</sup>

Some of those representatives in favor of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project saw the work as a way to memorialize a moment in history, a pivotal moment when the tumultuous past could be overcome and a new Germany could begin. That the politicians used this argument in their approach to this work gives insight to the inherent power that

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<sup>34</sup> Hanssen, “Christo’s *Wrapped Reichstag*,” 366 and 359 respectively. This is Hanssen’s paraphrasing of Schäuble’s concerns, which she says he voiced “repeatedly.”

<sup>35</sup> Hanssen, “Christo’s *Wrapped Reichstag*,” 358.



monuments have in fossilizing history so that it may be forgotten. Perhaps the Bundestag politicians recognized that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project could function in this way for Germany. In allowing the project to go ahead, many representatives showed their interest in commemorating the past and leaving it behind.

For these representatives, the ability of the monument to create a renewal of the Reichstag would help to skew public collective memory towards a more favorable reading of German nationalism and unity. Hanssen mentions that, "those [politicians] in favor [of the project] countered that positive aesthetic images would diffuse and stamp out of public memory the shameful, negative images of dangerous neo-Nazi violence, thus signaling a radical new beginning for the future Berlin republic."<sup>36</sup> Though it does bear repeating that not all the politicians read into the work this drastic idea of "stamping out" the Nazi and Communist pasts, most of them did consider the ability of the work to create a space for renewal and rejuvenation.

Although the context of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's realized project may have encouraged a reading of the work as one of renewal, the artists' earlier work suggests that they intended the *Wrapped Reichstag* to be a work critical of traditional monuments and interested in engaging the past rather than forgetting it.

### **Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A History**

The wrapping of the Reichstag provides a particular and unusual way to engage such a complex public and political symbol. Yet the *Wrapped Reichstag* seems to fit squarely within Christo and Jeanne-Claude's oeuvre. A look at the progression of their

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 359.

work, then, will provide us with a deeper understanding of the meanings inherent in the *Wrapped Reichstag*.

In the late 1950s Christo attended the fine Arts Academy in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he was “inculcated with a sense of the social relevance of art.”<sup>37</sup> He was told how and why to construct art, and was required to use his artistic senses for propagandistic purposes. These restrictions ultimately led to Christo’s defecting from Bulgaria to the West. By 1958 he was in Paris, where he began a series of works that resemble packaged or wrapped objects (Figures 7-8).

Christo has not explicitly characterized any intended meanings for these early wrapped things, but it seems important to note that these works began almost immediately after he left Bulgaria. Many of them are titled *Package*, making reference to commodities and to the ownership of objects. In their amorphous shapes, these parcels induce a sense of mystery and desire for their unknown contents. They defy the fulfillment of our anticipation by remaining hidden. It is their ambiguity and their mystery that gives these art objects great interest.

During the period of 1963-66, Christo developed many of the same concepts used in the packaged objects in a series of works resembling storefronts (Figure 9). These works play on ideas of absence and presence: we are presented with a store, presumably full of material possessions, but we are blocked from entering or seeing what is within. This negation of the expected use of a storefront creates a tension that lends the work its intrigue. Christo’s early storefronts and packages suggest his complex relationship to

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Fineberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: On the Way to the Gates, Central Park, New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 13.

commodities and to capitalist ideas, but they also suggest his interest in drawing the viewer in through negation and blankness.

Though Christo and Jeanne-Claude generally refuse to publicly admit that their works engage with politics, some of their early large scale works betray just how invested they are in dealing with the complexities and intricacies of difficult historical times or events. In 1962, for example, the artists created an illicit blockage of Rue Visconti in Paris called *Wall of Oil Barrels, Iron Curtain* (Figure 10). *Iron Curtain* was a specific reference and critique of the building of the Berlin wall, which had begun the previous year. By rendering the Rue Visconti impassible, the artists called attention to the inherent dysfunctionality of a wall used to isolate two parts of a city, and symbolically, two parts of a country. Significantly, it was this same year, 1961, in which Christo and Jeanne-Claude first thought of wrapping a public building, suggesting a link between the theoretical heart of *Iron Curtain* and the later the *Wrapped Reichstag*.

Further works show that the artists were clearly concerned with responding to the political situation plaguing Germany during this period. In the mid-sixties, the artists began to design an unrealized project that entailed running a length of fabric along the Berlin wall, creating a second, but ephemeral wall. The project was abandoned once the artists realized that the East Germans would be unable to interact with (or benefit from) this work.<sup>38</sup> Christo and Jeanne-Claude's ultimate choice of the Reichstag as the public building to wrap is consistent with their clear interest in German politics.

In all of their projects the artists have been concerned with critiquing the relationship of a place with its past or, in some cases, its difficult present. *Iron Curtain*,

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<sup>38</sup> Hanssen, "Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag*," 360.

and the abandoned project were both critiques of the Berlin wall; and in veiling such a historically significant building as the Reichstag, the artists were pointing directly to the difficult pasts located in its walls in order to question the possibility of the Reichstag's ability to serve as an unambiguous symbol of unity and nationhood. This negation of the traditional monument form is an important part of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's artistic oeuvre.

In 1970, the artists undertook a project to simultaneously wrap two public monuments in Milan, to coincide with an exhibition of Nouveau Réalisme.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the clearer example of the two is found in the work *Wrapped Monument to Leonardo da Vinci*, enacted in the Piazza della Scala, Milan (Figure 11).<sup>40</sup> Here Christo and Jeanne-Claude's argument against the monumental form is easily seen. The cloth is plain, offset by a red rope, and is wrapped hastily, as if the monument was under construction. The body of the famous painter so important to the city of Milan is imprisoned within a shroud, tied up with a rope around his neck. The rope simultaneously delineated the contours of the body and provided a visual metaphor for the death of the traditional monument as a viable form for engaging with history. In these two wrapped monuments, Christo and Jeanne-Claude complicate the viewer's relationship to the past and offer their work as a negation of the objectification and materialization of history normally accompanying the traditional celebratory monument. But perhaps the most striking

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<sup>39</sup> Baal-Teshuva, ed., *Christo: The Reichstag and Urban Projects*, 50.

<sup>40</sup> The clarity in content in the wrapped Leonardo monument comes mostly from the clarity of images of the monument. The photographs of wrapped Leonardo monument are pictured from the front, whereas the photographs of the *Wrapped Monument to Vittorio Emanuele* are mostly views from behind the monument. Additionally, the monument to Vittorio Emanuele pictures the King on a horse, which, once wrapped, did not convey the form of the monument underneath quite as well as the standing Leonardo featured in that monument.

aspect of the *Wrapped Monument to Leonardo da Vinci* is the way it evokes death. By referring to Leonardo's death, the artists called attention to the transient nature of time, questioning the ability of a fossilized stone monument to relate to the past.

The *Wrapped Reichstag*, conceived only one year following the *Wrapped Monument to Leonardo da Vinci*, also negates a monument at the heart of a city's history. The wrapping of the Reichstag's imposing structure must have been incredibly visually arresting; indeed, the actual visual and physical facts of the project cannot be ignored in any reading of this work. In order to see the conceptual ideas at work in the *Wrapped Reichstag* we must turn to a critical look at how those ideas are portrayed through the visual and physical realities of the work.

### **Blankness and Abstraction**<sup>41</sup>

During the two weeks that the *Wrapped Reichstag* was available to the public, the Reichstag's decorative statues were caged up, the familiar façade covered and the symbolism inherent in the bronze words "*Dem Deutschen Volke*," was quieted. The work offered no clear visual references other than mimicking the shape of the building itself, yet the blankness of the wrapping, a visual fact immediately apparent when looking at images of the work, served to make the familiar building suddenly unfamiliar (Figure 12). In this way, the artists abstracted the monument form of the Reichstag, complicating its engrained meaning and symbolism, and allowing the viewer to flesh out those

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<sup>41</sup> These next few sections ("Blankness and Abstraction," "Time in the *Wrapped Reichstag*," and much of "Irreconcilable Pasts"), will make up my assessment of the ways in which the work is successful as a monument to Germany's difficult past. These sections focus mainly on the ways through which the *Wrapped Reichstag* provides a compelling example of an anti-traditional monument.

meanings that had been overshadowed.<sup>42</sup> The viewer was encouraged to fill the blankness of the fabric's surface with his or her own memory-work, and could see those memories as part of the building's history.<sup>43</sup>

The *Wrapped Reichstag*'s blank surface also provided a distinct ambiguity in the meaning of the work. Patricia Phillips calls this the 'constructive ambiguity' that is an intrinsic part of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work.<sup>44</sup> When looking at photographs of the *Wrapped Reichstag*, one is taken aback by the extraordinarily strange artistic act presented (Figure 13). It is in our nature to question the meanings of such an act, particularly when clarification is not offered by the artists themselves.<sup>45</sup> As Phillips suggests, it is this ambiguity that "leads to clarity of questions," and that "empowers the public."<sup>46</sup> As in the *Wrapped Monument to Leonardo da Vinci*, the ambiguity created by veiling the Reichstag served to complicate that monument's assumed meanings, and, as Phillips points out, to "[invite] the viewer to challenge conventional perceptions and to

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<sup>42</sup> Andreas Huyssen has also noted the ways in which the artists' veiling of the Reichstag allowed a space for memory and reflection. See, Huyssen, "Monumental Seduction."

<sup>43</sup> Ideally the viewer would recognize this quality of the work and be able to interact with memory and the past. But, one of the problems with this supposition is that it assumes that viewer is in tune with this particular reading of the work. To many viewers the fabric could have simply appeared as a beautiful cloak in celebration of the building's future.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, "Christo," *Flash Art (International Edition)*, no. 151 (March/April 1990): 136.

<sup>45</sup> The public commentary offered by Christo and Jeanne-Claude about their work usually does not include a critical investigation of its conceptual goals. In interviews and in public speaking events, they more often focus on the aesthetic qualities of their works, or the way in which they incite a "joyous" atmosphere; but it seems to me that their silence on the meaning of their works has in many ways allowed for the kind of "constructive ambiguity" that Phillips describes here.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, "Christo," 136.

develop new ones.”<sup>47</sup> Through the wrapping of the Reichstag the artists gave its viewers an opportunity to ask difficult questions about the building’s symbolic role in the nation.

Abstraction too, is at play in blanketing the Reichstag in fabric. In its essence the past is fragmented: pieces are lost, and pieces are remembered, but the memory of the past can never provide the whole picture of history. Unlike many, more traditional monuments, whose specific references and objectified forms collectivize and unify memory of the past towards a specific reading of history, the *Wrapped Reichstag*’s visual abstraction suggested the complex and incomplete quality of memory. The *Wrapped Reichstag* allowed the viewers to activate their own memories and thoughts of the past, which encouraged the recovery of a multivalent reading of the past. These interpretations are not controlled; the *Wrapped Reichstag*’s ambiguity ensures its open, non-didactic nature, and the work’s ephemerality ensures that any memory or reading of the work is not fixed.

### **Time in the *Wrapped Reichstag***

The passage of time is also emphasized in the *Wrapped Reichstag*. The work engaged with the present visually, through the particular qualities of the fabric. Though held in place by rope, the *Wrapped Reichstag*’s fabric still had an airy, ethereal quality, and temporality was conveyed by the fabric’s dynamic interaction with its immediate surroundings. The fabric presented a constant play of light and shadow that shifted according to the weather, wind, and time of day, and forced the viewer to consider the work in the present. The movement of the fabric allowed the work to come alive, and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

challenged the static nature of building it covered. The work's incorporation of temporality in the fabric parallels the impermanence of the work itself.

Like all of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's large-scale public work, the *Wrapped Reichstag* was a work of emphatic ephemerality, the fleeting presence of which served to evoke a sense of anticipatory loss and nostalgia in the viewers that compelled them to interact with the work more completely. Once the material of the work was removed, an incomplete memory of it was all that was left, reflecting the nature of the past itself.

The ability of this work to evoke the past relates, in part, to the time of its making. Having been realized shortly after the reunification of Germany the *Wrapped Reichstag* was necessarily associated with the coming to terms with the past. At this time, Germans were (and as they continue to be, to some extent) obsessed with their nation's difficult past. Reunification offered the catalyst needed to begin the national process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As Daniel Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer argue in the introduction to *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*, "political transformations...serve as triggers or flashpoints for renewed struggles over the legacy of the past."<sup>48</sup> Germany's "renewed struggle" began with the reunification, which brought the traumatic past to the forefront of German consciousness.

If we are to consider the *Wrapped Reichstag* as a memorial, then its immaterial remnant forces us to consider that which is no longer physically or conceptually present; the memorial is thus "visited" in memory. The success of the *Wrapped Reichstag* project is that Germans have remembered it. Many German newspaper articles discussed the wrapping of the Reichstag in their coverage of the building's renovations shortly

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, eds., *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Durham: Duke University, 2004), 4.



thereafter, and art critics have remembered it as a project deeply connected to the proliferation of memory-sites in Berlin after reunification.<sup>49</sup>

Christo and Jeanne-Claude would not accede to requests to lengthen the project's two-week exhibition period, as allowing it to remain longer, in their view, would have lessened its conceptual integrity.<sup>50</sup> Had it remained long enough it could have become part of the fabric of the landscape, which would have allowed the public to normalize it and thus more easily relate it to an end or resolution. The essential ephemerality of this work counteracts one of James Young's greatest critiques of traditional monuments: that they can become a natural and familiar part of their surroundings. Using Esther Shalev-Gerz's ephemeral *Monument Against Fascism* as an example, Young extols the merits of monuments that manage to "[flout] a number of memorial conventions":

It's aim was not to...remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passerby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation...<sup>51</sup>

In this argument Young implies the success of contemporary works that challenge conventional notions of the monument. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work turned a static object, which was otherwise very much a natural part of the landscape into a dynamic

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<sup>49</sup> For example: "The vote this past June 1999 by the German Bundestag in favor of a national memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe marked the end of a decade-long debate that has yielded a rich discussion within contemporary German society around issues of memory and public culture. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Christo and Jean [sic]-Claude's Wrapped Reichstag, and Norman Foster's glass cupola are the prominent examples of the boom in public sites of memory such as museum, memorial, and monument in a culture seemingly obsessed with its past." Griffin, "Undoing Memory," 168.

<sup>50</sup> The German wish for the extension of the project is documented in several articles I have read. For example: "The Reichstag stayed wrapped for 14 days, then the German government, which initially opposed the project, asked for an extension. The artists refused." From Cathy Newman, "Christo and Jeanne-Claude Unwrapped," *National Geographic* 210, no. 5 (Nov. 2006): 38.

<sup>51</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 7-8.

monument that recognized the temporality of history in its constant recognition of the passing of time. At stake in the monument's ephemerality and its quality of "vivification" was a denial of a reconciliation with the past. The *Wrapped Reichstag* instead serves as a memory-site that must be remembered, and whose lack of completion creates another "ghost," or remnant in the symbolic history of the Reichstag.

### **Irreconcilable Pasts**

In its refusal to resolve history, the *Wrapped Reichstag* can be seen as an intervention against the traditional monument form that the Reichstag had come to represent. Christo and Jeanne-Claude were not alone in their endeavors to transform the traditional monument in late twentieth century Berlin. As Young relates in his book *At Memory's Edge*, the 1995 design competition (won by Peter Eisenman) for the Holocaust Memorial, led to one artist's poignant suggestion:

Artist Horst Hoheisel, already well known for his negative-form monument in Kassel, proposed a simple, if provocative antisolution to the memorial competition: blow up the Brandenburger Tor, grind its stone into dust, sprinkle the remains over its former site, and cover the entire memorial area with granite plates...Rather than filling in the void left by a murdered people with a positive form, the artist would carve out an empty space in Berlin by which to recall a now absent people...Rather than concretizing and thereby displacing the memory of Europe's murdered Jews, the artist would open a place in the landscape to be filled with the memory of those who come to remember Europe's murdered Jews.<sup>52</sup>

Like Hoheisel's proposed 'monument,' the *Wrapped Reichstag* created a void through the loss of the monument; and visually, the blankness of the work gave the viewer a space in which to contemplate the Reichstag's complex and layered history, rather than "concretizing and thereby displacing the memory" of the past. In both Christo and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 90.

Jeanne-Claude's and Hoheisel's anti-traditional monuments, the void created by the loss of the monument ensures the continued remembrance of past:

[Hoheisel] seems to suggest that the surest engagement with Holocaust memory in Germany may actually lie in its perpetual irresolution, that only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory. For it may be the finished monument that completes memory itself, puts a cap on memory-work, and draws a bottom line underneath an era that must always haunt Germany.<sup>53</sup>

For the *Wrapped Reichstag*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude worked with an already existing monument, but rather than destroy that monument, they imbued it with a sense of “perpetual irresolution.” The fabric’s effervescent movement lent the building a liveliness that brought the temporality of history to the forefront of the viewer’s mind. Further, the notion that the wrapping would soon disappear must have added to the intensity of the viewer’s interaction with the work. Through these physical qualities, Christo and Jeanne-Claude suggested that memory must be a lived memory, and that we must never become complacent with history. “Art is not immortal” Christo famously says, and in the *Wrapped Reichstag* he and Jeanne-Claude show us that history is also not immortal—it must be remembered again and again or it will be packed neatly into vitrified monuments that will slowly but surely become invisible.<sup>54</sup>

Christo and Jeanne-Claude attempted to create a monument that would jolt a viewer into the present space, rather than allow the space to become an inherent part of the site. If the viewer could sense the contradiction of monument and site, then the monument could successfully incite them to memory. Young points out that,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>54</sup> One place where this statement is documented is in an interview with the artists in Molly Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection, National Gallery of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 53

While the function of place in mnemonic memory has been well examined...the reciprocal exchange between a monument and its space is still too little studied. For a monument necessarily transforms an otherwise benign site into part of its content, even as it is absorbed into the site and made part of a larger locale. This tension between site and memorial can be relieved by a seemingly natural extension of site by monument, or it can be aggravated by a perceived incongruity between site and monument. It is better in the view of many contemporary monument makers, in fact, to provoke the landscape with an obtrusive monument than to create a form so pleasingly balanced that it—and memory—recede into the landscape (and oblivion) altogether.<sup>55</sup>

The clear contradiction of the *Wrapped Reichstag* with its site is easily read; the work is a visual negation of its site (Figure 12). Yet for many visitors the tension created by this contradiction was eased by its beautifully aesthetic qualities. The beauty of the wrapping took away from the provocation inherent in the negation of the Reichstag. Indeed, the draping of the building, rather than setting up a blank negation, could have been read as construction tarps suggesting the renovation of the building that was to follow the removal of the artists' wrappings. It is understandable, then, that many viewers actually read this work in the way that the Bundestag had hoped it would be read—as a cleansing and purification of the building from its difficult past—a catharsis. Turning to the ways in which the *Wrapped Reichstag* fails as a monument can help us to understand, and perhaps approach an answer to the question: is it possible to create a successful, appropriate, and understandable monument to Germany's traumatic past?

### **The Monument's Failings**

The enormity of the Holocaust and the ensuing difficult realities of Soviet occupation and a war-torn and divided country seem to require monuments on a large

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<sup>55</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 7.

scale. Yet, it was the very grandiosity of the *Wrapped Reichstag*'s that in part led to its ineffectiveness. The scale of the project and the high volume of visitors created an exciting atmosphere. One critic, Francesca Rogier, described the event as a kind of public festival:

The project not only effected a kind of purification rite for the home of the new Parliament, but its two-week life span forced Berliners, who struggle and fail to be spontaneous, to take part in the here and now, to sit, eat, sleep, dance, listen to drum around the clock. More importantly, it triggered enthusiasm untrammelled by pessimism: as much a response to the wrapping as to the possibilities it created, themselves a key part of the "art" whose meaning critics pondered. The Reichstag project captured the imagination and may have even signaled a turning point in the city's attitude, a positive outlook that might be taken up by its new planners: for the first time since 1989, Berliners could let go, could experience, even enjoy, one another, could occupy a space they barely knew night and day.<sup>56</sup>

Rogier's anecdote is supported by many photographs of viewers taking part in the festival like atmosphere (Figures 14-16). For many viewers, it seems, the *Wrapped Reichstag* represented the completion of memory-work in relation to this national symbol. If we read the work as a celebration of the future, now cleansed of its past, then this work certainly could have symbolized a "turning point" in Berlin's history. I would argue that this was not the intended outcome of the work. For a building so charged with historical significance, how could this work read as one to encourage enthusiasm 'untrammelled by pessimism'? Christo and Jeanne-Claude's past works such as *Iron Curtain* and *Running Fence* reflect a critical attitude towards Germany's ability or willingness to confront its difficult political pasts and presents. Surely the idea of looking towards the future without regards to the past is not an accurate reading of the *Wrapped Reichstag*. Yet, the

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<sup>56</sup> Francesca Rogier, "Growing Pains: From the Opening of the Wall to the Wrapping of the Reichstag," *Assemblage* 29 (Apr. 1996): 66.

nature of public artwork is such that the interpretation of the work by the public is viable. It must also be recognized that in creating a work of such arresting beauty, Christo and Jeanne-Claude eased the tension of the monument and its space.

The beauty of the *Wrapped Reichstag*, it seems, takes away from its ability to engage memory. Millions of visitors gathered around the shimmering building and admired the silvery reflective fabric and blue rope.<sup>57</sup> One would think that the project's visual reference to a package was meant to draw viewers to the work by compelling them to consider the contents of the wrapping. However, the viewer could have easily felt a joyous anticipation at the gift of receiving a renewed and soon-to-be renovated Reichstag upon the removal of the fabric.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's public projects all incorporate temporality in efforts to make present and visible difficult social and historical truths. At the moment when it was wrapped, the Reichstag held particular significance for the future, and I believe that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping was intended to critique the nation's blind hope in the future of the Reichstag without reverence or consideration of its past.<sup>58</sup> Yet for many critics, journalists, and visitors this more productive reading was overshadowed by the beauty of the project and the joyous atmosphere that called attention to the possibility of a purified future.

Perhaps the many years of controversy and discussion surrounding the wrapping of the Reichstag constitute the project's most successful conveyance of meaning. Better

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<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Fineberg, *On the Way to the Gates*, 50. "More than five million visitors came to view the work..."

<sup>58</sup> The hope that the Reichstag would be renewed or revived to the exclusion of memory of the past is confirmed by the aforementioned discussion of several of the German politicians' stated wish that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project would "stamp out" the Reichstag's negative associations.

than the physical monument itself, the discussions and debates over the nature of monuments, and of historical, national, and political symbols, of memory prompted by this artwork called the public to the memory and consideration of the past.

Conceptually, and I believe visually, the work incorporated qualities that are necessary for a post-reunification monument to Germany's difficult past. The work's abstraction and ambiguity allowed the viewer to approach memory and the past individually, rather than collectively. The nature of memory as fragmentary and the focus on the loss of the past is therein represented. In its ambiguity, the work refuses to provide specific answers to the questions remaining from the Holocaust or the Cold War, or even from the division of the nation; instead reflecting the irreconcilability of the past. Yet it is the work's ambiguous nature that has also allowed it to be read against what I see as its intentions. Is clarity in meaning, then, a necessary quality in a public monument? And is it possible for the monument to eschew traditional, conservative forms while being perfectly clear in meaning?

As we have seen, the *Wrapped Reichstag*'s ephemerality keeps the work's engagement with memory alive by forcing the viewer to remember the work itself. This irresolution of the *Wrapped Reichstag* is one of its most enticing conceptual qualities. But, does its ephemerality, the quality of finality, actually encourage forgetting? Maybe the physical object must remain in order to successfully engage the public in continued memory-work; even Hoheisel's anti-monument proposition, "Blow up the Brandenberger Tor" carried some continued material presence located in the remains of the destroyed gate. Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* a 'permanent'

monument in the center of Berlin provides a counterpoint to the ephemeral monument of the *Wrapped Reichstag*.

### **III. Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe***

Seventeen years after a group of German citizens first approached the government about the possibility of a Holocaust memorial, in May of 2005, a vast field of concrete pillars in the center of Berlin was opened to the public. Set in a grid-like structure and ranging in height from about two feet to about ten feet, these pillars collectively make up Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Figure 3).

American architect Peter Eisenman wanted to create a non-traditional monument. This work is one of blankness and ambiguity that reflects upon the fragmentation and loss of the past, and the fundamental flaws in memory. As such, Eisenman's monument provides no outward indication of what it is. The viewer can approach the monument from all sides and can enter it at any point on the periphery of the grid-like structure. The monument is meant to reflect on the irreconcilability of the Holocaust and the importance of the perseverance of memory.<sup>59</sup> Through his use of minimalist strategies, Eisenman directs his viewer away from the visual qualities of the monument and towards the experience of viewing. Eisenman's memorial reminds the visitor that memory must be a part of our everyday lived present.

Eisenman's design includes a "rigid grid structure composed of 2,711 concrete pillars, or stelae, each 95 centimeters wide and 2.375 meters long."<sup>60</sup> The approximately

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Eisenman, "Project Text" in *Tracing Eisenman: Peter Eisenman Complete Works*, by Cynthia Davidson (New York: Rizzoli Press, 2004): 290.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



3,000 pillars in the field was reduced from the 4200 of the original design. The government conditioned their acceptance of the project on this and several other important changes to the overall design.<sup>61</sup> As a result of the government's requests, American artist Richard Serra, who had collaborated with Eisenman on the initial proposal, removed his name from the project.<sup>62</sup> I will return to the issue of how those design changes may have affected the work. But in order to fully engage the question of the monument's success, we must first look closely at its visual qualities as a way to understand the experience of viewing the work.

### **The Visual and Physical Experience of the Monument**

Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* stretches across a field roughly the size of three football fields. This vast field is covered with slate gray pillars arranged in a grid whose variation in height resolves into a wave-like pattern. The lowest pillars in the grid are no more than two feet from the ground and the tallest pillars rise to about ten feet. From the outside of the monument, the task of entering it can seem daunting. Each slab, in its block-like structure, seems to represent a headstone in an endless cemetery of unmarked graves. The grid organization of the stelaes eases the strong association with headstones, and the regularity of the stelaes and the clear pathways between the pillars allow for a long-range visibility down each path and corridor of the monument's grid (Figure 17). The ground is paved with cobblestones, which lends the monument an inviting presence. The cobblestones also serve to visually differentiate the

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<sup>61</sup> This change, among others included the reduction in the height of the tallest pillars from 16 feet to about 10. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 210.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Serra felt that changes to the design would defeat the monument's effectiveness.

exterior of the monument from the interior. The idea of separating the city from the monument is also suggested through the quick rise in height of the pillars from a low, “footstool” height to pillars larger than the visitors. The sloping ground of the monument aids the fast change in the elevation of the pillars. As the visitor moves further into the structure of the monument, he or she becomes more and more distanced from the outside world. This distance removes the distractions of the busy city and creates an interior space in which the viewer can experience the monument more fully.

The viewer’s movement through the monument is of utmost importance to its ability to suggest meaning. Without movement the viewer would be unable to see the various subtleties that break up the otherwise easily discernible grid. Looking down one directional axis of the monument, the visitor can perceive the curvilinear slope of the ground, (Figure 18) yet when he or she looks down the other directional axis, the ground seems perfectly flat (Figure 17). The unevenness of the ground subtly changes the overall structure of the monument, placing each pillar at a slight tilt barely noticeable to the viewer. This physical quality is meant to add an almost imperceptible awkwardness to the monument, leaving the viewer feeling inexplicably anxious. This anxiety is also suggested by the changing height of the ground and the pillars. Yet, when viewed from above, the pillars cohere into a waving field (Figure 3). This soft, almost organic movement of the monument is echoed below in the undulation of the ground and adds to the monument’s aesthetic beauty.

The monument is visually quite blank and is imbued with ambiguity rather than directed meaning. As in the *Wrapped Reichstag*, ambiguity in Eisenman’s monument serves as a reference to the fragmented, multivalent nature of memory and the past.

Related to the ambiguity of the plain, imperceptible forms of the pillars is the ambiguity of the overall structure. It is physically impossible to see the entire monument at once, calling into question the very concept of a singular monument to Europe's lost Jews.

The pillars are made of plain, gray concrete. Their banal forms are meant to focus the viewer's attention away from the physical facts of the monument and towards a more experiential understanding. In fact, aside from the strangely beautiful, organic form of the wave created by the monument's overall structure, we are not enticed to linger over the visual qualities of this work. By deflecting attention away from the visual forms and towards the experience of interacting with the form, Peter Eisenman is clearly responding to an important tenet of Minimalism.

In its visual form, the angular, box-like, uninteresting quality of the pillar forms relates to many Minimalist sculptures whose aim was to direct the viewer's attention away from the form itself, and towards the act of viewing that form in its surroundings. The viewer is drawn into the present time of the lived experience. The act of viewing, then, includes the space of the room or environment, the time that passes while in that space, and the experience of oneself viewing the object.<sup>63</sup>

Peter Eisenman's memorial addresses the idea of banality in the monotony of the pillars. The homogeneity of the structure, the repetition of the pillar form, and the grid-

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Morris's important "Notes on Sculpture," the first part of which appeared in 1966, offered new views on the viewer's relationship with the object. He suggested that art should return the viewer's attention to the world around him or her, rather than take the viewer into an alternative or an internal, reflective space outside of the present. Morris also suggested that time, real time, should be an essential part of sculpture, enacted through the viewer's phenomenological interaction with the object. This is precisely the interaction with time at work in Eisenman's memorial. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 222-235.

like overall structure provide an opportunity to experience the memorial while not being distracted by its visual form. Eisenman's own writing recognized the ways in which his concept was indebted to Minimalist principles. He wrote that,

The art critic Douglas Crimp has argued that in order to overcome modernist idealism and its aesthetic conventions and metaphysic, that is, to move away from sculpture's own internal conditions, sculpture in the 1960s sought site specificity. This move, well documented in the work of such artists as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Carl Andre, and Richard Serra, attempted to reorient the perceptual experience of the subject.<sup>64</sup>

Eisenman wanted to see architectural spaces in the language of this site-specific, non-internally focused work. Sculpture can use the element of site-specificity to force the viewer to interact with the elements outside of the physical form of the object. In architecture there is an expectation of site-specificity that Eisenman wanted to overcome in order to "reorient" the viewer toward the external "perceptual experience" of seeing the work. He hoped to avoid the failings of the traditional monument, by focusing the viewer toward active memory. Ultimately, the committee that chose his design for the Berlin's memorial appreciated Eisenman's fresh approach to the idea of the monument. An account of the history of this memorial tracing its early conceptions, its various design competitions, and the public's discussion about it will contextualize the appeal of Eisenman's concept.

### ***The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: A History***

In 1988 a small citizens' group from West Berlin proposed to the German government that a memorial for the "murdered Jews of Europe" should be built in the

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<sup>64</sup> Peter Eisenman, "The Silence of Excess," in *Holocaust Memorial Berlin: Eisenman Architects* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2005), p. 2 of Eisenman's text.

heart of the city.<sup>65</sup> Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990, the idea gained the support of the city's senate and the federal government. A large and historically significant space in the heart of the city was set aside for the memorial. The site was "at the heart of the Nazi regime's former seat of power...bordered on one side by the 'Todesstreifen,' or 'death-strip,' at the foot of the Berlin wall, and on the other by the Tiergarten."<sup>66</sup> By declaring this five-acre space the site of the memorial, the government constrained any artist submitting a design to conceive of a monument with a predetermined location and size. The monument would have to recognize the enormity of the crime of the Holocaust in a large form.<sup>67</sup>

In an initial competition in 1994, the committee for the monument solicited designs for what was now officially titled the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." Christine Jakob-Marks, the winner of this first competition, presented the committee with a design consisting of an enormous square "gravestone" tilted at an angle and covered in millions of known names of murdered European Jews (Figure 19). On the surface of the concrete gravestone would be eighteen boulders taken from Israel's Mt. Masada, a Jewish sacred space and ancient site of a mass suicide of Jews who refused to

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<sup>65</sup> Many texts enumerate at much greater length the history of the making of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, see for example, Stiftung Denkmal für die Ermordeten Juden Europas, *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin: Nicolai, 2005) or Young, *At Memory's Edge*, from which most of my background here is drawn.

<sup>66</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> In 1996, Andreas Huyssen questioned the government's choice to set aside such a large space for the memorial, noting "It seems striking that a country whose culture has been guided for decades now by a deliberate antifascist antimonumentalism should resort to monumental dimensions when it comes to the public commemoration of the Holocaust for the reunified nation. Something here is out of sync." Huyssen, "Monumental Seduction," 32.

submit themselves as slaves to the Roman soldiers.<sup>68</sup> As Young points out, the winning design predictably solicited “an avalanche of artistic, intellectual, and editorial criticism decrying this ‘titled gravestone’ as too big, too heavy-handed, too divisive, and finally just too German.”<sup>69</sup>

The failure of the first competition to produce an acceptable design suggests that the goal for the Holocaust memorial was undefined. In the time between the choice of Christine Jackob-Marks’ design and the withdrawal of support for that design, the public was able to view all 528 designs originally submitted for the contest in an exhibition at the Stadtrathaus. In response to the exhibition, Henryk Broder, a columnist for the German weekly news journal *Der Spiegel*, argued that the exhibition of the designs represented a “quarry [where] anthropologists, psychologists, and behaviorists could examine the condition of a confused nation wanting to create a monument to its victims in order to purify itself.”<sup>70</sup> Uncertainty in the goals of the memorial made the artists’ submissions for the most part unsatisfying and confusing to the public. Though a design has since been chosen, the public’s confusion over the memorial’s meaning has unfortunately never dissipated.

After the rescinding of the winning design in 1995, chaos broke out in the monument debate, throwing the future of the Holocaust Memorial into uncertainty. At the bequest of the memorial’s organizers, three public colloquia were held, devoted to

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<sup>68</sup> In Judaism the number eighteen represents life, which unfortunately gave this proposal a contradiction in terms—death represented by the gravestone, and the place from which the boulders would have been culled; and life represented by the symbolic number. Not surprisingly, Jackob-Marks’ design received a lot of criticism from Berlin’s Jewish community for its confused symbolism. See Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 190.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in James Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 191.

discussions of what a monument would mean and whether there should be a monument at all. The colloquia complicated these questions rather than helping to provide answers. Eventually, a five member Findungskommission (of which James Young was a part) was charged with the task of finding a new winning design. In 1998 the Findungskommission recommended two designs to the public and the organizers of the project, who rallied around the one by Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra. Young describes the conceptual intrigue of their project, for the Findungskommission:

In its original conception, the proposal by Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra...suggested a startling alternative to the very idea of the Holocaust memorial...Theirs was a pointedly antiredemptory design: it found no compensation for the Holocaust in art or architecture...Rather than pretending to answer Germany's memorial problem in a single, reassuring form, this design proposed multiple, collected forms arranged so that visitors have to find their own path to the memory of Europe's murdered Jews. As such, this memorial provided not an answer to memory but an ongoing process, a continuing question without a certain solution.<sup>71</sup>

One of the stipulations for the Findungskommission was that the chosen design could not reconcile the viewer to the past. Instead, the design would be able to call attention to the public's inability to ever fully grasp the realities of Germany's history.

In June 1999, Peter Eisenman's design was officially approved in a full session of the German Bundestag. Construction of the monument advanced until it was finally opened on May 10, 2005. The memorial opened to mixed reviews, many of which lingered over discussions of what the monument was and how it should be used. Few, if any of these early articles delved deeply into the visual and physical facts of the memorial, and even fewer into how those visual qualities relate to Eisenman's design

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<sup>71</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 205-206.

concept.<sup>72</sup> The viewer's physical experience of the work, then, is a central component to Eisenman's memorial, which deserves greater attention.

### **Experiencing the Monument: Eisenman's use of Time**

Eisenman's memorial pushes the viewer to *experience* the memorial rather than simply to reflect upon its meaning. The viewer must physically engage with the monument. Eisenman's design requires the visitor to physically move through the monument, and the blank visual quality of its forms ask the viewer to take a more active role in interpreting its meaning. Therefore, rather than simply 'view' or 'contemplate' the work, the visitor must experience the work, and for this reason much of the content of the Eisenman's Holocaust memorial is open-ended. This is a deliberate decision, and one that has been celebrated by many critics, such as Hanno Rauterberg, arts editor for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*:

No, these concrete slabs are not a sign. At most, they are a non-sign, an indication that there is nothing to be discovered about the past, here in a place that, of all places, should surely be a site of remembering. We are not confronted with the presence of history, but with the present itself. What has been created here is not a landscape of remembrance but a landscape of experience.<sup>73</sup>

The visitors may enter and exit where they please. Indeed, Eisenman wished that people would choose their own path through the monument, and in fact the physical design of the monument requires that the viewer move through the space in order to experience the memorial (Figure 20). This was achieved, in part, because the memorial is designed so

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<sup>72</sup> See for example, "Ein Event – aber man fühlt nichts; Publikum stürmt das Mahnmahl," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 18. Mai 2005, or "Tanz auf der Stele," *Berliner Zeitung*, 13. Mai 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Hanno Rauterberg, *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*, p. 4 of the text



that it cannot be taken in all at once. As critic Rauterberg describes it, “The eye cannot take it in, nor can the camera capture it. It is accessible only through the third and fourth dimensions, through space and time, through the alternation of outside and inside, repetition and subtle variation, through ‘a moment ago’ and ‘in a moment.’”<sup>74</sup> Peter Eisenman sees the viewer’s phenomenological experience of the monument as a way to remember the past: the viewer’s interaction with the monument encourages an active memory, or what Eisenman refers to as “the living memory of the individual experience.”<sup>75</sup> Eisenman’s contemporary approach to the idea of the monument is wrapped up in this temporal experience:

The traditional monument is understood by its symbolic imagery, by what it represents. It is not understood in time, but in an instant in space; it is seen and understood simultaneously. ... The duration of an individual's experience of [the Holocaust memorial] grants no further understanding, since understanding is impossible. The time of the monument, its duration from top surface to ground, is disjoined from the time of experience. In this context, there is no nostalgia, no memory of the past, only the living memory of the individual experience. Here, we can only know the past through its manifestation in the present.<sup>76</sup>

For Eisenman, the passage of time sets his monument apart from traditional monuments, and refers the viewer to the time of history. Instead of representing the past in solidified moments, Eisenman’s memorial refers to a past of lived experiences, both banal and momentous, across the passage of time. Perhaps memorializing banal moments of life seems meaningless; but, in fact, it is the loss of the everyday life of the six million Jews that is felt most by the Holocaust. Therefore when Eisenman says, the “experience grants no further understanding since understanding is impossible,” he is pointing to the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Eisenman, “Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, Project Text” in *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

memorial's true function, which is not to provide answers to the Holocaust, but rather to strengthen our connection to the past.

Eisenman's interest in time here is different than that of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The project text above and the experience of interacting with the monument itself show that Eisenman wants the public to actively engage the monument, rather than passively reflect in its midst. The *Wrapped Reichstag* gave the public a point from which to start thinking about the past, yet was presented with the fluidity of time, allowing the past to become a constant and integral part of the present. For Eisenman, the space in which a traditional monument is experienced causes the monument to be "understood" and ignored rather than generating an active reflection.

In both works; however, the experience of the past in the present is of utmost importance. For Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the physical incorporation of the passing of time asks the viewer to engage the past in the present. Eisenman encourages that same experience by not allowing the viewer to escape into a nostalgic space in which memory work can be completed.

Because of its subject, the serenity and silence perceived from the street are broken by an internal claustrophobic density that gives little relief as it envelops the visitor who enters the field. The experience of being present in presence, of being without the conventional markers of experience, of being potentially lost in space, of an un-material materiality: that is the memorial's uncertainty.<sup>77</sup>

"Being present in presence," then seems to be an important quality to any artist's approach to monument form in Berlin after reunification. Rather than suggest that the viewers rid themselves of the past through an objectified form of historical engagement

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Eisenman, "The Silence of Excess," in *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*, p. 4 of Eisenman's essay.

(ie: the traditional monument), artists must design memorials that deny the easy disposal of a horrific past, compelling the viewers to interact with the past again and again. As in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work, while visiting the Holocaust memorial, the viewer is asked to consider the past through the lens of the present, ensuring the monument's viability. In one case time is suggested through the constant movement of fabric and through the ephemerality of the project; and in the other, time is found in the physical experience of the monument.

Eisenman's memorial eschews clarity in meaning in favor of a deliberate illegibility achieved through the ambiguity of the monument's form. Though the overall visual effect of the work may seem to suggest gravestones, each pillar remains blank, refusing to resolve into an actual headstone. The blank stelae and grid form do not make any clear statements about the Holocaust or how to remember it, nor do they seek to explain how it was allowed to happen, or what its motivations might have been. The imperceptible meaning of the monument reflects the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust.

It is this quality that Eisenman sees as the monument's greatest achievement: "When such a project can overcome its seeming diagrammatic abstraction, in its excess, in the excess of a reason gone mad, then such a work becomes a warning...not to be judged on its meaning or its aesthetic but on the impossibility of its own success."<sup>78</sup> By presenting a vast grid of plain, gray, stelae, Eisenman forces the viewer to ask questions about the meaning of the design, and, consequently, about the meaning of the Holocaust.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

The enormous space, covered in pillars of varying heights and with an uneven ground, begs the viewer to interpret its meaning.

The idea of “reason gone mad” is also of great importance to his design and ordering of the monument. In his writing on this work, Eisenman often discusses the illogic inherent in seemingly logical systems. Eisenman intended the form of the monument to evoke reason and rationality through logical systems, even as it implied the irrationality of that logic:

The enormity of the banal is the context of our monument. The project manifests the instability inherent in what seems to be a system, here a rational grid, and its potential for dissolution in time. It suggests that when a supposedly rational and ordered system grows too large and out of proportion to its intended purpose, it in fact loses touch with human reason. It then begins to reveal the innate disturbances and potential for chaos in all systems of seeming order, the idea that all closed systems of a closed order are bound to fail.<sup>79</sup>

In his 1969 “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” the American artist Sol LeWitt stressed the inherent irrationality in the use of logical systems. He showed that “irrational thoughts” could have a logical, orderly system behind them.<sup>80</sup> Peter Eisenman’s project text reflects LeWitt’s ideas, asking the viewer to see the chaos inherent in the irrational nature of logical systems. If rational ideas repeat indefinitely, they can, as Peter Eisenman

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. These ideas are also enumerated in Young’s essay, as well as in the book *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*. Eisenman’s language here reflects the language of Sol LeWitt.

<sup>80</sup> Sol LeWitt was another hugely influential artist of the associated with the minimalist period. Sol LeWitt, in his “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” wrote that:

1. Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
2. Rational judgements repeat rational judgements.
3. Illogical judgements lead to new experience.
4. Formal Art is essentially rational.
5. Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically

This text can be found in “Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 824.

suggests in his project text, “lose touch with human reason.” Eisenman used this technique to make explicit reference to the Nazi government and their methodical and ordered system for the annihilation of an entire race. He is suggesting that by visiting the monument and experiencing the breakdown of logical systems, one can prevent history from repeating itself. This idea, Eisenman hoped, would be illuminated by the subtle ways that he subverted the simple and ‘logical’ grid of pillars. The rippling of the pillars’s heights and the elevation of the ground itself were two elements that were meant to undermine the logical system put in place by the grid and to subtly suggest to the viewer the breakdown of rationality. But the question still remains, are the conceptual ideas behind Eisenman’s memorial design readable to the public?

### **Reception of the Monument**

Conflicting views on what the Holocaust memorial represents—whether it suggests a finality in the consideration of the past, a chance for the nation to pay its debt, a constant reminder of the guilt all Germans are to feel, or perhaps a responsible engagement with the past and a perpetual call to memory—have confused Eisenman’s intended concept for the work. This confusion has been explored in various critiques of the work. In the midst of the debates concerning the future of the monument, in March 1999, one of Germany’s most prominent philosophers, Jürgen Habermas, writing for *Die Zeit*, wondered if the monument could represent the incorporation of remembrance into Germany’s national identity:

Are we turning the self-critical remembrance of ‘Auschwitz’—the ongoing reflection on the events connected with its name—into an explicit element of our political self-image? Are we, who were born later, taking on the disturbing political responsibility for the departure from civilization

that Germans perpetrated, supported and tolerated, as an element in our fractured national identity?<sup>81</sup>

The question of national “political responsibility” is of interest here. Habermas sees a unified national meaning in the monument. Eisenman’s memorial, however, is not meant to impress a guilty conscience on the German nation, or to promote a national or political point of view; rather, the memorial requires the viewer to experience memory individually. The narrow passageways of the grid form severely limit the viewer’s ability to encounter the monument with other people. The individual memories and thoughts together represent a more accurate version of the fractured and multivalent past. Young suggests a way in which the many pillars themselves are meant to visually represent this individualistic approach to memory: “In their multiple and variegated sizes, the pillars are both individuated and collected: the very idea of ‘collective memory’ is broken down and replaced with the collected memories of individuals murdered, the terrible meaning of their deaths now multiplied and not merely unified.”<sup>82</sup> The vast field of innumerable pillars evokes the fractured nature of the history and memory. After all, innumerable lives were lost, and each one represents a vast amount of memory and history.

The difficulty with thinking of Eisenman’s memorial in terms of a national agenda is that the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* remains surprisingly open-ended in its message. The confusion over whether the monument represents a national, unified form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is perhaps due to the government’s representation of the meaning of this monument. This could be related to the contradiction of terms surrounding the work. In the public forums, in articles and

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<sup>81</sup> Translated text from this article is quoted in *Materials on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 31-32.

<sup>82</sup> Young, *At Memory’s Edge*, 210.

writings the memorial is referred to as a *Mahnmal*; yet, its German title clearly frames it as a *Denkmal*: “*Denkmal für die Ermordeten Juden Europas.*” If considered a *Mahnmal*, the viewer must relate to it in terms of a national guilt and recognition of the reprimand etymologically present in the word. But if the monument is considered a *Denkmal*, then the viewer is free to engage with the monument and to reflect on its meaninglessness more in the way Eisenman had envisioned. Perhaps the visitors to the memorial resent the implications of a *Mahnmal*, which requires them to feel a kind of national guilt for the events of the Holocaust. Or perhaps Eisenman’s message is not conveyed with the clarity required to overcome those implications.

### **Appropriation: Monument as Playground**

Conceptually, Eisenman’s work provides a compelling tension between the need to pause and reflect on loss, and the importance of the recognition of the passing of time. This tension, in theory, should keep the viewer anxious; that anxiety reminding the viewer that memory-work must never be relieved by completion. Yet, viewers have feelings other than those Eisenman intended. The physical form of the monument does not easily lead to the concepts behind that form. In fact, the required movement through the monument allows little time for reflection, and the silent banality of the form can easily chase the viewer’s attention away from the monument entirely. Perhaps the confusion and frustration over the purpose and meaning of the memorial has led to its misuse and misunderstanding.

A conspicuous lack of discussion concerning the monument’s concept in German newspapers and journals suggests the viewer’s difficulty in understanding the ideas

inherent in Eisenman's design. Many of the reviews for Eisenman's finished memorial focus a considerable amount of attention on the public's (mis)uses of the memorial. These misuses are immediately visible to any visitor of the memorial. Leaping from one pillar to the next with the intensity and flare of an Olympic sport, one young man demonstrates a common and now ubiquitous use of the memorial (Figure 21). I visited the memorial just two months after it opened and already it seemed natural to find this type of interaction with the memorial from visitors of all ages. At the time of its opening in May 2005, many newspapers and magazines discussed at length the appropriation of the monument. Take as an example, this French art critic's description of his experience:

As a friend and I entered the labyrinthine field of stones, he said to me, smiling, "I hope you have your GPS on you." This first visit didn't produce the kind of feeling of gravitas you would expect. In fact, during our twilight walk, the structure soon came to feel like a big playing field for some hi[gh]-concept game. You could even wonder if because of its false maze of paths that seem purpose-built for a game of hide-and-go seek, the monument might not become the next favorite hangout for exhibitionists of all kinds. Of course utilization, appropriation and recuperation of these almost 20,000 square meters has already begun. And while solemnity is not at all what this site produces—jumping from stele to stele is on the verge of becoming Berlin's favorite sport—I must admit that Eisenman has achieved dramatic effects.<sup>83</sup>

German news articles have focused especially on the use of the monument. One article in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, written less than a week after the monument was officially opened, reads more like a list of things that people can and cannot, or should and should not do at the memorial, than a discussion of its failings or successes. The article ends with the line, "Not all visitors regard stele jumping as an acceptable way to visit the

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<sup>83</sup> Thibaut de Ruyter, trans. L-S Torgoff, "Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*," *Art Press* no 317 (2005): 41.



memorial.”<sup>84</sup> Clearly the public had, and still has, an uncomfortable relationship with this monument. Perhaps they have not quite accepted its existence, or maybe the discomfort stems from what is suggested in the title of a particular newspaper article: “An event, but one does not feel anything: the public attacks the memorial.”<sup>85</sup> Not even the presence of signs dictating “rules of behavior” while visiting the memorial have stopped Berliners from engaging with the work in this way. But, can the visitor be expected to use the memorial in a particular way even if its design fails to communicate to the viewer its meaning?

Rather than criticize the monument’s design, many critics have directed their attention towards the visitors’ use of the monument. Rauterberg, for example, suggests that a person’s use of the monument suggests his or her ability to engage with history:

And so this metaphorical image inevitably becomes a self-image of the present. We may see, as through a glass darkly how we approach history—whether we remain indifferent to it, whether it moves us or whether the mindless pursuit of leisure-driven consumerism prevails, so that the stelae are used for picnics or as stepping-stones.<sup>86</sup>

Yet, it seems unfair to accuse of mindlessness those who use this memorial to “stelae-jump” or picnic. The “pursuit of leisure driven consumerism,” is not solely a failing of the user, but of the monument whose design invites this kind of behavior. One can easily sit or stand on the lower pillars, and the labyrinthine structure invites exciting games of “hide-and-go seek.” Perhaps the confusion and illegibility of the monument is a product of the process of this memorial’s coming to being: the debate over this

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<sup>84</sup> “Ein Event – aber man fühlt nichts; Publikum stürmt das Mahnmahl,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 18 May 2005. The German text reads, “Stelenspringen halten nicht alle Besucher für die passende Form eines Mahnmahlbesuchs.” (translation mine)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Another article from the *Berliner Zeitung* only three days after the monument opened, is titled “Tanz auf der Stele,” or “Dance on the Stele.” (translation mine)

<sup>86</sup> Hanno Rauterberg, *Holocaust Memorial Berlin*, p. 6 of the text

memorial never quite resolved the questions concerning its meaning and function. Should a visitor be expected to behave in a way appropriate to what this memorial represents if he or she does not know what they are engaging with or why they are engaging with it? Would a more effective design cause the public's residual feelings of confusion, frustration, and mistrust to dissipate more easily?

### **The Failings of the Monument**

Eisenman's concept about the inherent irrationality in the logical system imposed by the memorial is intriguing, but it is perhaps not conveyed through the memorial's physical form. The design of the monument is meant to suggest that rationality is subtly and imperceptibly slipping away. Instead, I would argue that the result of the undulating ground and changing heights of the pillars is a more aesthetically pleasing, beautiful form. The wave of the field of stelae gives a soft quality to an otherwise hard-edged, imposing form, undermining the monument's readability. In fact, Eisenman himself suggests that the aesthetic is too apparent: "I think it's a little too aesthetic. It's a little too good looking. It's not that I wanted something bad-looking, but I didn't want it to seem designed. I wanted the ordinary, the banal."<sup>87</sup> Eisenman points to the decreased effectiveness of the memorial caused by its clear aesthetic. The pleasing undulation of the ground does not effectively convey discomfort or illogic to the viewer. American artist Adrian Piper has also noted this apparent design flaw:

The stelae are placed on a grid system of rows and columns, which makes them very easy to navigate without losing direction, in the same way Manhattan is. This undercuts the sense of disorientation, of being cornered, trapped without hope of escape in a malevolent nightmare,

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, "Mute Point," *Nation*, October 17, 2005, 42.

which would have been an illuminating experience for most contemporary viewers. Eisenman's choices here make it too easy for viewers to escape after a short but edifying experience of site-induced sorrow, before moving on to the next stop on the tour bus.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the failure to deliver a 'sense of disorientation' is in part due to Eisenman's willingness to revise the original design of the project. This may be a product of his architectural background: "As an architect who saw accommodation to his client's wishes as part of his job, Eisenman agreed to adapt the design to the needs of the project."<sup>89</sup> James Young's use of the phrase, "needs of the project," suggests the ways in which this monument's purpose was, and is, fundamentally confused. Once a work that would have caused fear and anxiety through a claustrophobic crowding of pillars that reached sixteen feet, now the monument's wide open lanes and shorter pillars fail to create that anxiety.

Eisenman has likened his design to that of a cornfield he was once lost in. In his design he tried to recapture the experience: "I was trying to do something that had no center, had no edge, had no meaning, that was dumb."<sup>90</sup> Eisenman's hope was that the meaninglessness of his experience would be translated into the design of the memorial such that the viewer could then reflect on the meaninglessness of the Holocaust. Of this goal, American philosopher Arthur C. Danto has said, "It is brilliant but too much to ask of anyone that they should say: This is what he is getting at, this is what the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* is about! The experience is like being lost in a cornfield!

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<sup>88</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen, et. al., "The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," *Frieze*, n. 91 (May 2005): 111.

<sup>89</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 208.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Danto, "Mute Point," 43.

After all, nobody thinks of a cornfield in the middle of Eisenman's memorial."<sup>91</sup>

Frustrated with the memorial's illegibility, Danto suggests, the visitors turn away from interpretation and towards less lofty pursuits.

One way in which the concept of Eisenman's design does reflect the proposed concept of irrationality is in its execution of the repeated form over an improbably large space and to no perceivable end. This seemingly purposeless repetition of form may lead the viewer to wonder about the repetition's significance. In its subsequent silence, the monument's inability to answer is, perhaps, the closest the monument comes to anything like meaning. As Eisenman has said, "the duration of an individual's experience of [the Holocaust memorial] grants no further understanding, since understanding is impossible."<sup>92</sup> As a way to engage with the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust itself, Eisenman's memorial does not offer answers to the questions it occasions.

As James Young acknowledged during the beginning planning stages for the memorial, a successful Holocaust memorial should not try to answer these kinds of questions: "...If the aim is to remember for perpetuity that this great nation once murdered nearly six million human beings solely for having been Jews, then this monument must also embody the intractable questions at the heart of German Holocaust memory rather than claiming to answer them."<sup>93</sup> Peter Eisenman's memorial concept clearly "[embodies] intractable questions," in its silence and ambiguity. Eisenman understood that the success of the monument depended on its ability to keep memory alive and active, to bring the viewer to "remember for perpetuity." This is precisely what

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<sup>91</sup> Danto, "Mute Point," 44.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Eisenman, "Memorial Project Text."

<sup>93</sup> Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 194. We are reminded here also of Mark Godfrey's book, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, which deals with these ideas more thoroughly.

is at work in Eisenman's phenomenological approach towards monumentality—that the monument's continual presence in the viewer's experience of it creates a link between the present time and memory. The viewer's continual and frustrated engagement with work recalls the impossibility of a resolution with the past, and a perpetual inability to understand the past.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag*, and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* are two works that address some of Germany's most traumatic pasts. Conceptually, these works address Germany's past in potentially successful ways. Abstraction and ambiguity allow the viewer to have an individual approach to memory-work, rather than the resolved memory enacted in traditional monument forms. In this way the viewer's memory-work can remain forever unfinished; the reflection of the past never completed. The concept and design of these monuments reflects the irreconcilability of the past; the works claim that memory offers no resolution to a past that can have no explanation. Because of this, the monument must continually call its viewers to memory-work. A successful monument, however, should also be able to refuse inappropriate readings of the use of the monument, and this is one area where both the *Wrapped Reichstag* and the Holocaust memorial fail.

The *Wrapped Reichstag* was a monument whose conceptual underpinnings reflected the needs of the German public. The monument provided an abstract space in which to consider the fragmentation and loss of the past and suggested an alternative way of reading the building beneath the wrapping. The perpetually unfinished nature of

memory-work was incorporated in the *Wrapped Reichstag* through the work's registration of the passage of time and in its ephemerality. Critical of the unquestioned nationalist symbolism represented by the Reichstag, Christo and Jeanne-Claude presented an anti-traditional monument that offered alternative readings. The *Wrapped Reichstag's* main failing, however, was in its inability to protect its concept from other, less productive readings. The result was the reading of the work as a means to purify and cleanse the building of its past. Arguably, the work's visual qualities and the time in which it was realized may have suggested this reading, but given Christo and Jeanne-Claude's artistic history, as well as the history of this particular work, that outcome was not their goal.

Beauty is one of the failings in Peter Eisenman's memorial. The tension the viewer is meant to feel as a result of the stark, hard pillars is eased through the aesthetic, almost organic qualities of the curvilinear ground and overall surface. The abstract, ambiguous visual qualities of Eisenman's memorial refuse any resolution of the past into the stone of the monument; but the ambiguity of the design has also caused some visitors to play in the monument. Eisenman's compromise in design lessened the ability of the work to achieve its desired effect, yet his concept does incorporate most if not all of the necessary elements for a successful monument in Berlin after reunification.

This brings us back to Mark Godfrey's and James Young's criteria for successful and appropriate monuments to a violent and traumatic past. Godfrey maintains that artworks dealing with the Holocaust should be abstract in a way that does not suggest any particular reading, while still encouraging the viewer to question and interpret the meaning of the work. Christo and Jeanne-Claude and Peter Eisenman incorporate the

kind of ambiguity and openness in their works required to support Godfrey's model of appropriate abstraction. Young has argued that successful non-traditional monuments must engage with temporality, such that memory and the past remain active and present. The *Wrapped Reichstag* and the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* respond to this need through the incorporation of ephemerality and phenomenological interaction respectively. In fact, these monuments seem to follow quite precisely the very directions for successful and non-traditional monuments set up by scholars such as James Young and Mark Godfrey. Yet the need for ambiguity, abstraction, and temporality seems to carry with it its own failure. These monuments are often misunderstood, and both can potentially be read as another iteration of a traditional monument.

The failures of these works do suggest that a wholly successful monument to Germany's violent and traumatic past is probably not possible. Still, the attempts are necessary to the public's engagement with this past. In many ways, the discussions about the viability of these monuments effectively achieved the goal of activating the German public's memory. In their inability to memorialize or define the Holocaust, the Cold War, and Germany's division, the *Wrapped Reichstag* and the *Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe* succeed in leaving the past unresolved, and memory unfinished.

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