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 Courtauld Institute of Art, London. tel/fax 0171 377 1073.
 Colloquium II: New dimensions of Public Art: Monuments, Memories and a new Europe?

This paper will discuss Jochem Gerz's Monument Vivant de Biron, 1996, Sophie Calle's project The Detachment, Berlin, 1996; Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum under construction in Berlin, and Rachel Whiteread's Vienna Holocaust Memorial, due for completion in Spring, 1999. In each case, the civic or patriotic norms of centuries of commemorative sculpture are challenged through the artist's relationship with the political subject, nationality and generation. The subject of commemoration, whether the second World War French Resistance, Cold War East Berlin, or the Holocaust as an event in Germany or in Austria has taken place in a time, place and often country beyond the lived experience of the artist or architect. The subject of sculpture as memory is doubly poignant - or problematic. Within a reunited Europe of new political and economic alliances, these artists, German, French, Polish-American, English, work in a context of memories conditioned by nationalism, racial hatred, loss and mourning, but must also confront the spectres of neo-nazism, apathy or sheer ignorance. Thus these works must not only commemorate the past but carry some vision forward into the future. Each monumental project exists at a point in time and space which concentrates a knot of meanings and must invite renewed responses, yet each project requires a certain formal power.

Jochem Gerz, born in Berlin in 1940, moved to Paris in 1966 aged twenty six. His 'conceptual' Holocaust monuments in Germany (Hambourg, 1986 or Sarrebruck, 1993) are well known. However, his 'Monument vivant de Biron' (Acquitaine, in the Dordogne), works 'over' and 'upon' a decayed French memorial to the dead of the second world war at a site renowned for nazi atrocities in 1943-4 - now important for tourism. Annette Wierksa's Passant, souviens-toi!, 1995, detailed France's neglect of second world war memorials. Gerz restored the monument and inscribed it with responses to 'the secret question': for what causes would the villagers risk their lives? The spectator becomes both patron and author.

Sophie Calle's art generally involves fiction or detective work. In Berlin, however, 'The Detachment' was an antiproject, based on absence. The young French woman found sacred monuments spirited away by the post-Communist, post reunification 'democratic' German government. Only the oral histories she recorded in conjunction with old photographs - only this kind of bearing witness, envisaged as a responsibility for a new generation of artists - can preserve this memory.

Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, Berlin, constructed around a symbolic central void, will commemorate the obliteration of the Jewish population, challenging from within the 'tradition' of Holocaust museums. Architectural references to Suprematism evoke not only the problematic linkage between modernity and the Holocaust posited by fellow Pole, Zygmunt Bauman, but Libeskind's encounter with modernism and Malevitch as a child in the Lodz museum, Poland. (Lodz, his birthplace, was a notorious site of massacre and antisemitism). Can notions of personal 'authorship' inscribe this architectural tour-de-force?

Rachel Whiteread has justly achieved an international reputation for her sculptures, yet this young Englishwoman has a most formidable intellectual and spiritual burden to be sustained with her Vienna Holocaust memorial - a monolithic yet ghostly evocation of a library. What are the implications of both the 'critical distance' and the 'empathic' involved in such a project, for both the artist and the various generations of spectators?

'Temoignage' (bearing witness) extends outwards from Holocaust studies as a new tool involving form, symbol and meaning, the work of artists, critics and art historians.