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ACTIVATING VISUAL IMAGINATION

Ida Fink's Tangible Narrative

ABSTRACT: Ida Fink's short story "Traces" is a prime example of the conjuring power of a narrative that makes use of a photograph. Fink relies on the primacy given to the visual sense; in addition, she relies on a pervasive basic assumption regarding photography, namely that photos are faithful to the reality they capture, and correspondingly are endowed with a truth value. Yet the photo described by a witness to Nazi atrocities is perplexing: taken shortly after the murder of the village's Jews, it is almost completely empty, since the only visible signs of life are the footmarks they left on the snow. Fink nonetheless manages to use this photo in her narrative and turn the existence of the traces' owners into a tangible presence. Yet the testimony of the last survivor of the village is as fragile and problematic as the photograph is prone to manipulations. Both testimony and photograph perpetuate what cannot be seen, in a manoeuvre that reminds one of Jochen Gerz's "vanishing memorial," organically turning the invisible existence of the dead into cobble stones bearing the names of Jewish cemeteries upside down, so we may—or may not—be stepping on a replicated grave-stone. Both Gerz and Fink use barely visible traces as a constitutive middle ground for creator and reader / viewer, to demonstrate that the most powerful of visual capacities must be ceded to imagination.

KEYWORDS: Narrative Techniques, Photography, Imagination, Ida Fink, Holocaust, Memory, Public and Private Spaces.

The borders between photography and literature, once called space arts and time arts, have long been transgressed and the two mediums have cross-seminated each other in many ways. One striking example is Ida Fink's short story called "Traces" (Fink 1987, 135-137).

In this story, a Holocaust survivor is asked to look at a photograph and tell an unknown number of anonymous interlocutors whether she recognizes the place where it was taken. The survivor's words and the photograph we are looking at through her description bear very similar qualities and operate in parallel ways. Each medium is thus made to enhance and reverberate the qualities of the other.

Both photograph and narration are undermined from the onset. The photograph the survivor describes is discredited, since it is said to be of poor quality, merely a blurred copy of a photograph taken by a clumsy amateur. In a similar way, the survivor's words are disparaged when she admits that

“perhaps she has put it badly” (Fink 1987, 135) and misrepresented what can be seen in the photograph. She is a reluctant narrator, who soon pushes the photograph away, and claims: “I prefer not to be reminded” (Fink 1987, 135), attesting to the insufferable difficulty of putting the harrowing memory into words. Only when questioned again about details that led to the situation unwittingly disclosed in the photograph, does she agree to provide some more information and to look again at the photograph. Her “nearsighted eyes” (Fink 1987, 136) further undermine what she can see now; nonetheless, she does notice something she considers “very strange” (Fink 1987, 136), and which will become the focal point of both photograph and narrative.

The narrative and the photograph bear similar attributes as to their veracity. Even in our age of extensive manipulations to which photographs are routinely subjected, viewers still consider them as bearing a very high truth-value. The fact that an amateur took the photo in the story adds to its reliability, since he would perhaps have been less able to compose the photo purposefully to begin with when he took it, making it more spontaneous and presumably truthful. As to the narrative, its truth-value is equated to that of the photograph, since it is made up of the words of a living survivor, who witnessed the events as they took place. Her words, though quite probably as one-sided as those of any individual’s telling his or her side of a story, are nevertheless empowered with the respect and consideration we tend to ascribe to witnesses, especially witnesses of great tragedies.

The entire narrative is extremely short, almost as short as the time it takes the survivor to look at the photograph and react to what she sees. Its brief duration merely provides a sketch of the characters and the situation depicted, similarly to the amount of visual information one can obtain from a photograph, which is limited to what can actually be seen. In the particular photograph we are invited to glimpse at, this information is especially scarce. If we were to reproduce this photograph from the survivor’s words in actual life, the result would show nothing spectacular, just an empty scene in which there is not much to see: a village square, surrounded by a few wooden structures, all covered in snow, and some footsteps in the snow. These footsteps generate the focal point mentioned above, to which we shall shortly return.

Another similarity between narrative and photograph is the deceptively subdued and neutral tone of the narrative, reverberated in the almost empty photograph the survivor is looking at. The survivor is composed, and her words form a restrained, sotto-voce narrative, as empty of feelings as the scene presented in the photograph. The empty photograph in turn

accentuates the chillingly unemotional tone of a post-traumatic narrative.¹ Yet it is precisely the condensed, dispassionate narrative and the impartial photograph that constitute the strongest strands of the writer's cobweb that manage to ensnare the reader/viewer by the end of barely three pages.

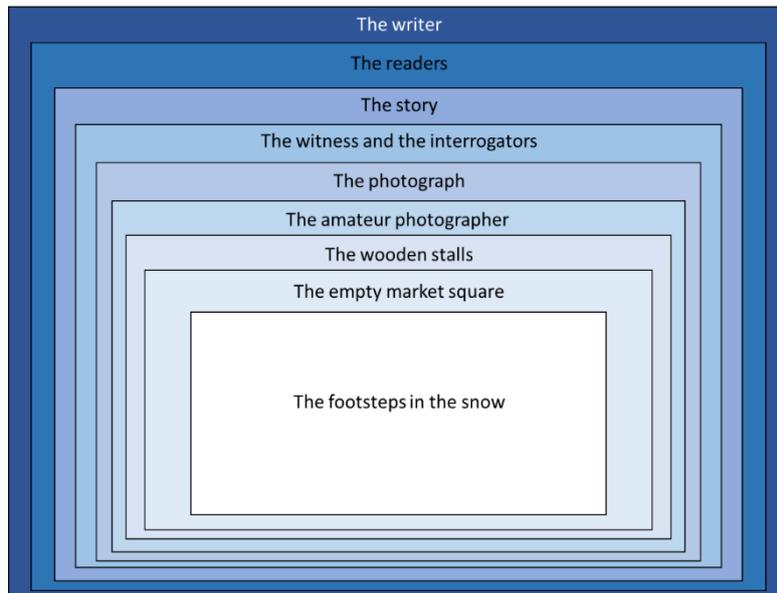
As the ending of the story demonstrates, the control of the narrative is put entirely in the hands of the survivor. Both the first sentences of the story and the last ones are paraphrases of the survivor's words. At the beginning, her recognition of the photograph sets the story in motion, though written in the third person: "Yes, of course she recognizes it. Why shouldn't she?" (Fink 1987, 135) whereas the last sentences of the story are: "in a calm voice she asks for a short break, with an indulgent smile she rejects the glass of water they hand her. After the break she will tell how they were all shot" (Fink 1987, 137). The survivor dictates not only the content of the testimony but also its pace and tone. She will continue to provide more information when she is ready, after the break—a testimony we shall not read. In this aspect too, the narrative follows the peculiarity of the photograph, which only provides an immediate visual image with no sequel. Any additional information would necessarily be obtained by other means than the text and photo can provide.

Structurally, the survivor's words at the beginning and at the end of the story constitute the most noteworthy relationship between narrative and photograph in this story, since her words are used for the purpose of framing, a literary device especially noticeable thanks to the inclusion of the description of the photograph. The importance of framing in photography is well known as a technique that effectively draws the viewers' gaze where the photographer wishes to lead their attention. Multiple frames can add depth of field to the photograph, and assist in creating a path the eyes follow. Thus, the frame also determines the viewers' interpretation.

Correspondingly, the narrative is built on a series of frames, juxtaposed in telescopic manner, narrowing down from the outer framework which contains the writer of the story, to the frame to which the readers belongs, to the frame of the story itself. Within the story, the first frame contains anonymous interviewers who ask the witness to identify the photograph, as well as the witness herself. The second frame contains the photograph she is made to look at. The photograph creates a third frame, which contains the amateur photographer at the time and place from which he took the photo. An inner frame within the photograph is produced by the wooden market stalls, which the survivor recognizes as those that had been converted into

¹ David Roskies and Naomi Diamant find that in this story "the act of recounting is sharp as cut crystal. There is no sentimentality in the account of the survivor" (Roskies and Diamant 2012, 287).

makeshift living quarters for the few residents of the village's last ghetto. These wooden stalls frame the empty market place, which is the focal point of both photograph and narrative, and encloses the final inner frame around the marks of footprints in the snow.



The depth of field achieved in the narrative, in similar manner to that achieved by a photographer who incorporates many frames within one photograph, creates an almost three-dimensional, tangible presence of the empty footprints at the centre of the photograph.

The footprints, in turn, point the viewers' gaze out of the frame, back into the outer, historical frame of the narrative, in the direction towards which the victims were made to walk, moments before the photograph was taken. Yet the readers are not allowed to wander far off, and are forcefully drawn back into the photograph, through the witness' claim that the actual record of these footprints is "very strange" (Fink 1987, 136). What surprises the witness is that someone obviously managed to shoot the photograph shortly after the people were taken away, but when they were still alive. She adds immediately: "when they shot them in the afternoon it was snowing again" (Fink 1987, 136). One is made to understand that a photograph taken in the afternoon would not have recorded the footprints, covered, as they would be, by fresh snow.

Snow, often associated with purification and transformation, as well as with death, covers everything indiscriminately and equally, allowing not only the registration of movements over it, but also the disappearance of the

marked registration. In Fink's story, the snow assists in divulging the existence of those who were forcefully taken out of the frame, and whose empty footsteps confirm are no longer part of the landscape. The natural elements are subtly made to underline human cruelty, when the snow is turned into a key agent in the uncovering of the evidence, achieved thanks to the combined information the photograph and the survivor provide.

The freezing snow also accentuates the freezing of time created and represented by any photograph, as it is duplicated here in a freezing of the narrative time, at the moment of realization the survivor undergoes during her interrogation. She continues to claim: "the people are gone—their footprints remain. Very strange" (Fink 1987, 136). The living presence of the slaughtered people as well as that of their murderers, obviously present at the same place and time, suddenly materializes for the readers by the survivor's words. This is achieved through the focus that is put on what is *not* there, not only now that the people have long been dead, but also at the time the photo was taken, when they were still alive and capable of producing marks in the snow. The empty footsteps are a hollow image left by their bodies, a negative imprint. The 'narrative negative' resembles the negative of a photograph that can show inverted presences when put to the light. In similar manner, the words of the survivor 'refill' the footsteps with their owners, attesting to their being already dead as they were making the marks in the snow. Her realization reverberates in the reader, in an inverted way to Roland Barthes' notion that a photograph of a corpse "certifies [...] that the corpse is alive as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing" (Barthes 1981 [1980], 78-79). In Fink's story, live humans are despondently turned into corpses in the absence of their bodies. The framing technique of both photograph and narrative is thus used not only as a focusing device but also as a declaration of the limits of the frame, which can only reproduce unexpected, hollow footsteps in lieu of concrete presences, forcefully pointing to the void left by the victims. By describing this particular photograph, that merely bares empty traces of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, Fink joins those writers for whom, as Michael Roth writes, "there is no presence that remains for us to hold onto. There 'remains' only annihilation" (Roth 2010, 96).

The actual photograph in the story necessarily proves the photographer's presence on the scene at the time, when he witnessed the occurrences through his lens. Yet through the description of the photograph, almost completely empty of the victims, Fink manages not only to engage her unsuspecting readers but also to turn them into "postmemorial viewers," as termed by Marianna Hirsch. When viewers look at photographs of atrocities, they are perforce "positioned in the place identical with the weapon of

destruction: our look, like the photographer's, is in the place of the executioner [...]. When we confront perpetrator images, we cannot look independently of the look of the perpetrator" (Hirsch 2012, 136-137). The amateur photographer was probably one of the German soldiers,² who happened to possess a camera, and "must have been standing next to the building in which the *Judenrat* was housed. That was an actual house, not a stall. Three windows in front and an attic under the roof" (Fink 1987, 135-136).

The simple photo and the neutral-sounding words of explanation attest to a warping of time experienced by the survivor, who is made to realize once more the enormity of the horror that was taken for granted at the time. When she first looked at the photograph and confirmed it was taken at what had become "their last ghetto" (Fink 1987, 135), her voice sounded amazed: "of course she is amazed. How did they survive there? [...] But in those days no one was surprised at anything. 'They did such terrible things to us that no one was surprised at anything,' she says out loud, as if she has just now understood" (Fink 1987, 135). The inoffensive photograph does not show the terrible things the survivor refers to, yet its very existence becomes an inherent part of the brutality. Its empty banality attests to an off-handedness on the part of the photographer. The photograph differs both in quality and content from official photographs that were part of the Nazi meticulous documenting operation of the atrocities they perpetrated. By taking such a neutral photograph, the photographer would have been safe from reprimand or punishment in the event that he were caught by his superiors.³ Nonetheless, the very existence of the photograph proves the photographer's complicity and total disregard of human ethical values.

What prompts the reluctant survivor to talk despite her expressed wish to forget is precisely the realization that the photographer stood near the *Judenrat* building from whose attic eight children were taken out into the square, where their parents had already been made to stand in front of a squad of SS soldiers. This is the scene immediately preceding that on the photograph, which depends on the witness' words to become known. She testifies that the dehumanisation of the children was complete: not only did

² As Andrea Liss points out, "Ghettos and camps were strictly closed off to the outside world, except for the Nazis stationed there" (Liss 1998, 1-2). It would be safe to assume the photographer embedded in the story is meant to be a German soldier, perhaps part of the Nazi propaganda industry.

³ Judith Keilbach and Kirsten Wächter point out prohibitions against personal, souvenir pictures of executions, a decree signed by SS lieutenant General Kruger 4/8/1940, another, signed in 1941 by Chief of Staff of the 11th army Otto Woehler, and yet another signed in 1942 by the Head of Gestapo & Security Services Reinhard Heydrich (Keilbach, Wächter 2009, 65).

they look like “little gray mice” (Fink 1987, 137), but instead of running to their parents’ side, as any child under seven would naturally do, they sat “motionless and looked straight ahead” (Fink 1987, 137). Despite the repeated shouts of the SS officer to point out their parents, they all remained silent; anticipating the silence the survivor has kept until finally provoked by the potential silencing of memory introduced by the photograph itself.

The only response to the photographer’s choice of frame are the words the survivor must now pronounce if she is to replace the empty traces with words “written down and preserved forever” (Fink 1987, 137), instead of the empty traces in the photograph, that voids the world of the murdered people’s presence yet again. The trace the survivor wishes to leave now is not only of the physical existence of the dead but of the children’s useless courage that proves the failure of the Nazis. While the Nazis nearly managed to exterminate the Jews of Europe, they did not manage to complete their initial goal, of the utter humiliation and degradation of their victims, not even of very young ones like the children caught in the attic of the Ghetto’s *Judenrat*. Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin argue that the Nazis denied the Jews their “shared humanity of humankind,” intent on humiliating them before killing them, in order to emphasize “the *difference* of their eventual collective death over the common identity that death imposes on us all.” Nonetheless, “the tormentor destroys the victim only to discover that by this murder a link is forged between the victim’s new identity as a victim and his or her previous identity as a nonhumiliated individual” (Margalit and Motzkin 1996, 70,75). In similar manner, the survivor’s testimony manages to conjure the living presence of individuals through ‘filling’ their generic, empty footsteps, by relying on the readers’ imagination and cooperation in vindicating the children and endowing them once more with human dignity.

From a creative point of view, the power of the empty frame hinges on what Ruth Ginsburg has termed a ‘negative chronotope.’ The chronotope, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, unites parameters of time and space as inseparable elements in narrative (Bakhtin 1981, 84-85). By pointing to the primacy of space over the classic narrative foregrounding of time, Ginsburg demonstrates that in essence, Fink’s story inverts Bakhtin’s term, producing a negative chronotope. Ginsburg’s insight is particularly apt for works such as Ida Fink’s which stress “a site of absence [...] where you see ‘nothing,’ a place that arrests a time of disappearing, of vanishing into nothing.” It is this kind of space that, like the result of taking a photograph, “points to a frozen time [...] rendering disappearance into nothingness artistically visible” (Ginsburg 2006, 205, 211).

Doubtlessly, the linear, progressive time of the living was frozen if not completely obliterated for Holocaust victims. As Fink writes in another

story, entitled “A Scrap of Time,” the time experienced during the war was no longer “measured in months and years,” but rather by a single word: “action” [*aktion* in German] (Fink 1987, 3), a word that altered reality irrevocably. Thus, when the time factor holds a different value than the regular time, time itself becomes a substance contained in and equated to the space opened in the present. Linking back to Ginsburg’s argument, the artistic visibility that materializes the empty space left by the murdered victims, relies not only on a freezing of time by both narrative and photograph, but on the particular time frame to which fictional characters belong, which is necessarily always the present time. In this sense, another fictional protagonist comes to mind, that expresses the plight of all created creatures: Luigi Pirandello’s mother character in his famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. When the director of the play within-the-play asks the mother character during the rehearsal of the play why she is so upset by the demand to repeat an action that has already happened, she replies: “No, it’s happening now. It happens all the time! My anguish is not over, sir! I am alive and present all the time and in every moment of my anguish which renews itself, alive and always present” (Pirandello 1995, 51). The mother character thus expresses Pirandello’s contention that the relevant time of a work of art is the present, the time of its performance. This is true not only for the time of a theatrical performance but also for the time of a narrative, which generates a performative action of reading, and that too takes place in the present.

The performativity of the text hinges on its activation by the readers, who are encouraged to use their imagination to fill the empty footsteps. The text is thereby turned into a kind of active memorial, performed each time the story is read. The superimposed photographic and narrative frames in Ida Fink’s story constitute a *mise-en-abîme*, an introspective, self-reflective device that effectively implicates the readers/viewers by paradoxically reducing the distance between them and the narrated events.⁴ The use of this device invites the readers to take a step into the fictive world in the fashion of Mary Poppins jumping into the drawing on the pavement, and listen to the survivor’s testimony alongside the fictive audience made up by her interrogators. The readers’ participation is achieved more easily when they are included and become part of the narrative, especially when they do not feel threatened by a seemingly empty photograph and the quiet words of the survivor.

⁴ For a multifaceted discussion of various aspects of the use of a play within a play, see for example: Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner eds. 2007. *The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi.

The readers' engagement in filling the missing presence of the victims is activated in a similar way to that of the viewers of Jochen Gerz' *Invisible Monument*, and their engagement endows meaning to the monument. A conceptual artist, Gerz and his students at the School of Fine Arts in Saarbrücken created this counter-monument by stealthily replacing 2,146 cobblestones of the square leading to the Saarbrücken Schloss, which had housed the Gestapo during the war, with cobblestones they had brought with them in their bags. Each of the cobblestones they had put into the ground had a nail embedded in it, so it would be easily found later on with a metal detector for the second phase of their nocturnal operations. The students then engraved the original cobblestones they had taken from the square with the names of Jewish cemeteries that existed in Germany before the war, and had been desecrated or eradicated. In a second guerrilla-like operation, the students then replaced the engraved cobblestones in their former location in the square, yet they inserted them into place with the engraved writing facing down. In such a way, no one would see where each engraved cobblestone is positioned in the square. Gerz' installation has organically turned the invisible existence of the dead into a part of the stone-fabric of the life of the square, as explained by Mark Callaghan (Callaghan 2010). The knowledge that we may—or may not—be stepping on a representation of a gravestone, creates insecurity and unease, resulting from a sense of transgression and of violation of taboos. In essence, Gerz is re-erecting the gravestones in an inverted, upside-down motion, reverberating those “first sites of memory created by survivors” which, as James Young points out, “were interior places, imagined gravesites,” and were created “in response to what has been called ‘the missing gravestone syndrome’” (Young 2000, 165). Young later adds that “in keeping with the bookish tradition, the first memorials to the Holocaust period came not in stone [...] but in narrative,” thus turning memorial books into “symbolic narratives” (Young 1993, 7).⁵ This remark strongly invokes another Holocaust memorial, Rachel Whiteread's *Nameless Library*, erected in the Judenplatz in Vienna, which displays a house whose outer walls are lined with rows of books on bookshelves. The spines of the books are turned in, and the viewer is faced with tantalizingly inaccessible contents of concrete pages one cannot read. Whiteread's memorial solidifies spaces “over, under and around everyday objects” and makes “palpable the notion that materiality can also be an index of absence” (Young 2000, 107).

Gerz himself created numerous installations, undertaking an unconventional representation of memory in space, as did other noteworthy

⁵ Young underlines the centrality of historical memory in Jewish liturgy and its major role in forming “Jewish national consciousness” (Young 1993, 110).

artists who produced ‘negative monuments’: one recalls Micha Ullman’s sunken library in Berlin, or Horst Hoheisel’s seemingly inexistent monument, which reproduces the absence of the victims by constructing an upside-down version of the Aschrott fountain in Kassel to only mention this particular approach.⁶

These inverted memorials assist in elucidating the nature of the reversal achieved by foregrounding the dimension of space over that of time which Ginsburg found operating in Fink’s story. Fink relies on several other inversions in “Traces,” that reinforce the reversal created by the empty footsteps in the snow. These include an inversion in time, between past and present, resulting in the amalgamation of both times into one. Another inversion is seen in the position of the readers, created by the use of multiple frames; finally, there is an inversion between private thoughts made public, as a response to public occurrences in the village square that had hitherto disappeared into the depth of the survivor’s memory.

The inversion between public and private spaces of memory function in a similar way in Gerz’ installation: the public Jewish cemeteries are now integrated into a public square, but upside-down, thereby becoming invisible. Yet each step taken on the square by a visitor in turn changes the public square into a private experience, the existence of which can only be found in the visitor’s mind. Importantly, this installation as well others, displays the impossibility of representation combined with an affirmation of the need to rely on imagination to trigger a new approach to memory. Notably, it resists all “possibility of encasing them [the victims] in a monument or museum that presumes the notion of preservation.” This is especially important when one recalls that “the Nazis perversely linked preservation to extinction,” according to Margalit and Motzkin, who refer to the Nazis’ planned “museum of an extinct race.” Their project emphasised the uniqueness of the extinction of the Jews in Nazi ideology, since it was aimed to allow one to only “remember the Jews and their humiliation in their extinct form” (Margalit and Motzkin 1996, 82-83).

Among by now many other similar memorials, Gerz’s and Whitereads’ installations thus create new, unsoiled, sites of remembrance. Despite vehement public and political arguments regarding the continued existence of Gerz’s memorial, it has been officially approved and the square renamed the *Square of the Invisible Monument*, thereby returning “the burden of

⁶ Other monuments by Gerz can be found at Dachau, Hamburg, and Biron (in the Dordogne), to only mention a few. Hoheisel used a slightly different approach when he created together with Andreas Knitz a memorial at Buchenwald, which consists of a stone designed to maintain 37 degrees Celsius continuously, a stone at human body temperature.

memory to those who come looking for it” when they visit the square, as Young has claimed. Young continues: it is “the public’s interaction with the monument that finally constitutes its aesthetic life,” since the memory is not placed by Gerz in the centre of town, but ultimately “in the centre of the public’s mind” (Young 2000, 166). The monument itself is an act of resistance to the “very possibility of its birth” (Young 1993, 28),⁷ to the events that led to its creation. Similarly, Fink’s restrained narrative, and the few balanced words she puts into the composed survivor’s mouth, establish continued acts of resistance to a painful memory. Conversely, the photograph included in the story constitutes both proof and resistance to the negation of the events the photographer performs by taking this particular frame. Common to monument, narrative and photograph, is the knowledge of what can’t be seen, represented by tangible signs that are as distorted as the events they attest to. What is inscribed in Gerz’ installation as well as in Ida Fink’s text, is thus the professed impossibility of representing what happened in a way that can be grasped by anyone who did not undergo the Shoa. Both Gerz and Fink use the void as a productive element in art, harnessed to give expression to the void left by the victims, and heighten our awareness of their continued presence. Both artists use barely visible traces as a constitutive middle ground for creator and viewer or reader, whose own resistance to acknowledge the past and remember it is skillfully overcome. The Viewer/reader is tuned into “an agent of historical memory” (Rosenfeld 2011, 166), a morally responsible bystander, demonstrating that the most powerful of visual and cognitive capacities must be ceded to imagination.

As George Didi-Huberman writes, “to remember, one must imagine [...] the *imaginable* certainly does not make radical evil ‘present’ and in no way masters it on a practical level: what it does is bring us closer to its *possibility*.” Didi-Huberman adds: “The *memory* of the Shoa should continually be reconfigured,” by whatever means available to us. We must “look into images to see that of which they are survivors. So that history, liberated from the pure past [...] might help us *to open* the present of time” (Didi-Huberman 2008 [2003], 30, 155, 159, 182). In a world soon to be empty of living Shoa survivors, ‘opening the present of time’ indeed relies on the activation of readers of fiction and viewers of artistic exhibits and on the performance of the willing engagement of their imagination.

⁷ Young here refers to other counter-monuments, such as Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz’s vanished *Monument against Fascism* in Hamburg, Horst Hoheisel’s negative-form of the Aschrott-Brunnen monument in Kassel, and Norbert Radermacher’s memorial near Berlin (Young 1993, 27-48).

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