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## Review of James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture.*

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**James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. 256 pp. 56 b/w, 47 color ill. ISBN 0300080328.**

**Reviewed by Lisa Saltzman, Bryn Mawr College**

Stenciled upon a gallery wall on the third floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York are the words “Counter-Monuments and Memory.” One of eleven sections in the sweeping exhibition “Open Ends,” the third and final piece of MoMA’s millennial re-installation of its collection, “Counter-Monuments and Memory” introduces the public to a defining aspect of art practice since 1960. That MoMA addresses such a commemorative and conceptual impulse in contemporary art is certainly noteworthy given its institutional history of formalist aesthetics. But perhaps even more noteworthy is the source for its decidedly thematic presentation of a dimension of postwar practice.

It is a testimony and tribute to the range and influence of the work of James Young, a professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, that the term and concept of the “countermonument” has entered the discourse on contemporary art. For even as there is a specificity to the coinage, emerging as it did from his study of Holocaust memorials, it has achieved critical currency for its capacity to capture something of the formal and theoretical essence of what might be termed an aesthetics of remembrance in the present. Published in 1993, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) analyzed the form and function of Holocaust memorials in Germany, Austria, Poland, Israel and the United States. Despite the expansive scope of the project, it was specifically within the German context that Young found a body of sculptural practice that allowed him to articulate the concept and category of the “countermonument.” For there, in the 1980s, aesthetic and ethical concerns about representation and its limits came together to produce commemorative work that insistently challenged traditional conceptions of the monument and the memorial, and with that, their own being-as-monuments. Indebted as Young’s countermonuments are to the form of minimalist sculpture, they refuse its conceptual claims of presence, autonomy and authority. Instead, Young’s countermonuments insist upon absence, impermanence, participation and context.

In many ways, Young’s *At Memory’s Edge* furthers the project begun in *The Texture of Memory*, extending the aesthetic and ethical questions raised in relation to works of explicit Holocaust commemoration to the broader domain of post-Holocaust visual culture. Where *The Texture of Memory* focused exclusively on Holocaust memorials,

the work that grounds *At Memory's Edge* ranges from publicly commissioned monuments and museums to privately realized acts of memory. Whether analyzing the postmodern aesthetics of simulation at play in David Levinthal's photographic historical scenes and scenarios or narrating the political debates surrounding the history and design of Daniel Libeskind's emphatically deconstructive Jewish Museum in Berlin, Young makes clear the imperatives, moral and historical, that shape the production and reception of Holocaust memory.

What links the aesthetic encounters with the Holocaust that comprise Young's book is their belatedness. That is, the work in question is produced by a generation of artists and architects that came after, a generation that knows the Holocaust only through its representations. Young foregrounds the issue of belatedness in the introductory section of his book, producing a framework for thinking about these "after-images" that is deeply, even if not explicitly, indebted to psychoanalysis and its theorization of trauma.

But perhaps even more important for Young, is the degree to which these self-consciously belated aesthetic encounters with highly mediated memory may provide paradigms for the disciplinary practice of history. In the concluding words of his introduction, and with his signature perspicuity and perspicacity, he writes:

It is time to step back and take an accounting: Where does all this history and its telling lead, to what kinds of knowledge, to what ends? For this is, I believe, the primary challenge to Holocaust art and historiography in an antiredemptory age: it is history-telling and memory that not only mark their own coming into being but also point to the places--both real and imagined--they inevitably take us. (11)

Young's interest in historiography, as well as the relationship between the practice of art and the discipline of history, is most explicitly wrought in the chapter that immediately follows the introduction. In that first chapter, Young draws on the work of such historians of the Holocaust as Saul Friedländer and Michael André Bernstein to present Art Spiegelman's two-volume comic-book project *Maus* as a paradigm for the discipline of post-Holocaust history. In the process, Young produces an account of Spiegelman's project that conveys the extraordinary power of his insistently self-conscious and self-critical enterprise in graphic art, autobiography and oral history.

If for Spiegelman, the history of the Holocaust was made present through the words of his survivor father, and it is the testimonial trace of that history that grounds his comic-book project, for David Levinthal, there is no such immediacy or contiguity to the historical or aesthetic enterprise. He, like the rest of us who come after, knows history only through its representation in culture. And it is that highly mediated

relationship to history that Young addresses in the following chapter, in his somewhat wary and ambivalent account of Levinthal's photographic simulations of history. Joining artifact with artifice, Levinthal's work deploys toy Nazi soldiers and other figurines in the staging and soft-focus production of historical tableaux, producing a blurred, pop-cultural vision of history as screened through the mythic lens of commodity culture.

In the ensuing chapter, Young explores the ways in which the photograph is put to entirely different uses in the site-specific installations of Shimon Attie. Coupling their evidentiary status with their nostalgic power, Attie projects archival photographs onto the amnesiac architectural facades, train tracks, sidewalks and seaports of European cities. In so doing, he makes present the degree to which Europe is haunted, at least in the minds and memories of some of its citizens and visitors, by the absence of its former Jewish subjects. That Attie produces the archival document as a spectral and ultimately ephemeral aesthetic experience, underscores the fragility of history, as it is both configured by and consigned to the realm of memory.

The following two chapters engage most explicitly with the category of the countermonument. Some of the material in these chapters either reprises or returns to aspects of Young's foundational work in *The Texture of Memory*. Rather than serving as a mere exercise in repetition, however, his revisiting of the work of Jochen Gerz and Horst Hoheisel demonstrates the degree to which their countermonuments, and Young's influential account of their form and function, came to define the topography of the postwar German memorial landscape. In these chapters, Young expands his discussions of each artist's oeuvre to include both earlier and later work, and he extends the parameters of his analysis to include projects by Micha Ullman, Rachel Whiteread and Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock. In so doing, Young secures the ethical importance and sheer prevalence of the countermonument as commemorative and aesthetic category at the end of the millennium.

In many ways, the chapter that ensues involves a further, if not final, examination of the countermonument, focusing as it does on Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Extension to the Berlin Museum. An architectural project that embodies and concretizes the aesthetic and ethical language of limit, rupture and void, Libeskind's museum, conjured up through Young's prose in all of its architectural uncanniness, may articulate and commemorate the Holocaust more powerfully and effectively than any other memorial.

The book concludes with an expressly autobiographical account of Young's own experiences on the *Findungskommission* for Berlin's "Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe." A narrative of a political process, the chapter is also a narrative of

Young's evolution from critic to commissioner, arbiter to advocate. In the end, the same conceptual clarity and critical conscience that marks his scholarly work also marks his foray into public policy. Through the power and persuasiveness of his words, he helps to set the terms for the memorial competition, and he gains parliamentary support for the architect Peter Eisenman's winning memorial proposal.

When built, Eisenman's Holocaust memorial will stand as a monumental "countermonument" to the historical loss it seeks to memorialize. It will also stand as a monument to the very concrete ways in which Young's work of interpretation, Young's voice, has come to influence and shape the forms of Holocaust memory in the present. For in speaking of and for these countermonuments, these "after-images" of the Holocaust, Young has found a language with which to speak, if not of history itself, at least of the historical experience of coming after.

That said, I want to conclude by invoking a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, recorded in March of 1972, in which Deleuze lauds Foucault for having taught us something fundamental, namely, "the indignity of speaking for others" ["Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," (1972) in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, Donald F. Bouchard, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 209]. I invoke this conversational moment not in the interest of repeating Foucault's critique of language, though it certainly warrants repetition in the face of the commemorative work, and the scholarly project, in question. Rather, I do so for what was born from this condemnation of language, from this acknowledgement of its inevitable failure. For it is out of an insistence on the ethical limits of language, and out of a dialogue, a dialogue with another, that Foucault's notion of a counter-discourse emerges, a discourse of others.

It might be said that Young's *At Memory's Edge* enacts and explores the possibilities and limits of such a counter-discourse, as it may be seen to take shape in scholarly and aesthetic form. Nowhere are the incapacities and indignities of language more acute than in the aftermath of trauma. Taking as his subject those artists and architects who have taken historical trauma as their belated subjects, Young finds a language with which to address their work, and with that, historical trauma. Young's is a scholarly language that shows the dignity that is possible in speaking of others. That dignity is a tribute both to Young's scholarly enterprise and to the commemorative aesthetic enterprises that he takes as his subject. For in creating their countermonuments, in insisting upon the irrevocable gap between experience and its enunciation, between history and its representation, between the self and the other, these postwar artists and architects have produced a memorializing "counter-discourse," an aesthetic language, that allows for the possibility of dignity in speaking of others. Their work and

Young's allow for the continued possibility of discourse, of communication, and with that, the transmission of the experience of the other, in other words, of history.