

A brief history of nothing (in four parts)

Dieter Daniels

The work by Famed discussed in this essay is called: *As If Nothing Happened*. Which connotations does the word “nothing” have in the context of this piece? For instance: will “everything” be alright, once the lights go on again? Or: were the lights ever really out? Perhaps I was mistaken and actually “nothing” ever happened. The implication being that everything continues as before, since either “nothing” occurred very quickly, or it did not happen at all. But what if the lights were to remain switched off for a longer period; would “something” have happened then, something that we need to consider? And how long does it take for “nothing” – being either already over or never there at all – to turn into “something” that cannot be ignored? What if the lights do not go on again? “The last one turns off the lights” is a German proverb used to express that something is definitely over.

In the following, four different perspectives are explored in order to tap the meaning of “nothing” in the title of Famed’s artwork.

One: a regional history of “things that did not happen”

In the area of Leipzig now known as “Höfe am Brühl” the lights have already gone out several times throughout the history of the city. It was one of the few areas in Leipzig’s inner city that was severely damaged in WWII. In the GDR, modern commercial and residential buildings were erected on this site until 1968. Since late 2004 these high-rises had been uninhabited, and were, eventually, demolished.

The shopping mall for which Famed have developed the work discussed here as “art within architecture” was built between 2010 to 2012. Some features of the buildings of the past are preserved in the new structure. One particularly spectacular element was the reconstruction of the aluminium façade that had adorned the former Konsument department store on the corner of Richard-Wagner-Platz, originally designed by the Leipzig sculptor Harry Müller in 1968. The locals casually referred to it as the “tin can”. And thus, the headlines in 2012 ran: “The citizens of Leipzig regain their ‘tin can’”. (*As if nothing happened?*)

The dismantling of the aluminium shell had revealed the building’s long obscured, and for the most part well preserved, original Gründerzeit façade. The discovery led to a debate whether or not the stone façade from 1908 with its many figurative reliefs should be restored instead. There are a number of precedents to this approach: the Schlossarkaden in Braunschweig, for example. On the site of the former Residenzschloss, which was demolished in 1960 due to severe bomb damages, the investors in charge of the new shopping mall opted for a façade that mocked the look of the former historical castle in 2007. (*As if nothing happened?*)

In Leipzig, the situation was reminiscent of the years of polemic debates surrounding the reconstruction of the gothic university church on Augustusplatz, which had been demolished by decree of Walter Ulbricht in 1968. The oft-cited, yet misleading example at the time was the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden. In GDR times its ruins had served as a memorial to the destruction of Dresden by air raids of the Allied Forces, two months before the end of WWII. Post-1990, a central argument for the reconstruction was the recreation of the former city scape. (*As if nothing happened?*)

In Leipzig, the 1968 GDR aluminium façade of the “tin can” now covers the 2012 mall, and behind the sheets of aluminium a part of the 1908 Gründerzeit façade has been preserved. It can be glimpsed from below through a narrow opening. Interestingly, the very name of the new structure refers back to a time before the devastations of WWII and the construction of the pre-fabricated high-rises of the GDR, back when this site was home to various trading companies, their buildings linked by inner courtyards, a characteristic trait of Leipzig architecture: Höfe am Brühl (the courts on Brühl). (*As if nothing happened?*)

Two: a modernist history of silence, the void and nothing

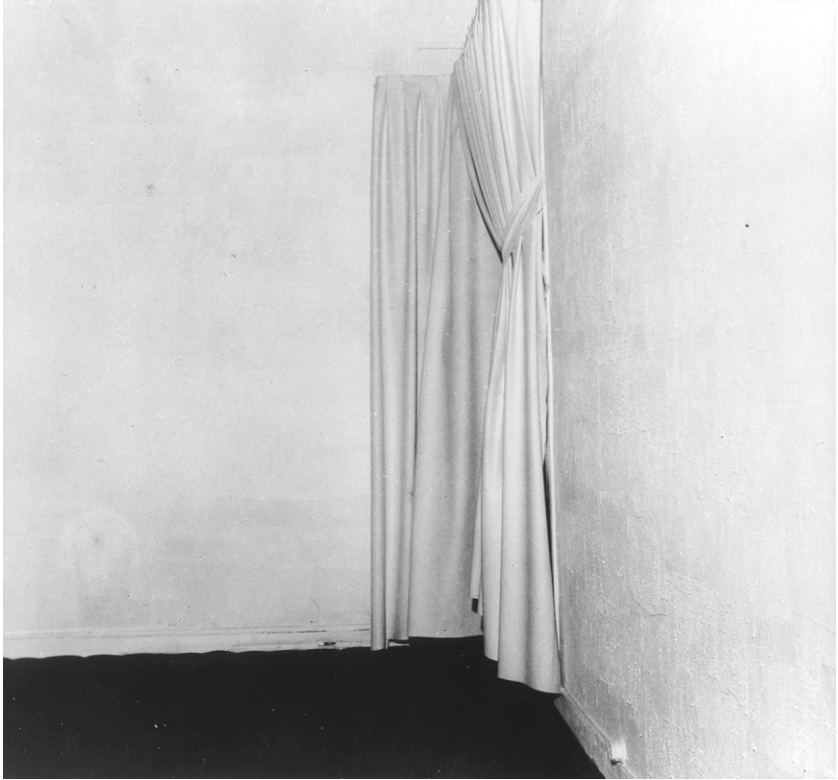
While the first part explored the word “nothing” as a pronoun, the remainder of the text will focus on “nothing” as a noun (a distinction that will be lost on English speaking readers) and its impressive career in the art of the latter half of the last century. The prevalence of nothing can be illustrated by looking at a number of exhibition titles from recent years: *Nothing*, London, 2001; *NICHTS* (“*NOTHING*”), Frankfurt am Main, 2006; *Fast nichts* (“*Almost nothing*”), Berlin, 2005.¹ To this we could add exhibitions focusing on the subjects of silence, the void or invisibility: *Silence*, Houston, 2012; *Several Silences*, Chicago, 2009; *[silence]*, New York City, 2007; *Sounds like Silence*, Dortmund, 2012; *Voids. A Retrospective*, Paris and Bern, 2009; *Invisible: Art About the Unseen*, London, 2012.²

1 cf. the following exhibition catalogues: *Nothing*, curated by Ele Carpenter and Graham Gussin (Exhib. NGCA, Sunderland), London: August Media, 2001; *NICHTS*, Eds. Martina Weinhart and Max Hollein (Exhib. Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt am Main), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006; *Fast nichts: minimalistische Werke aus der Friedrich Christian Flick Collection* (Exhib. Hamburger Bahnhof), Berlin: SMB DuMont, 2005.

2 cf.: *Silence*, Houston: The Menil Collection / Berkeley: UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2012; *Several Silences*, curated by Hamza Walker (Exhib. The Renaissance Society, Chicago), University of Chicago, 2009; *[silence]*, curated by Galen Joseph-Hunter & Dylan Gauthier, Gigantic Art Space [GAS], New York City, 2007, <http://www.giganticartspace.com/silence/> (20.03.2013); *Sounds like Silence. John Cage-4'33" – Silence today*, Eds. Dieter Daniels, Inke Arns, Leipzig: Spector Books, 2012; *Voids. A Retrospective*, Ed. John Armleder, Mathieu Copeland, Gustav Metzger, Mai-Thu Perret, Clive Phillpot (Exhib. Centre Pompidou, Paris; Kunsthalle Bern), Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2009; *Invisible: Art About the Unseen 1957–2012*, curated by Ralph Rugoff, London: Hayward Gallery, 2012.



Yves Klein, *La Spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée*, Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 28 April – 12 May, 1958



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All these current projects have their historical references in the mid-twentieth century. Between 1950 and 1958 there was an astonishing conglomeration of practices of absence, omission and refusal, which can be found in all the arts, be it painting, music, literature, theatre or film. We cannot explore these positions in much detail here, but a brief selection of examples seems useful: Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), John Cage's "silent piece" 4'33" (1952), which featured no intentional sounds, Guy Debord's film *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952), which is edited entirely from strips of black and empty celluloid, Samuel Beckett's various attempts at a theatre of nothing, and Yves Klein's exhibition "The Void", which took place in 1958 under the full title *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée* ("The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility"). These examples all explore different modes of the state of nothingness, and express these by different means: through emptiness (on Rauschenberg's canvas and in the space of Klein), silence (in the music of Cage), pauses (in Debord's film), and stagnation (in the theatre of Beckett).

At the same time there are fundamental differences to these artistic positions, as one might say: "nothing is never equal to nothing".³ There is no nothing without context; only its surroundings make the void appear, make it visible, audible, perceptible. That is the reason why every void feels unique, based on its context: it is emphatic (Cage) or full of grand emotionalism (Klein), it appears bright (Rauschenberg) or dark (Beckett), it is spiritual (Cage and Klein) or destructive (Debord), it is political/critical (Debord) or social/utopian (Cage). The same is true for the role of the author in these works: where Yves Klein self-centeredly puts himself at the heart of the void, John Cage seeks to overcome his artistic ego through silence, and Samuel Beckett locates the crisis of the non-self inside the void. The similarities and differences of the way these art works make use of silence, emptiness and the void, have, to my knowledge, never been analysed from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Two texts deserve special mention, because they explore the impossibility of putting nothing into words, and their artistic practice at the same time suggests a theory of nothing: John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* (1950) and Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* (1955). As to be expected, both works are widely different. Beckett's prose is full of existentialist contempt for the world, as it ponders the impossibility to become one with yourself. Cage's lecture is a demonstration of a set of approaches to composition, illustrated by way of self-reference: the lecture is structured according to the same techniques used for the music he discusses. As a double negation, his tautological motto "I have nothing to say and I am saying it" is a starting point for the affirmation of nothing as a moment of liberation from the ego, an aspect which characterises Cage's later work.

3 cf. Dieter Daniels, Your Silence Is Not My Silence. In: *Sounds like Silence. John Cage-4'33" – Silence today*, Ed. Inke Arns, Leipzig: Spector Books, 2012, pp. 20–38.

Three: a postmodern history of the void and nothing

From our contemporary perspective, it seems questionable whether the extensive exploration of nothing in the 1950s leaves much to add. And yet the mentioned exhibitions concerned with silence, the void, and nothing appear to suggest that there is still room for new ideas. In the visual arts, current positions often explore the context of an exhibition by putting the focus on institutions, the space as white cube, the behaviour of the visitors, the role of the curator, the art market, media reports, etc. *VOIDS. A Retrospective*, an exhibition on empty spaces in art since 1950 shown at Centre Pompidou and Kunsthalle Bern, gave a paradoxical account of this development. The original context of the respective pieces was only touched upon in the comprehensive catalogue. At Centre Pompidou the works were represented by nine similar empty, white spaces which functioned as symbolic placeholders. This situation suggested a similarity between otherwise completely different works. By contrast, the research on the individual works, according to co-curator Mathieu Copeland, eventually highlighted their non-comparability: “The empty space exhibited as such thus became, in a way, a classic of radicalism, and would be repeated and remade in other contexts, other places and other times by other artists whose intentions might be similar, different or even opposed to Klein’s.” To Copeland, this is an “affirmation that there is no such thing as nothing”.⁴ Strange alienation effects were created by *VOIDS*; Maria Eichhorn’s work *Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern* (“Money at Kunsthalle Bern”) (2001) is one example. Originally, her work consisted in investing the budget for her exhibition into the renovation of Kunsthalle Bern, which could then be visited, all empty and new. It seems paradoxical that this work should be presented in 2009 as just an empty white cube in Paris, without setting up a budget to renovate the Centre Pompidou. By the time the *VOIDS* exhibition travelled to Kunsthalle Bern, effectively bringing Eichhorn’s work back to its original site eight years later, but with no intention for another renovation of the Kunsthalle, the artistic intention had literally been changed into its opposite. There was no longer a subtle shift of attention between programme and institution, or otherwise between figure and background. Instead, an empty space remained an empty space. Even the emptiness had been taken from it, since it had now, through *VOIDS*, become part of the institution’s programme. This seems more like an artistic approach than a curatorial concept. And indeed, with John Armleder, Gustav Metzger, and Mai-Thu Perret, the curatorial team of *VOIDS* did feature three artists.

4 Mathieu Copeland, <http://www.mathieucopeland.net/VOIDS.html> (20.03.2013). See also the press release of Kunsthalle Bern: “Every void offers another interpretation of the empty space and represents perhaps something like a claim to a renunciation of or otherwise a celebration of the museum space. In contemplation of the void we are confronted with nothing, with the absence of all things, with the invisible and the indescribable, with destruction and negation. VOIDS are presented just as what they are and what they allow. This accumulation of empty spaces, resembling one another, but in fact different, creates resonances and implications beyond the walls of the museum.” http://www.kunsthalle-bern.ch/data/exhibitions/87/D_Pressemitteilung_mit_Bildern.pdf.

Current artistic positions concerned with nothing often make conscious use of interventions that alter situations; whereas in *VOIDS* this appeared more as a curatorial side-effect. In *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003) Roman Ondak stages a queue, usually found outside at openings, inside the exhibition space. For his contribution to the 2009 Venice Biennale Ondak had the interior of the pavilion of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic furnished in the exact same garden design of the giardini outside the pavilion, so that the visitors, as suggested by the work's title *Loop*, found themselves locked in a feedback loop of perception and reflection on the relation of inside and outside. In 2008, Martin Creed presented a piece commissioned by the Tate Gallery in London, which involved people sprinting as fast as possible through the neoclassicist halls of the museum at 30-second intervals. In this case, a situation which on the outside is part of normal urban life had been transferred into an institution. The piece created a strange tension as it disrupted the moderate pace of the ordinary visitors to a museum. The examples by Ondak and Creed present something that exists independently of their works (queues, parks, runners). While they do not show nothing, they also do not present anything new. However, the transfer into the exhibition space demands considerable and continued effort, due to the works dependency on human actors and plants.

In 2001 Creed produced another work for the Tate Gallery, *No. 227*, which went on to win the Turner Prize. The piece consists of the instruction to switch the light in the exhibition spaces on and off at 5 second intervals. "It is like a piece of music. It is a set of instructions that needs the lights to go on and off. It could be done by hand – I don't mind how it is done," said Martin Creed in 2010 on occasion of his donation of the at the time highly controversial piece to Tate London.⁵ It seems consistent that this well-known work would go to the institution where it was first presented, given that it was an edition of three, and the two other pieces had been sold to private collectors. It would be interesting to know whether *No. 227* was ever installed in a collector's private home. Quite similar to *VOIDS* this would result in a wide-ranging shift of its institution-specific connotations.

There are several works by Famed that touch on the subject of disappearance, absence, omissions, gaps and, eventually, nothing. In *Untitled* (2007) Famed refer to the "selfobliteration" of a US-American conceptual artist, who had previously exhibited with an established colleagues such as Lawrence Weiner, Louise Lawler and Cindy Sherman. In 1978, in connection with a group show at New York Artists Space, he made the decision to eliminate all references to his person in the art context. On invitations and publications there was a blank instead of his name, its size equalling what would have been the typographic representation of his name. Famed have researched his case

5 Quoted in Jonathan Brown, Turner-winning art bequeathed to the nation (well, sort of...). Martin Creed donates "The Lights Going On and Off" – minus the switch and bulb. In: *The Independent*, 23. April 2010. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/turnerwinning-art-bequeathed-to-the-nation-well-sort-of-1951951.html> (20.03.2013).

and taken him out of his self-chosen oblivion, at least insofar as they were making the story of the de-facto vanished artist known again. Consistently, the name of the artist was not communicated, the blank mentioned above also appeared in the work by Famed. Insofar, the work is a subtle homage to an absent artist, while at the same time it respects his decision to obliterate himself. In this way, it preserves, insofar as this is actually possible, the original intention of the unnamed, instead of turning it into a spectacle of revelation. It is only consistent that *Untitled* is not for sale.

The obvious parallel between Martin Creed's *No.227* (2001) and Famed's installation *As If Nothing Happened* lies in the fact that both works are based on switching lights on and off. But this should not lead us to ignore the fact that the differences of the works are much greater than their similarities. Otherwise we run the risk of suggesting an alleged similarity, as we saw in the example of the *VOIDS* exhibition from 2009. Creed's concern is the museum, Famed work in the public space; in Creed's piece the lights go on and off every five seconds, in Famed's work this happens once a day, according to an elaborate plan.

In this context we should consider a piece by South-African artist James Webb. His description of *The World Will Listen* (2005) is very simple: "4-minute 33-second power failure instigated at a gallery opening."⁶ Anne Szefer Karlsen writes: "During a period of rolling blackouts in 2005 in the Western Cape, the unannounced intervention titled *The World Will Listen* staged at an exhibition opening went by unnoticed. The subtle hint at this being part of the exhibition, or even a work of art, was the duration 4 minutes and 33 seconds, referencing of course the famous Cage-piece 4'33'". Other than that it appeared as just another instance of load shedding. The result: a social wave of exhibition goers moving out of the gallery space to carry on with their conversations."⁷ Fluxus artist George Brecht has coined the term "borderline art" to describe such interventions: "An art at the point of imperceptibility."⁸ If the audience at a gallery opening continues to chat outside the door during a power failure, *as if nothing happened*, it brings us more close to the challenge that Famed face in the public space.

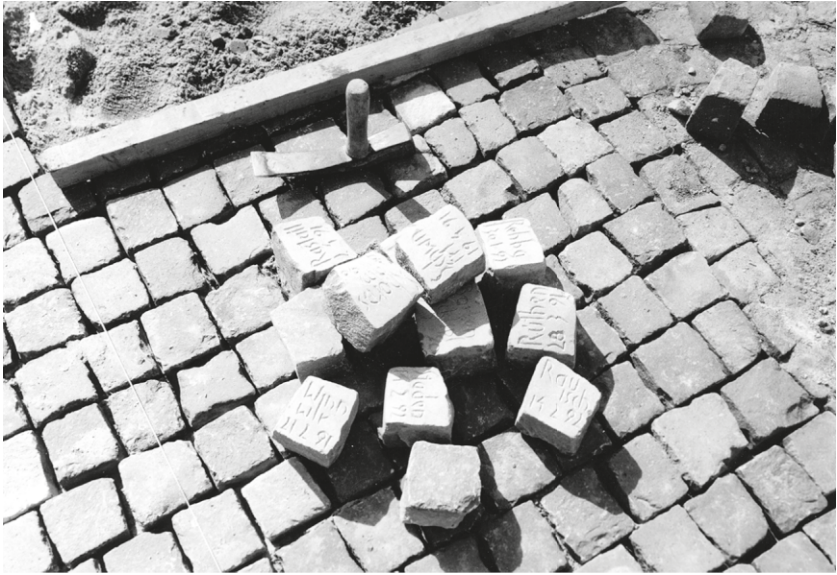
Four: a memorial history of the void and nothing (in the public space)

Apart from the intervention by Famed, all of the works mentioned in the previous section are institution-specific: transferring them into the private or public space would affect the meaning of the work. In the public space,

6 <http://www.theotherjameswebb.com/theworldwill.html>

7 Anne Szefer Karlsen on James Webb, <http://works-and-places.appartement22.com/spip.php?article24&artpage=1-3> (20.03.2013).

8 George Brecht, *Notebook IV*, Ed. Hermann Braun, Cologne: Walther König, 2005, p. 74f.



Jochen Gerz, *2146 Steine – Mahnmahl gegen Rassismus / Das unsichtbare Mahnmahl* (*2146 Stones – Monument against Racism / The Invisible Monument*), 1993, Saarbrücken

there seems to be no established framework for art that would be required to make an artistic intervention of absence, omission or gaps visible. And yet there are some well-known examples for such an approach, in particular regarding memorials. Jochen Gerz is a pioneer of this kind of work. His 1986 *Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* in Harburg, which was developed in collaboration with Esther Shalev-Gerz, has been lowered into the ground step by step since its installation; a process that was officially completed after the monument had been lowered for the eighth time in 1993. Public participation was essential to the timing of any further lowering of the memorial: a sign encourages people in seven languages to carve their names into the column of lead. “In the end it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice,” reads the final, most significant sentence on the sign. Each time the monument was lowered further, the act was accompanied by public political discussions concerned with the subject matter of the memorial. The work thus managed – as was to be expected – to rekindle the controversial debate about the memorial again and again over the course of time. In a paradoxical twist, the Harburg *Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* has, by its step-by-step disappearance, avoided what Robert Musil described as the invisibility of monuments.⁹

The so-called “invisible monument” (*2146 Steine – Mahnmal gegen Rassismus*, 1990–1993) in Saarbrücken, initiated by Jochen Gerz and realised together with local art students, avoids any kind of visual spectacle. In a first step, paving stones were secretly dug up from the square in front of Saarbrücker Schloss, seat of the Federal Government of Saarland, in summer 1990. Every stone was engraved with the name of a Jewish cemetery located in Germany and then, likewise in secret, replaced, with the inscription facing toward the ground. When it was no longer possible to keep the project a secret, Gerz and his students went public. After a wide-ranging debate, the Municipal Council of Saarbrücken officially decided to realise the memorial in 1991. In 1993, Oskar Lafontaine, Prime Minister of Saarland, Ignatz Bubis, Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and Karl-Heinz Trautmann, President of the Municipal Council Saarbrücken, opened the monument to the public and presented the new street signs of what was now called “Platz des Unsichtbaren Mahnmals” (“Square of the Invisible Monument”).

Since then, 2,146 engraved paving stones have been in place on the site – the yet most complete index of Jewish cemeteries in Germany, which was also published as a book.¹⁰ Researching the names of the cemeteries, engraving

9 Gerz’ Harburg *Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* has become a much debated subject in academic theory. See also, among others, James E. Young, The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today. In: *Critical Inquiry* 18:2 (Winter 1992), pp. 267–296. For a critical perspective on the *counter monuments* of the 1980s and 1990s cf. Noam Lupu, Memory Vanished, Absent, and Confined: The Countermemorial Project in 1980s and 1990s Germany, *History & Memory* 15:2 (2003), pp. 130–164. Online: <http://noamlupu.com/countermonuments.pdf>. For a historical overview cf. Mechthild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: Public Art, Photography, and the Past in Postwar Europe*, Ph.D. Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Architecture, 2009.

10 Jochen Gerz, *2146 Steine – Mahnmal gegen Rassismus Saarbrücken*, Stuttgart: Hatje, 1993.

the stones and replacing them on the square demanded a lot of time and effort. This illustrates again, how much work it is to install an intentional blank spot, in particular in the public space. The square, where there is nothing to see except for the street signs, is now listed as an official “sight” on the web page of the town of Saarbrücken.¹¹

The Jewish Museum by Daniel Libeskind and the Holocaust Memorial by Peter Eisenman, both located in Berlin, are prominent examples of a memorial architecture that makes use of the void as a symbolic form and as a metaphor for loss. Libeskind designed the museum before the fall of the Berlin Wall. When it opened in 1999, the museum quickly became an attraction even in its empty state, drawing approximately 350,000 visitors. Its popularity led to a discussion whether the museum should remain empty, because exhibits might detract visitors from the impressive effect of the structure as a site of memorial. But even after the opening of the permanent exhibition in 2001, emptiness still plays a key role for the overall impression of the museum, since Libeskind has included several large *voids* in the structure. According to Libeskind the building is “conceived as an emblem where the not visible has made itself apparent as a void, an invisible. ... The idea is very simple: to build the museum around a void that runs through it, a void that is to be experienced by the public.”¹² “The central emptiness is the very centre of the museum, because despite the fact that Jewish German history is full of achievements, it is also a history of eradication and extermination.”¹³

The Holocaust Memorial by Peter Eisenman opened in 2005 and makes use of a similar style of design, in particular when compared to Libeskind’s *Garten des Exils* at the Jewish Museum, which also consists of a field of stelae. The effect of the Holocaust Memorial does however stem mainly from the vast dimensions of the large scale monument. The original design, which Eisenman had submitted together with Richard Serra, was an even more radical take on these dimensions, insofar as it strictly ruled out any pavements or trees on the edges of the monument and intended the field to be much deeper.

The common factor of all the examples mentioned here is that the void, the disappearance, the invisibility come to stand for something that cannot be visually represented – the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust and the eradication of Jewish culture in Europe. In contrast to the modern and post-modern works mentioned above, the void, the nothing becomes the subject, the core meaning of these monuments. They are not engaged in a self-

11 However, the photo on the website of the city of Saarbrücken focuses on the elaborate sculptures of the castle fountain – rather than showing the empty square.

12 Libeskind quoted in: James E. Young, Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin. In: *Jewish Social Studies* 6:2 (Winter 2000), p. 11. Includes a comprehensive overview of the structure and metaphoric use of the *voids* inside the building.

13 ‘Void’ central to Jewish museum, CNN, 22. Januar 2003. http://articles.cnn.com/2003-01-22/world/design360.libeskind_1_museum-displays-jewish-museum-empty-space?_s=PM:WORLD (20.03.2013).

referential or critical approach to the context and the conditions of perceiving art. Instead, in these monuments absence gains a historical and existential dimension. They are concerned with emotional instead of formal aspects. The relation between “figure” and “background”, of art and context, is reversed: the void can be entered, touched; it becomes dramatic.

The term *counter monument*, which James E. Young has coined for these kind of memorials, is supposed to stand for a “memory against itself”.¹⁴ It wants to do justice to the paradox nature of modern monuments, as summarised by Lewis Mumford in 1938: “If it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.”¹⁵ The potential exaggeration of absence as a new form of emotionalism is immanent to all examples mentioned here, perhaps with the exception of the “Platz des Unsichtbaren Mahnmals” by Jochen Gerz, who, interestingly, tends to be widely ignored in the lively discourse on *counter monuments*. The inherent danger of exaggerated emotionalism, of pathos becomes apparent with the gigantic *voids* of the 9/11 Memorial in New York City (Michael Arad, *Reflecting Absence*), which was opened on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Here, the *counter monument* is exaggerated to monumental proportions itself, and the void becomes a resonant space of nationalism.

However, James E. Young sees the 9/11 Memorial in the genealogy of *counter monuments* and uses it to discuss the model role of German memorial art for the development in the US after 9/11. On the other hand, writer Adam Haslett describes the 9/11 Memorial as an architectonic manifestation of the nationalistic appropriation of the terrorist attacks.¹⁶ They served President George W. Bush Jr. as a legitimation for the war on Iraq, which was started allegedly to prevent further terrorist attacks. And yet, the numerous victims of this war are not commemorated in any way at the 9/11 Memorial.¹⁷

Besides the nationalistic connotations of the 9/11 Memorial, its proclaimed aim represents one of the main differences to the European monuments mentioned above. The *voids* in the Libeskind building or in Eisenman’s field of stelae are supposed to be a testimony to the irrecoverable loss of millions of human lives. The rhetoric of absence in the 9/11 Memorial, however, has a subtext that promises to heal a trauma.¹⁸ As art critic G. Roger

14 James E. Young, The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today. In: *Critical Inquiry* 18:2 (Winter 1992), pp.267–296.

15 Mumford, quoted ibd. p.272.

16 Highly controversial lectures by Young and Haslett concerning this matter were presented at the conference *Memorial Mania – soziale und politische Strategien des Erinnerns* (“Memorial Mania. Negotiating Social and Political Strategies of Memory”), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 10. December 2011.

17 cf. Adam Haslett on the political context: “But rather than offering a narrative that helped explain the purpose of the attacks and how most citizens weren’t at risk of immediate harm, the Bush Administration instead amplified their terrorizing effect by using them to induce more fear.” Adam Haslett, *Feeding the Fire: The Political Context of 9/11*, <http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/Feeding-the-Fire-The-Political-Context-of-9-11> (20.03.2013).

Denson has noted: “All who come to the Memorial, however, will acutely feel the Absence. Arad has seen to this by making the site something akin to those paintings and stories telling of long departed deities, heroes, and buddhas who, in their departure from earth, left no trace behind but their footprints. ... Spiritual sustenance and healing is exceedingly personal, and it will take years and tens of millions of visitors to tell us whether the site succeeds in this rite for the majority.”¹⁹

The commentaries on the two gigantic columns of light (*Tribute in Light*), which have filled the gap left by the destruction of the Twin Towers every year on September 11 since 2002, have been even more drastic. “An ethereal surrogate for the absent towers, the lights’ white luminescence not only replaces the void in New York’s skyline with a sense of memory and the possibility of hope and rebirth, but its ghostly presence is also a moving commemoration of the thousands of men and women who died on September 11, 2001.”²⁰ Or more briefly: “*Tribute in Light* is one of the most powerful and healing works of public art ever produced.”²¹ It is revelatory that the columns of light bring to mind other things than the healing of the rupture in the skyline of Manhattan as well, for instance the cathedral of light designed by Albert Speer for the 1938 Reichsparteitag of the German Nazi Party in Nuremberg, which he sought to defend against all accusations of propaganda as “instruments of illumination”.

The résumé of the history of the void and nothing in memorial culture remains tautological: just as nothing is not equal to nothing – so the void is not equal to the void – and light is not equal to light.

Postscript:

We have come back to the starting point of this essay – the upheavals in German history and the search for an appropriate form of memory, which does not continue *as if nothing happened*. The question remains whether the works of modern art that explored silence, the void and nothing in the 1950s could, in retrospect, against the background of the experience of the recent

18 In her book *Memorial Mania* (2010) Erika Doss looks at the boom of memorials in the US since 9/11 and describes this development as a reaction to the normalisation of fear and the failed attempts of a “socio-therapeutic approach to terrorism”. (Lecture by Erika Doss at the conference *Memorial Mania – soziale und politische Strategien des Erinnerns* (“Memorial Mania. Negotiating Social and Political Strategies of Memory”), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 10. December 2011.)

19 G. Roger Denson, Michael Arad’s 9/11 Memorial Reflecting “Absence”: More Than a Metaphor Or A Monument. In: *Huffington Post*, 9. September 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/michael-arads-911-memoria_b_955454.html (20.03.2013).

20 *Tribute in Light*, a public art project created by the Municipal Art Society and Creative Time, <http://creativetime.org/projects/1799-2/> (20.03.2013).

21 Municipal Art Society: <http://mas.org/programs/tributeinlight/> (20.03.2013).

devastations of the times (WWII, the holocaust, the nuclear bomb), can also be read as a specification of nothing under the awareness of the possibility of civilisation coming to an end. In this sense we could say: if nothing becomes a reality, there is no more use pretending, going on *as if nothing happened*. Perhaps Famed's intervention in the public space can help us to remember this.

In the dark, we see the stars.

On the relationship of light, products and community

Marc Ries

This is a report of a dream. Someone wakes up, it is still night. The room lies in darkness. He rises and heads for the door. He tries to turn on the lights, but they are not working. He enters another room. The lights cannot be switched on as well. There is something ominous inside the house. He tries to find a flashlight, some candles perhaps. He cannot find either. Or otherwise he finds candles, but no matches. He continues to walk around, growing desperate. Again, another failed attempt to turn on the lights ... Eventually, he wakes up. Every dream is a vision, one whose carrier is our switched-off luminous consciousness; another, ominous consciousness takes control over our body. A certain kind of deterritorialisation is a prerequisite for any dream. A suspension of all circumstances of waking life, their translation into an unusual, dramatic setting.¹ When I rise *inside* a dream, that is to say when I experience lucid self awareness under entirely different circumstances, it seems obvious that there is no light available, that there is no recognizability, no orientation. And also that I will need to question this negation, this system breakdown, when I eventually wake up in real life.

1 Sigmund Freud reports a similar dream, but he links the darkness to extinguishing the "light of the life" of the dreamer; here, the subject is the extinguishing of a "system". cf Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Band II/III. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998, p. 475f.