

2-1-2001

Review of "At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture" by James Young

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

Fairfield University, grosenfeld@fairfield.edu

Copyright 2001 Gavriel Rosenfeld

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel D., "Review of "At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture" by James Young" (2001). *History Faculty Publications*. 45.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/45>

Published Citation

Rosenfeld, G. (2001) Review of "At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture" by James Young in: *German Studies Review*, February, 2001, pp. 241-42.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

history before 1938; to acknowledge and, where possible, repair the architectural sins of the Nazis and the postwar governments; and, in exchange, to pass quickly over the fate of the victims and completely ignore the perpetrators. Such a selective construction of a 'common' Jewish memory is in principle quite compatible with turning a synagogue into a fire station.

WULF KANSTEINER, *SUNY Binghamton*

James Young. *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. Pp. viii, 248. Cloth \$35.00.

Over the course of the last decade, James Young has emerged as the leading American authority on the complex relationship between monuments and memory. His pioneering work, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993), examined with great skill the social and psychological forces that have given rise to the recent wave of Holocaust monuments in Europe, Israel, and the United States and further analyzed their debatable efficacy in preserving the memory of the events they are meant to commemorate. His new work, *At Memory's Edge*, updates this analysis by focusing on recent monuments erected in Germany while extending his reflections further into the realms of art and architecture.

More a collection of essays than a thematically integrated work such as *Texture of Memory*, *At Memory's Edge* is loosely structured around a central concept that Young articulates in the introduction—the concept of “vicarious” memory. Such memory belongs largely to what Young calls a “post-Holocaust generation”—a group of people who never experienced the Shoah directly but nevertheless have desired to depict it artistically by using the very sources that have shaped their understanding of it. For some artists, like Art Spiegelman, these sources are composed of survivor testimonies—in his case, those of his father, Vladek, whom he immortalized in his “commix” book, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. For others, like the conceptual artist David Levinthal, the sources are popular cultural representations—toy figurines of the perpetrators and victims—which he photographs in blurred fashion as simulations of the unrepresentable atrocities committed by the Nazis. What links the work of such artists, as well as the others who Young examines in separate essays, is a self-reflexive awareness of, and a desire to depict artistically, both the “mediated” nature of their sources and the problems attending the transmission of memory. The resulting artistic works are intensely informed by the past, but they are, of course, hardly works of history. Rather, they are “received histories” (a term Young coins) which interweave narratives of the past together with explicit or implicit commentaries on the manner in which the past is transmitted to us (15).

As demonstrated in the book's core chapters on countermonuments, these commentaries are dominated by doubt. The avant-garde creators of countermonuments, such as Jochen Gerz, Shimon Attie, and Horst Hoheisel, have long been skeptical of the ability of traditional monuments to actively stimulate and preserve memory. Rather than despair of the possibility of commemorating the past, however, these artists have channeled their profound doubts into the creation of self-reflexive memorial structures that subvert themselves in a variety of ways—whether by undermining their own physical permanence (as in the case of Gerz's disappearing column in Harburg) or narrative authority (as in Hoheisel's transformation of public spectators into the coproducers of a memorial—the Denk-Stein-Sammlung project—in Kassel). Young himself has been directly affected by this process, but in reverse, having been transformed from a distanced critic into a creator of such monuments by virtue of his recruitment into, and service on, the five-person panel responsible for creating Germany's national Holocaust memorial in Berlin. In the book's final and most compelling chapter, Young chronicles how he “became skeptical of ... [his] own skepticism” and assisted in the approval of deconstructivist architect Peter Eisenman's controversial “waving field of pillars” design. Endorsing this submission, though imperfect, he concluded, was far preferable to erecting no monument at all, for this would have served the ends of those eager to draw a *Schlußstrich* under the past by denying the Holocaust the public presence envisioned by the memorial competition.

At the Edge of Memory is a learned and stimulating book that brings the reader fully up to date on the most recent developments in the memorial culture of Germany. For this reason, the only shortcoming of Young's otherwise excellent study is his inclusion of dated material already published in *The Texture of Memory*, the presence of which introduces a sense of déjà-vu for those familiar with Young's prior work. Otherwise, *At the Edge of Memory* further consolidates Young's position as one of our leading scholars of the representation of the Holocaust in contemporary Western culture.

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD, *Fairfield University*

Elliot Neaman. *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism, 19). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. 315. \$40.00.

In the course of his long life, Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) not only commented upon, but participated actively in some of the salient events of twentieth-century German history, from the 1916 Battle of the Somme to the 1940 occupation of Paris to the 1984 Franco-German reconciliation ceremony at Verdun. His *Sämtliche*