

Name: Domingo

Surname: Martinez Rosario

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Abstract

This paper will explore the notion of James E. Young's 'counter-monument' (1992) as a catalyst to identify the use of temporality in contemporary artworks addressing the issue of memory and historical change.

Young defines the counter-monument as the display of new monuments, initially in Germany, that can be defined by a range of both formal and conceptual patterns and characteristics which challenge the traditional monument's iconography.

One of the main features in such memorials is the use of temporality as an agent to activate memory in the viewer, a feature also embraced by contemporary artists. Artists working in this field have generated an aesthetic that instils time experiences on the spectator. As a result, a major re-articulation of temporal categories takes place, in which art, memory and memorial practices merge, stemming from the perspective of the present.

The works of Micha Ullman, Christian Boltanski, Rachel Whiteread, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Shimon Attie and Mirosława Balka are just some examples of contemporary artists working in this field and will be used to explore temporality and its relation to space, memory and historical change. Their artworks represent an undesirability of leaving the past and present behind, as well as the related requirement to figure out the most productive way not to leave these temporal categories behind.

A formal and conceptual analysis concluding in an iconographic examination of the aforementioned artworks will enable me to assess their social, cultural and aesthetic value and explain the equivalence they produce between the temporalization of space and the spatialization of time.

Paper

My paper is framed within the practice of Contemporary art and its links with Cultural Memory. Contemporary art has become a medium within which to hold current discussions and debates surrounding issues related to memory, where temporality has high relevance and plays an essential role. In general terms, these artworks comprise images and accounts about past, histories of lost lives, trauma incurred and open wounds from the past.

In order to explain the relation and influences between art, temporality and history I will firstly focus on the idea of counter-monument. The notion and practice of monument has undergone a significant evolution throughout the last century, as well as any cultural and artistic manifestation, especially in the north Atlantic and Latin America. It has directly depended on changes in the political, aesthetic, arts and visual cultural realm. Professor of English and Judaic Studies James Young defines the counter-monument as the display of new monuments, initially in Germany, that ascribe to a range of patterns and characteristics, both formal and conceptual, that challenge the iconography of the traditional monument. The new wave of monuments takes non-figurative representation as its core to commemorate victims and traumatic events in history. Its target is to represent the antiheroic, in the broad meaning of the term. As James Young states, “[t]he result has been a metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of the late 19th century, which celebrated national ideals and triumphs, to the antiheroic, often ironic and self-effacing conceptual installations that mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late 20th-century postmodernism.”¹

These memorials are not only limited to buildings or big sculptures in public locations, but also works of art that have utilized a wide range of materials and interdisciplinary manifestations displayed temporally in public settings.

I will present three examples of counter-monument to elucidate its main features.

The *Monument against fascism* in Hamburg, built in 1986, is a 12-metres high-galvanised steel column. By this monument, conceptual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz aimed to invite citizens to reflect against fascism, to mourn and to make a collectively redemption. They placed an inscription next to it in several languages that says: “We invite the citizens of Hamburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here next to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Hamburg Monument against Fascism will be empty. In the end it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice.”²

The large column was lowered a meter and a half into the ground every time the column base was filled of names and inscriptions by voluntary citizens. Eventually, seven years later, the only trace remaining from the monument was its top side. The monument doesn't only remain as a trace in such plaque, but also in the memory of those who visited it, who now have the moral commitment of remembering it. Therefore, the artwork not only refers to ruptures and historical loss, but it also directly delegates the task of remembering and taking actions based on moral fundamentals to the citizens.

Artist Horst Hoheisel designs a negative and inverted shape for his monument proposal to commemorate the Aschrott fountain in Kassel City Hall, Germany. Originally this had been a twelve-meter-high, neo-Gothic pyramidal fountain, surrounded by a reflecting pool set in the main town square, in front of City Hall and built in 1908. It was founded by the German-Jewish

¹ YOUNG, James E., «Memory and Counter-memory: The End of the Monument in Germany», Harvard Design Magazine, n. 9, Fall, 1999, p. 2.

² Gintz, Claude, «Lanti-Monument de Jochen et Esther Gertz», Galeries Magazine, n° 19, June-July 1987. Quoted in: Young, James E., «The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today», Critical Inquiry, n° 18, The University of Chicago, winter 1992, p.274.

company Sigmund Aschrott for the city of Kassel. The very fact of being given as a present by a Jewish company was the reason why it was destroyed in the night of the 8th of April 1939 by the Nazis. The fountain has undergone several changes over the time, but it has never been rebuilt recreating the original one. In 1986, Horst Hoheisel designs a monument with a negative shape, about which he said: "I have designed the new fountain as a mirror image of the old one, sunk beneath the old place in order to rescue the history of this place as a wound and as an open question, to penetrate the consciousness of the Kassel citizens so that such things never happen again."³

The final work was a 12-meter-deep hollow space which shape reproduced the one from the original fountain as a cast, a pyramid turned into a funnel into whose darkness water runs down. The absent monument is perceived as a reflection in the ground, buried, creating a commemorative shape as illusory and intangible as memory is.

Israeli sculptor Micha Ullman designed a memorial for Bebelplatz square in Berlin in 1995 to commemorate the Nazi book burn. The memorial is not noticeable at first sight because it's made in the underground of the square and can only be seen through a one-square-metre glass in the floor. What we see from the ground in the square is a small room with white and empty bookshelves. By this casted space in the city, the artist refers to the void left by all the books burned in that place and in many other cities on the 10th of May 1933.

A common feature in counter-monuments is the artists' approach to temporality, which is often used as an agent to activate memory in the viewer. Such strategy comes from the contrast between long-lasting materials and the stillness of traditional monuments in public locations, which resulted in transmitting a codified and narrow account on memory. The design in counter-monument, mostly based in the idea of absence, void and the ephemeral, trigger a temporal relationship where present provides elements that activate a questioning revision of past. In the counter-monument, memory directly depends on present and the viewer' circumstances.

At this point, it is worth noting the difference between time and temporality to clearly understand how they are imbed in counter-monuments and contemporary artworks.

The concept of time relates to a quantity of duration that changes in a uniform and sequential order. Time is, in a sense, empty; without content or meaning beyond its own linear progressing. It is when nothing happens, and goes on not happening.

On the other hand, temporality regards to how we experience and live time. It is a variation of time, which allows us to discern the difference between what already happened and what is about to come. The dimensions that characterize temporality are neither uniform nor predictable. Time can be fulfilled and made anew through a profound change or rupture of some kind, making what happens thereafter radically unlike what had come before.

According to Polish sociologist and professor Elżbieta Halas, "[t]ime is basically given in changes, which may be reversible or irreversible. Of significance for the cultural perspective is precisely the thesis that time – whatever it may be – does not necessarily require irreversibility, which allows us to distinguish between time and temporality. Temporality refers to experiencing and representing time with metaphors which emphasize its irreversibility."⁴

More specifically, temporality within culture is the awareness of time passing that materializes in representations and experiences of time.

Artists produce counter-monuments to bring a specific event from the past into the present so that it can be remembered and revised. But, what is the strategy for such artists to achieve the

³ Horst Hoheisel, "Rathaus-Platz-Wunde", Aschrott-Brunnen: Offende Wunde der Stadtgeschichte (Kassel, 1989), p. 7. in: YOUNG, James E., «The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today», *Critical Inquiry*, n° 18, The University of Chicago, invierno 1992, p. 288.

⁴ HAŁAS, Elżbieta, Time and Memory: a Cultural Perspective, *Trames*, 2010, 14 (64/59), 4, University of Warsaw, p. 42.

spectator engaging in the work and in history? By utilising the aesthetic strategy of void and absence, the forwardness of time is somehow suspended. It is the viewer's task to remain still, observe the memorial and the specific location where it is displayed and use his/her imagination and memory to elaborate a historical account of the event commemorated.

Subsequently, counter-monuments connect temporality and historicity by suspending the forwardness of time passing and narratives. They insert experiences of time to reinvent and rearticulate the past and historicity.

As already mentioned, the practice of monuments has directly depended on changes in the aesthetic, arts and visual cultural realm. Such changes are also embraced by contemporary artworks dealing with memory. This reasserts the individual and collective need of remembering that has been manifest especially since the eighties. As well as counter-monuments, contemporary art is a pivotal site of temporal experimentation. It has become commonplace to state that aesthetic is now fundamentally temporal.

In order to elucidate such fact, I will present the works of artists Shimon Attie, Walid Raad and Mirosława Balka, who are highly representative of the use of temporality, memory and history in art practice.

American artist Shimon Attie has largely work on the representation of Holocaust memory and history. Most of his installations are old pictures projected onto specific places in the urban landscape.

The installation series entitled *The Writing in the Wall* (1992-1993) was accomplished in a former Jewish neighbourhood in Berlin. Attie projected old slide images of everyday life from the 1920s and 1930s in the same neighbourhood, the years preceding the atrocities of the Holocaust. The pictures overlay the buildings' façades and ruins exactly in the same place where the photographs were taken.

By projecting home photographs on specific locations, fragments from the past are placed into the collective imaginary of the present. The everyday life of Jewish people was visually enacted and represented for short periods of time.

His works leave a trace in the viewers' imaginary and memory, traces based on the former neighbours and the collective memory of the city. Over the time that the image projection is displayed in specific locations, memory and time from the past is somehow imposed to the viewers. When the installation is displayed, duration is suspended by the stillness of the image projected. However, once the installation is dismantled, the histories from past gain presence in the building of the neighbourhood and in the inhabitants, who become into a life memory.

Artist Walid Raad (born in Lebanon in 1967) is widely known for investigating and documenting the contemporary history of Lebanon, specifically the civil war. Raad retrieves, stores, examines and produces all kind of documents, but mainly those of an audio-visual, photographic and literary nature. His main objective is to track the trace and effects of the experiences of the war in present, as well as collective and personal memory.

Although Raad's exhibitions present his work in different disciplines, together online they constitute one virtual archive. The action of curating an online archive of work creates a reflexive space for the contemplation of how history is constructed, with the archive's artwork commonality being human affect and the capturing of everyday events.

The juxtaposition of different temporalities is particularly evident in Raad's performances when he presents his work to a wide audience. Although they are advertised as conferences or talks, they are really performances in which the artist shows slide presentations with photographs, videos and archived documents. In this way, the production of his visual documents and the presentation at conferences becomes an act of retrieving hidden or forgotten stories. Through

his voice, Raad manages to retrieve images from the archive and put them into the active imagination of the audience.

Curator Eva Respini states that personal narratives in Raad's work "serve as an alternative to the linear construction of the grand historical narrative. Raad follows the principle that conflict is never a unified entity, and privileges memory and personal experience in the retelling of history."⁵

Polish artist Mirosław Balka creates spaces where he places everyday objects and marks an itinerary around them for the spectator. Balka's work is relevant for the thorough and minimalist display of the objects, as well as for the lapses and pauses they generate in the viewer's attention. He deals with personal and collective memory, especially the one related to his Catholic education and the collective experience in Poland's fragmented history. His concern with familiar memory and public catastrophes lead him to explore the way in which personal trauma impacts on collective histories and vice versa. The artist utilizes basic materials or objects filled with symbolism, marks of the passing of time and traces of the past that trigger a both spatial and temporal route. The time that the viewer takes walking throughout the parts of the installations is interrupted when the objects catch his or her attention to transmit the mnemonic account that they embody. In that way, the time of the past event clearly emerges as an active time in the present.

Counter-monuments and contemporary artworks produce a revision of history through memory. They do it by triggering a connection among the spectator, his experience of time and the space where the artwork is displayed.

In order to understand the use of temporality in the new wave of monuments and artworks dealing with memory it is worth bearing in mind that time in modernity and contemporaneity is experienced differently. Throughout the nineteenth century and until post-war economic expansion, the temporal passing confirmed itself as a future-orientated movement of development that increased the obsolescence of the past and the present. Modernity was conducted by the future and the idea of history was a progressive paradigm. However, and according to French historian François Hartog, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 has marked the failed utopias of modernity, its obvious injustices, and the war and genocide catastrophes of the twentieth century. The futurism of modernity has been substituted by a regime that abolishes the prerogative of the future, to promote instead the prerogative of the present. Ignored pasts must be remembered but fail to be truly remembered as past; the traumatizing past can barely be remembered and thus fails to pass; the fear of reproducing the atrocities of the past blocks any sense of futurity. As François Hartog argues, we now live in a society where the historical time is literally suspended. The present encloses both the past and the future and re-articulates the temporal categories. This is the reason why memory and memorial practices are constructed from the perspective of the present.

As we have seen through the counter-monuments and artworks presented, the temporal experimentations of art are unique as they encompass both a contemporalization of temporal passing and a reactivation of historicity.

The different temporalities within the artworks unfold aesthetically by means of objects from the past and the representation of absence and void. These art practices bring the past closer to the present so that the recalled past might disclose what was otherwise forgotten, unseen, or unrealized. The spectators' role is essential in this process, since they are inscribed in different experiences of time, such as ephemerality, repetition, real time, slowing down or suspension.

Contemporary art, in its commitment with history and society, has demonstrated to be a fruitful field through which investigate the meaning of memory, history and temporality in contemporary

⁵ RESPINI, Eva. *Walid Raad*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015.

culture. The core aim in such works is not to reconstruct an event from past, but to retrieve and confirm memory as a cultural, anthropological and existential fact.