

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 and space in contemporary artworks addressing the issue of identity and memory.

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 that challenge the traditional monument's iconography.

One of the main features in such memorials is the use of temporality and space as agents 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, identity 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 space and its relation to 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. Such works of art, displayed both in public spaces and museums or galleries, tackle the ways in which personal and collective identity can be constructed in relation to specific locations and historical accounts.

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.

### **Biographical note:**

Dr Domingo Martinez holds a PhD in Fine Art from the University of Valencia. He was awarded a BA in Fine Art from the University of Salamanca in 2006 and a Masters in Artistic Production from the University of Valencia in 2007. He was awarded an Erasmus Scholarship to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and has been the recipient of a Fellowship at the School of Advanced Study, University of London.

Dr Martinez's thesis "Artwork as counter-monument: representation of the unheroic memory as a resource for contemporary art" explores the theory and practice of contemporary art, utilising cultural memory theories to analyse the methods through which twenty artists use 'memory' in their work. The artists' works contribute to contemporary debates around notions of cultural memory and question the traditional idea of history of something that is absolute and unsusceptible to change.

Dr Martinez is also an accomplished artist and has been the recipient of several prestigious scholarships, including the Francisco de Zurbarán award (Junta de Extremadura, 2008), a residency at the Antonio Gala Foundation for Young Artists (Córdoba, 2007) as well as participating in Living Art Terra IV Sanxenxo (Pontevedra, 2006).

As a practitioner and academic, Dr Martinez's work often crosses boundaries, uniting theory with practice and resulting in several solo and group exhibitions in both Spain and the United Kingdom.

Dr Martinez is currently working as a secondary school art teacher, artist and independent scholar in London.

### **Conferences/papers:**

- *Family memory in audiovisual artwork. The private into the public.* Institute of media studies, University of Bochum, Germany. November, 2010.
- *Languages and techniques of artistic production.* Fine Arts School, University of Salamanca, Spain. February 2011.
- *Reconfiguring past through memory and fiction in contemporary art. Tacita Dean and Francesc Torres.* The NewBridge Project. University of Newcastle and University of London. Newcastle, June 2015.
- *Contemporary artworks as platform of memory. From analogue resources of memory to digital art display: Walid Raad.* University of Groningen, the Netherlands, September 2015.
- *Representation of nostalgia and melancholy in contemporary artworks: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois.* Nottingham Trent University, Rovinj, Croatia. September 2015.
- *The artwork as counter-monument. Nazi period commemoration and memory in contemporary art.* Newcastle University, Newcastle, November 2015.
- *'Pacts of Forgetting'. Contemporary Art Responses to Collective Amnesia in Spain and Lebanon.* Cambridge University, April 2016.

## 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 relating to memory, where identity and temporality have high relevance and play an essential role. In general terms, artworks dealing with memory comprise images and accounts about the past, tell the histories of lost lives and trauma incurred by individuals, communities and societies and open historic wounds. Thus they elucidate a relationship between memory and identity, which itself has been a contentious issue in societies in recent decades. Debates on memory versus identity have been especially contentious relating to the re-construction of not only collective memory, but also historiographies about societies that have suffered political suppression, human right violations and war.

In order to explain the relationship and influences between art, identity, temporality and history, first I will focus on the idea of the counter-monument. Reflecting the developments in art and culture, the notion and practice of the monument has undergone significant evolution throughout the last century, particularly in the north Atlantic and Latin America. The notion and practice of the monument 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<sup>1</sup>. In his own words, “[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.”<sup>2</sup>

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

The *Monument against fascism in Hamburg*, built in 1986, is a 12-metres high-galvanised steel column. With this monument, conceptual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz aimed to invite citizens to reflect upon fascism and to mourn. Next to the monument, they placed an inscription translated into several languages that reads: “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.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> YOUNG, James E., *At memory's edge: after-images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

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

<sup>3</sup> Gintz, Claude, «Lanti-Monument de Jochen et Esther Gertz», *Galleries 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.

Seven years on, in 1993, the only trace remaining from the monument was its top peak. Today, it doesn't only remain as a trace pointed by such plaque, but also as a memory for those who visited it, who 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 foundations to the citizens.

The surface of the column has become a palimpsest inscribed with not only the names of citizens, but also with anti-Nazi sentiment, anti-Semitic writings and inscriptions supporting the Jewish people. All together, they show differences about race and ideological identities.

The second monument I want to consider is by artist Horst Hoheisel. He designed a negative and inverted shape for his monument proposal to commemorate the Aschrott fountain in Kassel City Hall, Germany, which originally was a twelve-meter-high, neo-Gothic pyramidal fountain, surrounded by a reflecting pool set in the main town square, and built in 1908. The fountain was founded by the German-Jewish company Sigmund Aschrott for the city of Kassel. The very fact that the fountain was 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 underwent several changes over time, but it was never rebuilt recreating the original one. In 1986, Horst Hoheisel designed 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."<sup>4</sup>

The final work was a 12-meter-deep hollow space whose shape reproduced the original fountain's 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.

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, such as concrete or stone, and the stationary nature of traditional monuments in public locations, which results in transmitting a codified and narrow account of memory and identity. The design of the counter-monument, mostly based in the idea of absence, void and the ephemeral, triggers a temporal relationship whereby the present provides elements that activate a questioning revision of past. In the counter-monument, memory is directly dependant on the present and the viewer's own personal circumstances, which triggers a memory work through which identities can be interrogated in reference to the impact that past events have on the present.

At this point, it is worth noting the difference between the notion of time and temporality to clearly understand how they are imbedded in counter-monuments and contemporary artwork. 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 progression. It is when nothing happens, and goes on not happening.

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<sup>4</sup> 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, winter 1992, p. 288.

On the other hand, temporality relates to how we experience and live time. 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 has come before. According to Polish sociologist 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.”<sup>5</sup>

Artists produce counter-monuments to bring a specific event from the past into the present so that it can be remembered and re-constructed. But, what strategies do artists use to encourage the spectator to engage in the work and 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 eventually use his/her imagination and memory to elaborate an 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 design 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 fact reasserts the individual and collective need of remembering that has been manifest especially since the nineteen eighties. As well as counter-monuments, contemporary art is a pivotal site of temporal experimentation.

The need to remember can also be explained as a search for identity, both personal and collective, which is also dependant on space and time. Maurice Halbwachs has tackled such matter in his book “On Collective Memory”<sup>6</sup>, where he states that human beings living in society resort to memory as a strategy that reasserts their belonging to a group and a specific identity. But memory also makes us aware of being in the space-time of the present and allows us to differentiate it from past. Halbwachs has claimed that identity construction depends on the individual perception of time and its relationship with space.

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, identity, memory and history in art practice.

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

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<sup>5</sup> HAŁAS, Elżbieta, Time and Memory: a Cultural Perspective, *Trames*, 2010, 14 (64/59), 4, University of Warsaw, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser, trans. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992.

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.

Attie's works leave a trace in the viewers' imagery and memory, traces based on the former neighbours and the collective memory of the city. During the time that the image projection is displayed in specific locations, memory and time from the past is somehow imposed on the viewers. The installation suspends duration by the stillness of the images projected. However, once the installation is dismantled, the histories from past gain presence in the buildings of the neighbourhood and also in its 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 the 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 and identity is constructed, with the archive's artwork commonality being human affect and the capturing of everyday events. Personal and collective identity is especially relevant in such revisionist work, since it exposes the discrepancies between Christians, Muslims and secular societies during the 15-year-long civil war and even nowadays.

The juxtaposition of different temporalities is particularly evident in Raad's performances when he presents his work to a wide audience pretending they are conferences. The artist shows slide presentations with photographs, videos and archived documents, which 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."<sup>7</sup>

Polish artist Miroslaw Balka creates spaces with everyday object and marks an itinerary around them for the spectator. Balka's work is known for the thorough and minimalist display of objects, as well as for the lapses and pauses they generate in the viewer's attention. He deals with personal and collective memory, with his catholic education and the collective experience of Poland's fragmented history clear

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<sup>7</sup> RESPINI, Eva. *Walid Raad*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015.

influences. 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 utilises 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 it takes the viewer to walk 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 present.

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 Francois Hartog, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 marked the failed utopias of modernity, its obvious injustices, and the war and genocide catastrophes of the twentieth century<sup>8</sup>. 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 Francois 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.

But it is not only our understanding and experience of time that has changed from modernity to contemporaneity, but also the way in which we construct narratives about the past. During modernity, the individual was independent from the great narratives and meta-narratives, and confined himself to accept the imposed versions and accounts. Nowadays, there are narratives with dynamic meanings in which personal accounts take part in their construction.

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

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

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<sup>8</sup> HARTOG, Francois, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2002.

