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Abstract

My presentation will be framed within the practice of Contemporary art and its links with Cultural Memory. This paper will explore the notion of James E. Young's 'counter-monument' by way of identifying common features of contemporary artworks that address the issue of memory from Nazi period. Such artworks have developed some of the commemorative features that are frequently associated with the monument and commemorative practices in the civic ceremonies.

James Young defines the counter-monument as the display of new monuments, initially in Germany, which ascribe to a range of patterns and characteristics, both formal and conceptual, that challenge the iconography of the traditional monument.

In this paper I will present some counter-monuments and identify three such patterns; the first related to the concept of dematerialisation and banal, seen in the work of artists who use discarded objects to evoke the absence left by victims of traumatic historical events. The second feature related to reconstructing history, where the counter-memory and counter-histories of victims serve to question the official and hegemonic versions of history. The third aspect I will consider is the artists' approach to temporality, often used as an agent to activate memory in the viewer.

The works of Christian Boltanski, Rachel Whiteread, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Shimon Attie or Mirosław Balka are just some examples of contemporary artists working in this field and will be used to explore the counter-monument in this paper.

A formal and conceptual analysis concluding in an iconographic examination of these artworks will enable me to assess their social, cultural and aesthetic value, and the role and function of contemporary art regarding history, memory and the commemoration of the German wartime.

Paper

My presentation will be framed within the practice of Contemporary art and its links with Cultural Memory. This paper will explore James E. Young's notion of 'counter-monument' by way of identifying common features of contemporary artworks and installations that address the issue of memory from the period of history when Germany was under Nazi leadership.

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 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.

Traditionally, the monument has been conceived as an ideological sign that contains specific connotations and values, mostly due to its material features of durability and rigidity. Its monumental and long lasting trait, as well as the display in important urban locations, explains the monument being utilized to broadcast dominant ideologies. That is the reason why it has been conceived as the work of art most related to power. In modernity and the early postmodern period, the materials used for monuments were chosen in order to resist adverse weather conditions and generally commemorated heroic historical events and important figures from history.

In his writing about monuments in 1936, Robert Musil warned about the indifference eventually showed by citizens to monuments, which could even go unnoticed and become invisible or "imbued by something that repels his attention"¹. He pointed out such an idea when he wrote: "there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument"².

According to such an idea, if we leave the burden of memory to a memorial and think it as a permanent repository for memories, then our engagement in retrieving and using the past would be nullified. Consequently, the events represented in the monument would fall into oblivion and we would not really be engaged and committed to history, historical accounts and memory.

On the other hand, the new wave of monuments distances itself from such an idea and takes non-figurative representation as its core to commemorate victims and traumatic events in history. In other words, its aim 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"³.

¹ MUSIL, Robert, «Monuments», in: *Posthumous Papers of Living Authors*, London, Penguin, 1993 [1936], p. 61.

² *Ibidem*.

³ YOUNG, James E., «Memory and Counter-memory: The End of the Monument in Germany», *Harvard Design Magazine*, n. 9, Fall, 1999, p. 2.

The target of the counter-monument is to fulfil a counter-memory in which unofficial history and the victims' experiences and testimonies are utilized to encourage a version of history seeking truth and justice about the past. Its purpose is to uphold human rights and propose an alternative approach in retrieving the "oppressed" collective memory.

James Young defines the counter-monument as "brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being".⁴ According to such a definition, we can include a new wave of memorials that are not only limited to buildings or large 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 now explain three examples of counter-monuments built in the late eighties and early nineties in Germany.

The first is a black cube by minimalist and conceptual artist Sol LeWitt. It measures 5.5 meters-long by 2 metres high by 2 metres wide and was produced for the *Skulptur Projekte* of Münster in 1987. It is dedicated to the disappeared Jews from Münster and was planned to be permanently displayed in Altona city Hall Square (Hamburg, Germany).

According to the artist's design, the sculpture doesn't have any inscription in its surface. There are just two signs on its sides explaining its origin, the history of the Jew community in Altona, most of which were deported by the Nazis in 1941. This sculpture is a clear example of a non-figurative monument. Its geometric shape and its black colour make a mark in its surroundings, as it sharply contrasts with the elegant architecture of the square to indicate a painful absence.

The monument against fascism in Hamburg, built in 1986, is a 12-metre high galvanised steel column with a one-by-one metre base. Through this monument, conceptual artists Jochen y Esther Gerz aimed to invite citizens to reflect about fascism and to collectively mourn.

The artists produce a monument against itself, that is, a self-negating monument. 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."⁵

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. In that way, the more people actively took part in it, the quicker the monument disappeared. Eventually, seven years later, the only trace remaining from the monument was its top side, which was covered by a commemorative plaque with the inscription: "Monument of Hamburg against Fascism". The monument won'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

⁴ YOUNG, James, *The Texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 27.

⁵ Gintz, Claude, «L'anti-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, invierno 1992, p. 274.

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.

Horst Hoheisel designs a negative and inverted shape for his monument proposal to commemorate the Aschrott fountain in Kassel City Hall. 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 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. The last design proposal dates from 1986, being under the requirement to restore any shape and history of the fountain, and recall the people who fund it, specifically Sigmund Aschrott.

Local artist Horst Hoheisel proposed 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"⁶.

The final work was a 12-meter-deep hollow space whose 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.

The new fountain becomes a part of the subtle history of the city and viewers are now the memorial itself, that is, the agents that trigger memory and recollections from past.

These three examples clearly explain new commemorative ways that are taking place in public settings through the notion of the counter-monument. In James Young's words, the counter-monument "flouted a number of memorial conventions: its aim was not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to re-main pristine but to invite its own violation; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town's feet."⁷

From these three counter-monuments I identify three main features or **patterns**.

The first relates to the notion of de-materialization and the representation of void, aiming to evoke the absence left by victims of traumatic historical events.

Bearing in mind the idea that materialisation can be an index for the absent, it is reasonable that artists utilise discarded materials, every day objects and abandoned buildings to deal with memory and evoke absence when victims from traumatic events in history die or disappear.

⁶ 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, nº 18, The University of Chicago, invierno 1992, p. 288.

⁷ YOUNG, James E., At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 7.

The second feature relates to the reconstruction of history, where the counter-memory and counter-histories of victims serve to question the official and hegemonic versions. These artworks demonstrate a moral commitment to the past and, more specifically, when re-reading certain traumatic events. The counter-monument main objective is to review past events. In order to achieve it, they trigger a counter-memory work which questions and rejects official accounts of history that were imposed by governments and historians. With such an aim, victims' testimonies play a key role, since they bring to light accounts repressed for years.

The third common feature in counter-monuments is the artists' approach to temporality, 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 result in transmitting a codified and narrow account of memory.

The materials in the counter-monument, mostly discarded and banal objects from past, trigger a temporal relationship where the present provides elements that activate a questioning revision of past. In the counter-monument, memory directly depends on the present and the viewer's circumstances. In other words, memory depends on time and vice versa in the counter-monument.

The aesthetic and concept in the counter-monument constitutes another expression of the quandary in how to represent the Holocaust and traumatic events in the literature, film, public monument and visual arts works produced since the 1980s. That was a tough task that Adorno already announced when he claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, warning that poetry and art in general runs the risk of representing such traumatic past events in aesthetic beauty that could take out of context and distort their references. In Adorno's words, "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today."⁸

Adorno's statement doesn't really mean that one cannot write poetry after Auschwitz, but that poetry and arts in general wouldn't be like it used to be before Holocaust. In this regard, Shoshane Felman commented: "Adorno's dictum did not mean that poetry could and should no longer be written but that it must write through' its own impossibility. If the whole field of representation was contaminated by this event which immensity exclude an appropriate representation, then art is the only hope –although apparently impossible"⁹.

The need to continue writing through its own impossibility, that is, the ethic and mimetic impossibility of representing the Holocaust, has impacted in the visual representations about the Holocaust in public locations. This requires a new type of representation that does not confine to retrieving historical events as they happened, but proposing an approach that would bridge such events through artworks produced in present.

Counter-monument practices have spread from public and urban locations to contemporary artworks displayed as site-specific works in the squares and streets of cities. Such fact reasserts the individual and collective need of remembering. In this line of work, we can find artists such as Micha Ullman, Christian Boltanski, Rachel Whiteread, Krzysztof Wodiczko,

⁸ ADORNO, Theodor W., *Prismas. La crítica de la cultura y la sociedad*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1962 [1955], p. 29.

⁹ RADSTONE, Susannah, *Memory and Methodology*, Oxford, New York, Berg, 2000, p. 6.

Shimon Attie or Mirosława Balka.

Israeli sculpturer 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.

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. 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. Through *The Writing in the Wall*, the everyday life of Jewish people was visually enacted and represented for short periods of time. His works leave a trace in the viewers' imagination 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 is somehow imposed on the viewers. However, once the installation is dismantled, the histories of the past gain presence in the building of the neighbourhood and in the inhabitants, who become into active memory.

As well as the monument against fascism in Hamburg, Jochen Gerz proposed another project in Saarbücken, Germany in 1993. The departure point is the idea of an invisible or hidden memorial under the title: "2146 stones. Monument against racism."

The project took place in the square next to Saarbücker Castle, which was the Gestapo headquarters under Hitler's Nazi rule. The history of the square is also significant, since it was the place where Nazis took Jewish people from that city to publicly humiliate them in Kristallnacht in 1938. Invited by the school of fine arts in Saarbücker, Gerz asked the students to take out a certain amount of cobblestones and engrave in them the names of Jewish cemeteries that are now abandoned or destroyed.

Some days later, the students took the engraved cobblestones back to the square and put them upside down, so that the name of the Jewish cemeteries could be neither seen nor read. Currently, the memorial is invisible and exists just as memory, as imagination, as something that belongs to the inhabitants, who are really the active subject in the memorial. The square has been renamed the "Square of the invisible monument."

The representation of void, the critical review of the past and the approach to temporarily are the common features and patterns that have made possible a visual and conceptual turn in commemorative practices and memorials from the nineties. They have triggered in the viewers a moral engagement with past and memory about the events that took place during the Second World War in Germany.

The counter-monument has merged the construction of memorials in public locations with

the practice of site-specific art installations, and has also developed some of the commemorative features that are frequently associated with the monument and commemorative practices in civic ceremonies.

In doing so, they also confirm the idea that, in Young's words, "the surest engagement with memory lies in its perpetual irresolution. In fact, the best German memorial to the fascist era and its victims may not be a single memorial at all- but simply the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end"¹⁰.

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

¹⁰ YOUNG, James, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 21.

Fig. 1. Sol Lewitt, *Black form*, Münster Palace Square, Skulptur Projekte, 1987.



Fig. 2. Jochen Gerz y Esther Shalev-Gerz, Monument against fascism in Hamburg, 1986.



Fig. 3. Horst Hoheisel, *Aschrott inverted fountain*, Kassel, 1987.

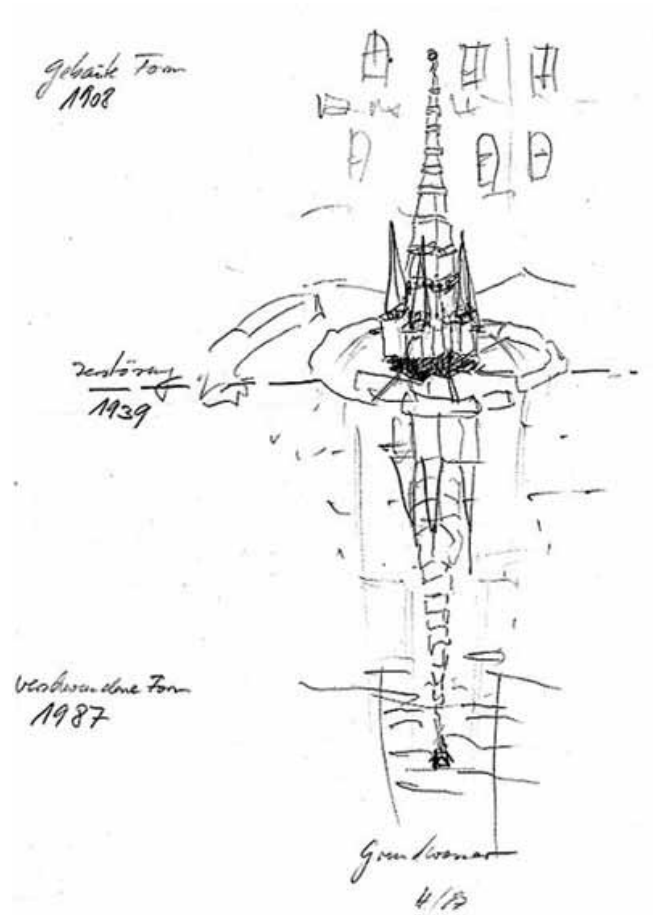
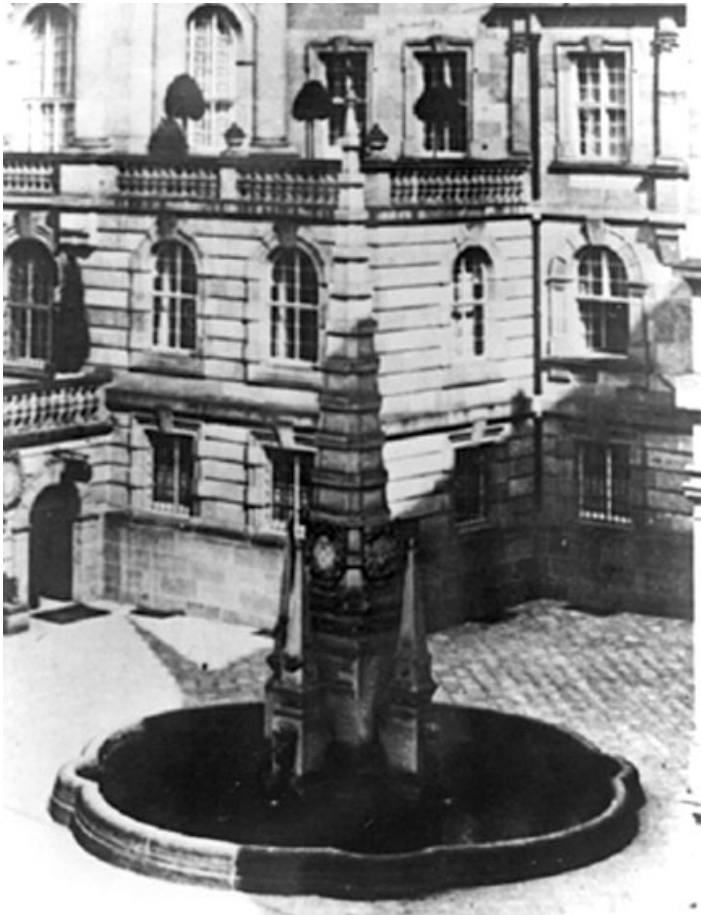


Fig. 4. Micha Ullman. *Memorial for the book burning*, 1995, Berlin, Germany.



Fig. 5. Shimon Attie. *The Writing in the Wall* (1992-1993). Berlin, Germany.

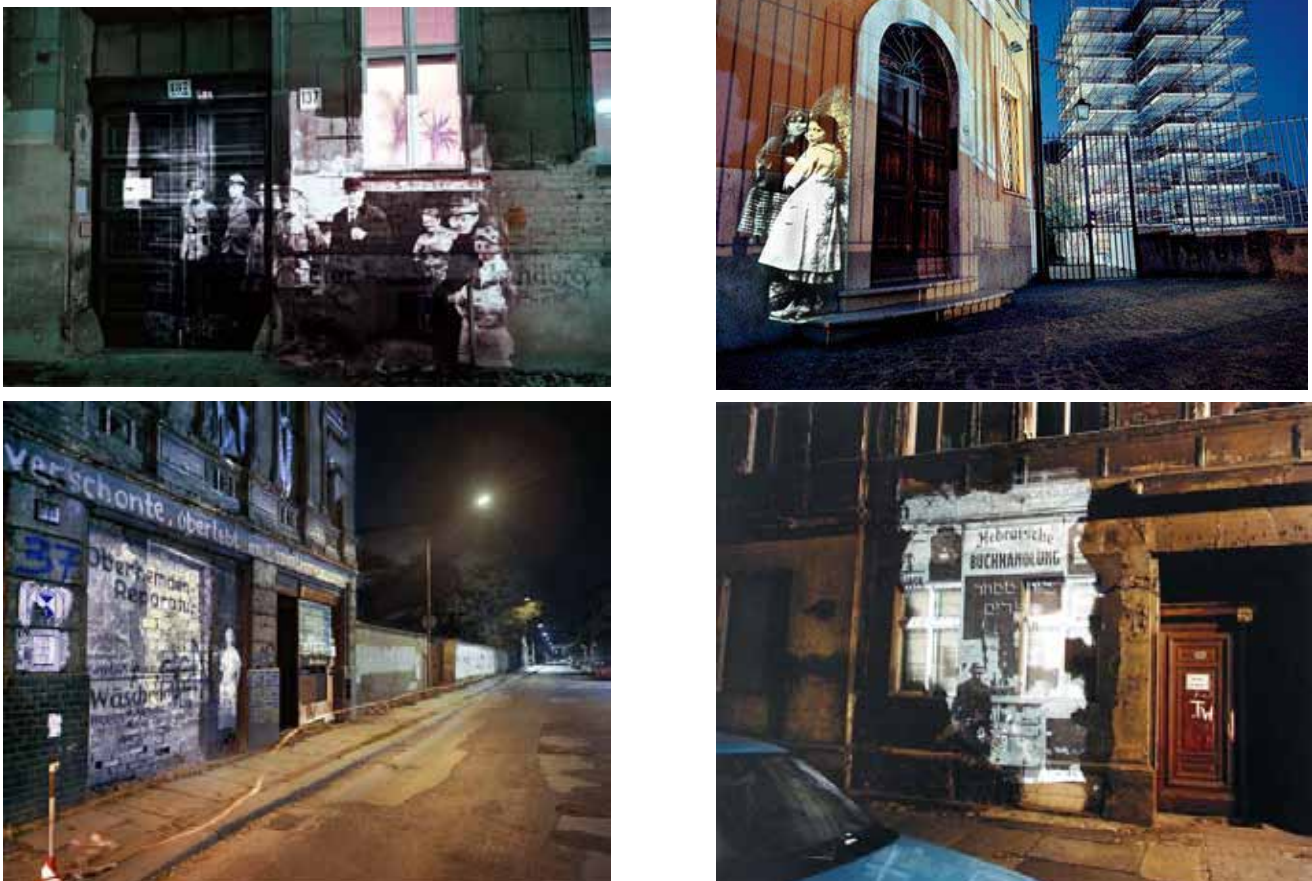


Fig. 6. Jochen Gerz, 2146 Steine. Mahnmal gegen Rassismus, (2146 Stones. Monument against racism), Saarbücken, Alemania, 1993.

