

Echoing the Past: A Proposal for a Counter-Monument

Dr Dave Loder

Art | Memory | Place Research Seminar

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin

13 November 2015

To hear an echo is to witness a past event; it is a past event in the here and now. The phenomenon of the echo is not an event cut off from its conception, that first outburst of noise or speech. But rather it *is* that birthing event, delayed and distorted, but nonetheless that past moment in this present; the echo is its own past made present. The echo is presented - made present - as an ephemeral event, departed yet connected from its own materialisation in the past; a distinct spatio-temporal activity and phenomenon where the past is dematerialised to erupt upon the present.

In what appears in the echo as the delivery of a unique paradigm for memorialisation and remembrance, this paper proposes the phenomenon of the echo as a paradigm for art and monument making. This text encompasses a body of research undertaken during and following the public arts project *Daughter of a Voice* (2011), an urban intervention and series of artworks that itself attended to an event of a remembered echo. It is the intention to propose this artwork as a paradigm of an echo, the materialisation of a past in the real and actual present and an art practice that can be described as counter-monumental.

Figure 1



The site for this public art project was the village of El Bruc in Catalonia where there is a monument to the local legend of 'The Drummer of El Bruc', a giant Disneyesque edifice [Figure 1] erected during the early 1950's in the reign of the fascist dictator Francisco Franco (1892-1975). According to the legend, in 1808 during the Napoleonic Wars when the French army was invading Spain, a young drummer boy was hiding in the mountains of Montserrat close to the village. When he saw the French army, he drummed out a warning to the local Catalonians, only for the sound of the drumming to be amplified and echoed through the mountain range. The French, thinking the resounding echoes were the marching drums of massive army hidden in the mountains, retreated in fear of a devastating ambush. A popular local legend, there would have typically been a festival held to commemorate the event,

Figure 2



however during 2011 and as fall-out from the financial crisis, the town hall had refrained from holding any festival in an effort to reduce their budget.

In a gesture of generosity to the village, I proposed the making of a sculptural event to serve in lieu of a formal festival that would re-activate and re-perform the famous legend. The desire was twofold; first, to make a gesture that, rather than repeating the past event in some way, was to make a new event that was distinctly present. Second, was to interrogate “the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat the ‘unrepeatable’.”¹ A commemoration or monument is remembering a unique event, so unique that it deserves a memorial, a way of remembering its uniqueness. But to repeat such uniqueness would suppose an erosion of that very uniqueness; to be normalising, institutionalising and the undermining of the unique.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles (1994) *Difference and Repetition* p.2

Following these concerns, two temporary sculptures were made in sight of the original monument and, although constructed from different materials, were made to visually mimic the appearance of the massive stone plinth the drummer boy statue was erected upon [Figure 2]. While different in scale and exact material, they were sufficient depictions in form and adjacency to make a distinct visual configuration in relation to the original statue. Within the extents of their site, the three objects enacted a performative relation; the device of a visual echo. Superficially, the diminished forms of the two additions attest to the echo and its reductive and deconstructive nature. But the materiality of the sculptures further attests to the simulation of the echo. The larger of the two's lightweight and semi-transparent character exhibits the transient and intangible qualities of the echo. While the smaller, contrasted in its physical and weighty mass, marks the connectedness of the echo to its own material site and procedure of (dis)assembly [Figure 3]. The tension between the two sculptures lies in their 'made-ness' and constructed authenticity which situates them as a temporal intervention in the site of the original monument; the temporal character of materials and processes makes their performativity with and against the massive permanence of the granite monument. It is the transience of the interventions that simulates the echo-of-legend in the present, whereby both material ephemerality and material repetition perform the temporality.

With regard to the use of the motif of the plinth that lacks any statue, the first purpose of this is to reinforce the making of a (visual) echo in itself and not a copying or reproduction of the (ideological) specifics of the statue; an echo is only ever a version of its original and is distinguished by its difference to that original. Furthermore, the emptiness of the new plinths is an expression of the 'emptiness', or the void, that an echo needs to occur within.



But more exactly, the plinth itself is a medium on which other objects can be sited, a pedestal for the propagation of ideas and ideologies, in the same way an echo, and the environment that facilitates it, is a medium for the propagation of a voice and its speaking, albeit in a distorted and delayed form. The arrangement of the three plinths (the original and two new sculptural interventions) is the performative making of a (visual) echo and the making of an unoccupied environment in which other (speech) events can occur. The temporality that is performed by the repetitive pattern is not only the performing of a present, but the performing of a futural event that is yet to occur; the performance and *becoming* of a space-time sensibility – a potentiality – in which a language event can unfold; and a language event which is made of the iterative capacity of the repeated pattern on display and its potential siting upon the plinth-echo sculptural arrangement.

Daughter of a voice deterritorialises the ideological function of the original statued monument; the monosyllabic and omni-authoritative voice has been neutered, only for the conditions that enabled its speech to be subverted and reinserted into a new paradigm for an alternative type of speaking. The monument and its content (the motif of the echo) have been reterritorialised as a new and vacant – yet to be filled – platform for speech; through the performance and making present of the echo, *Daughter of a voice* provokes a counter-ideological condition, a paradigmatic absence instilled with pregnant potential and a platform for a multitude of new democratic positions. The primitive, anchored and mono-voiced device has been disrupted by and through the manifestation of a model of speech which is simultaneously provocative (in the gesture of echoing) and compliant (in the making of a platform or medium to support something else). The performativity of *Daughter*

Figure 4



of a voice is the gesture of a spatial and temporal form and paradigm in which other events, or ontological positions, can occur.

To further pursue this counter-ideological paradigm that is enacted by *Daughter of a voice*, I turn to the practice of what James E. Young has termed counter-monuments. This is a movement that primarily arose as a strategy in negotiating national memory of the Holocaust within Germany. These works build on an expanded project of mourning within contemporary art practice Post-1945 and Adorno's claim of the impossibility of art after the Holocaust. Where traditional monuments strive to make visible a symbolic power, a state's ideology and narrative of nationhood, a problematic arises in how to sufficiently demonstrate recognition of what can be described as a stain on the memory of a nation. Where monuments tend towards a naturalisation of the values, ideals and laws of the land itself, there has been a counter-movement towards "brazen, painfully self-conscious

Figure 5



memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being”.² In opposition to an authority, permanence and material dominance, counter-monument works attempt to expose and disrupt such contingencies through dematerialisation and absence, breaking down the hierarchical relationship between object and audience, with the spectator becoming “an active participant in the formation and transmission of memory”.³

Jochen and Esther Gerz’ *Monument Against Fascism* (1986) is hailed by Young to epitomise the practice of counter-monuments [Figure 4]. The work takes the form of a twelve metre high lead-clad tower that was lowered in stages into the ground over five years; following each soft lead base section being covered with visitors own memorial graffiti, and finally

² Young, James E. (1992) "The German Counter-Monument" in *Art and the Public Sphere* p.291

³ Harris, C (2010) "German Memory of the Holocaust: The Emergence of Counter-Memorials"p.10

covered with a simple marker stone. Young states that the effect of the monument is to return the burden of memory to the visitors, for it is they whom will be left standing once the monument has disappeared, forcing them to rise up and remember for themselves in opposition to Fascism. How better to commemorate a vanished people than with a vanished monument, "leaving only the rememberer and the memory of a memorial"?⁴ With this self-consuming work the viewer becomes the subject, "the public becomes the sculpture".⁵ A second example that Young praises is Horst Hoheisel's *Aschrott Fountain Memorial* (1987) in Kassel, Germany [Figure 5]. This "negative form" monument occupies the location of the original Aschrott Fountain, condemned by the Nazis at the 'Jews' Fountain' and demolished by Nazi activists in 1939. A 12 metre high duplication of the original monument is sunk mirror-like into ground; it remembers an absence by reproducing it. Both these negative presentations, and other examples, employ a "strategy of indirection, a way of evoking rather than invoking".⁶ They are works that act upon memory and myth making. "Negative presentations depend on the general, public dissemination of the positive images to which they refer".⁷

The mechanism of an echoed voice can be rendered as a temporal action dependant on a physical boundary, the boundary being the material envelope to the void, the negative space. Equally, the echo is immaterial, manifested between the speaker, the void and the envelope. As with the spectator for the counter-monument, an echo can only be enacted, take form, within and through the presence of the viewer or speaker. The very temporality and event of the echo means that it too dissipates, decays, becoming myth and memory.

⁴ Young, James E. (1992) p.291

⁵ North, Michael (1992) "The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament" in *Art and the Public Sphere* p.861

⁶ Ray, Gene (2011) "Mourning and Cosmopolitics" in *Beuysian legacies in Ireland and beyond : art, culture and politics* p.32

⁷ Ibid. p.34

Central to this proposal for the echo as a counter-monument is the reification of the envelope or mechanism of echoing. Where Young's counter-monuments are dematerialised, it is the physical boundary that propagates the immateriality of the echo. The sculptural intervention of *Daughter of a voice* and its constellation of plinths is the performance of an absence of pregnant potentiality; a void and a yet to be filled platform for new events of speaking and memory. The artwork produces a counter-ideological paradigm in which the uniqueness of the past event – the legend of the boy and his echoing drums – is reconfigured as a newly unique presence; it is the absence of the echo that is made present, given presence. Where the *Aschrott Fountain Memorial* and *Monument Against Fascism* returns the burden of memory to its speakers, *Daughter of a voice* is the reification of a space in which new memories can be created and spoken.

This brief paper has provided a paradigm for the echo in which the regimes of reproduction of ideology are reconfigured and can be considered complicit with Young's description of the counter-monument. This is a paradigm that could be used in transient and parasitic practices to both new and existing monuments. But the echo also proposes further opportunities that not only suggest alternative conditions for memory and its remembering, but an agency that can be deployed to disrupt other regimes of reproduction; as a production through repetition.