

DECLAN CLARKE  
WE'LL BE THIS WAY UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD

JANUARY – FEBRUARY

## STILL LIVING

The monument is ideology made concrete. It is permanent, impermeable, petrified; the statue of the noble leader, the historic landmark, the phallic obelisk aspiring to the heavens. As symbols of political upheaval, military conflict and social change, such monuments deflect any critique or analysis of their conditions *at that time* in favour of a celebratory affirmation. They are memorials to victory, and to their own capacity to exist. Even in remembering a military defeat or national humiliation, the implication is that, as a civilised society, we are at a place where one can relate to it objectively, that times have moved on and have been made better. The state recognises its own progress, its transcendence of the historical moment, in its willingness to preserve its past.

How does one avoid the (self) admiration of the monument? In Declan Clarke's exhibition *We'll Be This Way Until The End Of The World*, the forensic scrutiny of the camera penetrates the classical façade of statuary to focus on its ruptures and cleavages, it scrapes away its ideological resolve to uncover traces of human endeavour, or subtly mocks its grandeur through slight, yet subversive, physical gestures. In each of these film installations, the dominant narrative of national self-definition, as visualised in both sculpture and architecture, is never simply taken for granted. Rather, the monument represents not only a specific historical event or individual but how the state wishes to utilise that memory in the here and now. Naturally, the political currency of the past is just as relevant in Ireland (witness the Irish media's pleas to the martyrs of 1916 in relation to the ECB / IMF bail-out of 2010) as in the various post-Communist states whose traumatic schisms have yet to fully settle.

Of the latter, Clarke's film *I Went Toward Them, I Went Directly Toward the Lights* (2010) presents a montage of deteriorating architecture, stripped-down urban landscapes, and ruined and toppled statues of past leaders. The decay of present-day Bucharest is aligned with his use of underexposed and disintegrating film stock so that, in one sequence, the snow of the winter landscape around the fallen monuments of Lenin and former Romanian prime minister Petru Groza and the 'snow' of the bleached and grainy footage create a veritable blizzard of distortion. In a shot of the same icons, the surface of the statue's head practically dissolves with static, as if literally realising Marx and Engel's famous declaration of "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned"<sup>1</sup>. Elsewhere, one sees tower masts, graffiti (the scrawled message 'Isus vine' or 'Jesus lives'), plaques, and various indicators of past human presence without any attendant sign of the population itself. The timeless atmosphere of the film suggests a place after ideological certainty, the physical manifestation of Fukuyama's 'End of History', as "a long process of degeneration set in, during which the state lost control of key aspects of civil society. Most important was its loss of control over the belief system."<sup>2</sup>

This loss of belief essentially implies the disappearance of Marx's notion of perpetual dialectical progress through a state of permanent revolution. In place of this, Fukuyama's final victory of free-market, liberal democracy suggests an end of ideology, even if it is to propose simply yet another, oppositional, ideology in its place.<sup>3</sup> If the permanence of the old, vanquished belief

system truly "melts into air", then it is only for the dissipated residue to re-consolidate itself in new form, leaving the wreckage of the past in its wake as a memorial to (in capitalist terms) a discredited and obsolete form of mass-hypnosis. These ruins, under capital, therefore serve a new function, to remind the populace of their own defeat, their own susceptibility to 'false consciousness'. "The change of political power always involves a change of symbolic power as well. Taking away statues implies that this symbolic power is very strongly felt by people, both in the presence of the monuments and, subsequently, in their removal and absence."<sup>4</sup>

The subversion of symbolic power recurs in another work here; a series of filmed interventions, each in different locations, which are displayed as a pyramid of three television sets propped upon a single Modernist credenza. In these works – *Declan's Pillar* (2000), *Willingly Done* (2002) and *Washing's Done* (2003) – the camera pans out from Clarke to reveal his position atop the pillar of a gatepost in a London suburb, shows the placement of a boot (a 'wellie') in front of the Wellington Monument in Dublin's Phoenix Park, and sees the artist standing on a soapbox in order to obscure, and thereby temporarily 'replace', the Washington Monument. Through their unwieldy positioning and the un-synchronised duration of the respective films, the work (as a whole) affirms the content of its component pieces, which each provide an anti-heroic antidote to the traditional memorial's connotations of sacrifice and stability. The artist's presence therefore re-introduces the subjective and seemingly insignificant gesture into the monument's ideological abstraction of past events. It re-animates them, as sites for critique and discourse as opposed to mute admiration, and, as such, acts as a truer legacy of the values represented than can ever be contained within an inert column of marble.

Similarly, in *We'll Be This Way Until The End Of The World* (2008), the unified cohesiveness of statuary is disassembled through film. Projected onto a free-standing screen, the work presents a sequence of static shots portraying different angles and details of the memorial to Daniel O'Connell in Dublin. Within the darkening surroundings of the gallery, the image takes on an ethereal quality, seemingly floating in space. It hovers before the spectator, as the film's fragmentary structure breaks apart the subject matter, clipping the wings from the angelic women framing the central figure and delving into the surface features so that the spectator loses any frame of reference as to its overall composition. Bullets fired during the 1916 Easter Rising – the smoothly perfect oval of the entry wound and the ragged edges of its exit – are shown in lingering close-ups. Punctured in the arms of the sculpture's winged female figures, the disparity between these two cavities serves as an analogy for, respectively, ideological intent and its messy realisation. Getting in is the easy part, getting out, less so. Of course, the historical continuity between events, which can be seen as the logical consequence of O'Connell's call for the repeal of the Act of Union of 1801, also speaks of a political 'return of the repressed'. The oppressive rule of the colonial power never truly eradicates the revolutionary impulse; it merely pushes it underground for a while, free to worm its way back to the surface at an opportune time. Like Marx's "old mole" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, "the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still travelling through purgatory. It does its work methodically [...] And when it has accomplished this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exult: Well burrowed, old mole!"<sup>5</sup> That the instant of

return, the piercing of the statue with the material of active conflict, is consolidated into the monument demonstrates only how slowly 'thoroughgoing' revolution actually proceeds. It advances, then falls back, dialectically integrating its losses and setbacks so as to return, ever stronger, the next time.

In *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner offers the oft-quoted statement that "the past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>6</sup> The truth is, however, this past never returns in the same form; it is continually used to cement the actions of today within a tradition that is only accessible in retrospect; an effect that was ironically, and perfectly, realised in Barack Obama's paraphrasing of the line as "the past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past" in the context of a 2008 speech on race relations in the United States. As the present becomes increasingly dislocated from the events it seeks to commemorate, the memory of those instants, and their articulation within an altered, even alien, contemporaneity, subtly evolves. It takes in new connotations and associations, and, on occasion, may even travel full circle to represent the precise opposite of what was originally intended.

Chris Clarke

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', reproduced in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka, (London: Penguin, 1983) p. 207

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London: Penguin, 1992) p. 40

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Situationist International's position that: "Revolutionary theory must mercilessly criticise all ideologies – including, of course, that particular ideology called 'the death of ideologies' (whose title is already a confession since ideologies have always been dead thought), which is merely an empiricist ideology rejoicing over the downfall of envied rivals." in 'Ideologies, Classes and the Domination of Nature', *Internationale Situationniste* no. 8, 1963, reproduced in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006) p. 133

<sup>4</sup> Hedvig Turai, 'Past Unmastered: Hot and Cold Memory in Hungary', in *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture*, vol 23, issue 1, January 2009, p. 97

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx's allusion to the 'old mole' is taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5: "Well said, old mole!" cited in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 481

<sup>6</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, (New York: Random House, 1950) p. 92



