The Chorus and The Contemporary Ruin: Bik Van der Pol's Public Arena

by
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Introduction: The Chorus in Our Heads

The scene is a dressing room, backstage. Young people wearing everyday clothes peer into illuminated mirrors and adjust their hair. They are aware of the camera but try to ignore it. Are they actors – or maybe participants in a reality TV contest, amateurs about to perform in front of an audience? A woman with an air of authority appears at the door. 'Yeah, that's fine', she says, inspecting the scene. Cut to a white text on a black screen - the first in a series of ambiguous statements:

> *'The first voice informs us and the second reminds us.' "Of what? " 'Not exactly of the forgotten, but rather of what we have chosen to forget.'*

These statements continue, alluding to a process in which voices listen, observe and articulate a response. Later, at the close of the video, the source is revealed. The text is adapted from a section of John Berger's 'The Chorus In Our Heads', a response to the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and particularly to his film about fear of war, entitled La Rabbia (Rage), which was commissioned for Italian television in 1962 but never shown in public.[1]

Composed of archived TV news footage since 1945, Pasolini's film included a voiceover commentary delivered by two unidentified speakers – according to Berger, one voice sounds like 'an urgent commentator while the other is half-historian and half-poet, a soothsayer's voice'. For Berger, these voices function like a Greek

1 Bik Van der Pol cite John Berger, 'The Chorus In Our Heads', *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, Vintage Books, 2007. Another version of this text can also be found in *Vertigo* magazine, Autumn 2006, http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/showarticle.php?sel=bac&siz=1&id=594
Pasolini's television work from this period also included *Comizi Di Amore* (1965), featuring interviews about sex and love, conducted with young people and others. This work is referenced by Francesco Vezzoli in *Comizi di Non Amore*, 2007, a work that appropriates the form of the reality TV show with a celebrity cast that includes Catherine Deneuve and Marianne Faithfull.

chorus. They cannot affect the outcome of what is being shown but can articulate what the viewer might be feeling. Crucially, the Greek chorus was not made up of actors – instead male citizens were chosen to represent the city, drawn from the agora (market-place, or place of assembly) and the forum. Their role was to speak for past and future generations of the city; 'When they spoke of what the public had already recognised, they were grandparents. When they gave voice to what the public felt but had been unable to articulate, they were the unborn.'[2] Bik Van der Pol's video also incorporates audio commentary, scripted from interviews (conducted by Barbara Nealon) with residents, sports fans and others affected by the dispute over the designation of Tallaght Stadium as a soccer-only facility. As in the case of La Rabbia, this commentary is delivered by more than one voice. While Pasolini was ostensibly concerned with war, however, Bik Van der Pol seem interested in the problems, and possibilities, of transposing the classical Chorus into the present.

The scene shifts to a stage, or perhaps a TV studio. The woman with the air of authority waits as the young people take up their places, seated in rows under bright stage lights. As technicians move around and adjust cables, she begins a roll call. At this point, sound and image begin to diverge. The image track consists mainly of close-ups and two-shots; candid scenes of teenagers laughing, waiting or staring into space, punctuated by the occasional insertion of a clapperboard indicating the date and details of the shot. Meanwhile, voices are heard on the soundtrack and although youthful, they are dislocated in time and space. The voices speak in neutral tones, expressing the views of others without judgement. So a young man relates the experience of a female soccer fan who might be in her twenties, thirties, or forties. In this way, Public Arena evokes but also questions the representative role of the Chorus, revealing representation itself as a problematic point of intersection between the spheres of politics, 'the political', and media production.[3]

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2 Berger. http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/showarticle.php?sel=bac&siz=1&id=

3 For a useful exploration of the relationship between politics, 'the political' and the public sphere see Chantal Mouffe, 'Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?', *Cork Caucus: On Art, Possibility & Democracy*, Frankfurt am Main : Revolver, c2006, 149-171.

At the time the interviews were conducted, the construction of Tallaght Stadium had been halted for several years, with the structure left half-finished. The dispute centred partly on the pitch size. A multi-purpose pitch large enough for senior level Gaelic Athletic Association games such as football and hurling would mean a reduction in the size of the stands, and in ticket sales. Several legal challenges had been mounted by the local GAA club, Thomas Davis, against South Dublin County Council but the eventual outcome was not yet certain. The script highlights the extent to which the stadium became a focus for competing understandings of Tallaght, as a community, a former village, a new city, a potential tourist destination and a home to people from various parts of the world.

Initially, the commentary focuses on competing claims to the stadium as a 'home ground'. So supporters of Thomas Davis cite its long association with Tallaght, its concern with tradition and its status as one of oldest GAA clubs in Ireland. Fans of Shamrock Rovers soccer club also emphasise the values of commitment and loyalty, highlighting the club's once glorious (and glamorous) past, its need to establish a permanent base and aspirations to work with young people in Tallaght. Gradually, however, other themes come to the fore. These include the negative but also potentially lucrative associations between soccer and celebrity culture, the different forms of violence associated with players and supporters in both camps, and the disparate experiences of female fans in GAA and soccer culture.

Proximity and Partiality

Public Arena is just one of a number of recent artists' video works in which theatrical settings or strategies form part of an exploration of representation in the public sphere. Examples include Maya Schweizer and Clemens Von Wedemeyer's Rien du Tout, 2006, which deals partly with public perceptions of the French banlieue. The opening section features a group of young performers auditioning for roles in a medieval play, observed by an imposing and vaguely aristocratic 'directrice' who comments on their clothes and gestures. As the action unfolds, however, the scene shifts from the theatre to the car park, suggesting a reversal of

power relations. Artur Żmijewski's Them, 2007 is also relevant – marked by a convergence of the theatrical and the televisual evident in the use of production and post-production techniques employed in reality TV. Under Żmijewski's direction, representatives of four distinct groups (characterised by ethnic, religious or political affiliations) participate in a workshop involving the creation of a visual symbol communicating their image of Poland. They are then encouraged to comment upon the symbols produced by others, in an exercise that ends in outright conflict.

Unlike these two works, however, Bik Van Der Pol's Public Arena is composed of multiple elements. The video is accompanied by a publication (designed by David Bennewith), featuring the script, a neon public art work based on the Thomas Davis club motto: 'Nascann Dúshlán Daoine' (Challenge Unites People), and a live installation and photo shoot with an enormous white ball in Tallaght Stadium. Structurally, there are parallels with Jeremy Deller's The Battle Of Orgreave, a work that encompasses a staged reenactment of a notorious confrontation between police and striking miners in the village of Orgreave, a film of the reenactment directed by Mike Figgis and an installation of ephemera entitled The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One is an Injury to All), 2004.

Like Deller's Archive, which aims to highlight the ongoing production of history, Bik Van der Pol's works resist closure. Even though I participated in the live installation, saw the neon sign in situ, watched the video and read the book, my own experience of Public Arena still feels somehow partial. By this term I mean both a sense of incompleteness and a sense of complicity. This position might be a side-effect of current modes of art production, whereby works sometimes unfold in stages, so that 'exhibition' is an attenuated process requiring engagement over time, both from curators and critics. Associated modes of reception can be distinctly participatory, even performative, most obviously when discursive events, such as talks, workshops and presentations, constitute part of the means of production. In some instances, such as with site-specific or site-responsive practices, it may even be necessary to track the physical movements of the artist as vari-

ous iterations of the work unfold.

At this point it is useful to turn to the critique of mobility and locationality articulated in Miwon Kwon's One Place After Another: Site-specific art and Locational Identity. According to Kwon, site-specific art is often characterised by a renewed insistence on the artist as the progenitor of meaning, even where authorship is deferred to others through processes of collaboration. She emphasizes that:

> *the thematization of discursive sites, which engenders a misrecognition of [these sites] as a natural extension of the artist's identity so that the legitimacy of the work's critique [of site, institution or context] is measured by the proximity of the artist's personal association (converted to expertise) with a particular place, history, discourse or identity, etc (converted to content).*[4]

For Kwon, the 'signifying chain of site-oriented art' is integrally linked to the movement of the artist from one place to another, continually generating other 'sites' in the form of their exhibition history.

In the case of Public Arena, however, there is little assertion by Bik Van der Pol of any personal association or expertise with regard to local history and context. Even though their project is described by the commissioners as a residency, the artists do not claim the role of residents and often involve intermediaries in their interactions with the local context. They produce a script that is based on interviews conducted by their collaborator Barbara Nealon, they observe from a distance while the roll-call for the video shoot is conducted, and they take photographs from the stands and sidelines as the participants in the live installation are led around the pitch. Yet Bik Van der Pol clearly do not disavow authorship – instead they publicly and visibly engage in a process of choreography, particularly in the 'live installation' and photo shoot.

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4 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004) 51. For an exploration of site-specificity and the local in relation to the work of Bik Van der Pol see Maria Lind, 'De sculptuur als gesprekspartner. The Discursive Sculpture' in *Collect/recollect. A dialogue between local art and an internationally oriented museum*, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 1999 pp.109-118.

For Bik Van der Pol, 'sites' are both spatially and temporally charged. They are particularly interested in the productive potential of memory and the archive, understood as 'an archive of experiences'[5], open to (re)activation.

> *In 2007 we noticed a half finished site. A nice green pitch, a half built concrete stand, with fences all around. Nothing seemed to happen there, even though it was located in the very heart of Tallaght, where new construction developments – hotels, shops, housing and office facilities – rapidly arose and surrounded this silent site. This site was Tallaght Stadium, a contemporary ruin where time seemed to have frozen*.[6]

Since Bik Van der Pol first noticed the 'contemporary ruin' of the stadium, the structure itself has been completed. But some of the new hotels, office buildings and apartment blocks around the stadium (and around the country) remain half-built or unoccupied, perhaps destined for ruin. Importantly, the video does not incorporate images of the stadium or its surroundings, differentiating it from a range of moving image works that invoke theme of the ruin through images of decaying or abandoned structures, often examples of modernist architecture.[7]

Architectural reference points are certainly evident in other works by Bik Van der Pol – several of their projects involve the use of architectural models. Yet these models tend to be understood as tools for thinking, or research, rather than as representations. So the scale replica of Cite des Ingenieurs in Dunkerque, entitled Model City (2002), is in fact a proposition – exploring the possibility that a housing complex built next to the BP oil refineries and now abandoned due to pollution, might still function as a 'critical

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5 Bik Van der Pol, 'Ways to Read This Book', *With Love From The Kitchen* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005) 7.

6 Bik Van der Pol, *Public Arena* Press release. See http://www.publicart.ie/en/main/critical-contexts/library/book/view//418ab80e60/?tx_pawreadingroom_uid=43

7 For a recent exploration of the theme of ruin in contemporary art see Brian Dillon, 'Decline and Fall', *Frieze*, Issue 130, April 2010. See also Dillon's screening programme for the Whitstable Biennale 2010 http://www.whitstablebiennale.com/biennale-2010/section/performance/brian-dillonetal.html

model' because it has been preserved in a 'representable state'.[8] Another work, Skinner's Box (2005), draws upon the theories and practices of a scientist, whose research is open to dispute, in order to produce a museum within the museum, with a ceiling height more suited to ten year-old children than adults.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the prominence of the moving image within museums and galleries since the mid-1990s can be understood partly as a staging of publicness, sometimes articulated through the direct or indirect evocation of the cinema as social space.[9] Exploring similar territory, Sven Lütticken notes that while 'some artists present their "social" practice as an alternative for an art world that is complicit with the culture industry, they are in fact using the art world and its media to create images of social participation'.[10] He suggests that while the work of Bik Van der Pol work may involve the display of 'users', such as those who enter into Skinner's Box, it is also characterised by the pragmatic use of institutions (exhibitions, museums, magazines). In addition, Lütticken highlights a recurrent interest in periods and processes of incubation, hence the focus on sleep in certain projects. From this perspective it is possible to understand the ruin, in terms of its function within the work of Bik Van der Pol as dormant instead of derelict.

Modest Proposals and Alien Powers: Bik Van der Pol in Ireland

Charles Esche has also highlighted the 'propositional' quality of Bik Van der Pol's practice, suggesting that their work operates not as a finished entity but as thought process.[11] In this respect it is emblematic of an approach he has theorised through reference to the term 'Modest Proposal'. Esche sees modesty and the propositional as connected, perhaps interdependent. Noting that

8 Bik Van der Pol, *With Love from the Kitchen*, 207.
9 See Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2009).
10 Sven Lütticken, 'Bik Van der Pol's Repetitions', *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art*, (Rotterdam and Amsterdam: NAi Publishers and Fonds BKVB, 2005) 155-6. In the case of Bik Van der Pol, however, participation is not always aligned with cohesion or consensus, as they have been drawn at times towards forms counter-publics that are not necessarily 'good', and he cites their *Loopanics* project, which involves the display of works associated with a now-defunct publisher of 'ambiguously subversive books', *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art*, 203.
11 Charles Esche, 'Beyond Institutional Critique: Modest Proposals Made in the Spirit of "Necessity is the Mother of Invention"', Bik Van der Pol, *With Love From The Kitchen* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005) 25.

'modesty is a great difference in the face of hyperbole', he states; 'I find a wonderful discipline in the way that [Bik Van der Pol] always keep to the modest scale in terms of their proposals while allowing space on the imaginative level for their viewers to project what might be from what is.'[12] Interestingly, although Esche's position was developed partly through reference to projects undertaken in Ireland, he does not acknowledge infamous Jonathan Swift's satirical essay, A Modest Proposal, published anonymously in 1729.[13] Not unlike propositional artworks, Swift's text operates at the imaginative level. But rather than envisioning a future from the present, or from the remnants of the past, Swift uses an imagined scenario – the possibility of Irish people selling their children as food for the landed gentry – to reveal the truth of 'what is' (the dire situation faced by the starving poor in Ireland).

Public Arena is not the first project undertaken by Bik Van der Pol in Ireland. In 2005 they were invited by a curatorial team that included Esche and Annie Fletcher to produce a new work as part of the Cork Caucus project.[14] They undertook a process of research, resulting in the publication of special insert in the Cork Evening Echo newspaper, featuring images and texts exploring the repurposing of timber packing crates originally used for transporting car parts, which were shipped to Ford's Cork factory between the 1950s and 1980s.[15] As in other projects, Bik Van der Pol conspicuously foreground the work of intermediaries and collaborators such as Katherine McClatchie, an architectural historian engaged in a survey for the Department of the Environment. She describes attending a presentation the artists delivered at the Crawford gallery, featuring images of a mobile studio, prompting her to mention the small holiday homes near various Cork beaches, known locally as 'Ford boxes'.

The Evening Echo insert is also notable for a text entitled 'Ford Boxes and Urban Space in Ireland', by Owen O'Doherty and Lisa

12 Esche, 23. Emphasis added.
13 The full title of Swift's essay is *A Modest Proposal, For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public.*
14 The full curatorial team included Tara Byrne and Sean Kelly (then director and programme manager of the National Sculpture Factory) and the artists group Art/not art (David O'Brien/Dobz and Fergal Gaynor).
15 The insert was republished in *Cork Caucus: On Art, Possibility & Democracy*, Frankfurt am Main : Revolver, c2006 (as visual essay 3, unpaginated section).

Godson.[16] The authors use the Ford Boxes as a lens through which to examine the relationship between assembly line production, shipping and suburbanisation in Ireland and, like Bik Van der Pol, they focus on processes of appropriation through which forms, artefacts and materials associated with one era are repurposed in another. The boxes were gradually superseded by weather-proof shipping containers, which no longer needed to be stored in warehouses typical of dockland areas. As ships grew in size, in response to containerization, many ports moved further out of cities to deeper water and urban Docklands areas were abandoned.

O'Doherty and Godson also note that many Irish cities and towns were developed during what came to be known, in the post-Independence era, as 'a time of occupation and control by a foreign invader'. Larger cities like Dublin were perceived as particularly 'foreign' or 'alien' - by virtue of their function as administrative centres and power bases for the occupying force. As such, they constituted a problem for new ascendancy; 'how does a new incoming political and social hierarchy treat the spaces that they will occupy but which have been created by alien powers?'[17] Unlike various science fiction narratives in which the remnants of some lost or alien civilisation are discovered on Earth or elsewhere, the 'alien powers' were not wholly displaced by the incoming hierarchy, and the ensuing power struggle had significant consequences for the development of Dublin.

Even in the 1960s, decades after the achievement of political independence, private developers (often with strong political links with the new administration, particularly Fianna Fáil) came into conflict with conservationists, who were perceived to be aligned to the old Anglo-Irish ascendancy through organizations such as the Irish Georgian Society. O'Doherty and Godson note that at one point, Kevin Boland - Minister for the Environment – actually defended the demolition of architecturally important Georgian buildings by accusing the conservationists of trying to eliminate 'the most fundamental component of our heritage which is the national language'. Boland's understanding of heritage as em-

16 The text is also available on Bik Van der Pol's website. Owen O'Doherty and Lisa Godson, 'Ford Boxes and Urban Space in Ireland' http://www.bikvanderpol.net/DOC/Ford%20boxes%20and%20urban%20space.pdf

17 O'Doherty and Godson.

bodied in immaterial rather than material form contributed to the pronounced neglect of historic city centres, which 'had to be abandoned in a wave of suburbanisation before their old associations with political power became sufficiently distant to allow re-occupation by the new demands of a booming economy'.[18] This wave of suburbanisation, in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to a new campus for University College Dublin, and shaped the transposition of whole communities from the city centre to the village of Tallaght.

Conclusion: Economies of Attachment

By the 1990s, the historic city centre had been re-occupied and repurposed as part of a convergence of culture, enterprise and heritage. Fifteen years later, however, the property bubble has burst, market values are uncertain, and politicians are again espousing the importance of an 'immaterial' cultural heritage. No longer restricted to the Irish language, culture is now a term used expansively as the basis for the tourism industry, rather than as the source or guarantee of national identity. Given this political context, and the prominence of the GAA as a cultural institution, the eventual designation of Tallaght Stadium as a soccer facility might seem surprising at first. To fully understand the outcome of the dispute it is useful to consider the different economies of participation and place associated with GAA and soccer. Like the majority of players, all of whom are amateurs, the typical GAA fan is allied to a specific county on the basis of birth, family tradition, or adopted residence.

Amateur structures can also be found within Irish soccer, but the sport is characterised by its associations with professionalization, and by association, commercialism. The majority of soccer fans in Ireland follow professional football leagues in Europe and the UK, in which players are 'bought' and transferred without much regard for the ties of birth, family tradition, or adopted residence. This does not mean, however, that supporters lack these attachments. In fact specialist agents promoting 'Father and Son' travel and ticket packages to matches in the UK often structure their advertising around the appeal of a particularly famous home ground

18 O'Doherty and Godson.

(Old Trafford, Anfield etc). The GAA seems to espouse a very different relation to place, but it is not adverse to the commercial exploitation of these attachments by corporate sponsors, including AIB - one of several from the banking sector. For example, the AIB television advertising campaign 'Supporting Clubs, Supporting Communities' openly trades upon the reputation and history of the GAA by depicting a small town where everyone plays their part in supporting the team.

Tallaght Stadium was eventually designated a soccer-only facility, apparently because of the requirement for large stands to maximise revenue from high profile matches.[19] While never envisaged as an architectural landmark, the stadium now seems to function partly as a means of branding Tallaght, presumably in the hope of attracting visitors and generating business for nearby hotels and shopping malls. Crucially, there is no attempt in Public Arena to pass judgement on the dispute or its resolution. Instead, the successive acts of producing the script from interview transcripts, casting young performers in roles of all ages, and separating sound from image, create a useful sense of detachment. The situation of the half-built stadium gradually acquires an abstracted quality, becoming productively dislocated in space and time. In the process, claims and positions regarding the past (understood in terms of struggle, heritage and tradition) and the future (understood in terms of aspiration, speculation and optimism) are acknowledged but are no longer fixed or certain. Through this process, an imaginative and propositional space is produced. In this space it is possible to view the half-built stadium as an emblem of a contested public sphere that, even when at appears to lie in ruin, might simply be dormant, waiting for some future moment of reactivation.

19 For an overview of the dispute with various links to newspaper articles and documentation of court rulings see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tallaght_Stadium

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