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REPETITION AND FORGETTING

2013

In this short text, I would like to suggest that we have begun collectively to move away from repetition. Not as a rejected model of practice, but as a slowly obliterated notion of time and memory affected by a new sense of the eternal present. Repetition is lost in the permanent present of a post-Fordist information economy. In this text, I will argue for an engagement rooted in the physicality of the world around us, and will suggest that such physicality in fact contains a radical potential for an experience that is singular, and which allows once again for repetition. To do this, I will follow Jonathan Crary's recent suggestion that the extension of our operations towards a 24/7 state of a permanent presentness, places us outside of rhythm and time. I will suggest that this obliterates distinction, and threatens repetition—whether as a phenomenon we experience, or as a willed or enacted event.

xv.

I want to begin by outlining a few forms of repetition, to describe their properties and what is at stake: the first is located in Kierkegaard and the response to his text by Alain Robbe-Grillet, in his novelistic homage, 'Repetition', where an idea of the return is embodied physically by revisiting a place, in this case Berlin. That is to say, there is a form of repetition enacted by the body; and a second conception of repetition, which sees it related to history and cultural memory, connected to what Gilles Deleuze says when he refers to Péguy, that repetition is anticipated

in the taking place of the event: he says “it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days“. A gross simplification of this should understand Péguy’s and Deleuze’s inversion of repetition as a repetition productive of difference, producing multiplicity and not uniformity. Finally, this inverted repetition also recalls something rooted in the practice of writers and artists, where repetition is enacted and produced, repetition or appropriation, and especially the Pataphysical idea of ‘plagiarism by anticipation’, in which copies emerge in advance of its model (Yves Klein produced a drawing in which Kazimir Malevich views a future Klein, using him as a model for his Suprematist reductions of painting, but the Salon of Incoherent Artists of 1888 in fact pre-empted this, by producing iconic works of 20th century art before the fact). Repetition becomes a model of the event.

It is important to note that these models are configured in their relation to time and moreover, the function, even the failure, of memory. Robbe-Grillet’s detective Henri Robin, uncertain of his experience, encounters a city which he only progressively comes to realize he has visited before; Deleuze and Péguy’s account of repetition sees it produce an anticipation of the future: repetition remains something that can only be acknowledged by identifying something ‘that has been’ or the ‘that which is to come’.

Discussing Jean-Luc Godard’s ‘In Praise of Love’, Jonathan Crary, in his recent book *24/7* describes the realization that “something fundamental has changed in the way in which we see, or fail to see, the world.” Crary suggests that for Godard, this failure “stems from a damaged relationship to past and to memory. We are swamped with images and information about the past and its recent catastrophes – but there is also a growing incapacity to engage these traces in way that could move beyond them.” For Crary, the *24/7* present of the future – the mixing of work and life, and the integration of technological devices is not the epistemological break that is often suggested to us, but a successively escalating rhythm of technological consumption which attacks any notion of the outside. He identifies sleep as a space that remains, despite various attempts to undermine its value or colonize its potential, as a radical outside.

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In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *100 Years of Solitude*, the protagonists of Macondo, who remain awake with insomnia, progressively lose their ability to remember. They write placards and leave messages to recall key events or ideas, even the location or function of objects, but to no avail: as time progresses, they begin to forget the meaning of words. (“Thus they

went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters.”). For Marquez, the note or reminder is insufficient when it is external to us; when we depend wholly upon an external source for our memory, we lose any sense of control we may have possessed.

In an echo of this external attempt to cling on to memory, Viktor Mayer Schonberger, in his book *Delete*, describes the progressive quest to increase storage and construct artificial forms of recall. For Mayer Schonberger, this is uniquely disconcerting: within its prescribed parameters, artificial memory by principle leaves no event unrecorded, we cannot escape what might be done, not merely in the naivety of youth or the heat of the moment, but moreover, in what we perceive to be private or solitary space. But something additional is also at stake: we lose the very sense of our ability to determine our own memory: we submit to a new, supposedly neutral recording mechanism (as if the post-structuralist critique of power is bypassed)—what is at stake is our self-determined ability to take responsibility for what we remember and forget. For memory is a prioritizing mechanism, one which stores, even conceals items within our memory, and repetition is our encounter with our own selected memory, as well our encounter with that which we have left behind. As Mayer Schonberger suggests, the quest is not only to remember, but also to be able to forget.

What is clear about memory in a period of digital storage is that what happens to our memory also happens to our images. Both are delegated away to digital storage, and a retrieval process is activated that we call upon through what David Joselit, in *After Art*, has called ‘the epistemology of search’. The search, for Joselit, is what now determines our primary activities. A search without end, the digital image is sought out and brought to us and quickly disposed of. Chance is managed by algorithms external to our control. We encounter the photograph or the memory only to pass it by. We spend a fraction of a second on things that we once interrogated and queried; images and memories melt into air.

xv.

Yet Crary makes a prescient remark when he describes the surprising solidity of objects outside and beyond the world of the screen. He states: “in the last two decades, one became familiar with the transitional moments when one shuts off an apparatus after having been immersed in any televisual or digital ambience for an extended period. There is inevitably a brief interval before the world fully recomposes itself into its unthought and unseen familiarity. It is an instant of disorientation when one’s immediate surroundings – for example, a room and its contents

– seem both vague and oppressive in their time-worn materiality, their heaviness, their vulnerability to dilapidation, but also their inflexible resistance to being clicked away in an instant”. And there seems to be some specific potential here: what Crary describes is the realization of our bodily and material sense of the world. The body and its fragility, and the objects curious solidity: these momentarily function as reminders that the world is constructed by relations actualized in the physical world, in which multiple senses are stimulated and experienced (it should be an obvious point to stress the materiality and sensory dimensions of the infrastructure which makes the world wide web possible). The world becomes clear to us when we re-encounter the vulnerable material histories with our world of the senses.

If the experience of images, and moreover, our memory, is affected by digital retrieval and storage, we might venture an observation: the digital file (and here my concern is the photograph, but we could equally refer to the essay or text) is, for all of the technophilia that surrounds the internet and its transparency, an object both saved and yet endlessly destroyed. Its permanency of storage, so commonly remarked upon, is counteracted by our inability, so often overlooked, to perceive it in its own time or on its own terms. Ulises Ali Meijas has written compellingly of the constraints which are imposed by the ‘nodocentrism’ of the network, in which that which does not conform to the model of the network becomes invisible. The controlled digital image is clicked away, and remains an object of easy but dispensable transmissibility, an object with little or no agency of its own.

I want to conclude then by proposing a suggestion to contest or disrupt the disappearance of memory and therefore, of repetition. But first, an observation: much recent photography is marked by its interest in manifestations of the image as an object, the photograph as a thing. I would like to suggest that such physical photographs contain a radical potential: they are intentionally present, and strangely disruptive. They have, as Jonathan Crary might state, an “inflexible resistance to being clicked away in an instant”. This is new to the photographic image, which has so often been perceived as industrially thin and infinitely communicative. The materiality of the image is more apparent in the light of the supposedly immateriality of the web (and I will leave this discussion for another time). Photography now invites us to understand its presence in space, to resist easily transmissibility and absorbance, and therefore to allow repetition. And we too as receivers of these image/objects, strive for this sense of presence, which manifests itself in unusual ways.

My modest proposal is this: to consider the touch, to consider the movement and placement of the object, its situation and presence in space, and our ability to also, perhaps transgressively, reach over the barrier and touch what is in front of us. For touch here might be understood as a multi-sensory encounter, a memory outside of the succession of information presented one-dimensionally to us, a continuous present which eliminates rhythm, respite, and therefore, the potential for repetition. The physical image/object, which we can touch and even record our experience of touching, is paradoxically an object which can insist on its presence, and be distinct in its absence. It so it is this distinct presence and absence which is the very possibility of repetition, of our own singular memory and experience – it is this which is at stake in our encounter with images.

In this text I have sought to begin to draw out some complex links between a description of our present modes of communication, and the diminishing possibilities for repetition within it. The technological media with which we communicate constructs, as we have seen, a perpetual present which constricts time. It attempts to not only supplement memory, but remove from us the very obligation to remember. A simple example of how we now delegate away memorable phone numbers or important dates would suffice here, but we might also recall our dependence upon memory for language and knowledge itself. This gradual loss of memory, I have argued, makes difficult the recognizing of repetition as it occurs. The 24/7 perpetual present, as Jonathan Crary has stated, challenges the very rhythms (day and night, work and non-work dualities, seasonal variation) that allow for distinction and respite, for space and consciousness.

I have suggested here that the materiality of the object allows for a sense of the world that engages time, a time that re-opens the possibility to remember. Crary has suggested in his writings that sleep is a space where we can unconsciously resist the passage of time. To this, I have suggested that touch, and the activation of the senses, intentionally places us at a remove from the attention and absorption of the screen. To touch is to perceive the world around us, outside of the passage of information or the procession of perpetually flickering visuals. As an aside, I have suggested that the materiality of recent photography might too be read as a resistance to being clicked away. These objects and senses, which return to us a sense of rhythm and of specificity, reject the indiscriminate flow of information, extract themselves from it, and make possible the experience of repetition in its full conceptual, historical and sensorial complexity.