

VANESSA PLACE
ES MACHT NICHT AUS:
CONCEPTUALISM AS RADICAL MIMESIS

2013

This is my memory of Berlin.

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By conceptualism I am referring specifically to the 21st century literary practice that engages in techniques of appropriation, collage, performance, procedure, and poetry, primarily as a means of recasting extant texts as literature, or making writing some other way than the purely creative, or purely communicative. It is writing that is not self-reflexive: if there is a *détournement*, it's in your head. Similarly, the reframing, processing, etc., tends not to produce richly allusive texts, ripe for postmodern discursive plumbing. Rather, the text-objects are skin-thin, shining surfaces that may do little more than reflect. Which may be plenty.

Though by conceptualism, I am referring generally, that is to say, in the larger sense, to the age of today, where things exist simultaneously, or not at all, more or less accessible, or not at all. It's a digital world, and our clouds, like clouds, assume shapes as we picture them, the shapes shape content as we use them as containers. And then they drift, and perhaps disburse, sometimes into droplets. Which are also more or less the same, and more or less different. For conceptualism is not

post-modern, and therefore doesn't ascribe to the postmodern ideas of *différence* and repetition. If there is repetition, you're the repeater. Conceptualism simply presents—it is. Like **this**. Like Berlin.

Put another way, the notion of repetition was about a stable *Ding* that we discover, to some horror or another, is unstable. While the card up the sleeve is the still-stable *imago* yet *Ding-ing* in the back of the brain. For postmodernism's dirty secret was its pro forma acknowledgment of and immediate amnesia regarding the fragility of the critic himself as I-witness. Enabling the shock of the punctum, etc. But it's not repetition we're after these days, not anymore, but concomitance. So the sense is not a set sense of fundamental instability or shifting stands, but of a fundamental partiality that is also fundamentally impartial. Thus, the ambiguity that results is not because the work is the animate object in a Barthesian sense (author is dead, critic very much alive) or even a point of excavation in a Foucauldian sense (*idem*), but rather because, in a bit of a hapless sense, we know that the swatch we're watching is just part of the picture, and like others who find themselves flat on their backs, we look at our clouds and imagine them as forms, and once formed, having content. Though, of course, like their grey-white counterparts, our digital clouds are formed by an interplay of forces, including other combinations, such as State and commerce, us and them, nature and nurture.

Like my Berlin is Benjamin's Berlin and Kierkegaard's Berlin and why not, as all are served equally digitally, equally realistically, equally now and again.

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Or like the McDonald's that are currently in some number that is a lot of countries, existing simultaneously, not one or the other better or worse, all tailored to whatever tastes (McShawarma or Croque McDo) within a certain McTemplate. Better still, like Facebook. Which we serve and which serves us, more or less happily, altogether open to whatever relationship we like, with certain preset boundaries that allow for mutual infidelities. So if I self-appropriate part of a legal brief, and present it (unchanged) as poetry, it goes nowhere fast. Put another way, it does not serve, as the law is intended to serve, as precedent, which is the juridical form of memory. Nor does it persuade in the usual way, but does show how poetry works as witness and how both law and poetry work as rhetorical modes of power, reflecting its various capitals and colours. Like photography can do, now that it is free of its mnemonic duties. See below.

This, for, example, is not a photograph. A photograph is thought to be capable of repetition. **This** is not capable of repetition. Merely existence. It is, then isn't. If it is more than once, so be it. In this sense, it is always a site.

The photograph in this sense is a non-site. It *is*, but it is not *of* the thing that it is. It, like a poem, has content, which, like a good poem, perhaps should bear some relationship to its container. Photographs are no longer capable of repetition because we don't confuse them as being anything more than the artefacts of photography. And photography has become more like memory itself, which we understand is no longer a storage system, but an information delivery system, that is to say, a series of processes, a network of contemporary neural engagements that results in the distinct feeling of "again" again. Why the first bite tastes better than the fifteenth. Thus, a photograph *is*. It's never a repetition, but a product. Of light and chemicals, or electronic digitalization, preceded and followed by more or less intentional manipulations.

(There is a fascinating side note here about the different ways viewers view two exhibitions of Civil War images currently at the Met: one, a collection of landscapes and genre paintings, the other, a collection of battlefield and studio photographs. The exhibitions are separately shown. The audience looks at the paintings, largely large, from a distance, keeping them, so to speak, in regard. The much-smaller photographs are peered at, scanned for points of identification, for punctum-points. The curatorial language used to describe the two shows focuses alternatively on the emotional content of the painted images, though without referencing painting, and on the rarity of the photographic images and the evolution of the camera. Thus the language of the exhibitions—which assumes painting hotter, photograph cooler—plays a chiasmic role to the way viewers actually deploy the two mediums.)

Given this, what of it? It could be argued that the photograph is then a partial product of photography, which is another node of another kind of memory engagement, of potential archive. Or as archive itself, as we host photos in the cloud, searchable by image, by size, as if there's a digital difference. "As if"—for this is what the photograph promises. Cohesion. Order. It is not memory, but it helps us to sustain the memory of memory. The distinct contemporary feeling of having felt before. And then, possibly, in the hereafter. Rather than nostalgia, a postmodern sense of sensibility, photography could model a hopeful hunt for futurity. Take a picture, it lasts longer.

(As an aside, I wanted to extend my metaphor and describe the photograph as a “bite,” like that first bite. This set me to thinking about the photograph as penis, that is to say, as the stand-in and stand-up substitute for the phallus. The phallus in this Lacanian sense being the Symbolic order that memory would serve, if it were faithful. Which it is, at least within its own frames—see Proust, see history, see the unintended fun of citing Derrida. Think of all the ways of translating Dante. Is this, I wonder, the reason we hoard our phone photographs, compulsively snapshotting and cloudstoring and socialseeding them to no particular gazed end? Just one more bite, and why not? After all, it’s tomorrow we stand before, not yesterday.)

If photography has become less about Photography and more about the immateriality of its production, or the materiality of photographing, the gesture of taking and sending a picture (and someone could think about this in terms of the toll of photographing as constant gift-culture), and not about materiality, what about the made photograph as its partial-product? Is the photograph on the wall not then a sculptural object, an object in space that exists as a concrete repository of narrative, of possible (and possibly discursive) allegory and allusion? The photograph qua photograph is a postmodern object insofar as it is a sculptural ruin. A rather traditional sculpture in the sense of dimensionality of stasis, of incapacity for alteration in the moment of reception. Versus an image on screen, which is not a photograph, but an image, that can be altered, that has no corporeal depth (though it does have a code that lies beneath, but then what doesn’t?), that can be pinched open or squeezed closed, shopped and enhanced as one likes. The pinchable presence of the variable machine (phone or pad, etc) is the feeling of materiality, but not thought of as such. It’s a bit of a magician’s trick perhaps, as our gaze centers on the image and not on the frame, but nonetheless. The point there is the mode of delivery is the mode of materiality. So the sculpted photograph does allow for that sense of contained discursion and allegory that is the feeling of memory, rather than memory itself. Famously permitting—and permitting is the key here—the punctum, a peephole into my self.

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Let’s go back to Facebook for a minute. If we want a contemporary metaphor for memory-making, or a medium, which is, after all, what social media is, there is Facebook. Just as Twitter is the durable present tense—the medium that replaces film for the illusion of cellular ongoingness—Facebook is the repository for the scrapbook and mirror-imaged past. We’ve turned, as it were, the punctum into the platform. And the point of art now is not the point (the object or objet du jour), but the platform (the Hirstian dotbiz or any Biennale).

Again, what of it? If, as my title promises, conceptualism is radical mimesis, then what conceptualism in the genre-specific sense does is turn platform back to product. Conceptualism is about production. The production of affect. Not of this affect or that affect, but like life itself, just site-contingent possibilities for affect. As Sontag came to cognize, everything needs its captions. Captions, in this sense, meaning headers. The death of my friend is a horror, the death of my enemy regrettably necessary. Or a real pleasure. Conceptualism takes the Real and realizes it as a site. Less affect infused, more product diffused. The radicality is the radicality of making nothing, the root to which the radical refers: the site is the site of the thing itself, though it may not be its situation. The moment is cordoned off for aesthetic consideration. In this sense, it is nothing but a stop, as Goethe's Faust would say, a point at which this is where you get off.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Dee Morris for pointing out these exhibitions, and their different audience engagements.