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Perception, Memory, and Play Towards Future Pasts

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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This thesis is an investigation of video and sculptural work Katherine Guillen completed towards a thesis exhibition in Spring 2016. It focuses on Bergson’s ideas around perception as it is informed by memory, and how these memories are the key to changing future perception and possibilities for being.
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Fig 1. Map of Thesis

(A note on form: To begin discussing what motivates and informs my practice at the top of a page suggests to me a hierarchy I relate to structures of value or time. I am oriented towards complicating linearity of duration or arrangement. If this thesis were to have a form that reflected my motivations it might look more like telephone system, a net balloon, or a treasure hunt, situated across space, and perhaps indistinguishable from the artwork I aim to create.)

Perception

"Is it the future pouring into the present that shatters yesterday and makes of it such a jumble?"

- Samuel R. Delaney, “The Motion of Light in Water”

I consider perception as the core of enacted subjectivity. Perception, as an action, has ethical and metaphysical qualities, useful toward understanding affect – but also towards
engaging it in the creation and reception of work that can function affectively. I have found resonance and clarification of my ideas around perception especially in Henri Bergon’s *Matter and Memory*. I had encountered traces of Bergson in Deleuze and other post-structural theorists, texts I had consulted to try and expand my own perception and ability to conceive outside of our current cultural stasis. The use of the concept of multiplicity by both Bergson and Deleuze provided a vocabulary I felt was sympathetic to the objectives I aim for in the reception of my work. Because my reading of Bergson is likely idiosyncratic and perhaps somewhat Deleuzian, I will try to summarize some of the more relevant concepts to make my orientation more legible.

Bergson’s characterization of perception is related his idea that time and all things that exist within it are only qualitatively divisible. Time is not spacial, as in actually measurable, it is simply intensities we relate to duration. Quantitative divisions are an illusion that result from a necessarily reductive stance toward perception. Bergson explains,

…We start neither from the perception of the individual nor from the conception of the genus, but from an intermediate knowledge, from a confused sense of the striking quality or of resemblance: this sense, equally remote from generality fully conceived and from individuality clearly perceived, begets them both by a process of dissociation. Reflective analysis clarifies it into the general idea; discriminative memory solidifies it into a perception of the individual.¹

Reduction, for Bergson can never lead towards true knowledge. Bergson sees duration instead as qualitative, a product of accumulated difference. This ‘difference’ is what is observed when a comparative focus of attention is brought to matter over time. “The

qualitative heterogeneity of our successive perceptions of the universe results from the fact that each, in itself, extends over a certain depth of duration, and that memory condenses in each an enormous multiplicity of vibrations which appear to us all at once, although they are successive.”

Perception therefore, is an activity that happens interior and exterior to our body, and, because it employs memory, is always located in the past. It is this relational activity of the directed attention (limited by what one desires or seeks from the thing being perceived) that produces a “representation” of the matter (that is virtual) on to which subjective memory is projected. The difference between memory and representation is the product of this comparison, and this quality is itself the perception.

So while Bergson doesn’t eliminate the possibility of absolute truth, he does locate it almost outside the reach of the subject.

For Bergson truth in knowledge aligns itself with complication and accumulation. Only through intuition and its focused activity of conceptually connecting a multitude or moments and qualities in duration that knowledge or truth can even be approached. This complication is visible when he uses the body to illustrate the more elusive yet parallel conceptual process. “The progress of living matter consists in a differentiation of function which leads first to the production and then to the increasing complication of a nervous system capable of canalizing excitations and of organizing actions. Complication is ultimately the key to freedom, depth and breadth of memory is liberation from the subjective limits of perception toward truth in matter.”

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Bergson’s orientation suggests a subject position I find profoundly affirming. In this model of perception, nominalism, and the activity of classifying and delineating are simple analytical procedures, separate from knowledge. Perceptual activity is rooted in a more empathetic position oriented towards qualities in search of connections rather than borders or divisions.

Complication, accumulation of memory, interconnectedness is freedom for Bergson:

“Not only, by its memory of former experience, does this consciousness retain the past better and better, so as to organize it with the present in a newer and richer decision; but, living with an intenser life, contracting, by its memory of the immediate experience, a growing number of external moments in its present duration, it becomes more capable of creating acts of which the inner indetermination, spread over as large a multiplicity of the moments of matter as you please, will pass the more easily through the meshes of necessity.” Thus, whether we consider it in time or in space, freedom always seems to have its roots deep in necessity and to be intimately organized with it. Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom.3

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Fig. 2: Excerpt from the pamphlet for *Overtitle*

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**Overtitle**, the multichannel video piece installed throughout the two floors of the Culver, with 2 different audio guides and a 24 page booklet, is almost entirely an investigation of perception in response to some of the ideas above. (Fig. 2) The modes of display present, the audience participation and space the piece attempts to create in the museum is as important as the imagery and audio, and fundamental in relating the virtual and our negotiation of it as the action of perception.

**Overtitle** is described as a “performance” because I consider the audience integral to its enactment. The audio-guide reminds the audience of their role “You participation is the performance of the piece” quips the narrator. The matter, the technology of **Overtitle** also performs and/or fails to perform (the small media player is predicted to fail in the introduction of the audio guide, and often does) – lastly my body, and my voice (in several modified ways) is present throughout the piece, a third moment of performance.

**Overtitle** had its origins in two experiences. The first was my experience of the Ai Wei Wei retrospective last September at the Royal Academy of London. The exhibit had an accompanying audio guide, produced by the museum and featuring primarily the curator, whose contributions contextualized and valorized the work on display. The audio guide, which was free, was handed to you as you entered the exhibit – and almost all in attendance donned the headphones, and traveled through the exhibit at the pace of the narration. (Fig. 3) Despite the number of people present it was eerily quiet throughout the halls.
The institutional benefit in effecting unanimous admiration and astonishment at the exhibit, as the audio guide seemed aimed to encourage, enacted a (persuasive) control of perception in the same space Ai Wei Wei purportedly presented his investigations of sites separate from the museum. I looked for signs that the guide was an extension of Wei Wei’s project – but nothing indicated this was the case.

Aside from my reservations about the function of this specific guide however, I love the richness of experience that can come from this form. I have had my perception expanded by being informed of an object’s connection to history and place. Standing in that hall of the Royal Academy, and seeing hundreds of people experience the same narration however, instead pointed towards reduction - a limiting of possible connections rather than expansion. The work’s careful arrangement as display in the gallery already visually framed its reception, applying the second framing device of the audio guide began to shut down experience in my mind. (An example clip from the audio guide available here, which perhaps succinctly illustrates the paradox I experienced.) Towards the end of the
clip, curator Adrian Locke attempts to read the piece described for the viewer “One could see this very much about the freedom of movement that a visitor to the exhibition has that Chinese people themselves doesn’t necessarily have.” It’s a curious freedom, one pointed to, but perceptually challenging under the conditions created.

*Overtitle* took up this question of the conditions of perception in the space of an institution. Like my reaction to the Ai Wei Wei audio guide, it attempts be both a celebration of the possibilities and critical of its own limits. The “story” of *Overtitle* (repeatedly alluded to throughout), is not a singular classically constructed arch story but in fact many stories. The material is the result of research I did into personal and historical circumstances I had recently recognized were part of my own experience, embedded in second hand memories. Though my experience was largely constructed from narratives I’d been told, I had never allowed myself to question them until almost the moment of beginning the project. I attempt to produce a perceptual experience for the audience, as a gesture towards the complication an interconnectedness that I recognized was at the heart of my own experience.

To try and give form to it here in language may be to undo the very intent I put into not reducing *Overtitle*. I will point to some aspects to illustrate my intentions – but hope that it will be understood as far more interwoven and ambivalent than the declarative character a thesis proposes. *Overtitle* is by definition the translation of an operatic libretto that’s projected above an Opera stage performance. I chose it to suggest the idea of titling and translation at such a distance that the viewer would understand they have to travel away from the space of the title to find proximity to the piece. It is my way of declaring
the information as not the thing, and not even the thing reconstructed in language, but the translation of the reconstruction in language of the thing. It also provides a false, but useful, purpose for the guide as most of the dialogue on the screens is in Italian – making an audio guide a possible language solution, though I don’t think there is a possibility of this being confused once it is experienced – there are few synchronicities that would make it seem to be working in this way.

The title is the first suggestion to the viewer of the perceptual space I aim to construct in which I hope they will operate – a space I constantly push to expand physically and conceptually throughout the tour. If you choose to use an audio guide there is instructions that include the suggestion of turning off the guide, or pausing and returning later and even of not synchronizing to the monitors. There is more than one guide, there is a paper guide that gives a third incomplete narrative and presents dates, reports and literary quotes that connect to the themes of the audio guides. I attempt to point to any moment when a perceived limit might be rupture, if not explicitly encouraging the rupture itself.
This story begins in 1995, in Italy. But it may also have started during the Roman Empire (when the first historical record speaks of Sardinian ‘bandit’ culture.) It could have origins in the decade of 1890-1899, or 1922, 1928, 1946, or maybe even 1934.

In 1971 Mario Barra was kidnapped, in 1994 the Barra barn was burned, and in 2007 death threats were made. This is a story about how those stories ended.

This is where this story begins.

Fig. 4: Final page of Overtitle pamphlet
Throughout *Overtitle* there is reference made to how ‘I am telling a story about a story ending, but starting at a beginning so you’ll know why I though it had ended.’ (fig. 4) There are either many beginnings and endings or perhaps none that achieve either. There are two monitors – indicated on the map of the audio tour- but not included in the guided narration. They have to be sought out and considered independently. These monitor have their own form of narration which shares some similarities with my own, but their attitude and motivation put them almost entirely at odds with my footage. The imagery in the video on the monitors also has space, and frames planarize and push the scene back at the same time I may be fore fronting it in the audio, while connecting the two time spaces and landscapes pictured simultaneously. (fig.5)

![Screen Still from Overtitle](image)

I also attempted to have the monitors link up across the space of the Culver, moments of landscape and scenery that echo throughout the space. On the second floor there are
vantages in which there are monitor to all sides, below and behind you. (Down below however, you might only be able to see one monitor a certain moments.) Then the space of the Culver itself is experienced differently depending on the guide. There is overlap and retracing between the two guides as they instruct you to travel the space. Also, the very areas of the building that I conceived of using were chosen because they are rarely ever used for display. This complicates experiencing elements of the piece as an object, and inserts itself into spaces of movement designed for bodies in hallways and the dance studio. While it pushes in on the space of the institution that is the Culver, it diffuses the framing function the spaces of display have, and begins to create, I feel, a confusing space that feels neither constructed for viewership or performance. The upstairs is especially haphazard, monitors flank a bathroom and are on the floor of a nondescript parcel of wall and the last lonely monitor on the tour is sitting on the narrower hall floor of the upstairs, an anti-climatic afterthought of ending in architecture. The scale of the piece is both large and small, only one projection is larger – and it is a projection that does not figure in the construction of the tour, it is experienced only if the viewer chooses to travel into the space of its display, and is otherwise almost invisible.

The possibilities of its perception/reception are intentionally impossible to quantify. The experience will be inevitably qualitatively different for each audience member, and the presence of their desire, and the stance they take towards the material (as in what Bergson describes as a self-interest - the cause of representation and virtuality through its orientation and limits), is called forth incessantly. **Overtitle** embraces the inevitability of the virtual, but still aims toward providing the possibility of a depth of memory in
duration that could enable the audience member to begin, as I myself attempted to, to navigate the space of perception towards something that transcends the moment or the facts presented. I could never really tell the true story of the Barra family, in the piece I constantly qualify it, but it still feels important to aim towards the question of what that story would be if I could. At the entrance of the Culver, near the display of audio guides and the paper pamphlet, a poster stands to announce the presence of the piece (pointing to the presence of the omnipresent piece because it is invisible in the way it rejects more common conventions of display in the same space?) A small line of text is embedded in a larger field of layered newspaper articles related to aspects of “the story” reads: When I started to tell this story I thought it began like this:

This is about how we understand things. An account that might stands in for a larger tale about how sometimes things happen without you knowing about them, and yet have everything to do with the person you become. About things that happen to other people, and not yourself, but which shape your life, and the way you see things, even if you never knew they happened.

It is an idea that is present throughout the piece, in the paper guide the wording changes slightly to end “About the forces that roar through lives, separate from you, but which shape your life and the way you understand the world. How that force remains in you, an echo that you carry on into the future, even if you never heard a thing.”

*Overtitle* is trying to engage the failure and potential of perception towards understanding which memories we hold onto or rewrite in the weaving of narratives that bring forward the past into the future. Bergson poetically suggests “Your perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; and in truth every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past, the pure
present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing the future. It is Bergson’s conception of memory and its relationship to difference and duration that seems present in Deleuze’s characterization of the cinegraphic image. According to Deleuze, the image is not in the present. “What is in the present is what the image "represents," but not the image itself… The image itself is a collection (ensemble) of time relations from which the present merely flows, whether as the common or the multiple, or as the lowest divisor. Time-relations are never seen in ordinary perception, but they are seen in the image, once it is creative.”

The image on screen is perceived and compared to what came before, and in this way, it is exists in the same past as Bergson attributed to memory. Deleuze is describing the relational quality of the image, but also is pointing to cinema’s creative relationship to time, and with its disruption and manipulation a possibility to make visible that which was previously limited by matters its situation both time and space. Cinema has the power to present multiple relations to time and space in quick succession, and through these images change, and perhaps expand the quality of memory and its perception. This facility of cinema (or video) to move through time is something I especially tried to employ in Overtitle, and its treatment purposefully pushes against linearity.

My own relationship to duration, perception and space is one of difference, (my work, and perhaps my entire approach, is often described to me as frenetic, anxious, and overwhelming). Despite this awareness, it is perhaps the most unresolved element of my practice for me conceptually. I might identify the reason why multiplicity is consciously

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in play, but by now my activity projecting cause and effect, imaging other points of perception may have become a physiological multiplicity of consciousness. I do recognize a relationship to empathy in the activity (as affirmed in Bergson) but finding ways to make this empathy available (productively) is difficult. I think that *Overtitle* does attempt at this, and I look forward to thinking about it more as I learn about its reception. In the meantime I have started reading the Martinician theorist Édouard Glissant and have been encouraged by his affirmation to aspects of my approach. “The rule of every action, individual or community, would gain ground by perfecting itself through the experience of Relation. It is the network that expresses the ethics. Every moral doctrine is a utopia. But this morality would only become a utopia if Relation itself had sunk into an absolute excessiveness of Chaos. The wager is that Chaos is order and disorder, excessiveness with no absolute, fate and evolution.”⁵ Glissant builds a case for opacity, a consideration of subject that is less individuated while increasingly complex. ‘Instead of Humanities - the exultant divergence of humanities.’

Memory

“*Memory, like liberty, is a fragile thing.*”- Dr. Elizabeth Loftus⁶

If I am motivated to create opportunities for perception that endeavor to change our future, according to Bergson my primary material must be memory. Using memory as a material puts me as an artist in a curious position. My material, in memory, is

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constructing my own perceptions, while I simultaneously am employing memory to try and bring out new perceptions of other possible futures. The interchange causes an ongoing renewal of both things simultaneously and, through them, essentially my very being. As Bergson explained, anyone examining “…the classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centering upon the subject of memory…”

The power held in memory is profound, and extends to social relations and cultural construction of identity and citizenship. The quote above, from Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, was published in Slate magazine as part of a biography where she explains how false memories of events are virtually indistinguishable from those actually witnessed. The interviewer, William Saletan, describes how in 1989, when the Chinese army killed protestors in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Loftus could recognize the strategies of memory reconstruction that were quickly employed to control reactions to the event. As Loftus described “Time was dissolving authentic memories of the uprising, and the regime was substituting its version by inducing people to repeat it in public seminars…Each class member makes a public pledge of allegiance to the "lie." All the right psychological high-tech ingredients are in place for the lie to become the truth…" While this points a possible weakness in memory that can be exploited, I am increasingly invested in memory collection, construction, creation and preservation for the related potential it contains which could be employed toward creating possible alternative future and opening up spaces for identities that have been displaced in the present past. It is in

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crafting and constructing with memory that I see the synthesis of artistic activity bringing forth possible space for political change that aligns my work with my ethics.

When I talk about my political intentions in my work, I would like to clarify that what I describe as political is the quality of interaction that I see as the result between my construction of spaces and memory as it relates to other confrontational, sometimes violent, forces present in culture directly aimed at unmooring or re-orienting aspect of my identity (or of those I care – which is basically everyone.). My activity, I hope, is not one of confrontation however, but of constantly trying to find stability in response – to add more weight to my presence so that when I throw off balance I gently rock back into my original position unharmed. (I aim to find a way of making, being, constructing and connecting with the world that does not even honor oppositional forces with answers or acknowledgement.) If politics are enacted by relations, organizations, movements and institutions, the investigation of one’s subjectivity in relationship to power seems undeniably rooted in control and distribution of memory.

The second inspiration for *Overtitle* was the featured in the projection labeled K, that is absent of narration and unacknowledged except as a point on the map. The video is projected in the dance studio and takes up almost the entire space of the front wall. It is a straight shot of 16 minutes, un-layered and employing diegetic sound. The camera looks down at an old book from above as I page slowly through its entirety. The book is a beautifully printed lithographic publication of primarily photographs from 1933. It was printed by the Fascist Italian government as a promotional volume that attempts to quantify the achievements thus far of the government under Mussolini. Mussolini wrote
an introduction to the book, reprinted as if on the original stationary with his seal and below, in type, “the Head of the Government” (in having on the title I realize Mussolini made his position interchangeable with his name - as if it had always been his identity.) The scrawled handwritten text is printed in a rich inky black making it seem almost as if he had written the words on the very page. The introduction and the captions, are translated into four other languages; French, English, German, and Spanish. I feel the volumes intense propaganda motives are only vaguely disguised as encyclopedic information, In English it says in part “All that is shown and documented in this volume, which will be very widely circulated, but not in order to get the sympathies of people, but [sic] to render homage to the truth and act as a guide for men of good will.” It continues, explaining the title of the publication is “Italy Advances,” What might be a more logical translation of “L’Italia Fascista in Cammino” is Fascist Italy on the March. I don’t think that it is a mistake that the movement was changed from happening in space vs time, (‘advancing’ being as relatable to time and progress versus ‘on the march’ as clearly located in moving through space with a military intent and order. ) The images do march, flooding the volumes pages with inscrutably positive documentation of changes that “have happened”, constructing a populace’s memory with an oppressively encyclopedic account of unfailing progress.

Near the front of Fascist Italy on the March there is a note that the images of the book were all drawn from the archive of Istituto L.U.C.E., the National Institute of Light, an organization started by the Fascist government to collect an distribute propaganda and cinegaraphic images. The organization’s early foundation by the Italian Fascist
government illuminates the purpose of the book; to wield power it is imperative to control and craft the documentation of that power towards carrying it into the future, a future rewritten in memory. L.U.C.E.’s projected the path of collective memory for power to follow.

The front endpage also contains the handwritten signature of the grandfather of the family I lived with, a fascist politician himself. Below his ink cursive is a stamp identifying the book “Ex Libris, Renato Barra”. My host father, in a gesture that feels both unnecessarily repetitive and symbolic, identified himself with the ownership of this document, originally his fathers, in indelible ink. What purpose did adding his along his father’s and Benito Mussolini in this propagandist record of Fascism serve? To whom would he lend this book? What value did it have now, that he aimed to secure its possession and ability to circulate into the future?

The translation of the text into four other languages, I concluded, serve their assumed function as accessible information. But I suspect their less visible but possible true purpose was to frame the perception of the Italian citizen encountering the book, the citizen on whom the Fascist government depended most of all.

To an Italian citizen, the quad-lingual captions may propose that citizens of other nations (of at least four different countries nonetheless) were interested and invested in the progress achieved in Italy. The captions function as an audience for the Italian citizen. The image that this quad-lingual audience would have of Italy’s recent past based on their experience of the book, was resplendent. This constructed history, a intact false memory which an outsider presumably would not be equipped to question, may translate
affectively for the Italian citizen into an opportunity for pride. The Italian citizen, this quad-lingual audience would be persuaded to conclude, is the fortunate beneficiary of this history in the illusional present. The book function as a stage on which Italians can see at least see themselves shining in the eyes of the foreign audience it proposed, as citizens of the successful organization depicted - Fascist Italy. This construction is a clever way to make room for the lived experiences of failure recognizably omitted for the Italian citizen - while still allowing them the experience of being present in one of the clearest picture of Utopian citizenship ever depicted.

Fascist Italy on the March proposes a complication of memory and perception which seems almost impossible to ever fully unravel. In its aesthetic, scope and complexity it is at both ends of the spectrum as something to aspire to and a cautionary tale. Erasing negative memories is perhaps the first step towards erasing the subjects and lived experiences that lived them. In Overtitle I hoped to make a piece that allowed for the complexity of truths to be present, and perhaps my own vision of history, while recognizing that even seemingly limitless interpretations still risk misrepresenting reality in a way that can have deleterious effects into futures we have yet to imagine. Memory, in this equation, is the most potent foundation for constructing new construction of possible future. To make good memories is not enough. (Fig. 6, 7, 8, 9)
Fig. 6: Screen Still from *Overtitle*

Fig. 7: Screen Still from *Overtitle*
Fig. 8: Screen Still from Overtitle

Fig. 9: Screen Still from Overtitle
The filmmaker Michelle Dizon recently spoke at 365 Mission, a Los Angeles gallery, as part of a conference program on the politics of art writing. (As in writing in art, not on art – and writing liberally defined to include film or performance.) Dizon made an argument for the importance of reconsidering the documents of an archive. “Anything can become a document if you think something has something to say.” In her definition, a document is present if there is a kind of possibility of address… all that is necessary is a call and response. “The work with documents is not so much a question of the past, but actually a deep investment in memories of the future.” For Dizon memory extends into matter and the archive could be marks on the land, a razed mountaintop as an archive of industrial clear cutting, or even one’s own body as a site of violence. The expansion of the idea of the archive is also important toward regaining control of memory and its manipulation by forces of power. Dizon related to the archive as essential to the empowering the violence of the colonial project.

In another talk, this one given at UCR by Angela Davis and Fred Motel last year, they related how in the space of the University, memory presented as information, is often still structured to fit the empirical molds cast to divide and subjugate, delineate and divide. When teaching the discussion section of the Art Theory class last Fall at UCR I couldn’t help but shudder to think I was replacing the students lived memory with the history of primarily the still dominant narrative rooted within the larger political project that worked to subjugate so many of us present in that classroom. Trying to find space in that narrative for my body and their bodies was difficult, as was defining what success would look like in that classroom. I wasn’t seeking to make the Art Theory class or its material
political. The politics happened when the structure I was supposed to enact required that I carry out the continual erasure of bodies that resembled my own and other in that room..

As Walter Benjamin explained in his investigation historical materialism versus historicity in his essay "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian":

> For the dialectical historian concerned with works of art, these works integrate their fore-history as well as their after-history; and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous process of change…For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intimated in that image.\(^8\)

I think it is my understanding of such experiences as these, (albeit barely engaged with uncovering how deeply entrenched and difficult the reality of continual subjugation is) that I see making art, which almost inevitably documents a relationship to memory, as political. In trying to negotiate the presence of ideologies, I appreciate the Trinh T. Minh-Ha attention to this sentiment in “Documentary Is/Not a Name” published by MIT Press in 1990. She explains:

> When the textual and the political neither separate themselves from one another nor simply collapse into a single qualifier, the practice of representation can, similarly, neither be taken for granted nor merely dismissed as being ideologically reactionary. By putting representation under scrutiny, textual theory/practice has more likely helped to upset rooted ideologies by bringing the mechanics of their inner workings to the fore.\(^9\)

Making work that decontextualize original sources, comparatively present documents from my own past and reactives them is a way to rupture the presentation of past

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memory and its hold on my own present. By investigating the construction of my perception as it relates to memory, history, ideologies and narratives, the affective power being wielded can be reengaged, and in some cases, disempowered through its exposure and separation from matter.

The potential power in memory construction (and reconstruction) to effect perception – and in doing the entire conception of structure and being, is the same power I understand Jacques Rancier ascribes to “literary locutions” in his treatise “The Politics of Aesthetics:”

Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies. They thereby take hold of unspecified groups of people, they widen gaps, open up space for deviations, modify the speeds, the trajectories, and the ways in which groups of people adhere to a condition, react to situations, recognize their images. They reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission.¹⁰

To alter, adjust, replay memory towards liberating it for renewed control and investigation is what I attempt, or inadvertently enact, in the video piece “Swimming for God and Country” (working title “Unedited Family Video, 1987). I began the experiment which produced the piece I later remade, by using one home video, the single six hour VHS my father and mother recorded documenting the span of about a year when I was 7 years old. I played this tape on multiple television monitors, which I recorded in the environment of the studio. These video were then played back along with the original,

initially side by side, and then eventually as projections that layered on top of the other monitors. With each recording and replaying the view was disrupted by its own multiplicity and my body moving in and out of the screen, adjusting the volume and fast forwarding (instructing the viewer to how the changes in tempo and volume are made.) What happened surprised me. My own subjectivity, now present in both the past and the present recordings in uncountable numbers becomes almost completely diffused. The environments, events and their qualities of sound and image overwhelm almost any understanding of the subjects present. The piece seems to function in line with Bergson’s instruction towards achieving intuition:

In short, try first to connect together the discontinuous objects of daily experience; then resolve the motionless continuity of their qualities into vibrations on the spot; finally fix your attention on these movements, by abstracting from the divisible space which underlies them and considering only their mobility that undivided act which our consciousness becomes aware of in our own movements): you will thus obtain a vision of matter, fatiguing perhaps for your imagination, but pure, and freed from all that the exigencies of life compel you to add to it in external perception.11

Bergson sees subjectivity as it employs memory projected in perception as a disruption of true perception of matter. In fact, the multiplicity that diffused my subjectivity also made any related narrative the video might contain impossible to construct – Instead, by highlighting the accumulation of qualities over duration, the video slowly reveals aesthetic forces of culture and power I hadn’t even intended to expose.

Despite perceptual difficulties, the national anthem, present at swim team meets, girl-scout ceremonies, and a fourth of July parade my parent organized, becomes an inescapably recognizable drone. The highly gendered displays in moment of performance

and social events become laughable in the multitude that turns beauty into farce. While my sad silent presence next to my adopted brother at his birthday party, holding each gift he was given until it was removed from my hands is pathetically revived with almost as little notice as when it originally occurred.

I attempt to foreground one speech three different times somewhat unsuccessfully. A man in dress white military uniform is given three chances to extol on the virtues of the Navy Base Swim Team. He tells us being the executive officer to the “Skipper” (Navy speak for the Commanding Officer of the Base) he has been sent to represent him, he explains – which “as you adults out there know” usually would mean being the “bad guy”, but tonight he is the “good guy” there to pass on congratulations. “On behalf of the Base”, he ends, “we hope to see you again next year.” The viewer is unlikely to recognize the man as my father, for despite it being specifically my swim team, no mention seems to be given that he had a daughter that was a swimmer, deferred to the diplomacy perhaps preventing it. (Fig. 11, 12, 13)
Fig. 10: Screen Still from *Swimming for God and Country*

Fig. 11: Screen Still from *Swimming for God and Country*
Once given a chance to compare itself to itself the home video’s embedded subtext and the value paradigm it documented was made astoundingly legible. Most surprisingly the aesthetic construction of activities in the geography of the U.S. military as an instructional towards educating participants in the dependent principles and hierarchies of its system—such as a clear gender binary, physical health and hetero-normativity—apparently integral components of patriotism and good citizenship in the military culture of 1987 Williamsburg, PA. This was an unexpected revelation; it wasn't the story I had intended to tell, and in fact in not intending to tell a story and simply playing with the material of memory I had at hand, I felt I may have succeeded in illuminating a much bigger truth than any could have attempted to create. In doing so I was also somewhat liberated from the elements of my memory that related to forces outside myself, or at least given the possibility of perceiving them.
“Fast Jets Media Unit” uses a similar strategy, and has direct origins in my experience of “Swimming for God and Country”. This piece went through multiple iterations, and in it current state is about 25 minutes long, made up of three televisions and a projector. The TVs and projector are situated on an found kitchen media cabinet constructed from MDF, together with the media they all appear to be from the late 1980’s, early 90’s. The main video at the top of the cabinet which is the most visible uses the audio of a CNN special exalting the “victory” in Iraq over woven clips from the 1989 film about a naval pilot “Top Gun”, which has been edited to primarily a few flying scenes, accompanied by all of those that focus on the romantic narrative between the lead Naval fighter pilot (Tom Cruise) and his female instructor (Kelly McGillis) at the Top Gun Naval academy that is the core narrative of the film. I was struck by how the audio narrating how the “war in the gulf” was won is almost imperceptibly different from the dialogue about Cruise’s domination of McGillis. Both in its tenor and focus centered on the thrill of power and control it is almost convincing as original to the fictional film. Apparently our ear is primed for the fictions of Hollywood to sound indistinguishably like the constructed “facts” of the cable newsroom. Smashed together they expose their true nature and separate the aesthetic of their construction from the matter actually present, or perhaps equally obscures it and provide moment of absurdity. Below, I inserted my body into the documentation of the war; the video has been manipulated so that my skin becomes the skin of the talking heads behind me as I proceed to change in and out of clothes that suggest different presentations of gender. Questions about where the disquieting narratives might land are addressed by the images that both project onto the viewer and
myself, simultaneously embedding us in the narrative as it is audibly dislocated from itself. (Fig 13, 14, 15)

Fig 13: Screen Still from *Fast Jets Media Unit*

Fig. 14: Screen Still from *Fast Jets Media Unit*
In this piece I am intentionally complicating the linear narrative as a political act. In “Documentary Is/Not a Name” Trinh T. Mihn-Ha describes how “The West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire people. Yet such illusion is real; it has its own reality, one in which the subject of Knowledge… continues to deploy established power relations, assuming Himself to be the basic reserve of reference in the totalizing quest for the referent.” The construction of gender and war as it is presented in the media I am distorting provides a space in which I am both the referent and its refusal. Trinh T. Mihn-Ha models a way forward in this space that I see as key, both theoretically and as a method to use in my approach specifically:
“The production of one irreality upon the other and the play of non-sense (which is not mere meaninglessness) upon meaning may therefore help to relieve the basic referent of its occupation, for the present situation of critical inquiry seems much less one of attacking the illusion of reality as one of displacing and emptying out the establishment of totality.”\(^\text{12}\)

Undoing the establishment of totality is an idea that I hope is present in both “Swimming For God and Country, Fast Jets Media Unit and Overtitle. This undoing of totality could also be related to the call for a right to ‘opacity’ by Édouard Glissant in his essay “Poetics of Relation”. Glissant describes opacity, not as an obscurity but as a complication and self-definition not in relation to power. “Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy...”

“Fast Jets Media Unit” engages Power directly. In its approach it is the most textual of all my work, addressing at length a viewer that is interested in ‘reading’ the piece. In reworking the piece I was considering its relationship to “wonder”, described by Stephen Greenblatt in his essay Resonance and Wonder as “the power of the displayed object to stop a viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness to evoke exalted attention.”\(^\text{13}\) This was the quality I tried to foster. I wanted to strive for opacity and wonder and not engage with power towards deconstruction – I wanted the freedom – and the place I found the most convincingly ascribed was in play.


Play

In the two recent *Performance for Video* pieces, I enact a methodical and undiscernibly logical response to the found footage. I play along performatively to the television screens using objects from the studio, fabric, cut paper, cardboard, found imagery and toys. The performance attempts to respond to the video, but not from a place of dissent or affirmation, but instead from a seemingly separate position not directly engaged with the larger questions suggested by the rhetoric and imagery in the found footage. This position becomes real space, initially almost invisible physically and conceptually as the simple space of the studio. Slowly it is constructed and elaborated until it almost consumes the televisions at the center. The depth it presents by the end of the video is surprising, and its layered construction vacillates between flattening into a formal all over composition and deep space. I relate my actions and the relationship they propose to the material pictured as again aiming toward Glissant’s call for opacity; “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components….The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.”

The space that “Fast Jets Media Unit” piece creates by mirroring itself onto the wall and the question of how our own body fits into the equation of its presentation brings up another aspect I relate to both memory and the space of play. In the last year I have been working primarily with technology that has been donated to the Goodwill or discarded. Initially my impulse was to try and understand what it meant to make an image have the quantity and quality of matter that these older televisions contain (in contrast to most
current imaging technology which seemingly strives to be invisible.) But in working with the older televisions I felt myself embody, literally in the unplugging and plugging of cords and adaptors, and the entering into stores like RadioShack, moments of lived experience that I related to a time outside our present, and their possible availability as spaces of play.

I distinctly recall the moment this space became visible. I had returned to the Goodwill after having already purchased a few televisions looking for a VCR. After some investigation I set up and connected the VCR to TV, got a clear indication it was working, but found the picture faulty. The man beside me watched as I worked, asked me if the VCR had turned on, how I knew it was faulty and then finally if I was a reseller of some sort. Apparently he hadn’t known how to connect the VCR to the television and something I’d done suggested professionalism. I had never experienced anything like this. While I had hardly exhibited any kind of technical mastery - it was perhaps because this mastery no longer had currency, or was of interest to him that I could be skilled, and could define my relationship to the technology outside his presence. By using the televisions, a material that situates itself in a discarded past, I had also found a way to engage the unoccupied space of their mastery open to my own conception. In “Homo Ludens”, Huizenga describes the space of play as “marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course…All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”

My relation to the television sets as discarded technology and their total absence from my education in

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materials of artmaking conceptually provided the kind of space in which performative play could begin to occur.

Play according to Johan Huizenga, author of one of the deepest investigations of the Ludic, is a mode of being that has a unique quality related to ritual. For Huizenga it is the ritual act has origins in play. And perhaps my activity, it spontaneity, visual concern with enacting the rules of response that I have only just invented, becomes an alternative to ideas of spirit or ritual on screen. In fact, Huizenga instructs “…"representation" is really identification, the mystic repetition or re-presentation of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much shown figuratively as actually reproduced in the action. The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshippers to participate in the sacred happening itself.” The focus on action, returns later in the book and is described as fundamental to play for Huizenga. This quality of “action” was present in other works, but it is fore fronted and complicated in the video performances. The moments of interest or difference that occur surprise me. Charles Peirce, in his essay “The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” credits play and the attentive focus on the connections between things (perhaps the best way to describe my own focus towards the videos) with the ability to produce knowledge that is neither “retroductive” or “deductive” but instead abductive (as in - derived from intuition) and in this way very related to Bergson’s intuition derived from recognizing connection, patterns and multiplicity of qualities.15 The use of play, performance and the space it

creates has opened a new relational spaces to the social and cultural conversations I want to engage. I am looking forward to continuing to explore what it meant to work in this way - it seems possible there is room in such a space for resonance, wonder, intuition, opacity, multiplicity and me.

Fig.16: Screen Still from *Performance for Video*
References


