

Not Quite How I Remember It

Written in conjunction with the exhibition 'Not Quite How I Remember It', The Power Plant, Toronto, 7 June to 1 September 2008

Helena Reckitt

While exploring ideas and art works for this show, I came across references to Dario Robleto's *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away* (1991). A delicate mobile, the piece incorporates red, white and blue candy wrappers from Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (USA Today)* (1990) confectionary spill that have been folded into tiny airplanes. The modesty of this work's size and materials stands in striking contrast to its conceptual and emotional richness. It seems to ask: Can the present harbour the past as the ground shelters a dormant seed? Can a living artist collaborate with a dead one? Or, as Robleto puts it, "Can a creative gesture begun by one artist be passed like a baton through the years to be continued or completed by another artist in another time so that it never has to end but fulfills Gonzalez-Torres's ambition to become 'endless copies'?"¹

Robleto's adaptation shares Gonzalez-Torres's interest in absence and presence, the expression of loss and Catholic-inflected ideas about the transmutation of flesh. Moreover, the piece fulfills Gonzalez-Torres's conviction that art's resonance extends beyond the art object to the associations, recollections and new works that it generates—an expanded concept of authorship that values collectivity and gift economies above private ownership. What else is this but a posthumous collaboration? These themes resonated powerfully with the other works that I was planning to include in the exhibition and compelled me to ask Robleto if we could include *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away*. "Unfortunately that's impossible," he replied in an email, "The work was lost after an exhibition. I've never forgiven FedEx."²

A similar desire to incorporate the past into the present informs many of the works in 'Not Quite How I Remember It.' The exhibition is not exclusively focused on remakes of

art works, but also examines how artists reconstruct actual events, narratives and cultural artifacts from the recent past. Revisiting iconic and obscure histories, artists wrest the past from master narratives to reveal suppressed or forgotten details and to propose surprising new connections. Previous exhibitions exploring artistic re-enactments have tended to privilege either historical events or artworks but 'Not Quite How I Remember It' makes no such distinction, instead taking both phenomena as central to the role of the artist as a historian. Through montage, sampling and remixing, these artists describe how the past continues to haunt the present. Neither wistful about bygone days nor deluded about their ability to reconstruct earlier times faithfully, the artists here activate history as an aperture through which to view contemporary reality.

Being There

Restaging pervades recent art. Perhaps looking for the period rush sought, for instance, by Civil War re-enactors, artists have revisited public events, often shifting attention from heroes and conquerors to the vanquished figures and peripheral narratives.³ In this context, restaging can buoy up individuals and groups who rarely see themselves as part of 'official' histories. Puncturing the heroic pomposity and grand linear history of public memorials, these living re-enactments open the past to ongoing speculation. They examine the differences between 'then' and 'now' to explore the complexities of cultural and artistic transmission, influence and inheritance. Such projects challenge one-sided media views of events and hold out the promise that revisiting the past might transform us from witnesses of history into creative participants.

Hence the conviction in this show that progressive social and political movements must co-opt conservative strategies of creating collective rituals and forms of witnessing. Seeking intimacy with prior social or artistic movements, the artists here excavate overlooked or unfulfilled countercultural projects. Like oral historians, their works spread information about events, people and ideas that exist under the radar of mainstream accounts, and ask us to consider what is remembered, how it is remembered and why. Lee Walton's commissioned performances for the exhibition explore ideas around experience and memory since only The Power Plant's gallery amateurs will be primary

participants. Visitors curious about the works must ask the amateurs to describe the performances that Walton originally performed for them, provoking recollections which will, of course, mutate as time stretches between the event and the re-telling.

This understanding of recounting as an act of creation parallels the ‘linguistic turn’ in recent historiography, characterized by the work of the historian and literary critic Hayden White. “Historians do not find the meaning of the past by examining the facts, they invent or make meanings through their use of language,” argues Tamsin Spargo, glossing White’s work. “They do not reconstruct or translate lived stories into prose stories but create meaningful narratives.”⁴ Chiming with such versions of subjective storytelling, and underscoring the embodied nature of knowledge, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s model of the ‘participant observer’ who becomes immersed in the object of scrutiny and recognizes the impossibility of neutrality, sets another useful precedent.

The Undetonated Past

But if history is as highly subjective and unstable as the archives we use to record it, how, asks Mary Kelly, do we bequeath political and cultural legacies to those who come later? The three light boxes in Kelly’s *Flashing Nipple Remix* (2005) show contemporary women re-enacting a feminist action from 1971 in which Kelly herself participated. Black-clad demonstrators mounted flashlights over their breasts and crotches and protested outside London’s Royal Albert Hall against the Miss World pageant taking place inside. Kelly first exhibited the work as part of the larger installation *Love Songs* (2005) that reflected on women’s memories of and identifications with late-1960s/early-1970s feminism. As Kelly notes, the work “attempts to describe what is left after the specific demands of the moment have faded and what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next.”⁵

Like Kelly, Sharon Hayes senses that legacies contain unrealized aims and wonders how to harness the unfulfilled ambitions of previous social activists. Her slide projection work *In The Near Future* presents images of political demonstrations from the 1960s and 1970s that Hayes restaged around New York City in 2005. While some of her placards

bear enigmatic messages such as ‘Nothing Will Be As Before,’ others borrow rallying cries from earlier demonstrations like ‘Ratify the E.R.A. Now!’ and ‘Who Approved the Vietnam War?’ The ongoing relevance of these protests hits home when we recall that the US Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified, and that American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq continue to prompt considerable opposition worldwide.

Similarly nurturing the thwarted hopes of the political past, Michael Stevenson’s *Fountain of Prosperity* (2005) resurrects the MONIAC, a computing machine developed in 1949 that demonstrated macroeconomics. The Bank of Guatemala purchased a model of the MONIAC, keeping it functioning during a brief period of relative autonomy in the 1950s that collapsed when a US-sponsored coup installed a military dictatorship. Moved to a university, the MONIAC fell into disrepair. “The Guatemalan MONIAC joins the ranks of myriad other ‘disappeared’ agents of alternative political economic futures for Latin America, and indeed the rest of the world,” Stevenson has written, adding, “The search for the MONIAC turns out to be the key not to understanding the economic vision of a lost revolution, but to understanding the ways in which that vision is always subject to the likelihood of being liquidated.”⁶

The dispassion with which these artists mobilize the past betrays skepticism about easy forms of ‘taking to the streets.’ An untroubled approach to activism and agitprop seems to belong to earlier eras, less battered and less schooled in the politics of representation. “We are too steeped in the debates of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes to know that simply reproducing an image of war or representing politics—no matter how graphic—hardly guarantees an oppositional practice,” argues the art historian Pamela S. Lee. “Indeed the conventions (read: clichés) we come to associate with ‘political art’ too often close around a kind of stock iconography, the purpose of which is to consolidate a notion of political identity in line with past histories of solidarity and opposition.”⁷

Mark Tribe, a professor at Brown University, shares with Lee a desire for an art that speaks to pressing contemporary concerns without suppressing ambivalence or complexity beneath didacticism. Discussing his students’ involvement in the Port Huron

Project, which restages New Left speeches of the 1960s and 1970s on the sites where they first were delivered, Tribe acknowledges that the events' lack of explicit or instrumental political aims may be part of their appeal. "It's not, directly at least, about swinging the vote or bringing the troops home," Tribe remarks, "but about creating an experience, however brief, of the unstable nature of history, reminding us that, as entrenched as the status quo may seem, history bears witness to the fact that the future is full of possibility."⁸

Such active and recuperative uses of the past recall Walter Benjamin's argument that "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."⁹ Instead of linear models of history and art pedigree, artists in this exhibition conceive influence and affiliation as rhizomatic movements that operate across generations. In her work on feminist legacies, the philosopher Iris van der Tuin argues that gender politics associated with previous periods can remain vitally current, proposing a model of reciprocity that she terms 'generation-jumping.' Echoing van der Tuin, the literary critic Elizabeth Freeman asks us to consider "a kind of temporal transitivity that does not leave feminism, femininity or other 'anachronisms' behind." Freeman continues:

'Generation,' a word for both biological and technological forms of replication, cannot be tossed out with the bathwater of reproductive thinking. Instead, it may be crucial to complicate the idea of horizontal political generations succeeding one another, with a notion of 'temporal drag,' thought less in the psychic time of the individual than in the movement time of collective political life.¹⁰

Repeat After Me

In tune with these inventive takes on cultural history, and mining Freeman's ideas of 'temporal drag,' Diane Borsato draws on Fluxus notions about art as instruction. Remaking legendary performances by artists Joseph Beuys, Bonnie Sherk and Marina Abramovic, Borsato recasts her cat in the parts of the coyote, tiger and cobra of the

originals. So these iconic art works become scripts or scores for Borsato to interpret or improvise upon, in a way that echoes Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* re-enactment series from 2005. Similar reverberations animate the 'rogue editing' of Michael Maranda, whose artist books are exhibited in the gallery's reading room. Maranda's adaptation of *Moby Dick*, for instance, runs each chapter through software that condenses the narrative to several pertinent paragraphs. For Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Maranda prints only the names mentioned in the text, revealing the author's status-consciousness. Where these projects complicate our appreciation of existing texts, Maranda's *Lost Books* speculate upon non-existent publications by creating cover designs and descriptions for these hypothetical volumes and presenting unreadable contents.

Strategic citation, albeit less overt than Maranda's, also informs Nancy Davenport's series of *Apartments* photographs—one of which recalls Chris Burden's seminal 1971 performance *Shoot*—as well as her recent video work *Weekend Campus*, which salutes Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-end* (1967) while footnoting Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* paintings. By highlighting her precursors rather than fighting or denying them, Davenport (like Maranda, Borsato, et al.) acknowledges her susceptibility to influence. This appreciation of artistic exchange and aesthetic weakness stands apart from the classic modern tactic of staking claim by challenging and defeating one's forerunners in the manner of Harold Bloom's "strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death."¹¹ Such equanimity toward influence is also noteworthy in an era when antecedents almost overwhelm us, creating, as the writer Marina Warner suggests, a new subjectivity that "does not respect the distinction that used to seem so clear between lived experience and dreams, between actual and unreal events, either in the forms they take or the degree of intensity with which they impinge." Warner continues, "I often find these days that I cannot remember if I've seen such and such a thing in real life, if I went to a film where I saw it happen, if I've read it, if someone else told me about it, or simply, if I've made it up."¹²

This sentiment recalls the thinking of Sherrie Levine, an artist whose work is an important conceptual resource for this show. "I like to consider my paintings membranes,"

Levine once said, “permeable from both sides so there is an easy flow between the past and the future, between my history and yours.”¹³ Of course Levine’s practice of re-photographing and remaking works of art by famous (mostly male) artists explores the discipleship that underlies education. In the Renaissance, for example, artists apprenticed themselves to master practitioners and learned by copying them. The novelist Jorge Luis Borges, in his short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (1939), pursues the idea that even verbatim forms of replication create something new. Presented as a literary review, the story concerns a 20th-century translator of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* who is so entranced by the work that he recreates it word-for-word in the original 16th-century Spanish. Another Borges story, *Legend* (1969), lies behind Nestor Kruger’s *Oblivion*, which condenses a snatch of dialogue from a chance meeting between Cain and Abel and reproduces it as physically separated but synchronized audio and textual elements. Kruger’s interest lies in repetition’s dark side, “a state of motionlessness” as he describes it, that “one might experience in a featureless landscape, like a desert, or the condition of chronic forgetfulness where one is doomed to repeat oneself.”¹⁴

Such evocations of discipleship and generation-jumping hint at notions of mentorship, a link reflected in the exhibition’s preponderance of media common to education environments, from slide projectors and Unicol stands to old-fashioned lecture screens and museological vitrines. In a few works, though, these connections come to the fore. Davenport’s *Campus* photographs insert images of recent anti-war protests into the Brutalist architecture of modern university environments. Influence also links clearly to education in works by Felix Gmelin that emulate and draw inspiration from clay sculptures created by blind children in a progressive German art program of the 1920s. The sense of budding potential in this piece makes it a particularly striking statement about historical promise interrupted: the image of blind youth reveling in the tactile pleasure of clay is undercut by the knowledge of how rapidly and decisively the governmental benevolence behind this initiative became its opposite a decade later. Indeed, pathologies of the eye deeply concerned Adolf Hitler in his attacks on ‘degenerate art,’ and these children would have been targeted victims of Nazi eugenics.

The approaches to remaking in ‘Not Quite How I Remember It’ draw on forms of artistic appropriation that Douglas Crimp surveyed in his landmark 1977 exhibition ‘Pictures,’ which included Sherrie Levine among others. However, the artists here diverge from the cool, laconic pillaging of the ‘Pictures’ generation. In a world where copying, sampling, cutting and pasting are just a click away, the artists of ‘Not Quite How I Remember It’ take paradoxically embodied and labour-intensive approaches to repetition. This impulse to use one’s body to identify and incorporate past events recalls the cultural theorist Steven Connor’s discussion of innate recognition in his study of ventriloquism. When we hear a song that we enjoy, Connor writes, “we find it hard not to sing along, seeking to take it into our own bodies, mirroring and protracting its auditory pleasure with the associated tactile and proprioceptive pleasures [. . .] Perhaps we cannot enjoy the sound of a voice without the sound having begun to offer the prospect of this quasi-tactile self-caress.”¹⁵ Connor’s description speaks strongly to the work of Dario Robleto, who often transforms existing materials, texts and narratives into new objects. Explaining the intimate, almost molecular, relationship he has to the source matter that informs his sculptural remixing, Robleto says, “I want to know what it feels like to hold history in your hand.”¹⁶

What Time Is It?

“The past may not have been what history tells us, it may be forever out of reach, but it is not over yet.” —Tasmin Spargo¹⁷

Distinguishing between history as the study of occurrences and poetry as the imagining of possibilities, Aristotle assigned poetry the higher place. Emphasizing the unrealized potential of the past, or what Sharon Hayes has called “pending or hypothetical events,” ‘Not Quite How I Remember It’ collapses the distance between set histories and possible futures. Consequently, temporal dislocation plays out variously across works in the show. Olivia Plender restages a 1960 BBC documentary about young artists ‘on the verge of success’ in the now gentrified (but then decrepit) West London locations where the TV program was filmed. Gerard Byrne dramatizes a Playboy roundtable from 1963 in which

science fiction writers speculate about the world of 1984. Foregrounding the presence of photographers and camera operators as part of *In The Near Future*, Hayes emphasizes the ways in which documentation techniques inflect how events are presented and understood, and reminds us that her re-enactments are based on recordings. Walid Raad also complicates time, memory and the dynamics of historical mediation. The photographs of Israel's 1982 invasion of Beirut that he shot as a teenager, but processed in 2007, show men watching almost casually as their city goes up in smoke, reminding us that some Lebanese citizens welcomed the Israeli military's arrival. The text accompanying Raad's photographs states that the negatives were carefully preserved. But clearly there is nothing pristine about these prints, covered as they are with scratches, flares and other marks that reflect the degradation caused by time and the drastic effects of war.

Raad's pictures share this concern with how to depict violence and trauma in our media-saturated era with several other works in the show. Subtle (as well as deliberately unsubtle) references to crisis emerge in Kelley Walker's inverted, manipulated images derived from Black Star Press photographs of the Birmingham race riots and Gmelin's depiction of blind children in pre-Nazi Germany. Yet the exhibition's mood is reflexive, not sensational, depicting catastrophe with a sense of distance and remoteness that contrasts sharply with the urgency of the original events. Discussing the youths in Weekend Campus who stand blankly before piled-up wrecked cars, Davenport evokes the post-traumatic mood that characterizes her and several fellow artists' work: "I don't see the students represented there as being passive, or cynical or blank or disengaged. I see them being shocked in trauma—shocked by out-of-control forces, into an appearance of passivity. And that's a difference. In this historical moment, one can't repeat the same gestures of '68 obviously and the question is [. . .] what is radical now or what is a form of political engagement that could be significant now."¹⁸ Walker also comments on how we consume images of violence and protest. After all, the pictures of race riots in his *Black Star Press* photo series were introduced to the international press by Martin Luther King. As Kelley's work reminds us: if something is not recorded and replayed, it might as well have never happened.

Historical narrative, figural representation, theatrical re-enactment—the ubiquity of these devices in ‘Not Quite How I Remember It’ separates this art decidedly from the 20th-century avant-garde. Grouping these tropes together, as “the conventions of depiction and figuration that painting had once shared with the other arts, theatre and literature in particular,” Michael Fried famously condemned them as that vanguard’s “declared enemies.”¹⁹ But if these artists eschew modernism’s rarefied investigations into the nature of art, they similarly steer clear of the Civil War re-enactor’s passion for period detail and authenticity. Gerard Byrne thinks of his works as ‘reconstructions’ rather than ‘re-enactments,’ claiming “the tone of the word re-enactment is much more about closure, whereas reconstruction somehow remains a little more open. Like the process itself is somehow a little more conspicuous.”²⁰

These temporal confusions foreground the slippage between fiction and documentary that underlies all historical accounts, treating the past as a work-in-progress and prompting us to ask: What time is it? or When are we? Far from nostalgic, these works question the idea that archives are transparent or self-evident, and challenge the ability of historical holdings to capture the impact and aftermath of dramatic as well as everyday events. They draw upon notions of performativity to show how repeating familiar tropes has the effect of ossifying meaning. And they use repetition against itself in a form of denaturalization that recalls Brechtian alienation effects that aimed “to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism.”²¹ In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes famously argued “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination.”²² Responding to Barthes’ provocation forty years later, the artists in this show release the potential of the past in order to imagine alternative futures.

Many works require time and patience to unravel. Sometimes we are not immediately sure what we are seeing or hearing. Caught in a dynamic tension between accessibility and reticence, the process of deciphering works asks us to dig deeply into our personal and collective image and data banks. The sense of layered time in the show reverberates with Walter Benjamin’s idea that outdated aesthetic objects make time appear.

Interpreting these works sharpens our awareness of historical place and perhaps prompts questions about how future generations will represent us.

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From: Cynthia Daignault
To: Helena Reckitt
Date: April 8th, 2008 9:51 AM
Subject: Re: Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Untitled (USA), 1995
Helena, and Dario

It sounds like a lovely piece. I will happily send you three candy wrappers from the “Untitled (USA Today)” installation that was shown at the Hamburger Bahnhof 2006 show. I’m sorry I cannot part with more, but as you can imagine our archives are very precious. This is both an unusual and special request, and as such we are willing to make an exception. If you contact the Hamburger Bahnhof or MOMA directly, you may be able to get more.

Please let me know the appropriate address to mail them. Further, when the piece is complete, I would love to see pictures of the final installation.

We keep a robust file of people influenced by Felix and I would love to add your piece to it.

Thank You,
Cynthia Daignault
The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation



Notes

1. Dario Robleto, email correspondence with the author, April, 2008.
2. Robleto, *ibid*.
3. Examples include Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), which re-enacted a violent confrontation between miners and police during the mid-1980s British miner's strike, and *The Third Memory* (1999) for which Pierre Huyghe remade scenes from Sidney Lumet's 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon*, casting the actual protagonist of the failed bank heist (played by Al Pacino in the movie) as the lead.
4. Tamsin Spargo, 'Introduction: Past, Present and Future Pasts' in Tamsin Spargo (ed.), *Reading the Past: Literature and History*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000.
5. Mary Kelly quoted in Rosalyn Deutsch, 'Not-Forgetting: Mary Kelly's Love Songs,' *Grey Room*, Summer 2006, No. 24, pp 26–37.
6. Michael Stevenson, 'The Search for the Foundation of Prosperity' in *c/o The Central Bank of Guatemala* (cat.), CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2006.
7. Pamela M. Lee, *October* 123, Winter 2008, p 99.
8. 'Politics by Other Means: Christina Ulke in conversation with Mark Tribe about his Port Huron Project,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, Issue #5, September 1, 2007; www.joaap.org/5/articles/Tribe/ulketribe.htm.
9. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' reprinted in Tamsin Spargo (ed.), *Reading the Past: Literature and History*, p 119.
10. Elizabeth Freeman, 'Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,' *New Literary History*, 31.4, Autumn 2000, pp 727–44; Freeman's consideration of Elisabeth Subrin's film *Shulie*, a shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 student film about the nascent feminist writer and activist Shulamith Firestone, is an important source for my ideas about the undetonated potential of the past explored in this show.
11. Harold Bloom, 'Introduction: A Mediation upon Priority, and a Synopsis,' *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 5.
12. Marina Warner, 'Rough Magic and Sweet Lullaby' in *Signs and Wonders: Essays on Literature and Culture*, Chatto & Windus, London, 2003.
13. Sherrie Levine, 'Photographs at the End of Modernism' in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995; quoted by Johanna Burton, 'Subject to Revision,' *Artforum*, *October*, 2004, pp 259–62.
14. Nestor Kruger, email correspondence with the author, March, 2008.
15. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p 10.
16. Dario Robleto, telephone conversation with the author, January, 2008.
17. Spargo, *ibid*, p 11.
18. 'Interview with Jakob Jakobsen, Henriette Heisse and Nancy Davenport at John Hansard Gallery,' University of Southampton, September, 2005; www.soton.ac.uk/~hansard/exhibition/archive/2005/campus.html.
19. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' *Artforum*, June, 1967; reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, EP Dutton, New York, 1968, pp 139–42.
20. *Gerard Byrne interviewed by Niels Henriksen*, August 7, 2007; www.kopenhagen.dk/interviews/interviews/interview_gerard_byrne.
21. Bertolt Brecht, 'The Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties' in John Willlet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, Methuen, London, 1978, p 23.
22. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in Brian O'Doherty (ed.), *Aspen 5&6: The Minimalism Issue*, Roaring Fork Press, New York, Fall–Winter 1967.