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Panel 7: Art and Memories through Home Movies

Contemporary Artworks as Platform of Memory. From Analogue Resources of Memory to Digital Art Display: Walid Raad.

This paper is situated within the context of contemporary art practice and its links with cultural memory. In it I will explain how contemporary art has become a medium within which to hold current discussions and debates about memory, paying particular attention to platforms of memory and how they resonate with artistic practice.

Cultural memory has become a central topic in History and Cultural Studies, and has set memory as an exclusive phenomenon of the present. Memory is now understood as the perception of the past and is in continuous transformation due to the fact that it depends upon and is made under current circumstances. Such issues have impacted on cinema, literature and documentary practice, and have grown in relevance in relation to the field of contemporary art. Traditional storage mediums of memory, for example analogue amateur photographs and home movies, have become important resources for contemporary artists dealing with memory. Such approaches are used to revise or reassert historical events and epochs of social change, as well as the ways people record and pass on their memories. This process often involves the digitisation of analogue mediums and results in final artworks comprising videos, photographs, video installations, images projections or online archives.

A range of strategies has been generated to deal with memory and history in art, which has reconfigured art practice and works of memory in general.

I argue that there are three main common patterns or strategies found in contemporary artworks dealing with memory.

The first is the appropriation of found and discarded objects. Artists utilise amateur photographs, home movies and other belongings because they have the power to trigger emotions, nostalgia and melancholy to engage viewers' attention and involve in the artwork.

The second pattern is the critical reconsideration of the past, i.e history. That is, the understanding of memory not as a fixed account of the past, but as something that is influenced by contemporary circumstances and emotions. In this way, memory becomes a tool with which to revise past and historical events, and also to help with the understanding of the present.

The third strategy has to do with the representation of temporality and time in the artwork. Artists generally utilise objects and images that embody different times in the past. By doing this, artists echo the way in which memory works; it evokes different events from a non-linear time. Besides, they construct a type of narrative that is made up of fragments.

In order to explain such artistic strategies and commonalities, I will now consider the work of internationally renowned artists Tacita Dean, Kristov Wodiczko, Shimon Attie and Walid Raad, whose art is heavily influenced and inspired by notions of memory, history, nostalgia and melancholy. I have chosen these artists specifically because they have utilised amateur photography and home movies and also because they have established contemporary art as a platform for memory.

Visual artist Tacita Dean is one of the so-called Young British Artists. Her artworks often comprise films, drawings, photographs, audio tracks and installations. She examines the links between different events that take place in diverse times and places, building up narratives that act as a meeting point for the past and present, fact and fiction, individual's stories and greater events.

Two of her major pieces are *Floh* (Fig. 1), a photo album made from amateur photographs purchased in flea markets, and *Teignmunt Electron* (Fig. 2), a project that tells the story of an amateur yachtsman called Donald Crowhurst. Crowhurst participated in a round the world yacht-race in 1968 and, unfortunately, was adrift in the middle of the ocean and died. Whilst sailing, Crowhurst recorded 16mm film and wrote an on-board diary, which Tacita Dean used in her work. For Dean, an image or a casual encounter with any past remnant becomes a mnemonic palimpsest.

Film is an ideal medium to capture historical time as well as a more figurative time: the time of memory. The use of several temporalities in Dean's artworks allows the recollection of events from a long time ago, as well as the reconsideration and revision of the past and the story that is now presented as a juxtaposition of appropriated fragments.

Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko has projected images onto buildings and monuments since the 1980s, creating a space for recollection. The projections have been seen in cities such as Cracow, Hiroshima, London, Berlin, Madrid and Boston. They combine the history of monumental architecture and video projections, working as an ideal medium for registering and broadcasting testimony.

The images projected are often human faces and hands that encourage the viewer to look and listen; we can hear them recounting memories and personal experiences of certain events, thus making a public statement of accounts that are normally kept in private.

Wodiczko focuses on the way in which architecture and monuments depict historical and collective memory, which is considered and paired with the stories and images projected on them. All his artworks combine ways of passing on oral history and video media in his aim to give voice to the victims.

In his Hiroshima installation (Fig. 3), images are projected onto the Genbaku dome, the well-known building partly destroyed by the atomic bomb, which is currently the Memorial for Peace in Hiroshima. As the images are projected, the voices of the victims and survivors from the devastating bomb are both summoned and represented. Wodiczko not only returns the memories of the event to the audience, but he also encourages the retrieval of personal traumatic stories in the viewers' own memory.

American artist Shimon Attie is also concerned with issues related to memory, place and identity. He gives visual form to personal and collective memory, and likewise to marginalised communities' stories. His installations are old pictures projected onto specific places in the urban landscape.

The installation series entitled *The Writing in the Wall* (1992-1993) (Fig. 4) was accomplished in a former Jewish neighbourhood in Berlin. Attie projected old slide images of everyday life from the 1920s and 1930s in the same neighbourhood, the years preceding the atrocities of the Holocaust. The pictures overlay the buildings' façades and ruins exactly in the same place where the photographs were taken.

By projecting home photographs on specific locations, fragments from the past are placed into the collective imaginary of the present. Through *The Writing in the Wall*, the everyday life of Jewish people was visually enacted and represented for short periods of time.

Walid Raad is a Lebanese artist known for creating an artificial collective called The Atlas Group. The Atlas Group is devoted to the investigation and documentation of Lebanon's contemporary history, specifically the fifteen years of civil war between 1975 to 1990/1991. Raad retrieves, stores, examines and produces a variety of document types, but mainly works with audio-visual, photographic and literary ones (Fig. 5 and 6).

Ultimately, all documentation defines a virtual archive, as they are digitised and uploaded to the Internet via the website www.theatlasgroup.org. Its aim is to create a site for meditation about the way in which the Lebanese wartime period's accounts are reconstructed in present.

Although Raad's exhibitions present his work in different disciplines, together online they constitute one virtual archive. The action of curating an online archive of work creates a reflexive space for the contemplation of how history is constructed, with the archive's artwork commonality being human affect and the capturing of everyday events. In the case of the Lebanese conflict, this is recorded in notebooks, oral testimony, amateur photography and home movies. Due to this, the archive is situated in both the private and the public, occupying a liminal space as every piece of the project has been created from fragments of personal archives that, eventually, become public the moment they are uploaded.

The online archive is a new platform for memory and it introduces an intangible, virtual and interactive quality to encourage the viewer's engagement with history. This is achieved because he/she directly interacts with the archive and also because it is displayed in a technologic medium; the Internet.

The juxtaposition of different temporalities is particularly evident in Raad's performances when he presents his work to a wide audience. Although they are advertised as conferences or talks, they are really performances in which the artist shows slide presentations with photographs, videos, short 8mm films and archived documents of The Atlas Group. In this way, the production of his visual documents and the presentation at conferences becomes an act of retrieving hidden or forgotten stories. In addition, he actively confronts contemporary situations and the effects of war. What is apparently hidden, inaccessible or dehumanised from the past comes alive and is updated and reconfigured during Raad's presentations. Through his voice, Raad manages to retrieve images from the archive and put them into the active imagination of the audience. In other words, "Raad's voice in his lectures add a capacity of his images to act, to affect, to activate, and to produce memory as that indispensable critical quality of the present that persist".¹

The Atlas Group reflects on matters such as the way in which historical narrative is made or the different roles it plays in present. The short counter-stories in his artworks refuse to create a unique, general and linear historical account about Lebanese recent history.

¹ LEPECKI, André, «In the Mist of the Event: Performance and the Activation of Memory in The Atlas Group Archive», en: *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): a project by Walid Raad* / herausgegeben von

Finally, I wanted to share a piece of my own work in this field; a video installation entitled *Recreaciones Preteritas (Reenactments of Past)* (Fig. 7) made with home movies of my own family. The artwork consists of a small table with two old televisions, one on top of the other. One of them plays original home movies recorded seventeen years ago, whilst the other plays images re-enacted from the first; that is, the same people in the same places enacting the dialogue and movements but with a time gap of seventeen years. The artwork aims to highlight the platform of home movie as a register for memory, and also the relationships between family members and their behaviour at home. Metaphorically, it shows that we recreate our past to get to know ourselves and to discover how we were and now are; our own identity.

In conclusion, the contrast between analogue and digital platforms of memory in contemporary artworks makes the viewer aware of the ever evolving ways in which we record and document our everyday life, as well as the large impact the digital and virtual have had and have on it.

Art dealing with memory shows that culture is characterised by what Mieke Bal called “acts of memory”. They are not just representations of the past in the present, but rather an interpretation of the influence of such past events from a current perspective. It is an act to activate and give sense to past experiences and events, paying particular attention to the shape they take in present. As Mieke Bal states, “cultural recall is not only something you have by chance, but something you perform, even if in many cases, such act are not consciously conceived”².

The works by the artists I have explained are representative for developing what Susannah Randstone calls memory-work; a process of involvement with the past which has both an ethic and historic aspect. Art has executed a distinguished role in such retrieval, reinterpretation and representation of the past. In this way, it has become a quasi-archetypal platform to demonstrate the importance of memory in current times both for life and for contemporary culture.

Memory works and acts of memory are materialised in all types of objects and images from past. And that’s why art is an ideal medium with plenty of strategies to help memory be broadcasted, represented and shared.

² BAL, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (ed.), *Acts of memory: cultural recall in the present*, Hanover, Dartmouth College, University Press of New England, 1999 [1998], p. VII.

Fig. 1. Tacita Dean, Floh, 2001. Photo-album.



Fig. 2. Tacita Dean, Teignmouth Electron, 2000.



Fig. 3. Krzysztof Wodiczko, A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima, 1999.



Fig. 4. Shimon Attie, The Writing in the wall, 1992-1993.



Fig. 5. Walid Raad, The Atlas Group, Notebook volume 72: missing lebanese wars, 1989/1998.

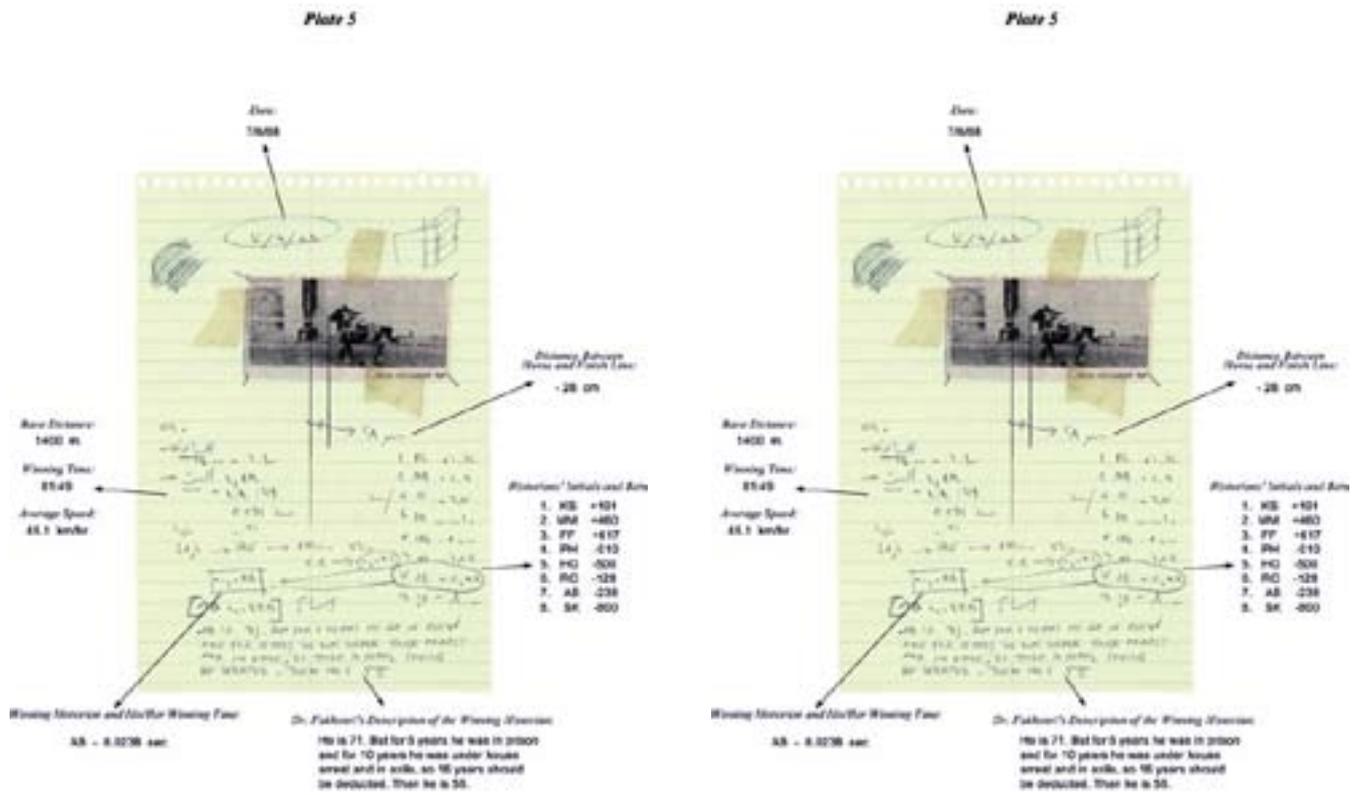


Fig. 6. Walid Raad, I think it would be better if i could weep, 2000.



Fig. 7. Domingo Martinez, Recreaciones pretéritas. 2009.



Watch video on-line.