Gerard Byrne’s Anachronic Reproduction. Repetition between Art and History

Maria Muhle

In his text on The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth from 1995, Jacques Rancière argues in favour of a notion of anachronism, that has been jointly condemned by different historical traditions as historicism and the Esthétique Anaéthisme. For Rancière, the anachronism represents an irrepressible scientific error that relates, following Rancière, not so much to what has actually, historically happened, but to the possibility—impossibility—of a specific event in a specific moment. "The accusation of anachronism is not the claim that something did not exist at a given date, it is the claim that something could not have existed at this date. Anachronism thus refers to the idea of an epoch as a "true regime" in which specific things cannot happen and others cannot have happened. The example Rancière gives is a Lutin Esprits reading of Rabearivelo’s anachronistic unfaithfulness: Bedford’s question was not if in fact Rabearivelo did not believe in God, but rather he argues that as Robefes’ time, the 16th century was completely determined by Christian religion. The idea of unfaithfulness was unthinkable, it could not exist in Robefes’ epoch. In Fevrev’s understanding, an anachronism thus presupposed an identification of men to their time or epoch. For Rancière, on the contrary, to explicate a phenomenon by referring it to its "time" means to put into play a metaphysical principle of authority camouflaged as a methodological concept of historical inquiry." And he thus opposes to this idea of anachronism the notion of "anachrony" (anachronic), which he defines as follows: "An anachrony is a world, an event, or a signifying sequence, that has left "its" time, and in this way is given the possibility to define completely original points of orientation (autotopographic), to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another."

Rancière’s argument on anachrony in this text is twofold: first, he argues that it allows for words and events to be repeated outside of their context, in an anachronic context, and that this inadequacy represents an impossible overlapping of times. And this inadequacy, secondly, that the idea of the epoch as a "true regime" of time, a totality must be referred to what Rancière calls in his writings on political aesthetics the "representative regime of the arts" as opposed to the aesthetic regime that gives way to an understanding of time as composed by multiple temporalities. In this line of thought, Giorgio Agamben has recently defined those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, as those who neither coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands —"the contemporary is not being 'part of one's own time', in the sense also captured by Rancière, but it means being in anachrony with it: The untimeliness of the contemporary thus bespeaks of the splitting the one time or epoch into multiple temporalities that enter into various relations with each other.

This productive understanding of anachronism as 'anarchonic', that Rancière and Agamben put forward, seems to be illuminating for a reading of Gerard Byrne’s extensive work in regard to the question of temporality, which, though under quite different aspects, remains central. It is engaged more concretely with the potential of the anachronic repetition, that is, with the specific and improper repetitions that anachrony features, and the subsequent multiplication of different temporalities. Its splitting up of the 'unitary' understanding of time, Byrne’s work is thus 'anarchonic' in this precise sense inasmuch as it combines different times — the narrational time of the work, the time of

the exhibition space and thus the reception of the work, but also the historical time in which the work is somehow embedded or to which it refers — but also and foremost because it problematizes the relationship of different temporali ties or temporal modes. This evokes the discussion of form on the one hand and the duration of time on the other, as well as the aesthetic degrees that they implicate through specific forms of reception. Because the 'repetition' Byrne uses both as a technical and aesthetic tool follow the logic that Rancière describes, inasmuch as they relate to something already said, written, represented, that is 'reasserted' or 'dead out of context', irreversibly, or reenacted in contemporary aesthetic terms: they refer to texts and images that are already there and that are being 'approached'. But it is not only because they relate to art historically improper subjects, that they might seem improper, but also because they are 'mere' repetition, i.e. repetition as reenactment, and do not put forward the pure creativity of the artist as author.

The engagement with this kind of repetition and its consequences it might have for traditional notions such as the author, the source, the present in one way or the other in all of Byrne's work over the last 15 years. They appropriate, repeat and re-enact different kinds of media (visual, sound, text) and also visual elements — interviews, panel discussions, advertisements. But there is something of a self-reflexive note in two different works that 'represent', 'reenact', 'reconstruct' effective constellations explicitly addressing art-historical discussions that are key debates for his own practice. For instance, the debate between modernist and non-modernist art (and indeed between Byrne's artistic understanding, as well as, more recently, the debate around the diagram as a photo-photographic and photo-cinematic medium that now addresses the artistic (and indeed technical) rivalry between still and moving images. Both debates are themselves deeply embedded within the problematisation of a specific artistic position as the dialogue between modernist instantaneousness and literality duration that plays a key role for the different modules of A Thing is a Theme that is also interwoven with Byrne's artistic understanding of historical duration.

In this context, Byrne's work plays a significant role in the realm of contemporary art often distort the idea of historical authenticity and importance by introducing some error, false note or variation within the repetition. This is done in order to shed light on the fact that total truth cannot be understood. This is why there is always a creative, or subjective, surplus that finally reconstructs the conservative understanding of repetition — and of history, we might add. Here, the question of the engagement is thus aimed at outlining a difference between the present and the past. But Byrne's art historical reenactments such as he presents them in A Thing is a Hole, or rather of these things, they are not try to negate time through the production of historical instantaneousness, nor do they aim at unveiling the hidden differences between a critical present and an ignominious past. Instead, the repetitions Byrne makes are marked by the paradoxical entanglement of these different temporalities: historical and narrative time, as well as intersubjective and duration — as we can most clearly see in his reenactment or reconstruction of Fried's Art and Objecthood.

As it is widely known, Fried, in Art and Objecthood, channels his critique of minimalism among other things through the question of its specific temporality. Fried rejects minimalism, which he calls 'literary art', because its aim is an engagement with the materiality of the spectator and argues that the 'literally decontextualized' amount of 'places for a new genre of theatre, and theatre is: now the negation of art'.

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This is so because literalist work is concerned with the "natural circumstances in which the beholder encounters it", where actuality means the conviction of the work and the spectator in a specific and concrete time-space. For Robert Morris, quoted by Fried, this concept involves the establishment of specific relationships "the beholder himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context." Literalist art thus displaces the viewer's experience from an aesthetic engagement within the artwork (as experienced in abstraction) to the "technological" and visual processes of the minimalistic objects infuse upon the imperative of the minimalistic work to "defend" or "suspend" its objecthood through form, and therefore, the force of light and its "movement" and instantaneousness. Its ability to lend itself to be experienced "in all its depths and fullness, to be forever convinced by it..." in a single infinitely brief instant. While the "modern" aesthetic experience is instantaneous and located within the work, the "literalist" situation of aesthetic experience is durational and continues to the work - the spectator experiences the work by becoming an actor in the temporal and spatial situation produced by minimalist sculpture - much like re-enactment strategies that produce immersive situations. This draws the spectator into an experience in a similar way as minimalist sculpture "extends" or "completes" from the beholder's view. The re-enactment then changes the specific relationship that Fried had described between the minimalist work and its beholder as one of total independence and confrontation, a constant or enforced relationship through time. In its opposition to the autonomy of modern art, obviously heralded Fried, this "theorization" of the relationship between the artwork and the beholder radically opposes the experience of the "true and authentic" minimalistic artwork involving the suspension both of objecthood and of the aesthetic inside the experience of the beholder. Literalist art is thus its time-based quality, the fact that its experience persists in time. Literalist art is essentially endless, or indefinite, in duration, as suggested in the Inscribing Reference, "the re-enactment has time..." The literalist perception with time - more precisely with the duration of the experience - is paradoxically extended, and marks the difference between literalist work and minimalist painting and sculpture. While the experience of the latter has no duration, because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. The experience of the literalist work necessarily exists in time, as Fried writes, paraphrasing Morris. And he continues: "The literalist perception with time - more precisely with the duration of the experience - is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical, as through theater confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the exclusiveness of a theatrical act of ritual..." The literalist re-enactments or reconstructions specifically highlight those characteristics of minimalism that, following Fried, excluded it from the realm of art: its original duration as well as its historical and spatial simultaneity. At the same time, these re-enactments also realize a critical remediation of the minimalism performance by transforming it into the medium of film and thereby undermining their "phantom" character - which had long been one of the essential degrees for the self-understanding of performance art.

A thing is a hole... therefore not only a critical commentary on Fried's high modernism, but also to the degree of minimalism and its idea of an aesthetic situation. Thus the re-enactment of Tony Smith's drive to the tundra following the quote from Fried's text addresses the question of the situation and its inherent experience as opposed to the modernist degree. At the same time, Byrne's reconstruction also paradoxically insists on the fact that his technical reproduction of this aesthetic situation is totally improper with regard to the aesthetic experience featured by minimalism's insistent request: you have to experience it... In a similar way, it brings theatrical foci, as in the video of the Van Abbe show, where the camera as the time-based medium par excellence, recreates the situation of the experience of literalist art through various reconstructions that he refers to as "dramatization", "narrativization", "dramatic representation", "re-staging", "re-construction" and "re-enactment". The camera shows actors and non-actors playing or being viewed, technicians, art experts, photographers, a cleaning lady and museum guards who enter the exhibition space and engage with the works in different ways by looking at them or by expressing to them, explaining, cleaning, installing or documenting them. The video shows these various scenes in a rather machinic mode, with the camera slowly following the action taking place within the frame, suggesting that there is no such thing as a specific and autonomous aesthetic experience or a specific time or position from which to experience aesthetically, but only different forms of interaction with the works or sculptures. Byrne thus re-enacts, if following the indications in Fried's text, a small artificial world that obeys the minimalist drive, the trial formed by the work, the space and the spectator (as it is mentioned by the "art expert" in the video).

While the video thus focuses on the question of the beholder - and documents how he is "drawn" into the work - the "re-dramatization" of the performance Columns from 1968 directly addresses the temporal dimension of minimalism. For his performance, which took place at The Living Theatre in New York, Morris built a gray, yellow, plywood platform, matching two feet square and eight feet high. The actors stood on an empty stage in a vertical position for three and a half minutes, after which time Morris topped it with the help of a string tied to the thorn's top. It then remained on the floor, sometimes for another three and a half minutes. Morris' performance is often read as proposing an exploration of bodies in space, and was inspired by the artist's interest in choreography and dance, or more generally speaking in art as happening, which was triggered by his insight that art making is a "last record of a performance done by the artist in the studio."

Now, Byrne's re-enactment is an exact reconstruction of the original performance, also performed in seven minutes, in which not much happens besides the stopping of the column. The only "dramatization" Byrne introduces is through the stage lights, as well as through the photo of a folding watch that the artist uses to measure the time of the re-enactment, which coincides with the original time of the performance and is therefore isochronous: it is a scenic discourse or narrative event that himself creates it's own temporal mode. In this way, as Gerhard Gerente writes, is a