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ON HOW THE VIAGRA OF THE CONTEMPORARY CAN INFLATE THE FLACCID REMNANTS OF THE PAST:

Drawing upon the artefact of the past: How the contemporary visual artists are simultaneously haunted by the past and its legacy of trauma and conflict while the present frees them to use history as a vehicle for discourse as demonstrated in the drawings of Michael Borremans.

“the past does indeed constrain the present” (*Lowenthal 1985*).

Amongst my contemporaries in the visual arts I have observed a reluctance to admit to a love of or use of the historical in their various practises. If this reluctance is overcome, it is usually accompanied by a need to apologise and/or to justify this urge or guilty pleasure. It is as if the act of admitting an appreciation of the historical will somehow undermine their credentials as contemporary artists. This compels me to ask why this is so and furthermore, whether it is possible to be both historical and contemporary without this need to apologise or justify historical urges.

I would argue that this urge to justify the use of the historical stems from a time when traditional art methods were considered by some to be an anathema to contemporary visual arts practise. I would also suggest, paradoxical as it may sound it, that it is now possible to be both contemporary and historical unapologetically and without masquerading behind an ironic guise. The role of this paper is not to act as a judge, confessor or co-conspirator but to explain what has changed, why the historical can be contemporary and why this tingle of guilty pleasure exists and informs the process.

In the last twenty years, contemporary art has re-embraced history under the various guises of such ideas variously called Archiving, the Alter-modern, the Off-modern, Historiographic Meta-fiction, Hetero-chronicity and the New Old Masters. The sheer number of contemporary art dialogues that refer to the past or history should be enough to underscore the dynamism and relevance of history, but there also exists a lingering sense of a need for apologia—that the use of history requires qualification and justification. In the drawings of Michael Borremans we see the historical as contemporary, in work that though it is informed by this “guilty twinge” does not avoid or attempt to separate itself from

the historical. It embraces and colludes with the historical in order to create the contemporary— baggage and all.

This need for apologia, or justification which shadows the historical, is not a rational reaction. That reaction, by the contemporary towards the historical, has been informed by past traumatic confrontations between exponents of what was considered progressive and contemporary, and those who rejected these notions of progress and aligned their politics with a narrow definition of art that was informed by “suitable” historical models. The favoured historical model usually consisted of various strains of figurative art that deliberately referenced ancient Greek or Roman forms via neo-classicism as propaganda tool, enunciated by Jacques-Louis David.

During the 20th century, this conflict exceeded a scale hitherto witnessed. Reactionary art and politics became associated with moments in history characterised by violence and repression. What we call a guilty twinge in response to the use of the historical could therefore be seen as a form of cultural transgenerational trauma. We are haunted by past actions that are not our own but have been handed down to us as learned reactions based upon others’ traumas. It is this process of recovery from these traumas that informs our current use of the historical in regard to contemporary visual arts. This process of recovery I am roughly equating to the notion of haunting developed by Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1994) and mourning as developed by Sigmund Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud 1917). Freud described the process of mourning as series of stages: grief, mourning and nostalgic fantasy. The middle phase, mourning, sits as a broad amorphous zone existing between extremes. As such it is an area rich in countless variations and permutations, to exist in this state is described by Derrida as a haunt or spectre (Derrida 1994). ‘Haunts’ have been developed into the framework of hauntology.

Hal Foster described our present period as one of reappraisal, as a period of “anomic fragmentation” (Foster 2004) when discussing the archival and its use of the artefact. This archival fragment or artefact includes the historical fragment.

In this regard archival art is as much preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps “anarchival impulse” is the more appropriate phrase), these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects—in art and in history alike—that might offer points of departure again (Foster 2004).

The dismantling of the grand twentieth century utopian narratives has created an intellectual environment in which the progress-vs-history opposition is questioned and re-appraised; it is one of anomic fragmentation “as a condition not only to represent but to work through, and proposes new orders of affective association, however partial and provisional, to this end, even as it also registers the difficulty, at times the absurdity, of doing so” (Foster 2004).

Historical fragments may have become enlivened by the present and become “points of departure again”, but the passage of time or period of mourning is not complete, hence the guilt or haunting. This “guilt” is a critical part of the present use of the historical fragment as it effects the way in which they are used. This guilt is the spectral fragment that haunts us as a result of the events that shaped and surrounded the rise of 20th century modernism and the idea of the avant-garde. We accept that change excites a range of reactions, both positive and negative, and the past is filled examples such as the 1878 libel suit of Whistler v Ruskin (Peters 1996). The artistic and ideological developments of the early twentieth century were accompanied by a brutal reaction in which ideological, racial and artistic differences were conflated, demonised and violently persecuted by authoritarian regimes. These acts of violent repression were accompanied by the authoritarian regimes of Germany, Spain and Russia

subordinating older forms that harked back to the neo-classical for their own ideological and propaganda purposes. Soviet Russia saw the displacement of earlier artistic revolutionary figures, such as Vladimir Tatlin. These artists either conformed to state sanctioned Socialist Realist Art, ceased making art, went into exile or were imprisoned (Conquest 1971). In Germany there was the Great German Art Exhibition and the exhibition and destruction of “Degenerate art” in 1937 (Barron 1991). The death, repression and exile of so many European intellectuals’ and artists’ mass trauma surrounding these authoritarian and revolutionary conflicts has informed subsequent generations’ appraisals of history or historical trauma. An example of this kind of trauma was discussed by Žižek in regards to the effects and combinations of brain and psychic injury (Žižek 2009), using the example of German Jewish émigré David Mamluk as provided by Oliver Sacks (Sacks 2007). In this example Žižek discusses the musical hallucination suffered by Mamluk. Žižek concluding that Sacks overly focussed upon the brain lesions that had caused the onset of the hallucination as a means of re-assuring Mamluk while not fully considering the import of the type of music that Mamluk was hearing was causing the emotional distress.

It started, he said, with a German Christmas song (he immediately hummed *this*) and then other Christmas songs and lullabies; these were followed by marches, especially the Nazi marching songs he had heard growing up in Hamburg in the 1930s. These songs were particularly distressing to him, for he was Jewish and had lived in terror of the Hitlerjugend, the belligerent gangs who had roamed the streets looking for Jews (Sacks 2007).

Žižek’s critical focus is upon the overuse of the organic cause of trauma, “it is nonetheless all too often that the direct reference to organic causes tends to obliterate the repressed traumatic dimension” (Žižek 2009) but the question of

why these particular songs cause Mamluk distress, not just any song, is not answered, as Žižek points out. Furthermore, the music that caused the traumatic association was not just any music but a particular style that Mamluk strongly associated with the Nazi persecution.

This shows that trauma can have a specific cultural affect. Not all music of this era causes a traumatic association for as Mamluk had earlier stated that:

his own tastes were for Schoenberg and other atonal masters, though he was fond of classical and, especially, chamber music (Sacks 2007).

The music Mamluk cites as his personal favourite is the very type of music that was denounced by the Nazis as degenerate. Though Sacks concludes that is an organic cause of the musical hallucination and Žižek points out that this ignores the traumatic association of the type of music, it would be worth considering that even prior to the hallucinations that the subconscious associations between different types of music and traumatic associations, which the hallucination reveals, may have subconsciously affected his tastes in music.

Even though it is a single specific case, this pattern of traumatic association is not new. Our stereotypes and the language used to describe this phenomenon such as *recherché*, *ancien-regime*, *reactionary*, *conservative* and *thermidorian* are all drawn from the French Revolutionary period of 1748 and its aftermath.

My suggestion is that during the growing influence and development of modernism in the post-WW2 period that the rejection of the past came to be associated with progress. Western liberal democracies perceived themselves as progressive and the repressive and reactionary came to be associated with authoritarian state. This association was further reinforced by a subconscious aversion, or the traumatic associations caused leading up to and during this period. If we look at “the past does indeed constrain the present” (Lowenthal 1985) as the notion that reflects the effects of historical trauma, the past has

indeed constrained the present by giving us a range of phobias concerning the use of the historical and still affects us in the way that artists utilise the historical fragment or artefact.

What has changed since is our present cultural understanding of history as a lineal, homogenous progressive concept. It has been challenged with the notion that we live in a post-historical period (Bourriaud 2009), a space rich with the ideas and histories existing in a heterogeneous fashion.



Figure 1. Laura Knight, Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring, 1943, oil on canvas, 86.3 cm x 101.9 cm. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 2850) <http://media.iwm.org.uk/iwm/mediaLib/146/media-146374/large.jpg?action=d&cat=art>.



Figure 2. Michael Borremans, *The Ceramic Salami*, 2001, 156 x 134mm, pencil and watercolour on cardboard. Photographer: Felix Terry. Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

Many of the mediums and techniques that have been traditionally associated with drawing carry their own weight of history with them because of this aforesaid tradition. Rather than evading the reductive that eschews the historical, artists such as Michael Borremans are amongst the artists that have embraced history as a medium in conjunction with the methods and imagery associated with history. As artists, they have taken these shrunken remnants of history and then redeployed them to pursue a contemporary agenda by re-infusing them with current discourses.

Delfim Sardo (2008) puts forward that Borremans' work has a cinematic quality because of its ambiguous timeframes, reference to several temporal moments

and “a diffuse and ironic melancholy, to produce an image that could be described as temporal dissension.” This description of Borremans’ work containing multiple temporal moments and “diffuse and ironic melancholy” implies that there is both an emotional and temporal montage at play. The montage plucks at both the nostalgic and guilt reflexes simultaneously. In the context of the discussion of trauma, it visually references the nostalgic twinge but does so in a critical way in the manner described by Svetlana Boym as “reflective nostalgia”(Boym 2001) which is yet another state that is “in-between” or evasive, containing both sentiment and distance.

The look of the drawing and manner in which is drawn are also evocative of the historical. The drawing is unashamedly illustrational, a word that has previously been used as a negative when describing drawing as means of differentiating between graphic and artistic modes. The drawings are populated by figures whose style of clothing and hair are reminiscent of the 1940s and 50s, but given the various fluctuation in retro or hipster fashion, we cannot pinpoint a particular period. WG Sebald’s writing evokes a similar complexity in his landscapes — a montage of history, anecdote and fantasy haunted by melancholy and guilt.

Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orfordness I cannot say, even now as I write these words (Sebald 1998).

Borremans’ work is made possible by what Foster calls this period of “anomic fragmentation”, Bourriaud calls “post history” and Boym cites as “off modern”. Regardless of what label we choose to describe the current period or conditions, the oppositional relationship between the historical and the contemporary as existing upon the opposite ends of a progressive/reactionary seesaw have been thoroughly eroded. We may be less able to distinguish what past constrains which present, but I view this as a positive, a past haunted by the present is far more exciting.

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Image List:

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