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Remediating Destroyed Human Bodies: Contemporaneity and Habits of Online Visual Culture

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Abstract

Introduction

Thomas Hirschhorn's video artwork *Touching Reality* has received much critical acclaim since it was first exhibited in 2012. First shown at the Palais de Tokyo in 2012, the artwork has since exhibited at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane (2013), and a recording of the piece installed [can be currently found on Vimeo](#). The floor to ceiling video installation presents a woman's hand scrolling through images on a touchscreen, which contains violent scenes of war where corpses that have been maimed, blown apart, destroyed, and mangled by war. Hirschhorn has explained that *Touching Reality* is a response to mainstream tabloid media presented in newspapers and magazines (1), and consequently Rex Butler has criticised the work for being "strangely out of date" (quoted in Johnston 9). However, the artwork resonates strongly with habits of online culture. Specifically, the remediation of images from the internet in this artwork presents, as I argue, a regard for contemporaneity that renders temporal and spatial providence of media texts as ambiguous. A key effect of this artwork then functions to historicise and monumentalise a particular approach to contemporaneity in digital culture today.

Remediation

The term "remediation", argued by Bolter and Grusin as a key "defining characteristic of the new digital media" ("Remediation", 339), was consciously and popularly used during the late 1990s and early 2000s. While remediation for Bolter and Grusin was used as a fluid term that covers a myriad of practices including repurposing, remixing, and mashing. A core underlying feature of remediation involves taking content and expressing it through another medium, which has continued to be a key aspect of online digital culture. Despite the connection between remediation and early web 2.0, the practices of remediation have become embedded in contemporary logic of digital culture, particularly through the recent production of memes taken from news media that provide political commentary and parody.

It is important to remember that remediation is not something new or unique to digital culture, but rather it is a practice and approach to creating and distributing digital media that had flourished since the domestication of the internet in Western culture. Western cultural memory is familiar with remediation in other contexts such as Andy Warhol's *Car Crash Series* and *Serial Disasters* where Warhol took images from newspapers of fatal car crashes and re-presented the images as screen prints in repetitious compositions on the canvas. Warhol's series performed a conscious interaction between media formats, mass media, popular culture, and art, and mimicked the mechanical reproduction of mass media through the production of artworks from his Factory. In effect, Warhol emphasised the ongoing unsatiated desire for disaster in tabloid media, and diminishing gap between the everyday and high art in modern society.

Remediation also has temporal implications between the past and present. Bolter and Grusin highlight that remediation can be reformative because it often involves "repurposing earlier media into digital forms" ("Remediation", 350). However, contemporary digital culture is less concerned with the remediation of older content expressed through digital media platforms. Instead the remediation of contemporary digital content is commonly expressed through another online format or platform. The emphasis here becomes less about the differences between 'old' and 'new' media, and instead focused on the repurposing of texts known to an exclusive online community, or wider public online discourses. In these contexts meaning is transformed when texts are remediated onto other online platforms. For example, the regular cycle of President Trump's speeches and footage from public ceremonies are often remediated into parodies.

Aside from being an effective method for expressing public commentary online, remediation also creates a temporal shrinking between the original and remediated text. No matter how old or recent the original text is, remediation propels it into the public eye and contemporary viral culture. The distinction between old and new is less important than what is known, or remembered by present communities in any given time. Art curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has echoed a similar sentiment when being asked about the current approach to history in the contemporary globalised society. According to Christov-Bakargiev, "everything that exists in the world is of my time, whether it is an old 1950s Bakelite telephone, or an artwork made two years ago or today" (33). Christov-Bakargiev is interested in thinking of the present that contains images of the past within it (Chau 26). For example, material and immaterial images of the past such as one's memory, mediated documentations, or even fetishes of vintage products exist in the present and are therefore contemporary.

Remediation acts as a reminder of this expansion of the contemporary to be more than just what is happening now, but recalling, refashioning and reinterpreting what has happened before. Remediation then is an indicator for expressions of contemporaneity: one that recalls and reinterprets texts from the past to the point that it is neither here nor there if the texts drawn from are from the latest news cycle, or archival footage from decades ago.

Contemporaneity

This flattening of temporal distinctions is similar to how Terry Smith has described our sense of "contemporaneity". For Smith, as with Christov-Bakargiev, to be contemporary is to persist with multiple perceptions of time playing out simultaneously. As Smith describes, the present:

is characterised more by the insistent presentness of multiple, often incompatible temporalities accompanied by the failure of all candidates that seek to provide *the* overriding temporal framework – be it modern, historical, spiritual, evolutionary, geological, scientific, globalizing, planetary...Everything about time these days – and therefore about place, subjectivity, and sociality – is at once intensely *here*, is slipping, or has become artifactual. (*What Is Contemporary Art?* 196)

Such a dizzying perspective of the present is amplified in digital culture where information is produced and consumed so rapidly. If we were to follow Smith's approach to the present day, what then does this look like, or how might this contemporaneity be expressed visually in digital culture and art? More importantly, how might this regard for contemporaneity be memorialised and historicised in the future? *Touching Reality* is useful for unravelling these questions in order to understand how the remediation of news, documentary, and online media. The artwork itself is not only an artefact of contemporary society but also indicates how contemporary digital culture expresses its contemporaneity, which will be historicised in the future.

Touching Reality by Thomas Hirschhorn

While the still images shown in the video are undoubtedly horrific, what is perhaps more disturbing about this artwork is the way in which the viewer in the video is unaffected by these images: The woman's hand leisurely swipes through the images with ambivalence and little attention. There are times when the woman viewing the images zooms in to inspect areas such as a body part, the face of an onlooker, or an accessory of carnage but rarely on the focal point of an image and without enough time for contemplation to arise before swiping to the next image. The gesture of each 'view' by the woman is casual and unaffected, much like scrolling through social media feeds or news media headlines. The woman's hand is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, its incorporation is crucial for creating a meta-frame for viewing the artwork. As viewers, we are watching a video of another viewer scrolling through photographs. Hirschhorn's incorporation of the woman's hand steers our focus away from the images themselves and towards her viewing of the images with political ambivalence and apathy. Additionally, by framing the hand viewing the photographs, the process of remediation is highlighted to signify the collective unconscious building in contemporary visual culture.

The images that appear on the touchscreen are not images that were originally taken by Hirschhorn himself, but were allegedly sources from a variety of sites on the internet. Similarly to Warhol's series mentioned earlier, *Touching Reality* is a remediation of images found online, which are re-presented in a video to be experienced in the physical setting of the white cube. The providence of these images is unknown to us but give the appearance of being taken to document and give witness to extreme situations of violence. This aspect of the process of remediation produces a significant amount of ambiguity around how one should read, absorb, contextualise and understand these images. We are not aware of who took them, why, or how, and yet they've been thrust into the viewer's field of perception.

If for Roland Barthes in his "Shock-Photo" essay, "the literal photograph introduces us to the scandal of horror, not to the horror itself" (73), *Touching Reality* articulates how war imagery is consumed and distributed online with technological ease and with little affect. The contemporary scandal of horror is then the disconnection from the reality of war that mediation provides. Such a visual economy persuades viewers to forget that such images represent the destruction of human lives as valuable as our own. What alarms Hirschhorn is how images of destroyed human bodies have been rendered redundant by the spectacle of media. In "Why Is It Important—Today—To Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?" Hirschhorn explains that his work is "not about images—it's about human bodies, about the human, of which the image is only a testimony." Hirschhorn continues:

I want to take it as something important, and I want to see this redundancy as a form. We do not want to accept the redundancy of

such images because we don't want to accept the redundancy of cruelty toward the human being. This is why it is important to look at images of destroyed human bodies in their very redundancy.

The incorporation of the woman's hand monumentalises the redundancy of shocking images of corpses in war, to which their cultural weight bears as much significance as the next image. As Hirschhorn reminds us, the images contain human bodies – and he does so because being so unaffected means that we need reminding. When viewing *Touching Reality* in the context of online visual culture, and viewing the work online, the work implicates us, the viewers, by mimicking the contemporary habits of online slacktivism and apathy by framing our gaze to be synonymous, or performed by the woman scanning through the image. We are positioned to let her scan, magnify, scroll and be apathetic for us.

Suffice to say that there is ample conversation around the affects that documentary photographs produce: Feelings of shock, removal, and distance have been widely discussed by seminal figures Judith Butler, Susan Sontag. Hirschhorn's use of remediation in *Touching Reality* further contributes to the mechanisms of removal, not only because there is an ambiguity around where the images came from, but also through the use of meta-framing where we are watching her view the images. As viewers of the artwork we are removed from the scenes that take place from the interface of the video, the touchscreen, and the camera. What is produced is a commentary, not on documentary, or framing, however, but of the contemporary gestures that signify ambivalence through the woman's caress and scroll of the touchscreen.

Feelings of removal are common to discussions around the documentation of violence. As Strauss identifies in *Between the Eyes*, "there has always been something about 'real pictures' of real violence that undercuts their political effect, and separates them from experience" (81). Documenting an experience will always create a shortfall between the representation and the real. Following Barthes, Strauss stresses that signifying violence only confirms that viewers have not had to experience that violence themselves, "because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing – except a single right of intellectual acquiescence" (81). Consequently for Strauss, "such images do not compel us to action, but to acceptance" (81). According to Strauss, violent images lack a shocking affect because "the action has already been taken" and consequently "we are not implicated." However, in *Touching Reality*, our reaction to shocking images online is implicated by the woman's behaviour in the video. There is an amplification of this shortfall because we are made to view a video of a woman scrolling through images of war, and we are also compelled to a similar kind of acceptance.

Consequently for some, *Touching Reality* leaves viewers feeling cold rather than shocked. As Ryan Johnston commented, "I was bothered by not being bothered by it" (7). (Similarly, my undergraduate students studying Contemporary Art never wonder why these images are taken and are easily accessible in the first place. Instead they question their very boredom and own political ambivalence without being propelled into emotion.) Perhaps part of this reaction is due to the fact that the work requires us to move beyond the question "can we look at these images," and come to the realisation that we already do and that they have become a part of the digital visual vernacular.

Much more could be noted about the affects produced by Hirschhorn through *Touching Reality* in regards to images of war, documentation, violence and the abject that relates specifically to digital culture. However, when focusing on how digital culture historicises our contemporaneity online, remediation produces ambiguity and ambivalence around time, place, locality, and context, and images fall into and are perpetuated within the continuous here and now online present. Despite Hirschhorn's intention of creating an artwork that critiques mass media outlets such as tabloid newspapers and magazines, *Touching Reality* also acutely presents a relationship to digital media texts that is common to contemporary culture; one that might historicise the nature and characteristic of contemporaneity today. The use of remediation by Hirschhorn in *Touching Reality* historicises digital culture and characterises it by a spatial and temporal shrinking that produces ambivalence around the providence of media texts, such as documentary photographs. As I have identified, *Touching Reality* performs a contemporaneity similar to the approaches of Terry Smith and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. The collapsing of temporal distinctions show 'everything that exists in the world is of my time' to the point that there is an indiscernibility around where and when the images in *Touching Reality* occurred.

My approach to remediation through *Touching Reality* is a departure from Bolter and Grusin who have argued that remediation reforms and reignites older texts and media formats. While Bolter and Grusin's approach might be the case in some situations, remediation also has the ability to produce other affects such as ambivalence for the providence and context of singular texts such as images of war. In *Touching Reality*, there isn't a nuanced reception of the images performed by the view in the video. For us, the images are decontextualised, repetitious, and there is an ambiguity about the specificity of the time and place in which they were taken. They are seen but not registered and indicate a larger historical present that is perpetuated in online culture.

Some might cautiously note, *Touching Reality* can be regarded as an artwork intended to produce affects in the viewers and even be manipulative in intent. The work is undoubtedly disturbing, not only because of what is depicted in the images, but because Hirschhorn uses them to amplify and intensify contemporary online habits around the aestheticisation of disaster. As Colman has observed, via Deleuze, the online mediation of war means, "we are called, perhaps more than ever, into the site of the intolerable" (156). If the ongoing experience with screen that "suspends the intolerable, rendering it an ordinary experience of daily life" (Deleuze, 168-9), then *Touching Reality* indicates that the site of intolerability is destroyed bodies from war. The artwork resonates much more strongly with an online visual culture that is thrust in front of media containing unspeakable violence to the point that it becomes a part of the habitual daily narrative. The woman's hand leisurely swiping across these images is indicative that the mediation of intolerable war imagery is what Colman terms as having 'passed into the vernacular of essential conditions of living' (156).

Conclusion

While much could be written about how *Touching Reality* taps into the history of documenting war, affect, and the aestheticisation of disaster, the artwork is also useful for unpacking current approaches to contemporaneity, and how online digital culture might be historicised in the future. If according to Christov-Bakargiev everything that we remember is of our time, then there is a collapse in temporal distinctions, and spatial contexts through the practice of remediation online. Images of bodies of war are easily accessible, shared and distributed immediately and are easily consumed. In a post-Baudrillard world, we Google "gross images of dead people" and find images of atrocity mingled in with images of makeup tutorials of zombies, and stills from *The Walking Dead*, and hence origin and context might be traceable, but temporal and spatial nuances are folded into the temporal present, and are indicative of our expressions of contemporaneity today.

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