

## The Context of Memory : Selective Amnesia in Contemporary Art

Kim Levin

Earlier this summer, scientists discovered something that postmodern theorists have been saying for years. It was announced that recent experiments with neurons and brain-cell receptors have proven that memory is not an imprint in the brain but a construction. True memories and false ones can now be distinguished from each other by a PET-scan of brain tissue. But while we in the art world may have known all along that memory is a construct -- something that can be deconstructed and reconstructed -- we have not yet reflected much on the ways in which this affects our readings of the history of objects, images, and ideas. We've been too busy with the processes of de- and re-construction to realize that our new versions of art history less constructed than the old.

For a couple of decades now, revisionist reinterpretations have been reshaping the way we think about both art and history. These changes have irrevocably altered the aesthetic terrain. Some of us feel that new foundations were necessary to correct the imbalances of old biases, assumptions, and blindnesses having to do with geography, race, politics, gender, and form. We've been dredging up what might be called the art historical equivalent of repressed memories : memories consigned to oblivion by selective amnesia. One might further claim that a profound amnesia about the past was at the core of the modernist project, which willed itself into the future and chose to forget, or to denigrate, great chunks of the past. In this process, the past acquired negative connotations. I'm tempted to say that the amnesias of modernism were not only selective, but collective.

Postmodernism was in large part a matter of recovering buried memories, and yet it too has had its own amnesias.

The scientific interest in distinguishing true from false memories, and the concurrent legal interest in repressed memory, may both be byproducts of the recent loss of faith in so-called objective truths. In art, we have no instruments to measure how much our recovery of repressed memories is true and how much is imagined. But since memory -- and especially historical memory -- is a construction, perhaps it doesn't matter as long as we realize that it is not an indelible imprint. What I want to propose is that selective amnesia (and false memory) plays an important role in the construction of historical memory -- a problematic but probably necessary role. It's yet another contextual layer for a period, an artist, or a work. Art without the associations of memory -- sociocultural or historical, real or false -- means nothing. When the elaborate refractory processes of memory snap into place, you can read the art. And however aware we think we've become about the social, political, psychological, sexual, economic, and cultural contexts surrounding art, processes of selective amnesia continue to operate.

We can now realize it was selective amnesia that consigned 19th century salon artists and academicians to oblivion for the sake of evolutionary modernism. It was selective amnesia that (in the west) pretended that the socialist and fascist realisms of the 1930s and 40s didn't exist, and conversely (in the east) doomed formalism to oblivion -- even though, like the flip sides of a coin, they shared a belief in progress, purity, and utopia.

If selective amnesia played a large role in the modernist narrative, the process continues. The present moment has its own amnesias, and most of us have lived long enough so that we have begun to see exhibitions that present skewed views of recent history as it never was. To digress a bit, an exhibition this summer at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, called « Africa : Art of a Continent », showed powerful objects stripped of all cultural memory : leaving a kind of pure formalism, offering only the retrograde connoisseurship of gorgeous but meaningless forms.

But to return to the context of memory and the question of selective amnesia, I'd like to indicate -- the allotted time forces me to be brief -- two examples ; first, Joseph Beuys, who tried to control his own legend and image, and second, Bill Gates, who is trying to gain control of the world's image banks. Beuys, whose work recovered repressed historical wartime memories and who spread a doctrine of universal creativity, is a paradoxical example. He wasn't in most aspects a modernist, but residual elements of modernism linger in his work and his stance. The modern myth of the artistic genius depended on selective amnesia : denial of the past. Because genius must spring from pure

inspiration, it must need no nourishment other than its own myth. It must not be contaminated or diminished by anything so prosaic as a formative influence.

Our understanding of Beuys's work has been constricted by his legend. He not only constructed a context for his own myth but also exerted a particular pull on the scholarly practice of art criticism and history, a directorial (almost dictatorial) pull. His work was generally considered within parameters he himself laid down. Like all parthenogenic myths of unique creation, this was as limiting as it was protective. His convoluted iconography of personal ritual and cultural symbolism left no room for influences. His charismatic persona coupled with his need for control led to a near total suspension of scholarly research. His socio-aesthetic stance discouraged investigations of formal roots or sources, as well as independent interpretation. Now, people who create legends about themselves tend to embroider the truth. Mythologizing his own history in the name of social sculpture, Beuys left us with two opposed branches of Beuys scholarship : cult-like believers and skeptical heretics.

I will briefly indicate some areas of amnesia about the sources and roots of his art.

One : aesthetic roots. Apart from the well-known Fluxus connection, the connections between Beuys's work and work by contemporaneous artists, such as Vito Acconci or Jannis Kounellis, are just beginning to be explored. Little has yet been said of the influence of Yves Klein, with whom Beuys collaborated at the start of the 1960s. Klein, at the time he was in Germany, had already conceived his Blue Revolution and was a more fully developed artist than Beuys, who later co-founded the Green Party. What effect did Klein's radical concepts have on Beuys ? And what was the influence, later in the '60s, of the radical student activists in Germany with whom Beuys continued to maintain contact into the 1980s ?

Two : historical roots. Besides the recovery of German romanticism and Teutonic mythology, Beuys's work has specific roots -- conscious and unconscious -- in the Third Reich. I have written about the subject, and will not go into detail here, except to say that his actions, objects, and words contain deliberate references to the philosophy, science, history, and ideology of that time. They also contain unconscious echoes of the teachings of that time.

Three : medical roots. He spoke of his art as homeopathic and therapeutic but his medical references have not been adequately explored. Homeopathy is not only the metaphoric healing of like with like but a specific mode of therapy. In the action Beuys performed in June 1972 titled *Vitus Agnus Castus*, the herb that is a homeopathic remedy for excessive sexual desire was fastened to his hat. This action was quite possibly a remedial response to Acconci's masturbatory *Seedbed* performance a few months earlier. The specific properties of other homeopathic substances used by Beuys remain to be investigated.

Four : conceptual roots. The influence of Rudolf Steiner is often cited. That of Henri Dunant is not. Beuys's signature red crosses refer to the Rosicrucians and possibly also to the pre-Nazi *Vril Society*, which was inspired by Rosicrucian ideas (in a novel by Bulwar-Lytton titled *The Coming Race*). But Beuys's omnipresent red crosses provide a more obvious clue that has been overlooked. Like Steiner, Henri Dunant was Swiss. He was a 19th century visionary utopian artist who made large drawings that were diagrammatic, cosmological, and elaborately symbolic. Dunant also was the founder of the Red Cross, as well as other less successful social projects such as *The World Association for Order and Construction*. Dunant won the Nobel Prize in 1901. His efforts to invent a new human form of society find parallels in Beuys's words and work.

Dunant appears to have had a major impact not only on Beuys's vision of the function of art, but on specific works such as his felt piano. Beuys himself told me of the existence of Dunant's fire-piano, called *Das Pyrophon*. It had only a few keys, and had glass cylinders like organ pipes in which flames burnt when it was played. What Beuys apparently didn't know is that *Das Pyrophon* was not actually invented by Dunant but for him by the son of a friend. The attraction this hybrid instrument must have had for Beuys -- as a sculptural object created for a spiritual purpose and performance use, giving off heat and energy, and alluding to pulpit, oven, and hearth -- should be obvious. My point, however, is that selective amnesia affects our understanding of even the best known contemporary art.

I will now skip abruptly to Bill Gates, whose activities also bear on selective amnesia and the context of memory. Amid widespread enthusiasm about the archival possibilities of the new electronic media, perhaps we should remember the *Book People* in that classic film, *Fahrenheit 451* : preservationists

of a culture of endangered materialized objects. After decades of Duchampian efforts to dematerialize and conceptualize the art object, and after decades of Greenbergian efforts to come to terms with the art object's resistant materiality, artists, critics, and curators have become infatuated with computer-generated virtuality. It is tempting to call this the ultimate literal dematerialization of art, and if Duchamp were around he might appreciate the irony. But the medium is in its infancy, and the creative results are often disappointing.

The problem, however, is not just one of quality but of obsolescence. When we speak of electronic technology, we have to consider that along with the rapid advances is the tendency toward an accelerated obsolescence. We have to assume that despite the lure of instant access to a glut of information, CD Roms, the Web, the Netscape, and the Internet will probably all be forgotten by the year 2040, having been rapidly superceded by more advanced and possibly incompatible technologies. But at a moment when our culture suffers not only from symptoms of selective amnesia but feelings of *deja vu*, instant obsolescence may well be appropriate.

A century of modernism has conditioned us to expect salvation from technological advances, but we should not overlook some ominous potentials. Paul Virilio wrote recently of « the metaphysical joke of technoculture ». Last year two apocalyptic kitsch movies, « Batman Forever » and the James Bond « Goldeneye », both had joking supervillains who were computer nerds. In real life there is Bill Gates Microsoft, with his image-gobbling company, Corbis, and the Bettman (not to be confused with Batman) Archive. First Gates bought a scientific codex by Leonardo da Vinci : this was a symbolic announcement. Then he began buying up electronic rights to entire museum collections. When he bought the Bettman Archive, the world's largest collection of historical photographs, some people began to realize that he might be moving toward an unprecedented monopoly of images. The Bettman Archive, which Gates now owns, consists of over 16 million images used by researchers and publishers around the world. « We will protect them », said Gates. Said the 92 year old Dr. Bettman, who was once a curator at Berlin's Prussian State Art Library and who fled to the United States in the 1930s with two trunks of photographs : « He now owns the history of everything ».

In the face of rapidly changing unstable technologies that will have a major effect on archival memory, we need to keep asking questions. Will the new media facilitate a free exchange of information or are they heading toward virtual colonization and control ? Cyberspace is a tricky metaphor. Its terminology is of surfing, cruising, leisure, mobility, and the open road. Yet its webs and nets are structures of entrapment. Does its expanding void of lateral networks complete the postmodern project or is it just another flawed dream of techno-utopia ? The illusion is total freedom of access and interchange. The actuality may be Bill Gates owning and controlling the electronic rights to the world's image banks.

Art and criticism intersect with social impulses and cultural memory. The new technologies accompany profound alterations in our mental and visual terrain. Having successively internalized the structural characteristics of photography, cinema, television, and video, we're now absorbed by computers. Like every other once new mode of communication, the computer is a mind-altering device, a stage in « the annihilation of distance » that Virilio discussed in 1980 in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Its instantaneous, dimensionless, unstable images -- on a surface that is only an interface -- are already altering our sense of time, space, and reality, reconstituting our minds to mirror the new media's structural rigidity, mutability, and immateriality.

Memory is history, or at least the raw material of history. And history -- personal, political, or cultural -- is itself a highly unstable edifice, constructed from the rubble of our collective memories. I say rubble because the half-life of decaying memories is short. When context leaks out, spent events, processes, and objects coagulate into unrecognizable structures. In the accidental or deliberate gaps, myths arise. Memory involves an element of faith : you have to believe the narrative, accepting it on trust. As critics, we should remember that the narrative is simply one of many possible versions, that the control of memory and history involves suppression and omission as well as interpretation, and, as the cliché says, that history is written -- always with some element of selective amnesia -- by the victors.