University of Huddersfield Repository

Townsley, Jill

The Process of Repetition - Digital Representations of Repetitive Labour Through Time

Original Citation

Townsley, Jill (2011) The Process of Repetition - Digital Representations of Repetitive Labour Through Time. In: Soft Borders Conference & Festival Proceedings: papers. Upgrade International, Sao Paulo, Brazil, pp. 77-83. ISBN 9788587985415

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/10652/

The Process of Repetition - Digital Representations of Repetitive Labour Through Time

Jill Townsley
Huddersfield University
Department of Art Design and Architecture, Queensgate, Huddersfield, England. HD1 3DH
jill@jilltownsley.com
J.Townsley@hud.ac.uk

This paper considers time based media and specifically digital representations of repetitive labour utilised in the process of art production. There is some precedence for the consideration of repetition observed as a repeated subject or object, and especially the Warholian like repeated image. Rosalind Krauss observed in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition* (1981) that many artists are '*condemned to repeating as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original'.* Here I address a different presentation of repetition, the repeated action of labour that accumulates during the process of production, and the digital imagery that allows access to this often-temporal activity.

Referring to work produced as case studies, for a practice based PhD entitled '*Moments of Repetition in the Process of Art Production: Temporalities, Labour, Appropriations and Authorships'* (2010) I will discuss how repetition may interact with time based media. Considering not just the repetitive aspects of 'the loop' but also elements of 'time' altered through digital representations.

Simple digital imagery and animation sequencing can help identify a number of issues that are significant to the consideration of repetition as it relates to the process of production. They include 'failure through repetition', 'temporality', 'erasure' and 'shifting authorships'.

The purpose of the repeated action within process can be considered more complex than a means to an end. It is not just a prerequisite to forming a critical mass or achieving a particular form. When observed from the standpoint of different schema such as time, the simulacra, mimesis or theories of replication, the repetition within process can be seen to affect the object, its relation to the viewer, authorship (either deferring or claiming) and the subject.

The paper concludes that a strong critical position can be utilised through observing the process of production as revealed through digital media. Process as a critical tool to help connect with the wider concepts that repetition can present to us.

Keywords: Repetition, Labour, Process, Time, Temporality, Shifting Authorships, Appropriation.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of visual art, the presence of repetition is often so fundamental that it can often become invisible, underlying rather than explicit. It may be considered a device, simply a means of achieving a critical mass, a multiplication of form or image, a tool that is so embedded in its process, so commonplace, that it is often unworthy of reference.

Yet for some it is the very essence of the work. On Kawara's *Date Paintings* (*The Today Series* 1966-date), is a vast number of paintings that record the date of each paintings production as its subject. The series, started in 1966 and is still in operation, presents a relentless repetition inherent in the process.

> On Kawara gathers the time of men, the measures of time. A million years ago, a million years hence. Between the two, our space, the space where we are: us, here and now*, as well as* and *as* all those other heres and all those other nows, all moments and all places*.* (Nancy, 2006, p.193)

Jean-Luc Nancy considers time and repetition in relation to *The Today Series*. He offers ideas around multiplicity, proposing that the process of production, the 'making', has inherent tensions that link it with all other artworks, communicating from the singular to the plural and across multiple fields.

The artworks I present here as case studies, also deal with repetition. Not a Warholian like repeated image but the repeated action of labour, usually hand labour, which accumulates during the process of production. Simple actions repeated over and over again until a work is completed.

Digital media became an essential tool in the final presentation of this work. Simple digital image sequencing, time-lapse animation, was utilised to expose the hidden process fundamental to the existence of the work. Used in order to obtain a more permanent visual access to the often temporal activity of repetitive labour. The digital media allowed comparisons to be made across wider theories of repetition. The resulting art objects are referred to as 'labourworks'.
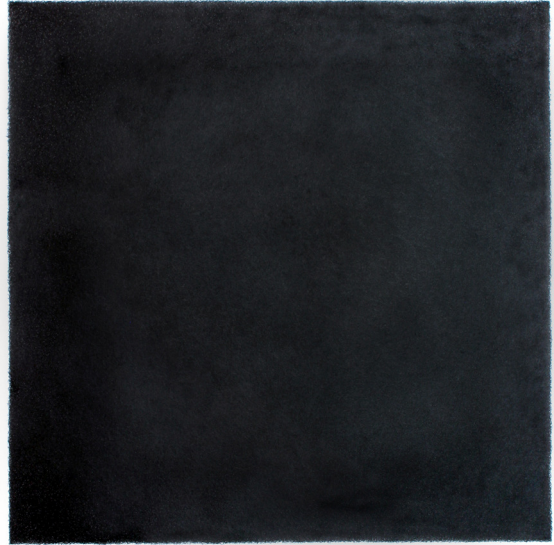
LABOURWORKS

Kate Armstrong argues that there are essentially two types of repetition in the process of art production: 1 - *'apathetic reiteration'* which artists such as Andy Warhol employ to act as a functional distancing, and 2 - *'the project of abstraction'* which severs links with representation and finds through repetition a closeness with the *'unrepresentable other'* (Armstrong, 2002, p.15 & 37).

The second definition is most relevant to the labourworks. The type of processes employed, combined with the labour (the action of making), which then undergo a lengthy sequence of repetition, is the vehicle for producing work that may connect with *'the project of abstraction'* to which Armstrong refers. Like Armstrong I propose that it is through repetition that the transformation is realised. Repetition, questioning not just time (as established in the *Date Paintings*) but also raising questions of the art object itself through authorship, failure, temporality, even challenging our relationship to the factual world.
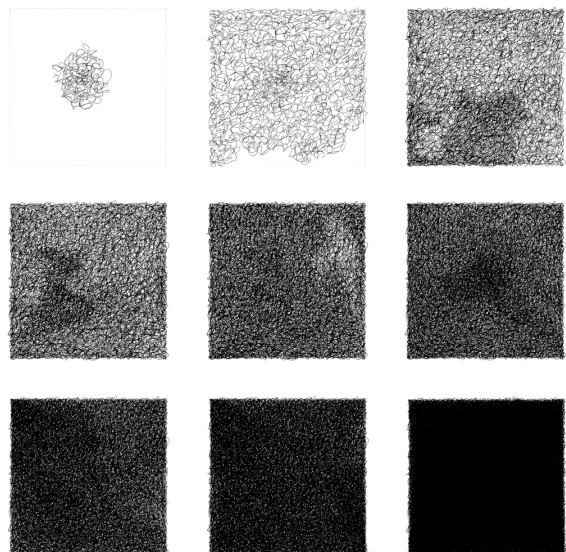
THE DIGITAL AND THE HAND

Time-lapse animation was first utilised as a response to making 5 drawings entitled '*Scribble Square*'. Each drawing consisted of an area one-meter square, which was filled with scribbling. Using a black jell pen, the process of scribbling was carried out until the whole area was black with ink.

Figure 1: *Scribble Square (2006 one of 5)*

Five black squares, whose process was only accessible through careful study of the surface and the drawing edge, places where the continual scribbled line was barely visible. Each square stands as singular; time condensed into an object, with each individual action of scribble lost to the whole.

To recapture the moments of process within the drawing, a new work, this time digital, was made: '*Scribble To The Count Of 5*' uses hand scribbling in just the same format, but on A4 paper. Digital scans were made during the process to record the development of the repetitive labour.

Figure 2: *Scribble to the Count of 5 (2007) video stills*

Each scan was taken after an interval of five seconds of scribbling, this was repeated 500 times.

The images were then animated in sequence to make a time-lapse animation; 500 images, offering a series of 5-second insights into the development of the drawing. Five drawings were completed to the same strict process making five time-lapse animations.

The format of *Scribble to the Count of 5* in digital terms is multifaceted. It begins with the **digital image**, which is then compiled into a **time-lapse animation** and presented in a **video installation** comprising of five screens each portraying the development of a different drawing made to the same rules.

Figure 3: *Scribble to the Count of 5 (2007)*

ERASURE

The most immediate observation, revealed through the time-lapse animation, is that the process erases itself through its own progression. Moments of action were in turn obliterated or over-written by the gesture of the next five-second process, or in other words the next moment. Process in this case is taken to its illogical limit; to the point of its own destruction, an erasure.

These drawings followed in reverse order to Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), where Rauschenberg erased a Willem de Kooning drawing over a period of a month, by rubbing it out. This destructive act of erasure could be perceived as a Freudian act, the killing off of his predecessor, his artistic father. However, viewed in another way this could be a constructive operation, a re-invention of drawing. Rauschenberg wrote that he simply wanted to find out:

> …whether a drawing could be made out of erasing (Rauschenberg, 1976, p.75)

So through erasure something else is formed and a 'return' can be observed; not a return of the original but a return to the significant elements, in this case a return to drawing. An outlook that is relevant to the *Scribble Square* drawings too. Though the

original surface and the usual creative considerations are negated, there is a return.

Rauschenberg's drawing starts off full and illustrative and ends empty, with only the residue of the action of labour present. Similarly, but in reverse order, the *Scribble Drawings* start as empty and white, then through the application of repetitive labour they conclude in the annihilation of the original state. We now perceive a full and black surface, a transformative process generative of both erasure and regeneration. The drawing presents a history that contains the binary oppositions of empty and white or full and black.

There is also a conceptual leap offered here, between the binary oppositions of existence and non-existence. Heidegger proposed that the condition of our existence must also be non-existence through his concept of Dasein.

> "Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. (Heidegger 1927. p251)

By assimilating non-existence (our death) we also contemplate existence. Like the sentiment of *'Erased de Kooning'* Heidegger advocates a mode of existence in relation to history where existence is inherently linked, by non-existence, to all those who have gone before.

FAILURE

So the time-lapse makes visible the hidden process within the whole, while the installation (five animations) offered a comparative opportunity to realise the buried process between each of the five drawings. What we actually see within the repetitive process is a series of 'singular' marks, each 'different' from the next and without comparison across all five drawings.

By making visible the singular or difference hidden within the repetition our very relationship to repetition may be questioned. For if repetition cannot be identified within what is inherently a repetitive process, maybe repetiton has failed?

For Søren Kierkegaard the failure of repetition is the point when we become conscious, when our idealised world collides and is broken by reality:

> In reality as such, there is no repetition. This is not because everything is different, not at all. If everything in the world were completely identical, in reality there would be no repetition, because reality is only in the moment. (Kierkegaard, 1843, p.274-5)
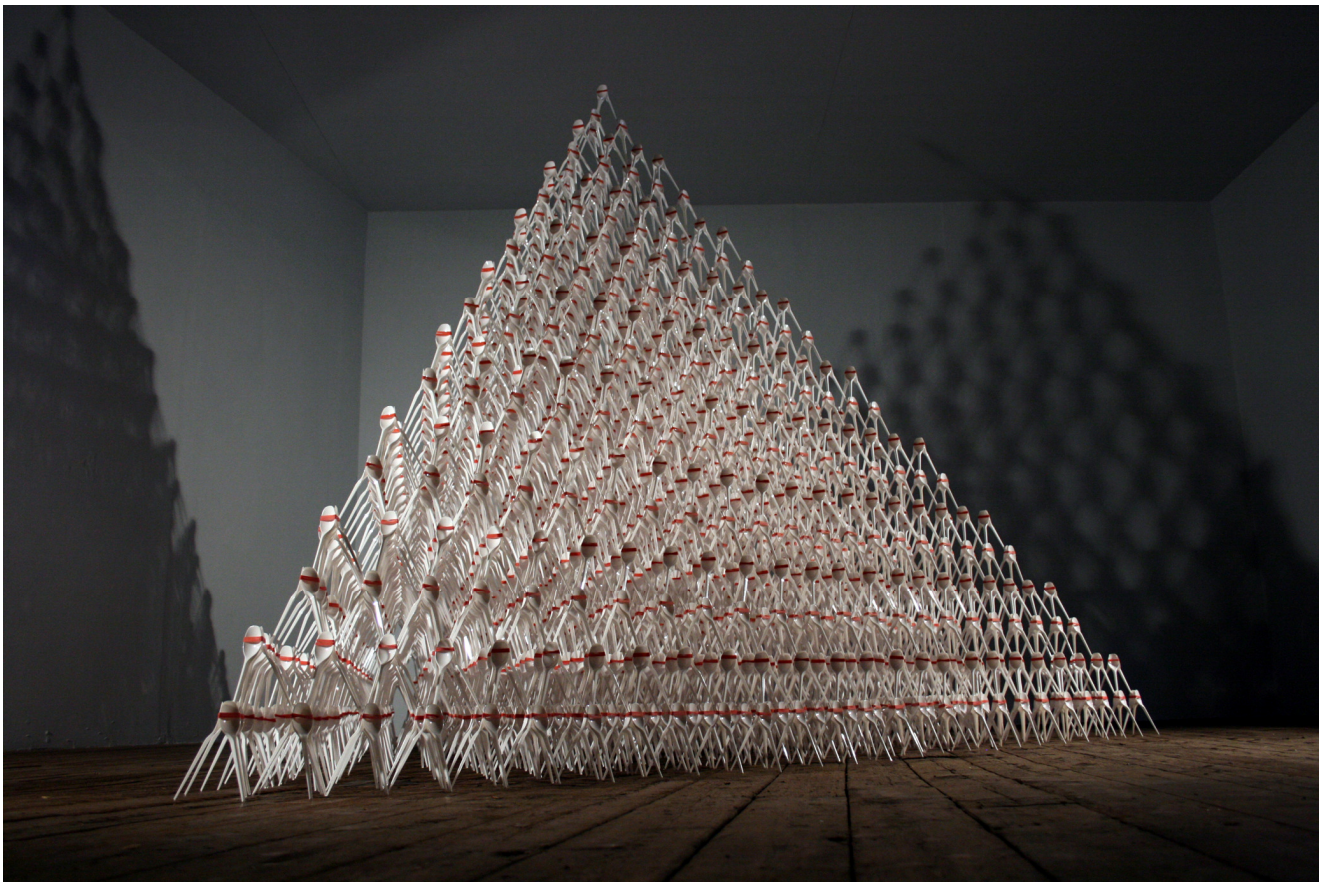
But if we accept that repetition is perhaps impossible in real terms then our sense of the factual may also be undermined. Especially when our mechanisms for understanding require a fundamental belief in the repeat event in order to pattern our systems of understanding. Such as may be found in laboratory conditions, the 'all things remaining equal' form of scientific repetition. Reliance on repetition could mean that the cultural foundations for truth are eroded through repetition's failure.

Mel Bochner highlights the awkward relationship between truth and logic when he considers his *Measurement Room* (1969):

Measurement is one of our means of believing that the world can be reduced to a function of human understanding. Yet, when forced to surrender its transparency, measurement reveals an essential nothing-ness. The yardstick does not say that the thing we are measuring is one yard long. Something must be added to the yardstick in order to assert anything about the length of the object. This something is a purely mental act ... "an assumption". (Bochner, in: Rorimer, 2001, p.184-5)

An acknowledgement that our factual world is only a *'function of human understanding'* leads us to a different vision. By looking for the difference between each repetition (the 'failure' of repetition)

Figure 4: *Spoons (2008)*

we are offered complexity beyond conformation of the repeat or the security offered within the fact.
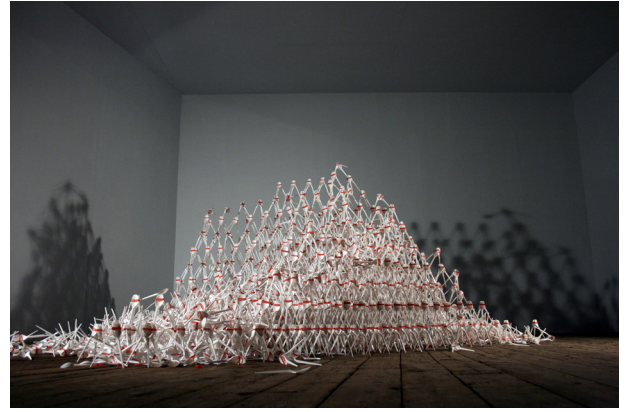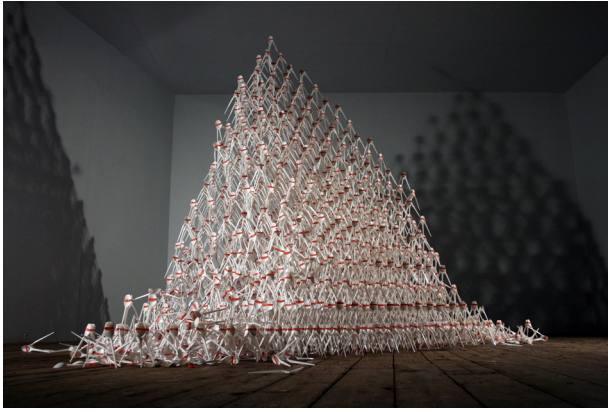
REVEALING THE TEMPORAL

The time-lapse offers a representation of time outside of our own. It can access the image in a more temporal manner (in a time outside of real time), conveying time captured as moments in time re-presented in a fluid sequence.

The difference between real time and the condensed time of the time-lapse, may be more

directly observed in another labourwork – *Spoons* (figure 4). *Spoons* consists of an 8-foot tall pyramid and a time-lapse animation, these two parts are always exhibited together. The pyramid is made from 9273 plastic spoons and 3091 rubber bands. Three spoons are bound together at the scoop end to form a unit. The units tessellate and are balanced on one-another to build a pyramidal structure.

Over time, the rubber in the band perishes and the unit collapses. The whole sculpture is then undermined and experiences a random decay. This process was filmed with time-lapse photography,

Figure 6 and 7: Spoons (2 stills from the time-laps animation)

programmed via computers to take one frame every twenty minutes, day and night over three consecutive months.

Like the classic subject of rotting fruit (e.g. Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life,* 2001) the time-lapse animation speeds up the world, re-presenting the concept of decay, making visible a different yet parallel timescale - one physically inaccessible to us living in real time. As a consequence the animation becomes 'more' than the object itself, a simulacra of the actual. In Baudrillard terms:

> *Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation* by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (Baudrillard, 1988, p.166)

The paradox is that in this work, 'decay' (traditionally of death) is also the generative field by which the repetition, through difference, reinvents the new - the simulacra.

Not unlike Plato's Greek statues, made larger at the top to 'look real' from below (Sophist- Socratic Dialogue Plato), the simulacrum of time-lapse photography makes real what is temporally impossible.

THE LOOP

The video loop in the labourworks is the return that happens within the overarching period of the time-lapse, the joining of the end to the beginning in constant repeat with an infinite duration, or until the equipment is shut down.

The loop itself is held within the linear time, yet it also marks a return to the beginning endlessly presenting the birth, life, death, birth, etc. of the work. Providing a circular system of time within the larger continuum, controlled neither by the artist nor viewer but by the sequence of the medium.

In the labourworks the loop has been used to multiply the futility of the repetitions within the structure of the work, deferring closure through the return of the loop.

If Baudrillard's terms are applied to the presentation of *Spoons*, with the '*referent*' describing the object (the pyramid) and the *'signifier'* the time-lapse animation, each medium is then distinguished as taking a different role within the work.

The referent presents itself within a mechanistic structure. Achieved when all the material elements return to their physical origin through decay. Within this construct the work is able to reach an identifiable end state.

The signifier, however, presents itself within a Nietzsche-like 'Anti-mechanism'. As the process is repeated ad-infinitum (as long as the video runs), the return never reaches equilibrium. There is no end state, as the loop reclaims the performance, ensuring no beginning or end:

> The sole fundamental fact, however, is that it [the world] does not aim at a final state; and every philosophy and scientific hypothesis (e.g. mechanistic theory) which necessitates such a final state is refuted by this fundamental fact. (Nietzsche, 1901, p.377)

Let's take the pyramid, and imagine treating it as the loop. Sisyphus like, we must include a re-build. Each time the work reaches its conclusion (total decay) the whole process would be repeated. Could this take us closer to Nietzsche's 'eternal return', could we eventually observe the repeat of the exact sequence of decay?

> In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. (Nietzsche, 1901, p.549)

The referent would then mirror the action presented by the video signifier; but there would still be a difference. The time-lapse only has the power to repeat a single sequence of the action. While the rebuild would present a different sequence of decay each time, until over a vast timescale a repeat could be realised.

The actual timescales found within the referent and the signifier are thus proved to be even more separated. To wait for the recurrence of the exact sequence of decay (that is each unit collapsing in an identical order and timescale) could take an unthinkable length of time.

> "Duration 'in vain' without end or aim is the most paralyzing idea...." (Nietzsche, 1901, p.35)

Through anticipation of a repeat, the comparison gap between the referent and the signifier become stretched over eternity; still linked by material, artefact and process, but operating within multiple (and very different) timescales.

AUTHORSHIP

There is yet another repetition to consider in this work in the form of the viewer. Watching the time-lapse animation *Spoons*, the viewer will observe the record of the decay (the time-lapse movie), which itself logs the random decay of the repeated action or process originally applied to the raw materials. This is repetition working in a physical, intellectual and time based manner, with the viewer also becoming implicated in the chain of events:

> 'To be sure, you are the author of the text you read here, that can be said, but you remain within an absolute heteronomy. You are responsible for the other, who makes you responsible. Who will have obligated you. [...] [T]here is nothing you can do about it, and unwittingly you will have read what will have made only possible, from out of the Other, what is happening at this very moment.' (Derrida, 1991, p.25)

In Derrida's framework, authorship is lost through reception, deferred through 'trace' to the 'Other', acting only within the present moment. Derrida claims that through authorial responsibility there is a shift in form, brought about through repetition, which changes concepts in time.

Viewed in this way, repetition is itself helping to shift meaning, claiming authorship without possession and shifting context through trace. Its authorship is not dictatorial, it has no sense of its own responsibility, it is just generative, working in all directions at all times, multiplying and shifting, amplifying and muting without altering the original object.

CONCLUSION

The repetition, as observed through the labourworks, demonstrated some ability to raise questions through the art object. Especially when observed from the philosophical standpoint of different theories of repetition: from Kierkegaard's observations about the failure of repetition, Nietzsche's eternal return, to the postmodern theories surrounding Baudrillard's simulacra or Derridian concepts of shifting authorships. Questions relating to time, authorship and erasure became particularly prevalent when viewed through the medium of the time-lapse animations.

The repetitive labour used to make the work, often became temporally condensed and somewhat inaccessible within the final object. Digital media helped make the process accessible by capturing moments and re-presenting them sequentially. Opening up the process for deeper consideration.

A most important aspect of reading the repetition within the labourworks, is the necessity to engage visually and conceptually with the 'process'. Process became the critical tool to connect with the wider concepts that repetition can present to us.

REFERENCES

Armstrong, K. (2002). *Crisis and Repetition: Essays on Art and Culture*. Michigan State University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1981). *Simulacra and Simulations*. In: Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings. M. Poster. Stanford, Stanford University Press (1988)

Bochner, M. Quoted in New Art in the60s and 70s: Redefining Reality. Rorimer, A. London, Thames & Hudson: (2001).

Derrida, J. (1991). *At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am*. Re-reading Levinas. Continuum International Publishing Group

Heidegger, M. (1927) *Being and Time*. London, Blackwell Publishing Translated by Macquarrie, J & Robinson, E. Edition (1962).

Kierkegaard, S. (1843). *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology by Constantin Constantius*. In: SØren Kierkegaard; Kierkegaard's Writings. (1983) Ed. Edna H. Hong, Howard V. Hong, Doubleday. Vol. 6.

Nancy, J.-L. (2006). *The Technique of the Present: On On Kawara*. in: Multiple Arts: The Muse II. Sparkes, S. Stanford University Press. California

Nietzsche, F. W. (1901) *The Will to Power*, Vintage Books edition. (1968).

Rauschenberg, R. (1976). Robert Rauschenberg: Exhibition Catologue. Washington, Smithsonian Institution