

Time. Duration. Perception. Memory. Remembrance. Continuity. Repetition. Habit. Boredom. Escapism. Myth.



Photo: Felix van de Vorst, printed by Ksenia Galiaeva, 2006

Introduction

This essay started out as a plan for a lecture about my own work. To keep it entertaining for myself as well as for others, I tried to organize my thoughts, the key notions and the loose threads, the work process and influences, the problems and fascinations – to create a context I could, at least temporarily, place myself in. Because the already existing information on the subjects, in art works and theory, seems endless, I had to limit myself to those examples I am best and longest acquainted with. Those are Pierre Bonnard, David Hockney (not only because of their dachshunds), Jean-Luc Mylayne, Henri Bergson, Joseph Brodsky and Vladimir Nabokov. I've been using them for tips regarding both the practical side and the content of my work. They are my support in an attempt to picture the time flow, changing memory; to find metaphors in small occurrences of everyday life; to make 'feel good' pictures to counterbalance my fears; and so to create my own personal myths. The inventory is by no means complete or definite, it is also very subjective. I am aware that I pick and adapt quotes and pictures from my artistic and literary examples to serve my own means. My apologies if 'the portraits' of those mentioned seem one-sided and incomplete.

My work

For twelve years I have been making colour photos of my parents, mostly in the modest but paradisiacal surroundings of our Russian summerhouse. The situations are not staged but completely spontaneous. The use of only a certain kind of situation, often comic and absurd, turns my models into fictional characters. Despite, or maybe because of my good knowledge of this family micro

cosmos, I am continuously able to project my ideas and interests onto this subject. My actual distance from it (I live in the Netherlands) gives me space for interpretation.

Though not an optimist myself, I use mostly 'feel good moments' to make a photo. This can be seen as a form of escapism, but for me it is a way to deal with my fears of time, death and human nature (fears familiar to everybody). The idea of life passing so quickly gives me a panicky feeling, but at the same time functions as an engine behind my actions. My photos are, in fact, *vanitas*, though without the usual symbols.

My main topics are the flow of time, continuity and memory. I am interested in the *time duration* theory of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, where duration, 'inner time', is the opposite of measurable time. Duration as a continuous flow of ageing combined with the continuous growth of memory of a person's past, with no dividing line between the past and the present. Both duration and memory are deeply embedded in perception.

I am fascinated by the way memories change through repetition; how family stories can grow to mythical proportions, how their colour and meaning changes through time and personal experience, and how one can influence and steer memory in different directions. The challenge in photography is to get past the restrictions of the medium – a 'decisive moment' seen in 'monocular' perspective. I want to give my work a feeling of snail-like time flow and continuity, and build up a myth that is based on reality but has its own time structure.

Problems

How does one make an artwork about time? Of course, one can always put the symbolic ingredients like clocks, skulls and decaying fruit in the picture. Those props illustrate time, but the sensation of time they cannot offer. How does one make an art work with time organically integrated into a static image, so it can be felt by the viewer? How can one draw the viewer in and keep him there, at least for a while – long enough to offer a chance for reflection and space for personal associations? If observation and work time are already automatically embedded in a painting, how can one achieve it in a photo, which takes less than a second to make and maybe 30 seconds to take in, a photo which is by definition a captured and framed moment?

According to Roland Barthes, 'photography – in contrast with painting – is not a picture of living reality, but merely an arrangement of dead signs. It is writing, presenting itself as a picture.'¹

A photo is flat and has a smooth surface, it misses the three-dimensionality of an object; it has no texture – nothing to make the sliding gaze stumble and pause; it can only rely on the impact of the image. The mechanics of a camera and the fixed perspective forced by optics suggest the presence of a neutral observer. A photo is made in an instant, the time put into the making of an image is minimal; it misses continuity or repeated looking, and so it leaves little space for the workings of subjective perception and memory.

The practical part

Texture and the artist's hand

In between making photos I paint and draw. I do this for several reasons: to not waste the technical skills I learned in art school (Soviet style); to not become too much of a photographer and get used to

¹ Boris Groys, *Life without Shadows*, an essay on Jeff Wall

the way people and things look in a photo; because I like doing it and hope that someday it will grow to the same independent level as my photography. I have also made copies of other paintings, both in assignment and to learn from. One of the difficult things to copy in a painting was always the rhythm and build up of brush strokes – the artist's handwriting. Familiar to every forger, one has to start with practising the moves in the air to get it right. There is a difference between hand movements and arm movements, depending on the size of a painting. Motorics can have a lot of charm and even offer some psychological insight.

Both Rembrandt and Bonnard were not painters of sharp corners. Bonnard's nervous marks are the opposite of Picasso's or Matisse's self-assured - one more than the other - lines. Hockney can pull off both curves and sharp corners very nicely, which made him a good Pop artist. The traced look that Hockney found in the lines of Ingres' portraits sent him off into the Camera Lucida adventure, resulting into a theory about the use of optics in Renaissance painting².

The way the hand moves influences the build up and texture of the painting. The pure physicality of it is a sign of work being done, whether it is a miniature or can be counted in square meters. Time and evolution are present in the hours of labour.

The best a photo has to offer in terms of texture is the grain (or pixel), both in the negative and the photo paper. Glossy paper is far too slippery and reflective for my aims.

To see manual labour in photography is not so easy. Sometimes I have a problem taking myself seriously as an artist for just that reason – not enough hours of physical work (proletarian ethics). I still think there is more physical presence in an analogue print as opposed to a digital print, but maybe that's just a romantic notion. I like printing photos. The time spent in the darkroom always turns out to be fruitful: the choices first made are not always the right ones, I can experiment with colours and sizes. Once I get into the flow of printing, the work seems to get a natural logic of its own, which can be similar to the trance-like state of painting, between consciousness, handiness and intuition. It is important to 'recognize and exploit the surprises that come from the material during the course of execution', says Bonnard. (The smell of chemicals is as addictive as the smell of turpentine.)

Can this be seen in a photo? I don't know, but I hope so.

Luckily what can be noticed in both (good) paintings and photographs – the masterpieces – is the accumulated knowledge and the conscious use of the medium, the craft and professionalism; the self-evident and natural quality of an art work that has the logic of a rock that has always been there, and that sometimes can be mistaken for simplicity. The goal of every (good) artist.

(From all this it can be deduced that I would have preferred to be a painter – I don't, not anymore; but I think I can learn from a medium that has been around much longer than photography, and has defined our perception of art.)

The suggestion of movement



Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism Of A Dog On Leash*, 1912

² David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge*, 2006

The most common tactics in photography to suggest the passing of time and the existence of the world outside the frame, is to depict any kind of action: the suggestion of movement – unsharpness; loose body part or objects supposedly getting in and out the frame (photography influencing painting, this time); any activities of nature – wind, rain or bursting volcanoes, waves and ripples, even Newton’s apple. A suggestion of a conversation, a stilled dialogue between the characters or an active one between a character and the viewer also does the job.

The composition and the picture plane offer the spectator a simulation of space, which is also time. The basics of any image making.

Sequences

‘There are “three basic ways of seeing the world – or of recreating it”. The first is the *cinematographic* principle, which ‘employs a sequence of separately insignificant differences to produce the effect of motion or animation in object seen’ (Muybridge). The second is the *montage* principle, which employs a succession of large contrasts to reproduce the disparity and contradiction that interrupt the continuity of experience (Sergey Eisenstein). The third is in some way the richest, and its development is one of Proust’s great achievements: ‘the *stereoscopic* principal abandons the portrayal of motion in order to establish a form of arrest which resists time. It selects a few images or impressions sufficiently different from one another not to give the effect of continuous motion, and sufficiently related to be linked in a discernible pattern. This stereoscopic principle allows our binocular (or multiocular) vision of mind to hold contradictory aspects of things in the steady perspective of recognition, or belief in time.’

Lawrence Weschler on Roger Shattuck’s *Proust’s Binoculars, True to life*, 2008



Ksenia Gالياeva, 2007-2009

Although my photos can be viewed separately, it is a combination of photos that makes them a work. Every two images placed next to each other imply that there could be a connection between them. The eye involuntarily searches for similarities and contrasts in those images. It is a natural human desire for narrative; being able to connect and interpret what you see is essential in trying to understand the world around you and your part in it.

The space in between the photos is as important as the pictures themselves, it allows the viewer to fill in the gaps to his/her own liking. Using one’s imagination is the key to a personal connection between the viewer and the art work. The connection can be quite intimate, and the interpretation very private. This feeling of owning a work is probably the reason why people want to buy art (and it could be a good investment, of course).

The space in between the photos also allows us to set the pace for story-telling, or to suggest it; to give us enough looking time and keep our concentration (one doesn't want people to get bored). The difference between putting a book or a presentation together lies in the way I could tell a story. A book asks for a story which is linear, the way that a film is linear, like an arrow pointing in one direction. For a presentation in an exhibition space I can construct a non-linear story, which has its own logic, but no clear beginning or ending. It offers the viewer more freedom to move around and is more similar to the way our perception and memory work. To put up a good story that is not rigid and still coherent is rather difficult.

David Hockney is foremost a painter, but he used photography to illustrate his investigations and theories concerning the shortcomings of photography in comparison with painting. While doing so he managed to produce some very nice photo works. His 'photo-joiners', made first with Polaroid grids and later developed into collages made with a 35mm camera, were an attempt to show a more human experience of looking – the quality he missed in photography.



David Hockney, *The Scrabble Game*, 1983

He finds his *The Scrabble Game* (1983) 'better than a movie', because it is not forced to be a linear story. 'I've been trying to figure out a way of telling stories in which the viewer can set his own pace, moving forward and back, in and out, at his own discretion', he says. Freedom for the viewer!



Jean-Luc Mylayne, *No. 507 février mars avril 2007*, *No. 507 février mars avril 2007*

Jean-Luc Mylayne, the bird photographer, also uses the multi-partite formats (diptychs, triptychs etc.) for his presentations. He has been photographing the same subjects for about 35 years now, each of his photos a unique print edited like a narrative. His 'strategic framing and sequencing of images' accentuates the 'inseparability of actor, time, action, place' and the observer. Making series for him is a way to 'commingle our activities of looking, reviewing, recalling and comparing – the way that time plays in our visual comprehension [perception – memory].'³

The nicest thing about reading about an artist I feel an affinity with, is finding good quotes that illustrate my own thoughts. Somebody has said it already, and better than I would, I always think.



Pierre Bonnard, *Nannies' Promenade. Frieze of Carriages*, 1895

Pierre Bonnard, 'Le Nabi Japonais', in his earlier work, made a different use of the rhythm of storytelling: the rhythm of the panels of a folding screen. The screen *Nannies' Promenade. Frieze of Carriages* (1895) is a good example of how a composition of four panels 'aspires to occupy the entire visual field of the spectator in real time'.⁴

The panels of Japanese folding screens, as well as those of altarpieces function as a three-dimensional story-board, dividing the story into chapters and giving the characters as much space as they deserve. Their size and object-like qualities invite the viewer (or the user and the worshipper) to move around in space, to make use of his/her own body. The story-board principle is also used in icons to illustrate key moments in the lives of saints, though with a more linear approach – comics without thought balloons.

Fixed perspective and the body of the viewer

According to David Hockney, the main problem of a photo is its fixed monocular perspective: the perspective of 'a frozen man' or 'a view of a paralyzed cyclop' as he calls it. This 'tunnel vision' is the result of the influence optics have on our perception of the world. 'Pictures influence pictures,' he says, 'it's difficult nowadays, in a world saturated with television and photographs and billboards and movies, to recall how radically new one-point perspective would have appeared to those first exposed to it.' After almost 600 hundred years of restriction and fixities of Renaissance one-point perspective we cannot help but think that this is what pictures are supposed to look like. 'European art looked out of the *window*' – Hockney again, meaning the rectangular edges in vision. I've heard Annie Leibovitz say, in a documentary made by her sister, that as a child, she spent a lot of time in

³ Ralph Rugoff on Jean-Luc Mylayne, *Tête d'Or*, 2009

⁴ Dita Amory, *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors*, 2009

her parents' car, looking out of the window. She thought that seeing the world through a frame might have influenced her decision to become a photographer.

Hockney has tried to thaw his 'frozen man', using examples of Cubism (repeated looking and circling around the subject), Chinese scrolls (the walking space), and Medieval painting, Jan van Eyck in particular (your eye focuses on what you are looking at; the sense of being close to every detail). Of course, he was not the first to revolt against the restrictions of one-point perspective. With the introduction of Kodak's 'little Brunelleschi box' (Kirk Varnedoe) in 1888 many artists rebelled against its enforced restrictions and took up the challenge to represent a 'truer', more natural experience of looking.



David Hockney, *Mother, Bradford Yorkshire*, 1982

Hockney's first photo-joiners, especially the Polaroid grids, are a direct homage to Cubism: 'if there are three noses, this is not because the face has three noses, or the nose has three aspects, but rather because it has been seen three times'. 'Repeated looking and remembering what you see' seems to be literally translated into his photo collages; he obviously had to keep very good track of the photos already taken not to end up with a picture full of gaps.



David Hockney, *Walking in the Zen Garden*, 1983

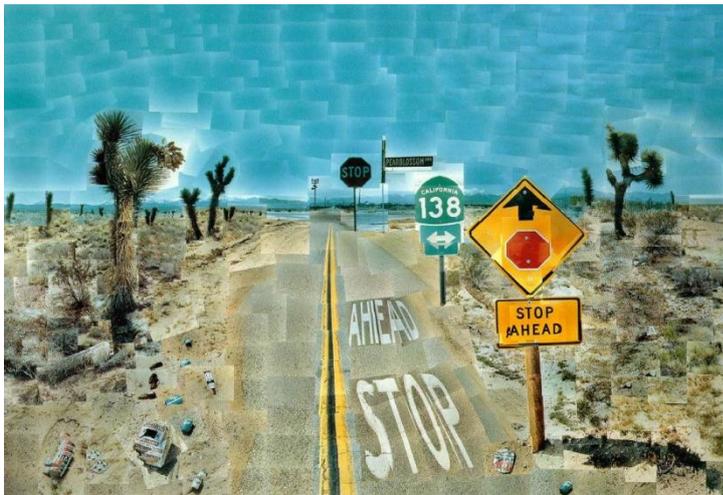
'Chinese painting is an art of time as well as space. This was implied in the arrangement of the group by movement motif through intervals; in the extended relationship of groups, movement in time became the

most memorable characteristic of Chinese design. [...] These early principles were later transformed and enriched until they reached their fulfilment in the supreme creation of Chinese genius – the landscape scroll. A scroll painting must be experienced in time like music or literature. [...] In the European tradition, the interest in measurable space destroyed the ‘continuous method’ of temporal sequence used in the Middle Ages and led to the fifteenth century invention of the fixed space of scientific perspective. When the Chinese were faced with the same problem of spatial depth in the T’ang period, they reworked the early principles of time and suggested a space through which one might wander and space which implied more space beyond the picture frame.’

George Rowley, *The Principles of Chinese Painting*, 1959

Instead of ‘looking out of the window’, Oriental art ‘looked out of doors’ – an invitation to step out into the open and wander about; to take a stroll inside the scroll. For his ‘Chinese’ works Hockney also made use of the reversed perspective to change the sense of space – things tend to get bigger when one gets closer.

David Hockney is a fanatical experimentalist. Looking through his works in a chronological order makes his process of finding a problem, looking for a solution and coming to a conclusion, very transparent and educative.

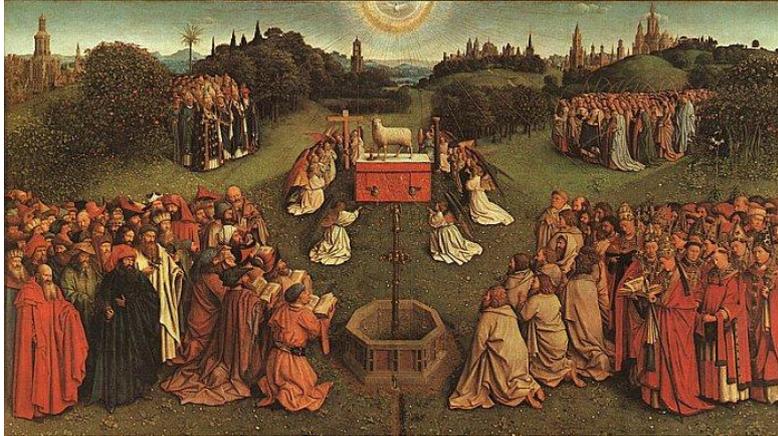


David Hockney, *Pearblossom Highway*, 1986



Paul Joyce, *Hockney photographing Pearblossom Highway*.

Though his first ‘joiners’ were more like an illustration of an idea, and made a fragmentary impression, the *Pearblossom Highway* was a culmination of his acquired knowledge and practice. The collage doesn’t give the impression of being assembled, the picture can be seen as a whole. To make the photos for the collage, Hockney had to walk around the scene for several hours, getting a close up of every detail and even using a ladder to get a frontal view of the stop sign. This impression of a complex space that gives a feeling of being close to every part of the picture (almost like the objects are ganging up on you), and offers an overview at the same time, has originated from the pre-optical use of perspective in the Middle Ages. Jan van Eyck’s *The Lamb of God* is its ancestor.



Jan van Eyck, *The Lamb of God*, 1432

The body of the viewer



Ksenia Gالياeva, 2010

I am the main character of my own pictorial narrative. My way of making photos is not that of a voyeur, but of an active participant. I want as many family members crowded in one picture as possible without organizing it beforehand – luckily there are now just the four of us, the dog included. I want my subjective experience of the surroundings and the interactions with my family to be visible and felt. Besides the occasional limbs finding their way into the frame, not always on purpose, I make use of the obviously subjective point of view, which is often a low one, because I don't get up from my sitting or lying position to have a better composition – laziness must be felt. Dachshund Titus, who is my spoiled stand-in while I am away, sometimes functions as my alter-ego. He knows that and doesn't appreciate it. The shared family humour, producing a direct emotion, also adds to the feeling of subjectivity and being a part of something. I have found out that the effects of a panorama camera – the curved line of the horizon resulting in an impression of a convex or concave space, with unsharp edges reminiscent of one's peripheral vision, and a feeling of being able to turn one's head looking from side to side – can also do the job.



Ksenia Galiaeva, 2010

'For something to be seen, it has to be looked at by somebody,' grumbles Hockney about how the optical perspective seems to take away the body of the viewer. 'You have a fixed point, you have no movement; in short you are not there, really. [...] True and real depiction should be an account of the experience of looking. In that sense it must deeply involve an observer whose body somehow has to be brought back in.'

Let's bring in the body.

Pierre Bonnard was one of the first to incorporate his own body, his unsteady, straying way of looking, his subjective perception coloured by memory, into his painting. Pierre Bonnard is my favourite artist.



Gisèle Freund, *Bonnard in his studio at Le Cannet*, 1946

After his Parisian Nabi period, Bonnard moved to the south of France to dedicate the rest of his life to painting his lifelong model and companion Marthe (chiefly preoccupied with bathing) in the interiors and scenery in and around the house. Although after his death he was put away as 'not a major artist' and a painter of domestic bourgeois happiness, Bonnard's reputation has recently been reviewed and honoured with a lot of attention. Connections have been made between his approach to painting and that of American Abstract Expressionism (Rothko – the shimmering and the heightened moment; Pollock – the 'all-overness' of space); contemporary painters like Eric Fischl and Peter Doig admit being fans. From a painter of pleasant homely scenes in pastel colours fit for hotel room decoration, Bonnard has been transformed into a visionary, a reputation shift which he fully deserves. 'I should like to arrive in front of the young painters of the year 2000 on the wings of a butterfly', he said in 1943, and did it.

'The eye of the painter gives to object a human value and reproduces things as the human eye sees them.
And this vision is variable.
And this vision is mobile.'
Pierre Bonnard



Pierre Bonnard, *Coin de Table*, 1935

The space in Bonnard's shimmering, glowing paintings works rather disorientating. It doesn't follow the rules of perspective. The crockery and the fruit in his still lifes look more like shape-shifters than grounded objects – everything is ready to come tumbling down at the slightest push and metamorphose. Marthe's face always remains unclear, even in the photos Bonnard made of her. This elusive quality makes every look at his paintings (even reproductions) a new experience. In real life they are even more hallucinogenic. You can say you know Bonnard's paintings, but you cannot say you know one of his paintings very well – the chaos of brush strokes undermines any attempt of conscious comprehension. I've been reading up on Bonnard during the last years and one would think this would help, but his work stays as slippery and intangible as ever. Quite a miracle. As the poet Tyutchev said about Russia: 'Incomprehensible to the mind, [...] one can only believe in it'. Believe your own eyes, in this case.

Timothy Hyman, himself a painter, has devoted a chapter of his book on Bonnard on the topic of 'A New Space for the Self'. The subchapters' titles are rather evocative: 'Let it be felt that the painter was there' (Bonnard) is about 'the space extending between the self and the world'; 'The Disappearing Self' – on self-portraits; 'Bonnard as *Selbst-Kunst*' – the self as a dramatized persona.

'If the Impressionists had aspired to remove the ego from perception, Bonnard puts it back again, registering the place of the spectator – Bonnard's own place – with a subjective emphasis new to painting. He employed the approximate qualities of Impressionist mark-making to stress subjectivity; the blur of Impressionism, to suggest the indistinctness of memory. Using Impressionist language for its own ends, for what Proust would call 'the search for lost time', Bonnard was reversing Impressionism, standing it on its head. [...]

His vision is not about 'capturing' or 'imprisoning' the object of his gaze. [...] The result is the seeing that attempts to lose itself in the other [...] by an act of submission. [...]

Bonnard also is forced to observe himself, as a consciousness which is inescapable and almost imprisoning; as that which *surrounds* his vision of the world. [...] When he employs curved space, this space must wrap itself around some core, must proceed from some central consciousness. The disadvantage of wide-angle or 'fish-eye' seeing in painting is that it will tend to present unstable forms, more or less comical in their distortion, and thus be destructive of dignity, gravitas, and monumentality. [...]

Through the subjectivity of Bonnard's wide-open space we are shocked out of the narrowness of our normal seeing, overwhelmed anew by the power and beauty of the visible.'

This feeling of a 'wide-open space' is a result of Bonnard's attempt to picture the instability of the gaze and the confusing effect of the peripheral vision. It is a democratic approach to composition – there are no main objects or objects that are supposed to attract less attention. Through the initial confusion and the chaos of colour they materialize one by one and take their place in the picture if you give them enough time. David Sylvester compared it to 'waking up in the morning, when we see a vague form in front of us that gradually acquires more and more substance, more clarity of definition and more overtones of meaning.' Another remarkable phrase, by Yve-Alain Bois, was about Bonnard's 'floating attention alighting on visual hiccups, [...] because they seemed to him to be the best approximation of images as the memory stores and restores them: fragmentary, discontinuous, with ill-defined edges, of irregular clarity'.

'In the previously uncharted territory of peripheral vision Bonnard discovered strange flattening, wobbles, shifts of angle as well as of colour, and darkening of tone, penumbral adventures and metamorphoses which liberated him from visual convention. It was as though the central area of fact were surrounded by much less predictable, almost fabulous, margins; where imagination and reverie and memory could be asserted as a heightened reality, in "impossible" intensities of colour.'
Timothy Hyman

Bonnard's experience with the seemingly decorative flat forms and silhouettes of his Nabi period must have helped him to recognize the accumulation of volume that an object gains on a closer look. 'The vision of distant things is a flat vision. It is the near planes which give the idea of the cosmos as the human eye sees it, of a universe that is rolling, or convex, or concave.' (Timothy Hyman)



Pierre Bonnard, *The Studio with Mimosa*, 1939-46

Back to photography. Mylayne uses self-made multi-focal lenses that ensure the disorientating effect reminiscent of unsharp peripheral fields, a mechanical simulation of the human gaze. Hockney lets the edges of his photo-joiners 'leak out' on purpose as a suggestion of the world continuing outside the frame.

The philosophical part

Perception, seeing with memory

'A drawing of a tree shows not the tree but a tree being looked at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree being looked at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second; it also involves, derives from, and refers back to much previous experience of looking. Within the instant of the sight of the tree is established a life experience. This is how the act of drawing refuses the process of disappearances and proposes the simultaneity of a multitude of moments.'

John Berger, *Drawn to the Moment*, 1981

From the swimming pools and interiors of California, David Hockney has recently returned to East Yorkshire to paint the familiar scenery of his childhood. He remarks that painting the same landscape through the seasonal changes is very educative: once you get to know the bare shapes of the winter trees, you recognize those shapes under the summer leaves, which makes it easier to paint them. 'You keep seeing more and more. Because you see with memory. [...] A knowledge which in turn, preserved in memory, can't help but inform how you see the tree now.'

The changes and similarities of things are conceivable only by comparison – what they were and what has become of them. With people I know well (just as with Hockney's trees), especially if I see them only once in a while, I am surprised, or shocked, by the changes that have occurred, the signs of passing time; only to be comforted, a bit later, by the recognition of their unchangeable core, their sameness to the image I have of them, by then already slightly adjusted. The history of things, surroundings, relationships adds to my understanding and interpretation of them, gives them the three-dimensionality in time as well as in space. Knowing one's subject makes it possible to have a glimpse of the future, to predict the possibility of an action or development, to be ready for a reaction. 'You've really got to prepare if you are going to be spontaneous.' (Hockney)

Each work of Jean-Luc Mylayne is a result of his lifelong interest in, and observation of bird behaviour, made by a 'cross between [an] ornithologist and [a] film director' (Ralph Rugoff). Though the composition of each photo is carefully constructed, it always features one unpredictable element – a bird. Mylayne titles his works with the amount of months spent on the preparation of them, the time of getting acquainted with a bird's habits – in fact, turning it into his collaborator – and setting up a decor for the action. Though his works suggest a good eye for coincidence, photographer's luck, they are only made possible by his ability to anticipate situations, an ability based on his knowledge and his patient observance; by the 'present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation'. (Thierry Raspail)



Jean-Luc Mylayne, *PO – 32, Mars – Avril 2001*

Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941), a French philosopher whose theory on memory and 'time duration' influenced his relative Marcel Proust and the Nabi, distinguishes between two forms of memory. He uses the metaphor of a lesson learnt by heart by repeated reading to illustrate the two memories of which the one *imagines* and the other *repeats*:

'I study a lesson, and in order to learn it by heart I read it a first time, accentuating every line; then I repeat it a certain number of times. At each repetition there is a progress; the words are more and more linked together and at last make a continuous whole. When that moment comes, it is said that I know my lesson by heart, that it is imprinted on my memory.

I consider now how the lesson has been learned, and picture to myself the successive phases of the process. Each successive reading then recurs to me with its own individuality; I can see it again with the circumstances which attended it and still form its setting. It is distinguished from those which preceded or followed it by the place which it occupied in time; in short, each reading stands out in my mind as a definite event in my history. [...]

In fact, the lesson once learned bears upon it no mark which betrays its origin and classes it in the past; it is part of my present, exactly like my habit of walking or of writing; it is lived and acted, rather than represented: I might believe it innate, if I did not choose to recall at the same time, as so many representations, the successive readings by means of which I learned it. Therefore, these representations are independent of it, and, just as they preceded the lesson as I now possess and know it, so the lesson once learned can do without them.

Following to the end this fundamental distinction, we are confronted by two different memories theoretically independent. The first records, in the form of memory-images, all the events of our daily life as they occur in time. [...] This consciousness of the whole past of efforts stored up in the present is indeed also a memory, but a memory profoundly different from the first, always bent upon action, seated in the present and looking only onto the future.'



Henri Bergson

Bonnard's attempt in his painting to combine the confusing immediate impression with the comforting remembrance of repeated looking, is a more emotional example of memories at work than Bergson's description of the lessons. 'I'm trying to do what I have never done, give the impression one has on entering a room: one sees everything and at the same time nothing.' Bonnard preferred not to work directly from the motif, but relied only on his quick pencil sketches and his memory, so as not to fall under the spell of the forceful visibility of things.

'Through seduction, or the first idea, the painter attains the universal. It is seduction which determines the choice of motif and corresponds directly to the painting. If this seduction, this initial idea fades away, all that remains is the motif, the object that invades and dominates the painter. From that time on, he no longer produces his own painting. With some painters – such as Titian – the seduction is so powerful that it never leaves them, even if they remain in direct contact with the object for a long time. But as for me, I'm very weak, it's hard for me to control myself in front of the object.'

Pierre Bonnard

What a brave thing to do: to try to control the process of painting through the build up of layers of ever-changing recollections of one memorable impression. Readjusting the memory on canvas must have required a lot of patience and concentration; it needed self-assurance but was based on uncertainty. No wonder that Bonnard sometimes spent several years on one painting, and reworked

them even after they were sold – the memory is never finished. This also explains the confusing and elusive qualities of his work: it is their point to make a doubting and unsure impression and at the same time shock with their fullness of luminosity and colour.

Knowing your subjects

‘...we seize, in the act of perception, something which outruns the perception itself [...]. Now bring back consciousness, and with it the exigencies of life: at long, very long, intervals, and by as many leaps over enormous periods of the inner history of things, quasi-instantaneous views will be taken, views that are bound to be pictorial, and of which the more vivid colours will condense an infinity of elementary repetitions and changes.’

Henri Bergson

It is my firm belief that to be able to work productively, to allow uncertainty, doubt and weakness in the process as constructive ingredients, one needs some steady ground to stand on. Habits, daily automatisms, routines – all those comfortable familiarities can clear the space for the adventures of thinking, just like a good night’s sleep. ‘The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention,’ said Søren Kierkegaard, probably lying under a blanket with a cup of tea. Exchange a blanket for a plaid, and you have Marcel Proust.

Bonnard the country squire used the same motifs for his paintings for over 50 years: ‘I find it very difficult even to introduce a new object into my still lifes. [...] I haven’t lived with it long enough to paint it.’

‘As he moved around the house, Bonnard’s heightened moments – or ecstasies – were often set off by chance groupings of objects’, writes Timothy Hyman. Those heightened moments are also moments of instant and intuitive recognition of a setting that has the ingredients needed to become a metaphor.

Over the years, objects gain on personality and acquire characteristic traits based on their stories, projected onto them by their owners. The micro cosmos of familiar surroundings is, using Bergson’s words, a lesson learned better and better by repetition, where the repetition is not a circular but a spiral movement. It offers a firm ground to recognize, accept and initiate changes. According to Deleuze, it is a mistake to think that ‘the work of the mind is carried out by the addition of elements (rather than by changes of level, genuine jumps, the reworking of systems).’

‘Memory is essentially difference and matter essentially repetition.’

Gilles Deleuze

Bergson: memory and ‘la duree’, attention to life

Once or twice a year I go to Russia to see my parents. Year after year I make photos of the same people in the same surroundings. I never have a work plan, I can only hope that it will go well, and every time it does, I am surprised. How can I have enough sameness and continuity and yet not repeat myself, not fall into the trap of tricks that seem to work? I can only rely on the natural evolution of things and my intuition.

To be able to make photos I have to be sure that it is not only the visual aesthetic qualities, or the so familiar but already exotic Russianness that I fall for. I have to get used to the role of being again the child of my parents, which I unlearn, or seem to forget during my grown-up life in the Netherlands. To get comfortable with the passivity of the role of daughter and photographer (waiting for the ‘heightened moments’ to present themselves, like a spider in a hammock) I need at least a couple of weeks of acclimatization. Those weeks are also necessary to get in sync with the different time flow. For time does seem to pass in a different manner over there: the days seem to stretch and

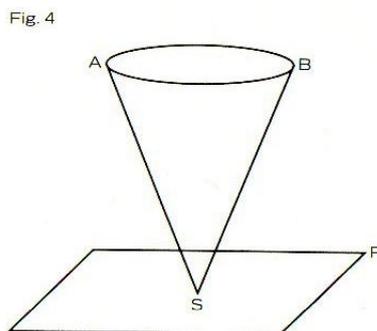
yet nothing happens; several hours can feel like a whole day, and today can feel like it's yesterday all over again.

Henri Bergson introduced the term *la durée*, the 'inner time': 'The duration lived by our consciousness is a duration with its own determined rhythm, a duration very different from the time of the physicist.' This psychological duration, the personal fluctuating rhythm of time flow compresses the multitude of moments of the past gliding into the future. Our subjective duration is but one among the infinity of other possible durations, which sometimes can partly overlap and seem synchronized. In duration, immediate perception coexists with memory, as the past coexists with the present.

'In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. Memory, inseparable in practice from perception, imports past into present, contracts into a single intuition many moments of duration. [...] It is memory [...] that lends to perception its subjective character. [...] Memory, a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future.'

Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire*, 1896

To illustrate the mechanisms of duration, Bergson uses a drawing of a cone, a pyramid standing upon its apex:



a cone SAB – the totality of the recollection accumulated in my memory; the base AB, situated in the past, remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.

The summit S is also a point where the past adapts itself to the present: 'the recollection must become actualized, it rotates to present itself from the most useful side.' (Deleuze) The recollection doesn't become actualized without being adapted to the requirements of the present; it becomes something of the present. 'A fundamental position of time and also the most profound paradox of memory: the past is 'contemporaneous' with the present that is *has been* [when we think of it as existing, it is already past – K.G.]' (Deleuze). It is the point of our 'attention to life', with 'the greater or lesser tension of duration, which expresses, at bottom, the greater or lesser intensity of life'.

(Bergson)

The possible and the virtual

Bergson, and after him Gilles Deleuze, describes the difference between the possible and the virtual as follows: The expected possibility can have two outcomes – it either 'passes' into the real, and the real is supposed to resemble it, or it ceases to exist if not realized (leaving us with a feeling of disappointment or relief). The problems of the possible (like those of disorder) lie in the particular psychological motives for the operations, 'such as when a being does not correspond to our expectation and we grasp it purely as a lack, the absence of what interests us.' The virtual, on the

other hand, already possesses (its own) reality; it does not have to be realized, but rather actualized, and in order to be actualized, it 'must create its own lines of actualization in positive acts. [...] Evolution takes place from the virtual to actual. Evolution is actualization, actualization is creation.'

As I understand it, the more rigid yes-or-no logic of a possibility – 'ready-made, preformed, pre-existent to itself' (Deleuze) – is the domain of consciousness, whereas the multiplicities of the virtual are that of intuition. What else is the actualized virtual but Bonnard's and Bergson's 'attention to life' and 'heightened moments', the *internal* quality of chance and coincidence, which requires a certain state of openness and even braveness to be recognized. 'Bonnard associated the first conception of each picture with a sudden involuntary heightening of experience: 'the emotion surges up: the shock is instantaneous, often unforeseen'. A note of 1936 reads: 'Consciousness. The shock of feeling and of memory.' Such moments entail a double motion: outwards, towards the scene or object, which one suddenly perceives as if for the first time; yet also inward, in a 'coming to oneself, a rediscovery of the fullness of being.' (Timothy Hyman).

'The interest of the living beings lies in discovering in the present situation that which resembles a former situation, and then in placing alongside of that present situation what preceded and followed the previous one, in order to profit by past experience. Those of resemblance and contiguity are therefore at first the associations that have a vital utility.'

Henri Bergson

Rotated and actualized recollections, presenting themselves 'the sunny side up', are therefore responsible for created associations and recognition of coincidence.

'There seems to be a hidden message in the coincidence. Is the coincidence merely a coincidence? Or has the coincidence been arranged? Elements of this supernatural innuendo emerge repeatedly in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. General Kuropatkin is showing the young Nabokov tricks with matches on a sofa, when he is summoned away: "the loose matches jumping up on the divan as his weight left it." Fifteen years later, the disguised, fugitive general asks Nabokov's father for a light. [...] Nabokov says the true purpose of autobiography is "the following of such thematic designs through one's life". [...]

The pleasure of memory is the pleasure we experience when we read a good simile – the pleasure of difference between the two things being compared, the pleasure we take in the justice of the comparison and the sensation of comprehension, [...] "the constant readiness to discern the halo round the frying pan or the likeness between a weeping-willow and a Skye terrier". That simile from Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a clue to the true nature of memory's mechanism.

Memory is like metaphor in its operations.'

Craig Raine, *Look back in wonder* (The Guardian, Saturday 5 January 2008)

A short digression: a plea for messy photography



Ksenia Galiaeva, 2007

Now that I think about it, the perception used for drawing is as different from the 'real life' perception, as the one used for making photos.

When I was drawing a portrait of my father, I was surprised by the character and the shape of his nose. The nose was what I started the drawing with, and seeing its form – the line – alone on paper, made me think that I got it wrong; it was not my father's nose. After I went on with the drawing (I was planning to redo the nose later, when his whole head would have a shape, thinking it would help me to get the line and the proportions right), I realized that the nose, combined with the other parts of his face, was not so wrong after all – I could recognize my father in the drawing. Am I not observant? Do I take my father's face for granted, have I never looked at it well enough? I actually felt guilty of inattention. But it is not so that I am not able to recognize my father or that I forget his face. In drawing or painting from nature ('Realism') the clue lies in the translation of the three-dimensional into a flat form or an outline, and in the abstraction of details. To get a grip on the complexities of form, volume, colour etc. one must dissect into pieces what one sees, take the parts out of their context one by one to make the representation possible, and put them back together in the process, as in a puzzle. Skill is what makes the puzzle pieces fit. While working, one makes a lot of choices: which details to use and which to leave out. As to shapes, when drawing a chair, one might draw the legs of the chair or the space in-between the legs of the chair – as long as the shape is correct, it will end up looking like a chair. Drawing the rest space instead of an object itself is not a common practise, though in fact it wouldn't make much difference. The rest space is registered in perception as a distance between objects, but translated on a flat surface, it is an abstract shape, just as any other – a composite of a puzzle. That abstraction of shapes also occurs in photography, but only in the aftermath. 'Real' perception takes in the whole picture and can zoom in on the important details without losing the connection with the surroundings. In a drawing, the surroundings can easily be 'lost in translation', by choice or by their overwhelming fullness. The democratic camera frames and flattens both the forms and their rest spaces without distinguishing between the two. In depicting chaos (confusion of sight, the fullness of the senses) a photo often does a better, and quicker, job than a painting – through making choices and putting the puzzle pieces together it (the painting) betrays the organization skills necessary for the process, and a constructed chaos is not the same thing (unless you are a Bonnard).

Most of photography, trying to copy the selectiveness and balanced composition of a painting, acknowledges order as a positive thing, and a well arranged composition as a sign of professionalism. The result is often one of predictability, fulfilled expectations, and is killing for surprise, liveliness or a chance for a 'heightened moment'. That problem of composition echoes the problem of the possible ('extracted from the real as a sterile double' – Deleuze) as opposed to the virtual: 'In the idea of disorder there is already the idea of order, plus its negation, plus the motive for that negation (when we encounter an order that is not the one we expected).' (Deleuze)



Ksenia Gالياeva, 2006

Passivity, weakness and boredom

Deleuze, following the steps of Bergson, offers a method of problem solving ('...so many misconceptions, so many lame answers to badly stated questions!' complains the man in the bowler hat), here in my own free arrangement:

1. Only intuition decides between the true and the false in the problems that are stated;
2. False problems are of two sorts: 'nonexistent problems' and 'badly stated questions';
3. A problem, when it is properly stated, tends to be solved on its own accord;
4. Therefore state problems and solve them in terms of time rather than of space.

It seems that by using intuition as a method one needs a certain amount of passivity and reverie, to 'transport ourselves to a wider plane of consciousness, to go away from action in the direction of dream' (Bergson); to let the problems dissolve rather than to try and solve them.

From my own experience, I've noticed that most of the solutions and the recognitions of patterns (loose threads interlacing) appear to me during the dreamy and vague moments of half-consciousness, when I am taking a shower, waking up or falling asleep, taking a walk. I can come across a needed clue while reading fiction or watching a film, sitting in a train or driving a car, or during any other activity that takes up all of my concentration, as long as I ignore the problem that needs to be solved. All those situations and activities are also typical examples of a fluctuating duration experience, time stretched or contracted, and completely different from the clock time.

This is why I am often late for appointments.

Looking up information on boredom, I came across a 'science blog' in which it was said that the bored brain is actually incredibly active, as it 'generates daydreams and engages in mental time travel. There seems to be an elaborate electrical conversation between the front and rear parts of the mind, and the brain is busy generating new connections between seemingly unrelated ideas. Instead of responding to the outside world, the cortex starts to explore its inner database, as it starts to think in a more relaxed manner'. (Jonah Lehrer). This is probably what the fertile and inventive Kierkegaard meant by limiting himself, or Deleuze by the reworking of systems – reshuffling the furniture for better interior design.

Joseph Brodsky compared the feeling of boredom with the psychological Sahara. Here are some excerpts from his *'In Praise of Boredom'* (adapted from Dartmouth College commencement address, Harper's Magazine, March 1995):

'Known under several aliases – anguish, ennui, tedium, the doldrums, humdrum, the blahs, apathy, listlessness, stolidity, lethargy, languor, etc. – boredom is a complex phenomenon and by and large a product of repetition. It would seem, then, that the best remedy against it would be constant inventiveness and originality. [...] Alas, life won't supply you with that option, for life's main medium is precisely repetition. [...]

When hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is: The sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface. The idea here is to exact a full look at the worst. The reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendour.

Boredom is your window on the properties of time that one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one's mental equilibrium. It is your window on time's infinity. Once this window opens, don't try to shut it; on the contrary, throw it wide open. For boredom speaks the language of time, and it teaches you the most valuable lesson of your life: the lesson of your utter insignificance. It is valuable to you, as well as to those you are to rub shoulders with. "You are finite," time tells you in the voice of boredom, "and whatever you do is, from my point of view, futile." As music to your ears, this, of course, may not count; yet the sense of futility, of the limited significance of even your best, most ardent actions, is better than the illusion of their consequences and the attendant self-aggrandizement.

For boredom is an invasion of time into your set of values. It puts your existence into its proper perspective, the net result of which is precision and humility. The former, it must be noted, breeds the latter. The more you learn about your own size, the more humble and the more compassionate you become to your likes, to the dust aswirl in a sunbeam or already immobile atop your table.

If it takes will-paralyzing boredom to bring your insignificance home, then hail the boredom. You are insignificant because you are finite. Yet infinity is not terribly lively, not terribly emotional. Your boredom, at least, tells you that much. And the more finite a thing is, the more it is charged with life, emotions, joy, fears, compassion.

What's good about boredom, about anguish and the sense of meaninglessness of your own, of everything else's existence, is that it is not a deception. Try to embrace, or let yourself be embraced by, boredom and anguish, which are larger than you anyhow. No doubt you'll find that bosom smothering, yet try to endure it as long as you can, and then some more. Above all, don't think you've goofed somewhere along the line, don't try to retrace your steps to correct the error. No, as W. H. Auden said, "Believe your pain." This awful bear hug is no mistake. Nothing that disturbs you ever is.'

For Kierkegaard, angst offered freedom and possibility: 'An individual becomes truly aware of their potential through the experience of anxiety.' Bonnard often complained of his lack of energy and willpower, but it is precisely this passivity, the feeling of being completely overcome by sensation, memory and doubt – dissed by Picasso as a 'potpourri of indecision' – that is the basis of Bonnard's painting and its main virtue.

I must add that a talent for passivity is not only an acquired but also a hereditary character trait, judging from my own experience as the sole offspring of a doubting father and a mother who is always set on immediate action ('Ksenia, you must!').

Here is another method of problem solving: to face one's fears and phobias (but without cultivating them), to use them, to turn them into a reason for action and creativity makes things bearable and even pleasurable. 'He who sings is not always happy' (Bonnard), but singing definitely helps.

Myths

It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world. [...] [but] the relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled. [...] Rather than *what* we see, these pictures ultimately address *how* we see – how we perceive ourselves in space and time, and by extension, how we inhabit the world and define our place in it.



Ksenia Gالياeva, 2006

Photos (family photos) influence and distort actual recollections; there is always an element of 'wishful thinking' in the choice of photos that are made and kept, a way to construct your life story and present yourself in a certain light, also to yourself. Matters of importance, of symbolic value, are being concentrated on, grow with every repeated looking or telling of the story. Also accidental occurrences (and snapshots) can grow in value and meaning through retelling and recollection. Trivial details acquire universal meaning; we often attribute symbolic qualities to them just because we can remember them, like keepsakes, or amulets – sensations, experiences, with lucid colours, intensified by imagination.

Karen Armstrong, in 'A Short History of Myths', writes that story-making enables us to place our lives in a larger setting, reveals 'an underlying pattern, that gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.' The main purpose of myths then, is also coming to terms with death, reflecting on death, colouring and shaping memory that contains a message about the future. 'A myth was an event which, in some sense, has happened once, but which also happened all the time. Because of our chronological view of history we have no word for such an occurrence, but mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality.' A story told ceases to be in the distant past and becomes a living reality – Bergson's cone. Mythology is often connected to rituals; I am fond of creating habits and traditions.

Family mythology plays an important role in the construction of a personal life story, it gives a sense of unity and continuity to events and coincidences. And the coherence of one's life story, the combination of facts and fiction (how we see, or want to see or present ourselves, and how we are seen, or want to be seen by others) helps us to come to terms with ourselves, accept and maybe even try to make the best of a given situation. Being able to live with myself, which seems to be part of my survival instinct, is the ground condition for not being unhappy, and the not-unhappiness stretched over a longer period of time equals a life story with a possible happy ending – a plan modest and ambitious at the same time.

I am building my own myths (with their own time structure) with things I want to keep and to remember. Every evening in the summer (or so we try), my mother, the dog and I take an evening walk along the lake – always the same route, always a different light. The rest of the year I look forward to those walks, for as long as we can do it, everything is going well.

The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has

*entered the room and bumps against the ceiling.
Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change,
nobody will ever die.*
V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

Ksenia Gالياeva
November 2010 – February 2011



Ksenia Gالياeva, 2010

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