wee hiccup

Ana Terry

Teresa Andrew, *Still Sleeping*, 30 Polaroids, 2006 (courtesy of artist, photograph by Ana Terry).

Excessive repetition has become a growing phenomenon in the visual arts. It manifests throughout a range of current art media including sculpture and video as engaged with by the artists whose work I curated for an exhibition called *wee hiccup* in 2006. In this article I discuss excessive repetition in their practice, either in their mode of making and/or in their representation of motifs. The conceptual premise for *wee hiccup* proposed that: 1) the simple reiteration of the same creates a surface pattern; 2) after a while this pattern becomes familiar to the viewer; 3) this very familiarity can allow the penetration of the surface through the active participation of the viewer; and 4) this participation can result in the identification of small differences within the pattern. (Some viewers may not complete this process and could walk away bored with the pattern which they perceive as mere surface.) This fourfold premise was particularly important in dispelling the stereotype of artists who work in repetitive ways as being either obsessive compulsive in their mode of making or as merely interested in surface effects in their representation of motifs. In order to understand and dismantle these stereotypes, this essay draws on concepts ranging across physiological, psychological and political experiences for a close reading of the works in contention.

In practice, the process of manufacturing the repetitive often requires intensely repetitive actions. On the surface, this process can appear obsessive and one could argue that the practitioner uses repetition as a cathartic rather than a conceptual framework. I suggest that the propensity to infer neurosis in the manufacturer (or artist) from the manifestation of repetition is the result of twentieth-century psychology theory, and that century's development

of systems of control and technology. References to repetition's propensity to malfunction are often reinforced through popular culture. For example, through the factory workers' exhaustive attempts to synchronise with the machine's repetition in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) or the robotic-like battalion of brooms fetching buckets of water oblivious to Mickey's summons to stop in Disney's version of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*[1] (1940), repetition not only runs riot but it is also unreasonable. In both films, the repetitive action generates anxiety and suggests the body's inability to sustain mechanical repetition and our fear of the automaton's mindless repetition, which may reach a crescendo of self-annihilation. Repetition and its association with neurosis and technology have been profoundly influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin.

Freud, in his analysis of trauma experienced by the soldiers returning home from WW1, defined this as a cluster named "the death drive". He suggested that the compulsive repetition of unpleasant experiences was a means to master trauma.[2] However, in repeating the event the victim "succumbs to statis, fixation, neurosis". He suggested that while repetition provides a sense of control this will entail a masking of inner chaos. Associations of trauma with repetition were also considered in Walter Benjamin's anthropology of industrialised humanity, which was conceived at the same time as Freud's seminal essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). Benjamin established links between technology and neurosis, suggesting that the repetitive actions of the soldier on the battlefield mimic the repetitive and automated actions of the factory worker.[3] Technology dictates that both the worker and the soldier perform repetitive actions with machinery. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin quotes Karl Marx: "In working with machines workers learn to coordinate their own 'movement to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton'." [4]

Mechanistic repetition in body actions not only suggests the treadmill of labour, but can lead to a realisation of our inability to sustain the repetitive action. Artist Teresa Andrew has a history of work in which she deploys the repetitive motif which marks the body both physically and psychically to the point of exhaustion. Her highly charged performances often reference systems of social control and even extreme fascist regimes through personal rituals such as hand washing. Her use of repetition acutely engages time; repeated visual phrases set up reverberations of recall; and simultaneously suggest the impossibility of complete retrieval. The body may attempt to repeat the action but this cannot be sustained nor can the action ever be accurately repeated. In all instances a narrative evolves from the repetition, suggesting that the body is capable of transformation and change through repetition. In her work for *wee hiccup* Andrew continued to explore these possibilities in a performative action she has coined "repeated stillness".

Still Sleeping is a series of Polaroid portraits of a young woman in various states of rest and restlessness. The work references Andy Warhol's use of the Polaroid, his six-hour film *Sleep* (1963), and his use of repetition in grid format. In this instance, however, Andrew varies each portrait rather than adopting Warhol's serial production in which he likened himself to a machine.[5] The format and content of her work at first appears to be a shift away from her history of real time performances, where she would use her own body to recall experiences through repetition.

In this instance, the 'recall' manifests through the use of the photograph. The Polaroid captures a unique moment in time that can never be revisited and reminds us of how the photograph functions as a *memento mori*.[6] Furthermore, the Polaroid, unlike a photographic print, is unrepeatable, a one-off. Her use of this twentieth-century technology also references Warhol's use of the medium – he likened the act of taking a Polaroid to "an event".[7] Singularly, each 'still' presents a moment in time. However, arranged as a series of still images cinemaphotography is denoted, suggesting a continuous series of frames in a film. A sequential time frame is implied, yet we know that the photographs could have been taken over any period of time. This variation in space and time displaces the repetition and control in Andrew's previous performance work. Furthermore, the artist cannot work autonomously as the work is a

collaborative effort between herself and her daughter. An evolutionary process is suggested by this shift in self-reliance while genetic replication is proposed. In a biological context, life forms evolve and change through repetition; they perpetuate to create difference rather than replicating similarity.

Contemporary French philosopher Gilles Deleuze discusses this possibility of difference through repetition using an evolutionary model.[8] In *Difference and Repetition* he likens "dynamic repetition" to genetic action. According to Deleuze nothing can recur exactly, as it entails an evolution of continuous becoming which breaks with the habitual.[9] Using a biological model, he proposes that the body comprehends something else that is lived and evolving, and can never be repeated identically. Thus a sense of differentiation in this becoming is facilitated by repetition. Henri Lefebvre also proposes "dynamic repetition" where he advocates a corporeal understanding of repetition rather than a purely cerebral understanding: "Is it not the body, in fact, since it preserves difference within repetition, that is also responsible for the emergence of the new from the repetitive? Analytical thought, by contrast, because it evacuates difference, is unable to grasp how repetition is able to secrete innovation."[10] This implies that in the purely cognitive apprehension of repetition, the repetitive motif is homogenised, ignoring variation.

One way of experiencing difference, however, is through a phenomenological approach which engages the body in relation to the works. Media theorist Laura Marks advocates a way of experiencing work which calls upon multiple senses through the visual. She suggests that the viewing subject is an entire body: "The engagement of the haptic viewer occurs not simply in psychic registers but in the sensorium."[11] Sculptor Emily Pauling activates this way of looking not only through the tactility of material employed and its form but through the internal spaces she constructs which compel us to project our psychic body into their life-sized enclaves.

As if in response to Andrew's work, Pauling constructed an upholstered wall that echoes the quilted surface of the bed pictured in *Sleeping Still.* The white vinyl wall spanned the entire width of the gallery and was painstakingly upholstered with over 1000 hand-covered buttons. Interrupting this sumptuous moulded surface an illuminated recess at eye level suggests a space for the prone body. The surface embodies repetitive processes but the artist cannot sustain such serial repetition. Each button and its pinched indentation are variable. In this work, Pauling attempts to simulate mechanical seriality but is thwarted by every reiteration as we register variations between each button and the pull of fabric. Claustrophobia speaks through this excessive process and through the funereal associations of the plush upholstery and the coffin-like interior of the recess. A glitch in the surface of repetitive productivity is both felt and seen in the work. The expectation of repetition's eternal consistency is undermined through variance and the implicit reference to our body's eventual breakdown and mortality.

One way in which the body may be represented to suggest sustained mechanical repetition is by way of the medium of virtual realms found through the digital. Rebecca Pilcher explores our apprehension of the body repeating itself in the video *kickn gainst the...* Through manipulation of video footage she extends the performer's ability beyond physical endurance in what she describes as "The frottage of repetition ...getting somewhere without moving".[12] In this video a man appears pinned up against the wall by some unknown force. The camera angle on the subject is disorientating. His body, as if in a fit, gyrates spasmodically. A loud electric guitar riff accompanies the erratic movement. Am I witnessing a seizure during sleep or a young man playing air guitar in the privacy of his room, eyes shut in concentration? My body is tilted towards the screen and a physical engagement with the work manifests. The beat is hypnotic; it is as if the pulse begins to synchronise with the body's own visceral repetitions.

Art theorist Rosalind Krauss discusses the possibility of a psycho-physiological engagement with the pulse of repetition in filmic work and suggests that these threaten comprehension of form and rationalisation. Referencing Freud's theory on repetition and trauma she suggests that the viewer contributes to the "fabric of the film", projecting her or his own biological

Emily Pauling, *Tight Sleep*, (detail) vinyl upholstered wall and recess, 478cm x 210cm, Blue Oyster Gallery Art Project Space, Dunedin, 2006 (courtesy of artist, photograph by Ana Terry).

impulses within the mechanism of the flicker of light emitted through the pattern of 24 frames per second. She suggests that the structural pattern of on/off offers a sense of stability; interruption to this pattern poses a constant threat and holds the viewer in a state of apprehension.[13]

The anticipation of disruption to the continuity of repetition is a device often deployed by artist Kim Pieters. Her work characteristically focuses on the shallow plane of the video projection while exploiting the viewer's expectation of repetition. This strategy threatens the diegetic flow we have come to expect from time-based media and we become aware of the projection's materiality rather than merely its narrative content. Visual strategies include focusing on the shallow space of the screen and the digital fibre of the image rather than plunging the viewer into deep cinematic space. The work invokes the notion of 'haptic visuality' which offers a method of sensory analysis not dependent upon literal touch.

In *highland* Pieters continues this engagement through repetition and the attention to the materiality of the surface. The pulse of an irrigation pump arcs rhythmically across the screen mimicking the body's internal rhythms, the surge of blood or expulsion of fluid. Strangely, a synchronicity begins to develop between my heartbeat and the external visual referent, but this feeling is tenuous. I am hypnotically drawn into the pulse only to be pushed back to the surface by an imposing form that fills the projection. Between the middle distance and the skin of the screen, Pieters exploits perceptual suspension between stasis and mobility; nothing happens on the threshold of something occurring. The interruption of flow suggests a glitch in the machine, in the very fabric of the video projection and draws attention to our bodily engagement with and against repetition.

While the hiccup in the repetition is obvious in Pieter's work, Andrew Last's jewellery piece more subtly indicates a glitch. He works with scientific

models which refer to nature's processes through actions such as duplication, folding and mirroring. His finely crafted works embody repetitive processes which include elaborate and detailed CAD drawings and specifically designed software tools for the task at hand. In this instance, Last constructed a jewellery piece called *Tensegrity* based on the sculptural works of Kenneth Snelson and Buckminster Fuller in the 1960s. A concentrated articulation of repetition is focused in the delicate and complex structure of a necklace. At first glance the pattern appears chaotic but through closer engagement one becomes aware of a rhythmic form of repetition through the interlocking of tiny silver rods.

This work could suggest industrial standardisation. However, the organic associations evoked through the movement create a sense of outward growth and evolution. Last's use of repetition suggests transformation through biological associations and is further enhanced in its installation. The piece is suspended at neck height in front of a series of mirrors reflecting both the object and the viewer's body from multiple angles and in manifold ways.

wee hiccup offered an alternative reading of the notion of repetition as difference rather than simply as a reiteration of the same. In the works exhibited, repetition allows forms to accrete and take ground both physically and metaphysically through proliferation and variation. Repeated visual phrases shift from the tautological to a series of phrases gaining variation and movement rather than grinding down onto one fixed point. Repetition can invoke bodily memory and experience, and in turn can stimulate reflection beyond mere surface apprehension of a motif or of process as obsessive-compulsively neurotic.

1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1779, translated by Edwin Zeydel, 1995. http://www.fln.vcu.edu/goethe/zauber_e3.html (last accessed on 16 May, 2007).

2 Sigmund Freud, *Freud Reader,* ed. P Gay, (W W Norton & Company, 1989), 599 - 601.

3 Lester Esther, "Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft", *Journal of Design History*, Vol.11 no. 1, (Spring 1998), 7.

4 Ibid., 7.

5 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the avant garde at the end of the century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 130 - 131.

6 According to Susan Sontag "All photographs are *memento mori.* To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." From Susan Sontag, *On Photography: In Plato's Cave* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). 15.

7 Warhol produced tens of thousands of Polaroids during the 1970s. He established a rigorous system of cataloguing these including editing and sequencing them into individual Holson Polaroid albums. http://www.parisvoice.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=36&Itemid=33 (last accessed on 27 August, 2007).

8 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 70. Accessed in article "Repetition and the Scientific model in Art" by Ellen K Levy, Spring, 1996, *Art Journal* at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_n1_v55/ai_18299598 (last accessed on 31 November 2006).

9 http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/deleuze.htm#SH4c (last accessed on 1 December 2006).

10 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 203.

11 Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensory Theory and Multi-Sensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 18.

12 Rebecca Pilcher, "wee hiccup – synopsis", 30 August 2006, personal email (31 August 2006).

13 Rosalind Krauss & Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 162 – 163.

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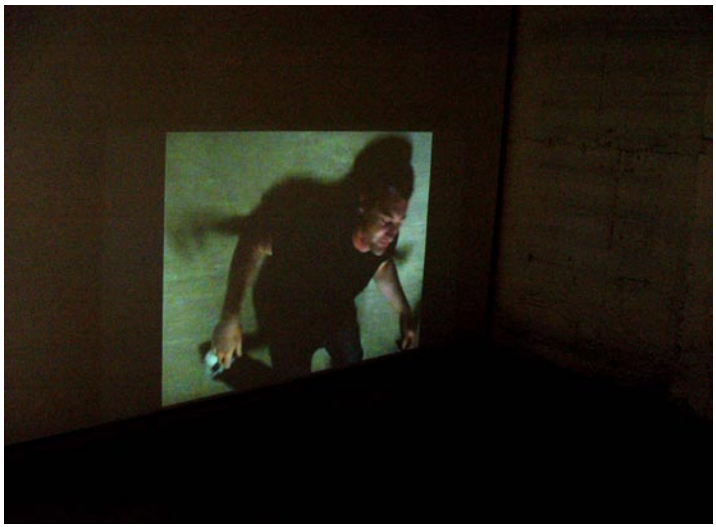
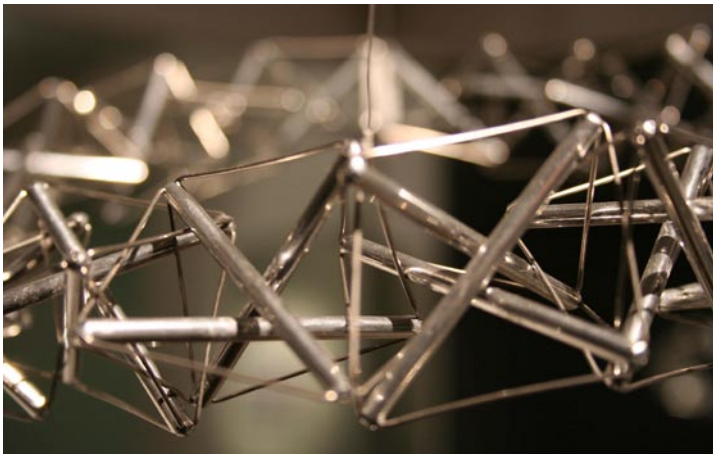


Rebecca Pilcher, *kickn gainst the...,* installation of DVD projection and soundtrack, 2006 (courtesy of the artist).

Kim Pieters, *highland*, stills from DVD and soundtrack 'Flies inside the sun' from Burning Glass CD by Metronomic, 2006 (images courtesy of the artist).



Andrew Last, detail of *Tensegrity,* diameter 22cm, height 4cm, aluminium and stainless steel, 2006 (courtesy of artist, photograph by Ana Terry).