

時憶

Moving in Time

Interview by Andrew Maerkle

My understanding is that in Time Memory you work with scraps of unsolicited bulk mail and packaging materials as “fragments of time.” How do you think about the role of time in your overall practice? Do you think that time is already implicit in the practice of collage and assemblage? If so, do you ever think of yourself as directly manipulating time?

The production of *Time Memory* is a time-intensive process, so in making the works I have an awareness of the passing and accumulation of time that I don't get from typical approaches to painting. People understand “time” differently, but I personally think of it as the combination of “time and memory.” I think about “time” as a flow that continuously penetrates the infinite “layers” of memories of the past. That flow is not necessarily linear. It repeatedly moves forward, backward and in all directions within the layers of memory, even as it leads back to the present. With *Time Memory*, I view the “fragments of time” of the paper scraps as the “layers of memory,” and the drawn-in lines as the “flow of time.” Although I don't think of myself as manipulating time, I do have the sense of having been thrown *into* time.

You have a strong interest in film, which emerges in all aspects of your works. In that sense, as an artist who is known for working with “collage,” do you actually feel closer to “montage,” as a kind of collage that occurs in time, or the collage of time itself?

More than film itself I would say I am interested in the nature of moving images – if we accept the idea of “collaging time itself” as one definition of montage. The word collage has strong connotations in Western art history, and, more than with simple “pasting,” I feel in it the constraint of seeking “meaning” from the content and composition of the material itself. For me, collage entails the act of sticking together images mentally rather than physically combining matter. I feel that the process in video editing of cutting and pasting the immaterial images that have been burned into the material of the film approximates the “manipulation of memory” that occurs when we try to recall past events.

Among your older works are two that particularly interest me. One, Pink Box (1980), comprises scraps that have been cut out from magazines, newspapers and other printed matter and individually pasted onto index-card-like mounts, which are then filed in a pink plastic box. The other, Hari-kei / Page 1 and Hari-kei / Page 2 (2004), shown in your first exhibition at Take Ninagawa in 2008, involved ripping out all the pages of English paperback books, and then pasting them back together again, one on

top of the next. I feel that it is precisely because these works are so simple in their execution that they reveal something about your broader practice. And in this sense I also think that on a fundamental level they share something with Time Memory. Could you talk about these works?

One basis for the *Hari-kei* works comes from when I was in London in the late 1970s, and saw people wheatpasting posters on the streets. That was an amazing sight. The workers would stick these big, mop-like brushes into the paste and then slap it right onto the surface onto which they were pasting, and over time they kept pasting the posters one on top of the next, so all these layers would accumulate. I was fascinated when I first saw that. I even ripped out bits of the posters to turn into my own works. That is something that has stayed with me ever since I first encountered it. So with the *Hari-kei* works, I'm interested in making layers out of the parts that do not have content, rather than the contents itself. And in that sense it connects to *Time Memory*, because one of the key aspects of *Time Memory* is the making of the layered compositions. It's similar to painting. As you apply more and more layers of paint to the canvas, the under layers disappear, but they still exude some kind of presence. For me it's the presence of the under layers that is critical.

But in Pink Box you cut out the images and pasted them one by one onto individual cards, as if they were specimens.

Specimen is a good way of putting it. The pink box is something I picked up from the photo lab where I was working at the time in London. There was an empty box for Kodak film that had been thrown out, and the box really spoke to me. It was like an empty box of memories into which I added things I collected, one by one.

Comparing Hari-kei and Pink Box, in one everything is stuck together as a single accumulation, while in the other all the parts are kept separate. Does that reflect anything about your overall practice?

With *Pink Box* I was working in a miniscule apartment in London, so I think it relates more to the conditions of the city. I didn't have the luxury of buying whatever art supplies I wanted, and it was essential to get the things that I wanted or needed for free if possible. That empty box that I found in the developing lab was a really precious material for me. And, as I said just now, there were also works that I made by ripping out parts of the posters that were pasted up around the city. I was pasting the sections from the posters without otherwise altering them.

The Hari-kei works suggest something of Marcel Duchamp's concept of the inframince (infra-thin), as we have discussed it in relation to your Retina series.

You know, thinking about the *inframince* I realize that one thing that distinguishes

my practice is the idea of “doing nothing.” It’s like maybe I’ve been subconsciously searching for a way to make works by “simply selecting something.”

In this sense another work that seems to anticipate Time Memory is Memphis Board (1989), the assemblage made with strips of paper that have numbers written all over them.

I went to the flea market in New Orleans and found an old restaurant accounts book that I bought for a dollar. The wood that became the support was from a table that had been thrown out. I didn’t alter it at all. All I did was to cut the parts with the numbers out from the accounts book and paste them on. Everything else is the way I found it.

In Memphis Board as well as in works like Japanese Comics (2000), you use the same “weaving” pattern that later appears in Time Memory, which differs from how you make your Scrapbook compositions.

Yes. Someone pointed this out to me a long time ago, and I thought it was quite perceptive, but I’m really particular about the horizontal and vertical axes. I don’t paste things in crooked. As a rule I tend to paste them in straight.

Is it like you are weaving together memories?

Sure. It’s not a conceptual decision, but maybe weaving together horizontal and vertical lines is the simplest way to express what I want.

But it doesn’t come up so often in other works.

But even in a work like *Japanese Comics*, the things that I’m pasting with are rectilinear. Even when I’ve ripped something out by hand and it’s a bit irregular around the edges, the image itself is oriented along its horizontal and vertical axes. It bothers me when it’s not that way.

In his essay for the catalogue of your exhibition in 2014 at Parasol Unit in London, Marco Livingstone compared you to Mondrian. How do you feel about that comparison?

I’m not sure. I guess Marco’s idea is that, with all these strips of material pasted in vertically and horizontally, my work evokes something like *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. I remember what always surprised me about *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which of course is one of his last works, is that Mondrian was using tape, and not paint.

That was a shock. I imagine Mondrian felt that instead of just using tape as a tool for defining the outlines of his painting, the tape itself was the best expression of the hard edge, and that's why he chose it. But more than the later abstract works, what always interested me were Mondrian's early figurative paintings of flowers and still lifes, which were made before he developed his own style.

In the Scrapbooks all kinds of images, photographs and representational elements are pasted into the compositions. You say that working unconsciously is a big part of your practice, but surely the representational elements must have some effect on the composition. What happens with Time Memory, where there are almost no representational elements?

Actually, I realize in retrospect that as I was making *Scrapbook #65* (2005-10), there was a page that seemed to anticipate *Time Memory*. I had pasted all kinds of cardboard on it, and there were almost no images at all. *Time Memory* is like a subconscious continuation of that imageless page. Certainly, it was still fresh in my mind, if not altogether a template for what I was doing. In the case of *Time Memory*, though, as I worked with all these different kinds of papers, if I found any other printed matter stuck to them I would rip it off so that I was working only with the plain paper. What ties everything together is that once the composition is done, I coat it with oil varnish, which has a nice thickness to it. That action is what completes the work, almost like the development of a photograph. It is the varnish and the way it soaks into the material that transforms the ripped surfaces of the paper to produce interesting variations. It brings out the differences in the texture all at once.

Of course, in the Scrapbooks it seems like you treat the figurative elements almost as if they were abstract – you are not trying to create figurative compositions. So is there a difference between image and texture?

Right. With the *Scrapbooks*, the components are figurative, but the whole is abstract. With an image, the margins for interpretation are narrower. For example, if you have the image of an elephant, it immediately evokes the word elephant, and that prescribes how the viewer relates to the image. It is only when you combine that one element with other elements that the possibilities for engagement broaden. With texture, I think it's broader to begin with. There are these signs or hints that jump out at the viewer. It's very open to interpretation.

What relationship do you see between your practice and language?

I'm really interested in language, as well as the nature of Chinese characters. In relation to *Time Memory*, I'm interested in how we make words. Words contain signs that go beyond meaning and can be perceived differently by each person, and

ancient words all the more so. In Japanese we have many such words – words with a lot of breadth. Obviously, I’m not as familiar with it as I am with Japanese, but in the case of English there are also things like anagrams, for example, where new words can be made by rearranging the order of the letters of a starting word, which I find inspiring.

Language also appears directly in your works – for example, the names and information on the packaging and newsprint that you paste into the Scrapbooks. Some of the text is in Japanese, or English, Arabic and other languages, and all of it continues to function as text, while also expressing new ideas through its integration into the compositions.

Yes, text has an even stronger effect on people than images. As soon as you see a word, you start to think about its meaning. For example, your brain automatically begins to process whether or not it’s a word you already know. That’s fascinating. These elements of conditioned reflex are stronger with text than with images.

In the case of Time Memory, would you say there is any “grammar” that informs the composition of the work?

Well, I try to avoid that kind of thing as much as possible, but in making work after work, I guess it’s inevitable that something like a grammar would eventually emerge. But it’s not my intent to follow a grammar. The brain is constantly learning, even when we’re not conscious of it. Whether I like it or not, there is an accretion of knowledge that develops about what will happen if I paste something one way, for example, or what effect it might have if I move the brush in another way. That’s ok to a certain extent, but if such “learning” takes control of the work, then it can only lead to a dead end.

In looking at the Scrapbooks, there is so much visual and intellectual stimulation that comes from the arrangements of the images, words, colors and lines covering their pages, page after page. What’s impressive is that this sense of stimulation is sustained in Time Memory, too, even though there are almost no words or images.

I think what connects the two is the way that I paste things in layers. Whether there is an image there or not, the layering creates the effect of producing some kind of sign. Differences in the height and depth of the layers emerge, or, depending on the part of the composition, there might also be differences in the number of layers I paste. In *Time Memory*, I think that excitement also comes from the lines that I add to the compositions. I have the strong sense that the lines represent the flow of time moving among the layers. There is continual time and truncated time and time that ends in a specific point. In drawing the lines it’s like adding time that flows across the time that has accreted in the layers to create different intersections in time.

In a statement you wrote on Time Memory when you started the project, you describe pasting together “fragmentary materials carrying ‘time’ that was produced in different periods in different places.” I’m interested in this idea of producing time that you reference here. Time and labor and production are closely linked. How do you understand the relations between them? For example, if each material is a fragment of time, then could it also be considered a fragment of labor, and a fragment of production?

It was not my intent to try to create new time through the *Time Memory* series, although in the end you could say that’s what the work does on some level. Certainly, all the paper goods that I use are the result of labor produced at various times in different countries. But I don’t choose to work with them on that basis. I work more sensually. When I touch the paper I get a powerful sense of the differences between the countries. Each country has its own quality of paper. That touch or texture itself could also be a result of the labor of each country, I suppose. But neither is it my intent to mix these materials together as an expression of the differences between countries. It really boils down to how the paper feels upon my fingertips.

As a final question, how do you understand the “frame”? What is it for you that makes scraps of paper function as art?

There’s the idea of recycling, right? You take something that is no longer useful and turn it into something useful. That doesn’t interest me. I’m interested in things that prompt conceptual questions. I think something becomes a work when it can shift the frame or create a new frame that stands on its own. One of the roles of art is to make people think. Art is a field into which we can toss the question mark of potential. Artworks have the potential to challenge fixed concepts and ideas about how things should be in the world, without resorting to verbalization.