

Ways of Looking: Appropriation in Annie MacDonell's *Originality and Repetition*

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Abstract

Relative to the ubiquity of repeated and recontextualised imagery in contemporary art, appropriation maintains a limited presence in its critical discourses. Through an analysis of Annie MacDonell's 2012 film *Originality and Repetition*, this Major Research Paper engages appropriation as an approach to considering how we look at images in the 21st-century.

Originality and Repetition takes up repetition and appropriation, in the context of their prevalence, to thematize and enact what I argue are three distinct modes of looking. I refer to these modes as *exhausted looking*, *looking in excess* and *looking simultaneously*, and situate each within a contemporary visual culture animated by images that are reproduced quickly, shift in orientation to the world, and recall the existence of multiple time frames at once. Together they express the practical and theoretical relevance of appropriation to exploring spectatorship today.

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Introduction

Under many names—quotation, citation, remix, copying, repetition—the appropriation and recontextualization of materials is central to the production and circulation of contemporary culture. Within the visual arts, the creative decision to refer to, or outright copy, pre-existing imagery or ideas within one's own work is unremarkable in and of itself. As artist Andy Patton observes, relative to his encounter with appropriation in the early 1980s, the practice now plays to a different and diminished level of attention: "It has, in a sense, disappeared because everyone does it, everyone copies images. At the same time, almost no-one does it..."¹ Patton astutely summarises the environment of artistic appropriation today, wherein—as a truly pervasive phenomena—it eludes perception and judgement as an explicit *aesthetic* gesture. Through an analysis of Toronto-based artist Annie MacDonell's 2012 film *Originality and Repetition*, this paper explores appropriation's potential as a critical approach to the concept of how we look at images today. Distinct from the attention-grabbing "kick" that earlier appropriation art was able to deliver, I identify a subtler invitation in the film.² In *Originality and Repetition* the prevalence of appropriation, and the repeating of imagery that it involves, becomes emblematic of contemporary visual cultural currents and participates in the way images populate quickly, shift in orientation to the world, and exist in and recall the existence of multiple places and time frames at once. In response, I propose that the film enacts three modes of viewing, which I am calling *exhausted looking*, *looking in excess* and *looking simultaneously*.

¹ Andy Patton, interview by Maxwell Hyett, *Community of Images: Strategies of Appropriation in Canadian Art, 1977-1990*, ed., Janice Gurney and Julian J. Haladyn, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2022), 312

² Jan Verwoert, "Apropos Appropriation: why stealing images today feels different," *Art & Research* 1, no. 2 (2007)

With *Originality and Repetition* MacDonell set out to interrogate her own 21st century practice—one that readily employs now-normalised procedures of appropriation and repetition.³ The twelve-minute film contains two montages set to music, in which MacDonell brings together select images from the “Reflections” and “Mirrors” folders in the Toronto Reference Library’s “Picture Collection.” Between these, an actor in character as “The Caption” delivers a monologue on the film’s titular subjects.⁴ I consider the film extended by its 2012 installation at Mercer Union for the exhibition *Originality and the Avant-Garde (On Art and Repetition)* along with MacDonell’s digital image series *The Picture Collection* (2012).⁵ The title of the exhibition recycles Rosalind Krauss’ 1981 “Originality of the Avant-Garde,” an essay from which the Caption’s speech borrows liberally and from whence it derives the language of “repetition” *contra* originality. The two works, which repurpose many of the same images, were set into relation through a constructed camera obscura that doubled as a cinema for the film and captured the image suite framed in the external gallery through its lens. As the intended viewing space for the film, the camera obscura—coated in mirrors and built to the dimensions of the artist’s own studio—furnished it with a physicality that underscored looking as an essential dimension of its expressed interest, in a moment saturated by images and their copies.⁶

Originality and Repetition reflects MacDonell’s persistent preoccupation with photographic reproduction and with the activity of looking.⁷ Formally trained as a photographer,

³ Annie MacDonell, interview by Joan Lillian Wilson, *Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*, Mercer Union, 2012

⁴ Jacob Korczynski, *Annie MacDonell: Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*, (Toronto: Mercer Union, 2012). Exhibition Catalogue.
<https://www.mercerunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/macdonellleguillonbrochure1.pdf>. The Caption is played by actor Evan Webber.

⁵ Annie MacDonell, “Annie MacDonell,” *Annie MacDonell*. Accessed May 5, 2022.

<http://www.anniemacdonell.ca/>. According to MacDonell’s website, and to the best of my knowledge this is the only setting in which the film has been exhibited.

⁶ “*Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*,” Mercer Union, Accessed April 3, 2022

⁷ Ibid.

photography occupies a central conceptual role in her work across other media including film, installation, sculpture, writing and performance. MacDonell engages “our shifting relationship to images” by examining the customs that surround how they are circulated, presented and consumed as vehicles for ideas.⁸ Her bio for Toronto Metropolitan University School of Image Arts, where she currently teaches, cites “multi-layered and self-reflexive meditations on the act of looking” that often spiral outwards from “gestures of recuperation and reanimation.”⁹ Reanimation, mirroring, copying, and quotation figure consistently in her work as methodological approaches, while theories and histories of reproduction and referentiality subtend it.

Originality and Repetition asks to be read through a framework informed by the history of repetition and appropriation in and as art, because it takes the “creative potential within repetition” as its explicit subject.¹⁰ I limit the scope of this study to the legacy of appropriation art specifically, as a mode of making that hinges on, in Janice Gurney’s definition, “the seizing of an image (one that already exists) and moving it into a different (new) context.”¹¹ Of course, the history of using pre-made and pre-authored imagery predates appropriation as a recognized art form, as do considerations of reproduction and mix-and-match contexts. By taking up this recent history, I contextualise how MacDonell’s appropriation, like that of many artists since the 1970s, explores the conditions of what remains an image-saturated culture. The pervasiveness of images in everyday life plays a determining role in shaping looking habits and experiences; it is a

⁸ “Faculty, Annie MacDonell,” School of Image Arts, *Toronto Metropolitan University*, accessed May 9, 2022 <https://www.ryerson.ca/image-arts/about/faculty/annie-macdonell/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ MacDonell, interview by Joan Lillian Wilson

¹¹ Janice Gurney, Introduction to *Community of Images: Strategies of Appropriation in Canadian Art, 1977-1990*, ed., Janice Gurney and Julian J. Haladyn, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2022), 9

consideration consistent among all three modes of looking that I identify in *Originality and Repetition*.

Appropriation, in the context in which MacDonell is engaging with it, emerged in North America in the late 1970s. Artists invested in developing and staging ideas through the materially minimal gesture of copying, an interest that conveys Conceptualism as one immediate precursor; the influence of Pop Art was even more apparent in their re-presentations of consumer and pop-cultural imagery.¹² Operating in a postmodern paradigm that extended any and all imagery as potential material, appropriation artists sought to carry the image and its conditions to a self-conscious extreme.¹³ Through the art of copying they considered the status of meaning in images and the influence of their massive presence in society.

The more varied body of appropriation art is often conflated with the work of artists known collectively as “The Pictures Generation.” In his canonical 1977 “Pictures” catalogue essay, the curator and critic Douglas Crimp identified a withdrawal of the image from signification in the works of featured artists.¹⁴ Establishing this schism between an image and its depicted content served as one mode of articulating the contingency of representation; as Craig Owens has argued, citing Walter Benjamin, appropriation artists proceeded through the allegorical idea that “any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”¹⁵

¹² David Evans, ed., *Appropriation (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*, (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2009), 13. Evans’ anthology further traces the art historical genealogy of appropriation art. For illustrative purposes, Conceptual art’s interest in articulating ideas with understated material fabrication can be seen in works such as Micheal Craig Martin’s *Oak Tree* (1973), Sol LeWitt’s drawing instructions, or Dan Graham’s *Homes for America* (1966-67). Examples of Pop art that underscore its influence on appropriation include Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (1964), Roy Lichtenstein’s comic book panels, or Richard Hamilton’s advertisement collages.

¹³ Julian J. Haladyn, “Late Capitalism, or the Cultural Logic of Canadian Appropriation Art,” *Community of Images in Community of Images: Strategies of Appropriation in Canadian Art, 1977-1990*, ed., Janice Gurney and Julian J. Haladyn, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2022), 189

¹⁴ Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *X-tra* 8, no. 1 (2005): 23

¹⁵ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* no. 12, (1980):

Emphasising a different dimension to appropriation, Gurney describes work that favours an active multitude of associations; by engaging with images and their sources artists made “constructions of different histories that came together in the context of [a] new work.”¹⁶ The strategic recontextualization of images enabled artists to reflect the implication of images in and for the dynamics of the human world. By destabilising an image’s familiar relationships many artists worked to unsettle the narratives and myths—among them historical progress, documentary truth, cultural and/or economic value, and artistic originality—believed inherent to certain kinds of visual material.

In her famous essay, Krauss complicates the hierarchical distinction between originality and repetition that was an integral tenant of modernism and a catalyst for its postmodern critique.¹⁷ With help from Krauss, *Originality and Repetition* proposes to explore the same dynamic, and the creative potential of repetition; waged in 2012, this proposition asks to be evaluated not as a challenge to originality, but against the fact that appropriation has become so commonplace. As Boris Groys argues, the prevailing logic of artistic production, one that accepts repetition, has further taken hold in everyday approaches to image making, sharing and viewing: “‘copy and paste’ is the most standard, most widespread practice on the internet...a place where even those who do not know or appreciate contemporary art[]... will employ the same forms of sampling on which those art practices are based.”¹⁸ Rather than a willful denial of the fact that appropriation has become a thoroughly embedded part of art making, *Originality and Repetition* conforms to what MacDonell’s bio from the time of the exhibition describes as work “that deals

¹⁶ Janice Gurney, “In and Out of History,” *Community of Images in Community of Images: Strategies of Appropriation in Canadian Art, 1977-1990*, ed., Janice Gurney and Julian J. Haladyn, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2022), 142. Gurney identifies this as a specifically Canadian approach to appropriation and distinguishes it from concurrent American activities, namely those of the Pictures Generation.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, US: MIT Press, 1986), 160

¹⁸ Boris Groys, “Marx After Duchamp, or The Artist’s Two Bodies” *e-flux Journal*, no. 19, (October 2010)

with exhausted ideas and images.”¹⁹ Phrased this way, the film engages repetition and appropriation as concepts no longer fashionable to name, but nonetheless wearied still by use. MacDonell exhumes appropriation from a state of omnipresent invisibility, to observe looking habits developed in tandem with other such pervasive patterns in the lives of images.

In this paper I assess MacDonell’s appropriation, selection of *mise en abyme* images, and ready use of mirrors in *Originality and Repetition* as parenthetical to the multiplying frameworks through which images circulate, populate, and morph today; as curator Cheyanne Turions writes, MacDonell builds a “multiplying...framework around the image in order to bring attention not to the subject of the photograph, but instead the act of looking at a photograph.”²⁰ In keeping with this observation, I argue that the inquiry into the creative potential of repetition staged in the film circles around the question of how we *look* at images. MacDonell’s appropriation is different from the suspended image posited by Crimp and exemplified by Sherrie Levine, one fixed, “picture-like... an elegant object [of] our distance from...history” and concerned with the surface of imagery and signs.²¹ In the vein of artists like Cindy Sherman (for example her *Untitled Film Stills*), or Jeff Wall (for example his *Picture for Women*), MacDonell uses repetition to invoke conventions in representation and make the processes and effects of looking apparent.

Originality and Repetition draws on this legacy of destabilising and interrogating the status of images and image-making practices in order to attend to a 21st-century context, and examines looking at images in relation to what is today a culture of distinctly digital spectatorship. The film presents analog images through editing techniques that belie an

¹⁹ MacDonell, interview by Joan Lillian Wilson

²⁰ CheyanneTurions, “Not Looking at an Archive of Collecting Practices,” *SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art*, May 2014, <https://www.sbcgallery.ca/texte-5---cheyanne-turions-fr?lang=en>.

²¹ Crimp, “Pictures,” 26

atmosphere in which images and other visual media are subject to hyper-consumption and instant access, constant re-distribution and decontextualisation, and the spatiotemporal flattening out of visual media.²² I look to contemporary theorists, namely Hito Steyerl and Byung Chul Han, in whose writing I find an affinity with the concerns of the film, which confront the contemporary relationship to images—one mediated to an undeniably large extent by digital communications. And it is in this general environment that I argue *Originality and Repetition* takes repetition and appropriation, as both method and subject, to thematize what can be considered three different but interconnected modes of looking.

Across the three sections that follow, I advance an understanding of exhausted looking, looking in excess, and looking simultaneously. Each section corresponds to a mode of looking, which in turn corresponds to one of what are three separate sequences in *Originality and Repetition* itself. In “Sequence One: *Exhausted Looking*,” I discuss the first sequence of the film, a montage that swells to an intensity which describes the common experience of encountering images in large quantities and at high speeds: conditions incompatible with looking at them closely. In “Sequence Two: *Looking in Excess*” I go on to consider how MacDonell’s talking “Caption” highlights the dense and unruly associations of images in the world and foregrounds feeling both accountable to and overwhelmed by the possibilities of looking outside the frame. Finally, the third sequence of the film and section of this paper layers together the preceding two. In “Sequence Three: *Looking Simultaneously*,” I explore what I argue is an exercise in looking that negotiates with the experience of ‘everything all at once,’ feeling its pressures and resisting the temptations to collapse the heterogeneity it implies. What persists throughout each of these sections is the suggestion that repetition and appropriation are also conflicted processes, ones

²² Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans., Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 1

intimately connected to the flawed structural realities in which exhausted looking, looking in excess, and looking simultaneously take place. In art and beyond, these gestures are charged with emboldening vapid images, concealing and sustaining established ideologies; they are implicated as mechanisms of accelerated and deregulated circulation, displacement, imminent multiplication, and interventions made into images.²³

Formal Description

The structure of the film's viewing room for *Originality and The Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)* was designed in consideration of the ideas of making and seeing images through repetition that also animate the film. It was coated in mirrored panelling on the outside, built to the exact size and scale of the artist's own studio, and fitted with a lens to serve as a functioning camera obscura (figures 1-2). As a cinema, it housed twin projections: the film itself and—through the camera obscura's lens—the exterior gallery and MacDonnell's image series, *The Picture Collection* mounted there (figure 3).

The two montage sequences in the film and *The Picture Collection* bring together the same images from the "Mirrors" and "Reflections" folders at the Toronto Reference Library's "Picture Collection (figures 4-6)." Each one already contains a visual duplication within its own frame; mirrors, water, windows, and other reflective surfaces create an internal repetition that precedes that of the artists' gesture. During the first silent minute of the film, pictures appear one by one. In the next minute, the silence is broken by a fast-paced drum kit track that announces itself visually as the turnover between images picks up speed and branches apart. Now as many as four at once flash up from different positions on screen. The drum beat ends as the images

²³ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux Journal* 10, (November 2009)

wind down to a solitary, dramatically lit snapshot of a woman holding up a hand-mirror that obscures her face (figure 7). The scene pauses here. Then, someone ferries a bulky object across the frame, before a hand reaches in to pull the last image off the wall.

The Caption arrives in silence to take up his seat before MacDonell positions herself in front of the camera; with forearms outstretched, she gives the director's signature "clap" that returns the audio and cues the Caption into action (figure 8). He speaks for two minutes, and then steals a loaded glance at the camera before the scene ends (figure 9). The film picks up again in a visual relay: from the final image of the first montage, the second sequence (the Caption's) begins, followed momentarily by the train of images from the very start of the film, which plays over top at increased transparency. Accompanied by sombre piano music, the two tracks of footage play through so that eventually the Caption re-enters. Proceeding to speak over himself silently in two staggered layers that never synchronise, his gesticulations carry us to the end of the film.

Sequence 1: *Exhausted Looking*

The Caption's opening lines codify the film's reference to "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," as more-than-nominal. "Lately I've been thinking about the relationship between originality, and repetition..." he begins.²⁴ Following Krauss, he proceeds to articulate their perceived opposition by referring to *originality* as "the valorized half of the pair" and *repetition* as its "disreputable" (a slight deviation from Krauss' "discredited") counterpart. In the speech that ensues and the montage it builds from, *Originality and Repetition* deviates from the postmodern discourse of copying in which Krauss situates the effects of then-novel appropriation

²⁴ Annie MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 02:51

practices. These served “radically to question the concept of origin and with it the notion of originality” by mobilising “the pirated print.”²⁵ *Originality and Repetition* establishes a chronological and conceptual remove from these concerns by acknowledging the sheer prevalence of appropriation and repetition today; it draws on Krauss in order to illustrate a different milieu, one in which “our absolute ease with practices of quotation and appropriation” preclude the drama of a transgressed origin.²⁶

The film deals with a concept of repetition that has proliferated past its constitutive and critical relationship to originality and assumes the status of a culturally defining feature in its own right. As Marcus Boon succinctly phrases it, “Many of the most visible aspects of contemporary culture—art... digital networks of distribution... [and] social networking sites... rely explicitly on something we call copying.”²⁷ Within this environment, the *Caption* proposes that originality has become a *diversion* from a reality in which repetition is ubiquitous. The dynamic between the recognition that repetition is everywhere, and the film’s stated interest in its creative potential is an uncomfortable and confusing one. What emerges more concretely is a sense for MacDonell’s own attempt as an artist to grapple with finding an authentic response to this conflicting reality. I develop the idea of *exhausted looking* in order to consider how she applies strategies of appropriation to articulate the tension between looking closely at images and the speed and quantity in which we have access to them. Focussing on the first sequence of the film in relation to its structure and select musings from the *Caption*, I observe how MacDonell establishes a thematics of looking at images within conditions of encounter that alternately overwhelm or deflect meaningful attention.

²⁵ Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” 168

²⁶ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05: 29

²⁷ Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4

Each image that MacDonell uses in the film documents an instance of doubled imaging. Their literal depictions of repetition effectively establish that the methods of appropriating and repeating images through which they have been incorporated into the film are also its subject. MacDonell underscores the multiplicity of these pictures and the doublings they represent by making each one appear more than once over the course of the first sequence. This montage functions to predictively supply evidence for the widespread influence of contemporary repetition that the Caption describes:

it seems to me that our refusal to let the ideologies of modernism die off has become ever more problematic as the years go on. The fact of the matter is, our sustained obsession with the original has itself become repetitious; it's an empty, knee jerk valorisation that has little to do with the present moment. For what defines the present is in fact the opposite impulse, it's our absolute ease with practices of quotation and appropriation. ...And yet, how are we to engage in it fully unless we give up this pursuit of the original?²⁸

The hyper speed of the first sequence and the intensity of its soundtrack communicate that the case the film seeks to make for repetition is not an uncomplicated or wholly positive one. Instead, as the Caption later argues, practices of repetition and appropriation are definitive of the present moment in time—inclusive of, as is implied, its ills.

While at times borrowing near-total phrases from “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” *Originality and Repetition*’s defence of repetition further recalls Hito Steyerl’s “In Defense of the Poor Image,” and the ambivalence she attributes to its degraded appearance. Steyerl writes that the poor image, iteratively compressed to travel efficiently on the internet is “no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence... It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is

²⁸ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05:03

about reality.”²⁹ The poor image testifies to the breadth of implications held by the easy movement and multiplication of media online, from radical accessibility and subversion to consolidations and abuses of power. Similarly, the Caption does not vindicate repetition as an innately democratic or critical practice. *Originality and Repetition* locates contemporary appropriation somewhere between the poor image — a copy for which an original is irrelevant—and the expressly deconstructive posture towards “notions of origin and originality” that Krauss identifies.³⁰ The Caption’s remarks explicitly deride the modernist pursuit of origins, but also provide that repetition does not necessarily comment on, or preclude, their ideological grounds. Instead, he positions repetition as a medium of the present, an admittedly capacious designation that holds it equally representative of the vapid and nefarious dimensions to contemporary culture.

In the Caption’s telling, the problems of modern ideology include an escapist attitude, expressed by our fixation with new origins. The establishment of avant-garde frontiers throughout modernity, which Krauss recognized as repetitive, is phrased by the Caption as an impatient rush towards the development of new ideas and the production of new things. Today, by extension, it motivates an evasion of the present characterised by “our absolute ease with practices of quotation and appropriation”—and relegates it to an unexamined obscurity.³¹ The Caption nominates a third and negatively associated term, *repetitious*, to describe this mindless motion towards new things: “To be repetitious is to repeat without intent, without thought or understanding of what it is you are doing... Repetitious is the stick hitting the drum too many times without variation ... but the idea of repetition is itself an altogether richer and more

²⁹ Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image”

³⁰ Krauss, “Originality of the Avant Garde,” 170

³¹ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05:41

promising thing.”³² Following the first montage, wherein each repeated image arrives, cutting short the appearance of what came before it—too short for it to be perceived as the result of intention—his words are complicated by the recognition that repetition is often repetitious too.

In his book *In the Swarm*, Han identifies a similar phenomenon in the specifically contemporary terms of digital image production. He writes that the quantity of “such massive production can also be interpreted as a reaction of defence and flight... When faced with reality, which strikes us as something imperfect, we run away into the realm of images.”³³ *Originality and Repetition* applies this formula to a preexisting surplus of images, endlessly copied, and degraded in the process, and to the fact of repetition itself. By contrast to the repetitious, an idealised understanding of repetition’s promise takes shape as a thoughtful and intentional mode of engaging with “the existing pool of images that reality offers up to us,” and of taking those images seriously as a part of our reality.³⁴

Elsewhere, as MacDonell explains of her interest in working with previously made imagery, “the essential act then becomes one of framing those existing images in order to designate them for a special kind of attention. We get the viewer to look at them with an intent and intensity we don’t normally bring to the act of seeing.”³⁵ In this conceptualisation, repetition provides the basic function of emphasis. Drawing an image out from general conditions that Han describes in *Saving Beauty* as a “flood of information [and] rapid cutting... which force the eye quickly to digest what it sees, [and] do not allow for lingering,” the artist presents it as something that merits looking at.³⁶ In the context of *Originality and Repetition*, the camera obscura adds the

³² Ibid., 04:17

³³ Byung-Chul Han, *In The Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans., Erik Butler (Cambridge, US: The MIT Press, 2017), 29

³⁴ Turions, “Not Looking at an Archive of Collecting Practices”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Han, *Saving beauty*, 35

suggestion of duration to this attentive look, which firstly belongs to the artist. Built to the shape of MacDonell's studio, the structure earnestly characterises the process of sifting through images as a discerning one. The camera obscura recalls its historic role as an artist's aid that optimised the slow process of representing the world outside its lens by hand. Codified by the meditative eye of the camera obscura, repetition entails a traditional understanding of art objects (and gallery settings) that warrant looking closely.

The camera obscura/studio structure makes the production process a conscious element of images on display, building on the disclosive effect of seeing repetition inside an image, via literal (mirror) reflection. MacDonell has revisited the idea of *en abyme* photography, where, drawing on Craig Owens, she uses its application as “a reduced internal image of the photograph... it tells us in a photograph what a photograph is.”³⁷ Analogous to the understanding of a photograph *as* a mirror image of the world—a flattened, inverted copy—the image *of* a mirror further disrupts the photograph's documentary authority by revealing how the photographic process works to “internally organise and generate meaning.”³⁸ In MacDonell's appropriated images-in-images we look at scenes that betray themselves as contrived. The concerted gaze suggested by the camera obscura is here directed at the process by which photography shapes reality, and the fact that these images have been re-presented to us at the behest of the artist.

The most characteristically *en abyme* image in the film is set in a luxurious living room interior; the camera squarely captures a gilded mirror that faces another one on the opposite wall (figure 10). The mirror frames an endless regression of the room's space into smaller and smaller

³⁷ Craig Owens, “Photography ‘en abyme,’” *October* no. 5, (1978): 75

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84

reflections caught between two mirrors. The proliferation of pictures that this single image contains exemplifies what Owens writes as the capacity of images-in-images to communicate “the theoretically unlimited number of copies that may be engendered by a single negative.”³⁹ This disorienting image encapsulates the experience that the first sequence of the film creates. What care was taken in the image selection process is defeated by a manner of presentation that emphasises the bulk appearance of images that spin off into even more inconceivable numbers. *Originality and Repetition* forecloses on the potential of reflecting on its images by incorporating the barriers to looking that are germane to a “culture of speed [and] ubiquitous computing.”⁴⁰ Among these barriers are our own viewing habits, which as Han observes, have hollowed out and become vapid in tandem with the images we so readily produce, offering themselves up entirely on the surface, and containing no resistance to vision.⁴¹ These consumable images respond to eyes that seek and expect satiation, through immediately available information: “digital images cannot attract attention in a lasting fashion; they quickly eject their visual stimuli and fade away.”⁴² Splicing them together with cuts at roughly one second intervals, MacDonnell recontextualizes the physical prints she has taken from The Picture Collection in a temporal framework wherein they appear as so much generic stimuli.

The illegibility of individual images in this piece becomes stressful with the onset of the drum track and the introduction of frame-to-frame combinations. The film as a whole shares its sensitivity to the influence of undead modernist principles about the way we circulate and encounter images today, with Roy Arden’s 2007 internet video *The World as Will and*

³⁹ Ibid., 85

⁴⁰ Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 14

⁴¹ Han, *Saving Beauty*, 35

⁴² Ibid., 73

Representation.⁴³ The latter half of MacDonell's first sequence, in particular, recalls Arden's dizzying attempt to capture this relationship. *The World as Will and Representation* is a forty-minute long parade of images from Arden's personal internet archive, cheekily set to instrumental from Timmy Thomas' hit single "Why Can't We Live Together." Arden fuses together documentation of major episodes in 20th-century advancement and disaster with a pessimism that suits his title, taken from Arthur Schopenhauer's book of the same name. With images of things such as geodes, artefact measuring processes and older anthropological-style images, Arden gestures to the brutality and violence of pointlessly striving to impose or interpret meaning in the world; the same "swirling vision of stasis and sameness that underlies Schopenhauer's worldview" torments Arden's version of historical progress.⁴⁴

This history of deterministic interpretive frameworks persist, in Arden's telling, in the conceits of digital archives and search engines—from which he has collected these images—to codify and make all of this information accessible.⁴⁵ MacDonell positions the images in *Originality and Repetition* against the backdrop of the same technologies. Her interest in working with these images was inspired in large part by the fact that they belonged to the Picture Collection, which she explains as a counterpoint to the more extensive selections offered by databases like Google Images, and the efficiency by which they return so many images relevant to our search terms, to instantly satisfy curiosity.⁴⁶ Through its crashing soundtrack, fast cuts and combinations in which images appear to multiply, *Originality and Repetition* presents a

⁴³ Arden's *The World as Will and Representation* can be viewed in its entirety on the artist's website: <http://www.royarden.com/pages/worldas.html>

⁴⁴ Dieter Roelstraete, "Les Mots et Les Choses, Alternating Currents in Roy Arden's Net.Art," *Ciel Variable* no. 71, (2006)

⁴⁵ "Roy Arden: New World Order," *Canadian Art*

⁴⁶ MacDonell, interview by Joan Lillian Wilson. MacDonell's investment in the themes of digital image storing, and databases as articulated in contradistinction to the Picture Collection is affirmed by her several repeat engagements with it; *The Bird And the Cup* (2014) and *Pictures Become Objects, Objects Become Events* (2014), both collaborations with Maïder Fortuné, are examples not covered in this paper.

comparatively limited number of analog images as though they were figures in a truly overwhelming mass like that of *The World as Will*. Contextualised by the Caption's new-ness oriented originality, flourishing where "capitalism has heightened our appetites and shortened our attention spans in such perfectly inverse proportions," MacDonell's interest appears more bound up in the perspectival effects of such unmitigated access.⁴⁷ As she recognizes, "The ever-presence of digital information has flattened out the contours of life and filled in all its gaps, allowing us to glide across its surfaces without difficulty, without constraint."⁴⁸

Arden's achievement in *The World as Will* is to deliver his audiences a sense for the cool and procedural detachment through which such images participate in the ironing-out of history. the steady succession of images, one after another, quickly dulls into the looping soundtrack and becomes hypnotically calm. At a rate of six per-second, images ranging from mundane to ethically compromising and hard-to-look-at receive the same amused detachment of Arden's diagnostic gaze."⁴⁹ Arden subdues would-be rational or emotional responses through rapid and rhythmic cuts, calibrated for apathy. In contrast to Arden, MacDonell places viewers of *Originality and Repetition* at the whims of a pace that both impedes significant engagement with images and makes that impediment palpable. Despite its consistently innocuous images, *Originality and Repetition* never releases the tension by which it keeps its viewers alert because it doesn't become predictable, in spite of its more restrained scale. Images repeat according to ostensibly random rules, they pop up in different places on the screen, and the timing of their appearances relative to the beat of the drum never conforms to a discernible pattern.

⁴⁷ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 3:14

⁴⁸ Annie MacDonell, "Flatness, Light, Black & White," Annie MacDonell, Accessed March 21, 2022. <http://www.anniemacdonell.ca/Flatness-Light-Black-White-2>. These reflections are specifically attached to MacDonell's image series *Flatness, Light, Black & White* (2013), Because they are phrased as general observations, I use them here to supply context for her interests in *Originality and Repetition*. I go on to discuss the parallel between these two works in "Sequence 3: *Looking Simultaneously*."

⁴⁹ Roelstraete, "Alternating Currents in Roy Arden's Net.Art"

The careful timing of this procession—fast enough, but never too fast—provokes the sort of considered and discerning gaze that the camera obscura suggests and gallery setting suggest, while simultaneously making it untenable by exhausting it. The serial similarity of images alludes to a narrative that we cannot slow down and read properly. The fleeting collision between images proliferates points of intrigue; pairs of the same, triplets of the very similar, and groupings of an indeterminate correlation invite a curiosity that is never satisfied and almost instantly renewed. Both *The World as Will and Representation*, and *Originality and Repetition* observe the legacies of acquisition and progress sublimated into today's easy commandment of images; but Arden meets audiences halfway with a pause button. Without this convenience in its intended encounter, *Originality and Repetition* confronts the casually consumptive looking customary to digital environments by enforcing the distance between viewer and image they rest on abolishing (figure 11).⁵⁰

A remaindered moment arrives at the very end of the sequence. In a single image, a woman holds up a round hand mirror; it eclipses her face and is washed empty by bright white light. In the wake of so much overwhelming information, the image appears like an offering to be lingered over—a suggestion echoed by the fact that it was also the first image in the sequence. This pause, held by an image that is largely obscured (partly by the mirror, partly by heavy shadow), facilitates a moment to process. In Han's theory, the image that holds something back works as an invitation to thought, a process missing from the majority of encounters with images. As MacDonell reflects on this sequence, "There is no longer such thing as an empty moment or an unanswered question."⁵¹ The ease of our access to images exhausts the possibility

⁵⁰ Han, *In the Swarm*, 1-2

⁵¹ MacDonell, "Flatness, Light, Black and White."

of looking at and interrogating their positions within the systems that dictate how they are made or how they move through the world. MacDonell, who leans on Krauss and Owens, extends this final image, with its vacant and unreflective mirror, as one that holds open questions: what responsibilities do we have when looking at images that are not wholly visible? How does the *mise en abyme* image function when mediated by a screen? How does the contemporary multiplication of images affect the way they shape and represent the world?

Sequence 2: *Looking in Excess*

The Caption's insistence on weighing indefinite concepts like 'originality' and 'progress' against what he speculates as the prevailing interests of the contemporary moment, secures his practical failure as *a caption*. Neglecting to make the audio-visual information delivered in the montage sequences more legible to his audience, he instead trades in theory and abstraction. The interplay between what he says, and what MacDonell attributes to his character as a reference to Benjamin, further complicates our desire to see the film's images. Through the Caption, MacDonell considers the re- and de-contextualization of images and establishes the critical influence of an image's extra-representational relationships on how viewers experience its meaning. In this section, I consider the second sequence of the film as it reflects MacDonell's interest in the way art and images are distributed today along with the re-positioning and newly constructed situations for materials that appropriation always entails. I use the term *looking in excess* to describe an encounter with visuals that, like those in the film, move and change, shedding and accumulating resonances as they do. Traces on the physical images that MacDonell uses merge with an affected constructedness between sequences to impress the contingency of their existence in the film — a contingency emphasised in the exhibition context by the

additional appearance of the same images in *The Picture Collection*. After the montage in the first sequence, the hand that pulls the final image off the wall, and the activity of people moving and placing equipment, expose the process of set building and reveal the action on screen to be the contrived result of artistic intervention. The visible mechanics of the scene convey the fact that its images could easily be used somewhere else, or to communicate something different.

However, rather than hold her images as examples of the weightlessness of their meaning, MacDonell approaches them in the interest of “excavating all the layers of meaning that accumulate around images when they’ve been hanging around in the world for a while.”⁵² She invests in her images as repositories for multiple “signifying layers and social complications,” that the Caption compounds with additional references.⁵³ In doing so, his dialogue functions to defer any understanding of what these images might mean. At the same time, by supplying more and more connotations to them he remains unrelenting in his suggestion that they are meaningful, and that pursuing that meaning is important. I take this sequence to articulate the frustrations of negotiating the shifting interface between images and the dynamics of the human world—social, political, historical—that they are actively caught up in. Looking in excess means also looking at what is *not* contained within the frame; I use it in reference to the way the film at once asks that we seek more-than what is immediately visible, and take it seriously, while also incorporating no foreseeable limitations to what may be relevant and establishing the constancy of change.

In *Originality and Repetition*, the Caption reverses the underlying supposition that context for an image is necessarily *experienced* as an agent of clarity. He assumes his role at the nexus point between the film’s images and the world; but rather than solidify where they came

⁵² MacDonell, interview with Jane Lilian Wilson

⁵³ Ibid.

from, he opens them up to additional relationships and collisions fraught with speculative meaning. The Caption's arrival is signalled by a sort of 'reality check,' in which we anticipate sense-making. Having dismantled the illusion and revealed the constructed nature of the set, MacDonell suggests that what comes next will, like a caption, provide an instructive piece of context around which to build an interpretation of the images we have just seen.

This ultimately misguided expectation, aligns loosely with the understanding of the caption that Walter Benjamin describes in his 1931 essay "Little History of Photography." He writes:

[for] images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder... inscription must come into play, by means of which photography intervenes as the literarization of all the conditions of life and without which all photographic construction must arrested in the approximate...will not the inscription become the most important component of the shot? ⁵⁴

Benjamin argues that as photographic technology surpasses past human vision, captions become vital; operating as a materialist literature that reorients viewers to the fact of what an image depicts, lest they lose sight of the real social dynamics it participates in.⁵⁵ Teased along by nods to the Caption's learnedness—a smart-looking suit, spare and sophisticated *mise en scene*, captured in soft black and white—we long for the didacticism of the caption that Benjamin describes. *Originality and Repetition* ostensibly accepts the premise of Benjamin's prediction. In as far as it intervenes to relate the images of the film to the world, the Caption's linguistic contribution works toward a similar end. Its importance is also inferred by the fact that it

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed., by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 294-295. This translation uses "inscription" in place of "caption" for the German *schrift*, sometimes translated to 'script,' or even 'scripture.' The connotations of the word "inscription" in English, here emphasises the comparatively lasting correlation between a photograph and what it captures, which Benjamin suggests this instructional caption should communicate. For more on this translation see pg. 198 and 178n3

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 293

occupies the film's centrefold. But being separated in a sequence of his own, as the Caption speaks, he carries us both literally and figuratively further away from contact with the formal characteristics of images themselves.

Affirming Benjamin's foresight in her own words, MacDonell says "I think this is true...[of] the way we make art in general now... it's the way that you discuss the work, the way you title it and present it, that really activates it."⁵⁶ MacDonell narrows in on the mutability subtly coded into Benjamin's language in order to align her Caption with the unpredictable influence that post-production context and conversation have on what significance an artwork comes to hold. Her reading of Benjamin's remarks on captioning in "A Short History of Photography," verges on his more open-ended idea of the script-image and the "eruptive expressiveness of allegorical interpretation" that belongs to its muddled graphic and textual registers.⁵⁷ MacDonell's Caption echoes with the transformative power that re-placing images in new environments or relationships—including by captioning them—has over and in addition to interpretation. In place of explication, he meets our gaze with his own, shifting emphasis onto our reception of the amorphous intersection between the words he speaks and the images in the film.

That the Caption undermines the expectation to a precise or at least illustrative association between what we have been looking at and any assumed representational reality, recalls the rebellion against Benjamin's sentiments that Crimp observes in his *Pictures* essay. Framing appropriation as the extraction of an image from its place in and reference to the world,

⁵⁶ MacDonell, interview by Jane Lillian Wilson

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Antinomies of Allegorical Exegesis," *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed., Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 176

Crimp envisions it as a means of demonstrating the schism between the two. He writes that the artists included in the *Pictures* show

subvert the standard signifying function of those pictures, tied to their captions, their commentaries, narrative sequences— tied, that is, to the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified. Walter Benjamin’s dictum that the caption will become the most important component of the shot is taken as prophetic. Because this ubiquitous captioning is nothing but an insistent attempt to force upon the picture a relation to the signified that it does not intrinsically have.⁵⁸

The significance of this anti-signifying gesture was, for many artists and their viewers, that it exposed the false premise of the image’s authority.

Crimp recalls Benjamin in particular to analyse the dysfunctional caption in Troy Brauntuch’s *Golden Distance* (1976) (figure 12). In this pair of black and white prints, Brauntuch reproduces a single photo of a woman’s head from behind in two versions, side by side. Both are suspended in perfectly round borders and encircled by black, but one is hued in gold. Doubling down on interchangeability as the received effect of representing one image two ways, Brauntuch adds a fancy script above the gold circle only. For Crimp, this opaque poeticism, ‘*whispers around a woman*’ serves as “an insistent reminder of the picture’s withdrawal from signification.”⁵⁹ Like MacDonell’s *Caption*, who arrives with the promise of meaning, Brauntuch’s postures as though to illustrate something important. As Owens describes, his “images simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning.”⁶⁰ The caption in *Golden Distance* requires that we squint at barely legible cursive, only to achieve no better understanding of the image(s).

Brauntuch and MacDonell both affect a play of protracted meaning through captions, but differently. Pointing to Brauntuch as his example, Owens describes appropriation as allegory— *if*

⁵⁸ Crimp, “Pictures,” 20. Crimp cites an alternate translation of Benjamin that uses the term “caption” and is titled “A Short History of Photography.” This version was published in *Screen* 13, no. 1 (Spring, 1972).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23

⁶⁰ Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 70

it adds meaning, it “does so only to replace... supplant[ing] an antecedent one.”⁶¹ MacDonell’s Caption instead builds up a network of acquired and potential relationships, the significance of which — intrinsic or otherwise — we feel obliged to navigate. Krauss expands on appropriation that, as conceived by Crimp and Owens, established a vacancy of meaning at the heart of its images. She terms this innovation a “demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art...acting now to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition.”⁶² Even as he voices a critique of similar myths, the Caption in *Originality and Repetition* exposes their transience by flooding MacDonell’s appropriated images with a surfeit of relationships, rather than liquidating meaning and its prospects. His deferral of meaning is sustained between several moving parts, between which “possibilities for misunderstanding and incomprehensibility” abound.⁶³

The Caption’s far-flung textual intervention highlights that the sources, histories and worlds that once belonged to the images in *Originality and Repetition* were abstracted from them before they were appropriated for the film. MacDonell engages the separation that her images underwent when adopted into the library’s Picture Collection as a part of their story. By contrast, in *Golden Distance* Brauntuch separates his mysterious image from any source, emphasising its isolation through mechanically clean borders against an empty field. Artist Stan Douglas criticises what he calls an irresponsible lack of “reconciliation, or even engagement with the world from which [their] images were taken” attempted by Pictures Generation artists.⁶⁴ As though heeding these sentiments, in the absence of further context, MacDonell leaves the

⁶¹ Ibid, 69

⁶² Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” 170

⁶³ Patrick Greaney, *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6

⁶⁴ Stan Douglas, “Joanne Todd and the Final Girl,” 34. Quoted in Janice Gurney, “In and Out of History,” *Community of Images*, 144

primary decontextualization of her images visible; imperfectly scissor-cut edges, pencilled scrawls in various handwriting, and creases and rubbings incurred in circulation suggest the Picture Collection as a substitute source.⁶⁵ Encountering the images in *Originality and Repetition* or *The Picture Collection*, as Turions writes, “means negotiating between independent and related acts... the librarian’s decision to extract the images from their original context and insert them into... folders; MacDonell’s research and compulsion toward certain images; her collaging and re-photographing in her studio; and our looking in the gallery.”⁶⁶ MacDonell implicates her own gesture in the progressive removal of these images from their original places in time and space by documenting them against her studio wall; provided with a Caption who does not attribute them to a source, the task of reckoning with missing context ultimately falls on the viewer.

The esoteric connections that the Caption draws, coupled with his cocky smile and cheap shots (“what is original and what is a repetition has of course been dealt with before, so I’ll make no claims to originality here myself”) characterise him as suspiciously self-important. But his role in the film contaminates any would-be “self-encapsulation,” a condition that Krauss diagnoses in her 1976 essay, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.”⁶⁷ She argues that the cyclicity of video’s instant feedback technology, the centrality of atomized human bodies to its recordings, and reflections of the audience—symptoms that *Originality and Repetition* formally exhibits—insulates its subjects in a collapsed present. Cut off from historical time, they “withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the self.”⁶⁸ The Caption forgoes any direct reference to the visual information on screen, and rather than close that

⁶⁵ Gurney, “In and Out of History,” *Community of Images*, 142

⁶⁶ Turions, “Not Looking at an Archive of Collecting Practices”

⁶⁷ Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (1976): 53

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 57

explicatory loop, he draws our attention to tangents that mire *Originality and Repetition* in discursive relationships and timeframes. By citing his own history of modernism, making unspoken references to Benjamin, and using language from Krauss and then Deleuze, he evokes a “more general historical relationship.”⁶⁹ Moreover, according to Krauss this gesture suggests that “this larger history is the source of meaning” for the work in which it is made.⁷⁰ The Caption’s musings, however tenuous, function to communicate the idea that there is meaning for the film (and its images) contained in relationships that extend beyond the frame.

At the end of his speech, the Caption issues an appeal through Deleuze by name: “Deleuze has said that ideas advance, or grow out of the centre of things. The middle, he claims, is where the real, generative action unfolds. If this is true, then maybe we need to... turn back ... This time holding fast to the centre instead of racing forward to the end.”⁷¹ By summoning the rhizome, “open and connectable in all of its dimensions... detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification... reworked by an individual, group, or social formation... always [with] multiple entryways,” the Caption suggests the boundlessness and dynamism of images in relation.⁷² As Deleuze and Guattari write in the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, “The middle is... it is where things pick up speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction.”⁷³ The parameters of relevance have expanded beyond the reasonable expectation that we may be able to process and properly think things through; by definition, the point will never come.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 53

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05:54

⁷² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12

⁷³ Ibid., 25

And still we are compelled to respond by the sincere eye contact that the Caption levels through the camera. His look reinforces the blurred boundary between making and looking, artist and audience, producer and viewer that settles in the art object today. “Through its transposing of inside and outside space” and by “bring[ing] the space of research and production (the library, her studio) into the space of display (the gallery),” *Originality and Repetition*’s camera obscura/studio/viewing room augments the proliferating relationships that we may encounter around images.⁷⁴ By supplying the condition that as we look, we too become an influential part of that network, the structure recalls the fact that viewers are implicated in what becomes of an image’s relationally conjured and mobile horizon of meaning.

In an essay titled “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” Steyerl argues that production has fused with circulation and ushered in “an age of crowd creativity” on the internet, the logics of which are now moving offline.⁷⁵ This shift further embeds the post-Duchampian transformative spectatorship that *Originality and Repetition* salutes, and accentuates it with the recognition that “images are not... merely treacherous appearances... [but] nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems.”⁷⁶ Looking in excess—at an image’s past and prospective passage in and out of relationships, the powers that dictate them, the gaps they leave, and their speculative futures—is thus also a preliminary component to looking *responsibly*. The reality that appearances (however treacherous) and myths (however constructed) are practically, if not intrinsically, meaningful, hovers in MacDonell’s conscious choice of images. As Turions writes, that “there is no mirror without an image and no photograph of nothing... that a reflection is

⁷⁴ Gabrielle Moser, “Annie MacDonell, Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition),” *esse arts + opinions* 75, (2012): 79

⁷⁵ Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux Journal* no. 49, (November 2013)

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

always of something...is a perfect metaphor for the mediation of the world through photography.”⁷⁷ Cognizant of the postmodern discourse of appropriation, I add that this metaphor is distinctly contemporary.

By giving hers a speaking role, MacDonell reverses the silent and supplementary function of captions as *subtitles* to reaffirm the importance of Benjamin’s caption as a reminder that an image’s meaning exists in conference with the world. The talking, human Caption solicits consideration for these many and mutating relationships to people, histories, and ideas. Han distinguishes images possessed of a countenance, a “self-possessed counterpart— which looks at, concerns or implicates me.”⁷⁸ This is “the gaze [of] the other within the image.”⁷⁹ The Caption arrives with a face and a voice through which he both concerns his audience with the context based significance of the film’s images, and portends a pitiless level of relativity and change. Benjamin returned to captioning in his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” where he describes its precise and commanding role in films “where the way each single image is understood seems prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images.”⁸⁰ In the very same paragraph, he opposes this prescribed mode of looking to aura’s “last entrenchment: the human countenance...the fleeting expression of a human face” and the “free-floating contemplation” appropriate to it.⁸¹ In light of this passage, the Caption’s role in *Originality and Repetition* hints at preserving the mystery contained between the film’s images; their interplay remains the source of an undisclosed narrative, resistant to interpellation.

⁷⁷ Turions, “Not Looking at an Archive of Collecting Practices”

⁷⁸ Han, *In the Swarm*, 23

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 27

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Sequence 3: *Looking Simultaneously*

Following the Caption's monologue, the screen cuts to black. When it does whirr back to life, it is to double back on itself. The final sequence of the film commences as though to demonstrate what the Caption identifies as our "ability to hold everything in the air at once, to fold ideas into each other."⁸² In his terms, our "ease with practices of quotation and appropriation" expresses this collective faculty for negotiating the coexistence of things at the same time.⁸³ In this section, I discuss the retroactive collection of already-made materials as a means of articulating experiences of the momentary as kaleidoscopic; in the third sequence of the film, MacDonell transmutes this idea by interlacing the two preceding ones. Starting respectively from the same image of the woman with the mirror covering her face, sequences one and two begin again, the first staggered behind the second. At an increased transparency the two layered reels play over each other with the hazy quality of memory: image overlaid with image, image overlaid with the Caption, the Caption overlaid with himself.

The soundtrack for the final four and a half minutes of *Originality and Repetition* is a piano rendition of Bach's "Canon a 2 Per Tonos."⁸⁴ Composed as a "canon"—a single piece to be played by multiple instruments, separated by temporal intervals—this musical scheme mirrors relayed visuals and carries the overarching theme of repetition. But what is more apparent, by contrast to the percussive crashes in the first sequence and the Caption's forceful cadence in the second, is the piano's sombre mood. The third and longest sequence returns to an understanding of appropriation as a gathering mechanism for disparate images. As the coda to the film, it collects together the opening, frenetic montage, with the real-timing of the Caption's monologue

⁸² MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05:34

⁸³ Ibid., 05:29

⁸⁴ Korczynski, *Annie MacDonell: Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*. This music was played and recorded for the film by Alex Geddie.

and figures them together at an attenuated pace. Recalled in transparent layers and with a slowed score, as Jacob Korman describes in the catalogue essay, “images are overlaid to move simultaneously but their double never dovetails – it refuses to synchronise even as the voice falls silent.”⁸⁵ As they shift over each other all at once, images and their former positions, along with the Caption, almost merge; however, in their resistance to a singular continuity and their refusal to resolve into one another, they convey a heightened sense for their own displacement in time. MacDonell deploys strategies of appropriation to hold together, and preserve as distinct, spatially and temporally discontinuous images. By observing it in concert with MacDonell’s use of space and mirrors, I argue that the third sequence of *Originality and Repetition* unfolds as an exercise in *looking simultaneously*: a mode of bearing witness to the simultaneity of the immediate moment as one that comprises multiple stories and perspectives at the same time.

In her engagement with Krauss’ conception of originality, MacDonell, via the Caption, fixates on the avant-garde “ground zero [or] birth,” privileged through the “rejection or dissolution of the past.”⁸⁶ These characteristics become, in his words “identical, repetitious oedipal blows” dealt between successive modernist episodes “racing forward.”⁸⁷ A contradistinctive understanding of repetition and appropriation emerges; as procedures that reanimate previously-made materials, they contend with the past. The final sequence of the film enacts this idea, firstly by recollecting its own past. In lieu of introducing additional images or dialogue, when the film turns back on itself, it recalls images and brings them into a relationship with the Caption and his double.

Drawing on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Han takes up recollection as an approach to history, one that counters the oedipal sign of progress, and introduces it as an

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant Garde,” 157

⁸⁷ *Originality and Repetition*, 06:34

antidote to the additive logic of contemporary communications. He writes: “Communication as the exchange of information does not recount anything it only counts... Narrative relations give way to informational connections. The amassing of information does not ... let things and events enter into a conversation with each other.”⁸⁸ Similarly, *Originality and Repetition* and repetition refuses the dissolution of the past as a means of facilitating conversation between its images. In the final sequence of the film we look at MacDonell’s appropriated images as the subjects of new relationships to one another.

The existence of (or increased appreciation for) multiple histories, their material effects on, and subjectivity to amendment today, is an important feature of contemporary simultaneity. Vereowert attributes the distinctly different conditions of appropriation today to the “current sense of an excessive presence of history.”⁸⁹ He continues: the “emptiness of the signifier and the death of historical meaning [came] to sound like a mantra, a spell to keep away the specters of modern history that linger on the margins...[with] the sudden realization that the signs do speak as multiple echoes of historic meaning.”⁹⁰ While a simplified periodization, Steyerl affirms and further specifies this shift as one precipitated by “the contradictory dynamics of globalization and postcommunism/postcolonialism, [within which] archives fragment and multiply, some become porous and leak, some bend and twist their contents.”⁹¹ This environment, as Verwoert and Steyerl describe it, urges the practice of looking in excess that I have argued the second sequence of the film reflects; their observations further underscore the grounds on which appropriation elsewhere articulates important subversions and supplements of normative histories and their control of reproduction. In tune with the Caption’s critique of modernist

⁸⁸ Han, *Saving Beauty*, 75

⁸⁹ Verwoert, “Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Today Feels Different”

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Hito Steyerl, “Politics of the Archive: Translations in Film,” *transversal texts*, (March 2008) <https://transversal.at/transversal/0608/steyerl/en>.

progress, and MacDonell's vaguely wary treatment of the Picture Collection's acquisition practices, it is difficult to resist reading protest into MacDonell's interest in the multiplicity of historical (and plain temporal) structures that mark the present.

But the third sequence of *Originality and Repetition* approaches the concept of nonlinear time in a more abstract sense; I read the commingling of images that it unfolds as more ambiguous evidence of "multiple rhythms, stories, and durations," and their simultaneous existence as such.⁹² In his book *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, Lutz Koepnick recognizes that these effects, which structure our present, are coterminous with "a seemingly overwhelming and mind-numbing sense of simultaneity."⁹³ Everything and all at once characterises moment-to-moment existence in a globalised world mapped by communication lines that know no distance, and meted out with the signature speed of contemporary capitalism. Where speed "continues to inhabit the normative center of what it means to envision any viable form of mobility, progress, and transformation," Koepnick argues that the present asks to be considered in the register of an aesthetic *slowness*.⁹⁴ He asserts that experiencing the heartening dimensions of a heterogeneous world, hinges in part on wrestling simultaneity from the stultification of a spatially collapsed and temporally accelerated present. The third sequence's melancholic score reflects an ambivalence consistent with a present that rings with both plural perspectives and the fragmenting pressures of deregulation for profit.

There is a literal, and valid, parallel to be drawn between Koepnick's understanding of slowness and *Originality and Repetition*'s now decelerated presentation of images. If the first sequence illustrates the incomprehensibility of visual information thrust at the viewer too fast (or all at once), the third sequence ostensibly relaxes its pace to allow for consideration. But the

⁹² Koepnick, *On Slowness*, 13

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

images return as foggy layers that pass over one another; they disrupt each other's surfaces and install new shadows that impede immediate visibility. For Han, the “disturbed [and] fissured” image resists viewing as consuming: a habit recommended by the speed of digital communication.⁹⁵ He writes “In the course of acceleration, immediate presence becomes total. It pushes out any latency. Everything has to be available at once.”⁹⁶ ‘Everything has to be available at once’—a command that smooth images satisfy formally—captures the nature of simultaneity in a culture of capitalist speed. Now slowed, the images in *Originality and Repetition* still do not give themselves over as wholly consumable entities. This effect is further delivered by their depictions of mirrors, frozen in time and unyielding to the viewer. In contrast to the real mirrors on the camera obscura's exterior, the photographed mirrors in the film defy the self-referential attitude towards images that their immediate accessibility promotes.

Instead, the third sequence of *Originality and Repetition* reflects simultaneity with images that retain some autonomy from vision. In doing so, they affect a slowness that, as Koepnick goes on to describe, “sharpens our sense for the coexistence of different and often incompatible vectors of time and, in doing so, it invites us to reflect on the impact of contemporary speed.”⁹⁷ The return of the images in *Originality and Repetition* functions to illustrate a concurrent existence that might be considered. What it provides with a pace that starkly contrasts that of the first sequence is not heightened visibility, but room to meditate, rather than consume in its absence. As their shifts and fades unfold, bleeding but never collapsing into one another, an architecture of slowly passing time reinforces the space between them.

⁹⁵ Han, *Saving Beauty*, 36

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38

⁹⁷ Koepnick, *On Slowness*, 4

In its nearly (but not quite) fused images, *Originality and Repetition* visualises the traces of their distinct sources as a testament to individuation. Their dates (inscribed through fashions) as well as styles and qualities—commercial, documentary, personal—that were roughly apparent in the chaotic first sequence, now create a perspective replete with “the disparate and inexplicable... in close proximity.”⁹⁸ The end of the film concludes the passage of its images, not only through the first two sequences. As Korczyski traces, from their framed place in the *Picture Collection* on the outside wall, “these images echo...via the mirrors...forming the exterior of [the cinema]...The photographs then return twice to the interior of this structure, first as inverted camera obscura images pulled from the same gallery, and then in [the] film... but multiply as they may, the frame of each form remains intact.”⁹⁹ Finally, brought into the strictest proximity, they resist being “pushed through the order and filters of consciousness, rationality, and meaning-making.”¹⁰⁰ Visibly tempting both formal and conceptual melding, they ultimately refuse to cohere under the viewer’s gaze.

The bringing-together of images at the same time in the third sequence reveals that the uneasy traces of their displacement persist; the physicality of the images, as captured in the film and reinforced in the gallery space further distils a sense for their independent existences. In the film, the shadows that their curling forms make on the wall remains an insistent reminder that not even these particular copies can be contained or confined by the moment we look at them; not only do they come from somewhere, they were also literally returned to the Picture Collection once the borrowing period was up. Extended out into the installation schema, the identities of the images in *Originality and Repetition* gathered a spatial presence and a material guard against what Steyerl observes as the “flattening-out of visual content...within economies

⁹⁸ Ibid., 196

⁹⁹ Korczynski, *Annie Macdonell: Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*

¹⁰⁰ Koepnick, *On Slowness*, 196

of knowledge that tear images and their captions out of context into the swirl of permanent capitalist deterritorialization.”¹⁰¹ While the Caption’s sequence reflects the daunting absence of inhibitions and the incomprehensibility of images that have succumbed to this swirl, *Originality and Repetition* now thwarts the effects of compression, a key characteristic of images augmented for speed.

In her 2013 image series *Flatness, Light, Black & White*, MacDonell further explores the effects of compression in the digital age, aligning it with experiences of the world that are similarly flattened out and reduced to metrics of information (figures 13-15). As she writes, “the series of photographs charts the formal properties of the image in the digital age: its mutability and propensity for multiple perspectives, its capacity for compression, flatness and transparency.”¹⁰² Shot in a single barber shop over the course of a day, the reduction of three-dimensional space in these images to panes of black and white attests jarringly to her claim that “the ever-presence of digital information has flattened out the contours of life.”¹⁰³ *Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)* represents this dynamic by opposite means; the proliferation of images cast about the space to appear instantly in multiple places at once operates as a spatially expanded reimagination of images on the move.

Completed by the mirrored exterior of the camera obscura *Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)* establishes the position of its viewers within this network of mobile images—one that includes the power to blot them out, and to warp them by shifting in orientation. What it also enables is the more anxious possibility of seeing oneself in the act of looking. As Gabrielle Moser reviews, “MacDonell’s mirrored camera positions us as both the object of its gaze and its viewer, confusing the acts of framing and being framed, looking and

¹⁰¹ Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image”

¹⁰² MacDonell, “Flatness, Light, Black and White”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

being watched.”¹⁰⁴ The prospect of being aware of one’s own act of looking is an uncomfortable one, likened by MacDonell to the vulnerability of being looked at.

This exchange recalls an ethical dimension to the activity of looking simultaneously as illustrated in the third sequence of the film. By training the eye to what Koepnick describes as “interlac[ed,] different perceptions [onto] ever moving, unabashedly heterogeneous images of passing time and space in motion,” *Originality and Repetition*’s final sequence facilitates an experience of looking simultaneously that respects the fragmented moment for what it is: heterogeneous.¹⁰⁵ Looking simultaneously includes at base, looking *at* manifest simultaneity; but the active negotiation that final sequence provokes by experimenting with unresolved distinctions and indeterminate interactions between images, pushes beyond that more or less unavoidable perceptual experience. The possibility of looking this way in everyday encounters with simultaneity (in and beyond images themselves) becomes a necessarily effortful resistance to the compressive weight of contemporary speed and apparent limitlessness. It entails a patient, discerning response that withstands the urge, in Han’s words, to “impos[e] something on the object,” and instead respects the diverse inflections that make up simultaneousness by releasing them to their specificity.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The mournful tone that *Originality and Repetition* assumes in the end offsets the hope contained in commencing an inquiry into “the creative potential within repetition.”¹⁰⁷ Evaluated

¹⁰⁴ Moser, “Annie MacDonell, Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition),” 79

¹⁰⁵ Koepnick, *On Slowness*, 196

¹⁰⁶ Han, *Saving Beauty*, 54

¹⁰⁷ Annie MacDonell Interview by Joan Lilian Wison

strictly in the terms put forth by this objective, the film then arrives at a variation on the unsatisfying, but basically unimpeachable conclusion that Boon summarizes in *In Praise of Copying*: “In the final analysis, copying itself is neither good nor bad— it all depends on what we use it for.”¹⁰⁸ Reflected by the film, repetition and appropriation—evidence of which is exhaustingly and excessively present—are necessarily relativistic, context-contingent, and muddled. As MacDonell observes in her essay, “Image and the Abyss,” today images and ideas are

knocked together in different combinations and configurations until meaning emerges. Sometimes this ricocheting network of signals falls into a complicated, dazzling work of harmony, one that makes the head spin and the mind open in new and exciting ways. At other times, the reflections bounce around without effect then recede meaninglessly into the dead space that they themselves have generated. The line between these two outcomes can be narrow.¹⁰⁹

Looking simultaneously, looking in excess and exhausted looking are all traversed by this narrow line and in turn animated by the conflictedness of appropriation and repetition—something I have hoped to communicate in choosing to work with terms that do not immediately redeem their effects.

Exhaustion, simultaneity and excess are all words that, independently of the concerns of this paper, effectively describe contemporary life; exhaustion and excess do so with decidedly negative connotations. Faced with the availability of an overwhelming number of images, taking those images seriously, looking concertedly and thinking critically are procedures that quickly give way to exhaustion. In *In the Swarm* Han describes “Information Fatigue Syndrome” as an affliction brought on by excessive information: “Today, immunosuppression allows massive quantities of information to penetrate us without any immune defense... [IFS] augments the

¹⁰⁸ Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, 10

¹⁰⁹ Annie MacDonell “Image and the Abyss,” *Millions Magazine* 2 <http://www.anniemacdonell.ca/millions>

consumption of information.”¹¹⁰ The urgency of interrogating the conditions of exhausted looking, which place critical observation under the spell of acceleration and excess, reveals itself in the effects of IFS: “Patients complain about the progressive weakening of their analytic capacity... and inability to bear responsibility.”¹¹¹

The excessive presence of information that Han here charges with overwhelming analytic capacities, returns to torment looking in excess with the unbridled possibilities of meaning generated in constantly shifting contexts. The Caption’s sequence of *Originality and Repetition* conveys the elasticity of meaning, and recognises the ambivalent and potentially immobilising task of looking in excess. As I began to address in “Sequence two: Looking in excess,” the practical and material effects of images on people has not waned with our loss of faith in their fixed values. The importance of considering how we look at images, something *Originality and Repetition* does through appropriation, extends not from the fact that they are *essentially* meaningful, but because in existence, and experience, they absolutely do communicate; they dazzle, they hurt, they galvanize, they compel, and manifest change.

A strong case could be made for the fact that we should care about repetition and appropriation precisely because of this fact: images matter. In a review of MacDonell’s practice, Rea MacNamara reminds that “Appropriation... is a means of re-circulating images, and ultimately, narratives.”¹¹² To repeat an image or an artwork, even to deconstruct its ideological foundations, is to place it in circulation anew. This acknowledgement hovers in the background of MacDonell’s work. But what might it look like to foreground it, and to survey contemporary appropriation as the face of so many mobilized ideas? The consequences of

¹¹⁰ Han, *In The Swarm*, 60

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Rea MacNamara, “10 Canadian Artists with Forward Thinking Practices,” *Canadian Art*, January 3, 2017 <https://canadianart.ca/features/forward-looking-canadian-artists/>.

appropriation-as-distribution are arguably a more pressing concern as we become increasingly indifferent to *and* inundated by its re-introduced imagery. The sensitivity with which *Originality and Repetition* treats looking is not unique; nor do the modes of looking that I have ascribed to the film pertain to it alone. Seeking out evidence of exhausted looking, looking in excess and looking simultaneously as practices, and applying them as theories beyond the narrow focus of this paper could yield a greater understanding of the implications of so much repetition or the potential contained in being aware of how we look at things.

Since the 1970s and 80s, when appropriation appeared in the controversial and exciting light of an emergent practice, the dissipation of categorical characterizations—radical, subversive, petulant, sacrilegious—might have allowed for a renewed critical distance. But appropriation’s thorough adoption into the vernacular of contemporary art making has instead led to a dramatic decrease in visibility, and has unfolded concurrently with what Han identifies as a decline in critical distance as such.¹¹³ There is a great deal of truth to the Caption’s claim that “our absolute ease with practices of quotation and appropriation...defines this present moment in time.”¹¹⁴ *Originality and Repetition* captures this context such that it becomes legitimate to ask the tautological question of whether the distancing and destabilizing effects of altering an image’s relationship to the place that it belongs, might be used to interrogate the predominance of appropriation itself— which is a largely unscrutinized feature of contemporary visual culture.

As pervasive, appropriation at least qualifies as an effective place to commence an inquiry into the culture of spectatorship today. Owing to the embeddedness of procedures of quotation, copy-paste, social media “sharing,” and more, practices of appropriating and repeating images in art reflect the real ways in which they amass, change hands, are encountered and

¹¹³ Han, *In the Swarm*, 1

¹¹⁴ MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*, 05: 29

experienced in a world trending towards a decentralized means of reproduction. As I have argued, MacDonell demonstrates the applicability of these artistic strategies to thematizing, parsing, exploring and learning how we look at images. Ultimately, she develops a constructive model for looking simultaneously, a resolutely critical perspective from which we might proceed to engage with, rather than evade this world of tossed up timeframes and plastic durations.

As the tenor of the final sequence of *Originality and Repetition* denotes, the object of looking simultaneously is not pleasure; instead it suggests resigning oneself to *experience*, an ongoing and necessarily uncomfortable process. As Han elegantly argues, “Seeing in the emphatic sense always mean *seeing differently*, namely *experiencing*. It is impossible to see differently without exposing oneself to injury...otherwise the same keeps repeating itself. Sensing is vulnerability...Without injury there is no truth, not even perception. There is no truth in the hell of the same.”¹¹⁵ The distance between looking in this paper— concerned by capitalist speeds, shorn contexts, and obfuscated or digitized material consequences— and *seeing* as Han describes it, is vast and fraught. Equally complicating to my commentary on repetition is his allusion to sameness. But it also returns us to the crucial recognition that to experience, see, perceive, or look today includes contending with a reality overflowing with copies. *Originality and Repetition* takes this nebulous responsibility seriously. It ends with a sense of dutiful, fated optimism that is also refracted through the camera obscura as a metaphor for looking simultaneously: its lens a technological eye, to which belongs an image that still moves with the world, an image before it is developed.

¹¹⁵ Han, *Saving Beauty*, 33

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Figures



Figure 1. Annie MacDonell, *Originality and The Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*. Installation view at Mercer Union, 2012



Figure 2. Annie MacDonell, *Originality and The Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition)*. Installation view at Mercer Union, 2012



Figure 3. Annie MacDonell, *The Picture Collection* from inside the camera obscura. Installation view at Mercer Union, 2012

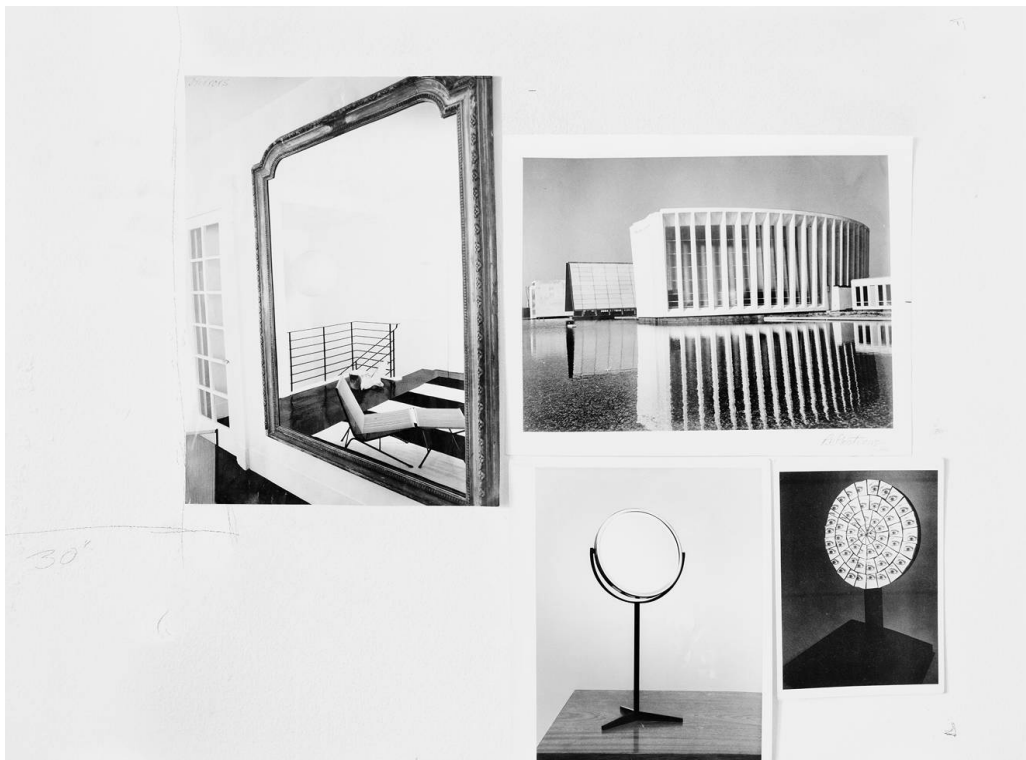


Figure 4. Annie MacDonell, from *The Picture Collection*, 2012



Figure 5. Annie MacDonell, from *The Picture Collection*, 2012



Figure 6. Annie MacDonell, from *The Picture Collection*, 2012



Figure 7. Annie MacDonell, from *The Picture Collection*, 2012 (The top right image is highlighted in the text)



Figure 8. Annie MacDonell, still from *Originality and Repetition*, 2012



Figure 9. Annie MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition*.played inside the camera obscura's cinema at Mercer Union, 2012



Figure 10. Annie MacDonell, from *The Picture Collection*, 2012



Figure 11. Annie MacDonell, *Originality and Repetition* played inside the camera obscura's cinema at Mercer Union, 2012

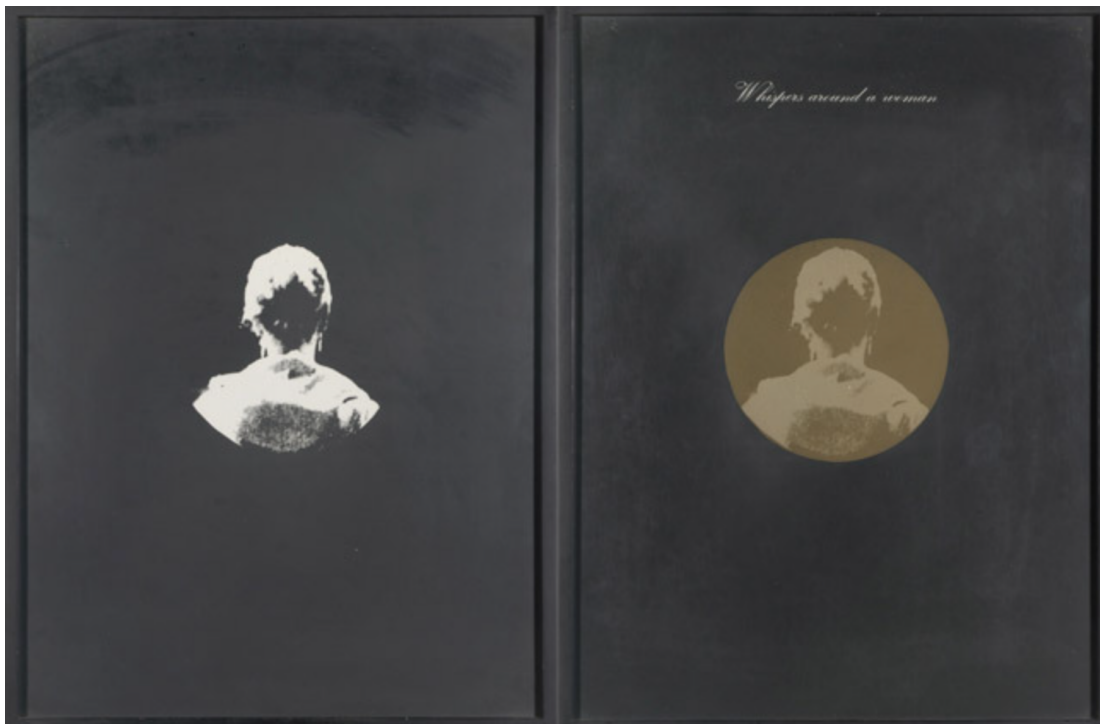


Figure 12. Troy Brauntuch, *Golden Distance*, 1976

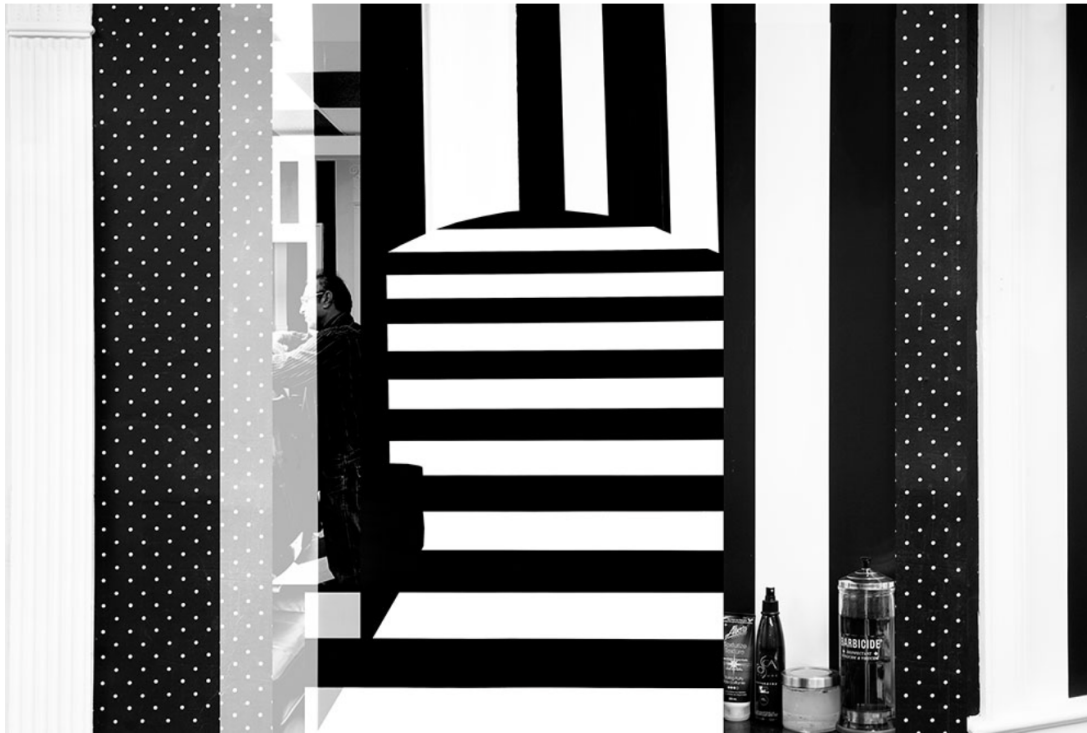


Figure 13. Annie MacDonell, from *Flatness, Light, Black & White*, 2013



Figure 14. Annie MacDonell, from *Flatness, Light, Black & White*, 2013



Figure 15. Annie MacDonell, from *Flatness, Light, Black & White*, 2013