BECOMING PAST

HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

JANE BLOCKER

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Jane Blocker

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For my teachers,
especially Carol, Kevin, and Della,
and for my students

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Contents

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HISTORY AS PROSTHESIS

> *History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now.*
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

The Problem of the Contemporary

To be a historian of contemporary art is to work in a rather challenging and uncomfortable profession. First, no one can really agree on what we're talking about when we use the term *contemporary*, a word that develops etymologically from *tempus* and yet yields little understanding of time. *Current*, *recent*, *new*, *up-to-date*, *modern*, *now*, *present*, *on the horizon*—*contemporary*'s synonyms are as numerous as they are vague. Second, whatever the contemporary is, it's clear there's way too much of it. Terry Smith nicely explains the unique obstacles set in the way of the contemporary art historian when he writes: "Look around you. Contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now. It cannot be subject to generalization and has overwhelmed art history; it is simply, totally contemporaneous."[1] The spatial spread of the global contemporary overwhelms because there is no end of the "now" in sight.

As a consequence of that temporal and spatial flood, we attempt to erect levees, taxonomic sandbags to divert some of it elsewhere, but we're not really sure where the dams should go. What constitutes "the now" as a period designation? The problem with the contemporary is that, inasmuch as its temporal parameters relate to an individual's

lifetime (my contemporary is decidedly different from my students'), it is indexical, a fugitive, a shifter in Roman Jakobson's sense. Richard Meyer, in his recent book *What Was Contemporary Art?*,[2] describes the surprise felt by many middle-aged academics when he realizes that "rather than referring to art since 1945, art since 1960, or even art since 1970 [what are for us and our generation of art historians the logical moment from which the contemporary can be said to have embarked], 'contemporary' meant to [my students] the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past."[3] I definitely feel his pain. The contemporary, of course, skews to a younger demographic. More contentious than any other historical period designation, the meaning of "contemporary" is only discernible in the specific context of its utterance and only for the specific audience it is hailing at any given moment.

Moreover, as soon as the number of years to which one can apply that name expands to sixty or seventy, its descriptive force is significantly diminished.[4] This is the problem with which Amelia Jones wrestles in her introduction to a survey textbook on contemporary art since 1945. "How can what is defined as *in existence now*—the contemporary—be written into (a) history? Is the notion of 'contemporary art history' or a 'history of contemporary art,'" she asks, "a contradiction in terms?" The challenge, she goes on to explain, is to explore "the complexities both of contemporary art as a now 'historical' phenomenon (as the years between 'now' and 1945 expand in number) and of contemporary art as potentially the cutting edge of what people calling themselves artists (or understood by others as such) are making and doing in this increasingly complex and globalized economy of cultural practices."[5] The contemporary, Jones suggests, flows in two directions at once: back toward history in the past tense and forward toward the cutting edge in the present progressive.

Not only is it a rather elusive category, but the slipperiness of the contemporary also causes actual panic. The charges read against it at academic conferences, in books and journals, and in the halls of art history departments are lengthy (I've heard them all): it isn't serious enough or distant enough in the past to warrant historical inquiry; we are too chummy with it and lose our objectivity; it blurs the distinctions between history and art criticism; it can't be researched because

there is no archive; it examines only that which is currently fashionable; it is self-involved; it is not all that new; it is an academic subfield that lacks rigor and is merely popular.[6] I believe that such claims are largely a manifestation of a profound lack of understanding of the contemporary's complex ontology and a certain level of denial about the degree to which other historical periods are equally plagued by subjectivity and self-involvement. To accuse the contemporary of being fashionable or popular is tautological; it is simply to accuse it of being contemporary. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his small essay on the topic, explains that the contemporary, like fashion, "can be defined as the introduction into time of a peculiar discontinuity," what he calls dys-chrony.[7] Like a sun always in the process of setting, the contemporary dips toward but never fully crosses the imaginary horizon between the present and the past, thus it feels too close, too personal, too subjective to be taken seriously as history. As such, however, it also makes evident the arbitrariness of all historical time and the imaginary and purely conventional nature of any historical distance that scholars deem to be sufficient.

Moreover, it is important to note that scholars' unease with this dys-chrony manifests itself in the dismissive rhetoric they use to describe the contemporary, a rhetoric that is very often cast in generational terms. That is, the contemporary is personified as an adolescent and associated with the indiscretions of youth—it is lazy, narcissistic, capricious, puerile, superficial, romantic, and unaware that previous time periods were young once too. Thus it must be reproached, disciplined, and encouraged to mature. Although it is clear that Meyer does not necessarily share all of these views, his caution to the contemporary reads in similarly paternal terms. "We may . . . have developed too much love for the new and now," he counsels as though he were talking about a lovesick teenager, "while retaining too little for the old and then."[8] That paternalism, the close and yet alienated relation between symbolic fathers and their symbolic children, between the becoming past and the present, is, I argue, endemic to the contemporary (this indeed will be the subject of later chapters).

Even if we could sort out the timing, bridge the generation gap, and fix some date sufficiently far back to bear the weight of historicist gravitas (1960 to the present, say), and even if we could limit the

geographic reach (maybe exclude some of the more remote places—whatever those are), we would have dealt only with the term's material definition, and of course at some point even that would have to be adjusted as the future continues to arrive. The other, much more interesting problem, to which I have already alluded, is the contemporary as a contradictory operation, a confounding mechanism, and a paradoxical logic. Agamben describes the complex temporal contortions to which the contemporary historian is subject when he writes: "The time of fashion [the time of the contemporary] . . . constitutively anticipates itself and consequently is also always too late. It always takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a 'not yet' and a 'no more.'"[9] As soon as one names the moment of the immediate present "contemporary," one performatively produces that moment as now and simultaneously ushers it into the past. The name discursively recognizes that moment in already familiar terms, situates it and lays it aside with other contemporary moments now gone, manages it with a retrospective gaze. Contemporariness, Agamben avers, "is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*."[10] The contemporary peculiarly announces itself as "of its time," close enough to breathe down time's neck, but also, as a result, to be tripped up by time, to fall out of step with it.

Connected and separated at once, looking forward while turning back, gliding into the future while standing awkwardly in the past, the historian of the contemporary flails about and falters. This is the humorous balletic spectacle I imagine artist Tino Sehgal was thinking of when he created his work *This Is So Contemporary* (2005), in which he trained museum guards periodically to dance about the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale while singing "This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary." "The dance," as curator and critic Francesco Bonami describes it, "is very simple, nothing elaborate, as if the guards were dancing among friends in a disco."[11] Sehgal does not allow photo or video documentation of his work, but the few bootleg images of the performance one finds on the Internet show it to have been a rather awkward affair. Not only is the dance rather silly and the song amateurish, but also, as soon as the work is proclaimed

to be "so contemporary," it is utterly uncontemporary, downright old-fashioned. What is more, the work is now, as I write this, nearly a decade old (it will be older still by the time you read this). To paraphrase Agamben, the locution "I am in this instant contemporary" is contradictory, because the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already no longer contemporary.[12] Ridiculously, this is the song and dance that my book seeks to perform, the untenable moment it seeks to occupy. Even worse, I am trying to watch myself as I perform it.

Pathology

This kind of self-awareness is common in scholarship on the contemporary, which is obliged to talk about the present moment while at the same time analyzing why that moment makes talking about it so difficult. By all accounts, there is something very wrong with the present, and it seems to have to do with some crisis, some pathology, in memory or history, or both. Many scholars (such as Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Carolyn Steedman, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Andreas Huyssen, and Pierre Nora) have attempted repeatedly over the last forty or more years to diagnose this affliction. Kerwin Lee Klein names the problem the "memory industry" and dates its origins to the early 1980s (a decade that, for some, coincides with the start of what we call the contemporary as a historical period) with the publication of Pierre Nora's "Between Memory and History."[13]

Nora, reversing the centuries-long philosophical tradition of repudiating memory and praising history, or the tendency among professional historians since the nineteenth century to consider history a matter of steely masculine objectivity and memory as unreliably feminine, asserts that we are lamentably experiencing a simultaneous loss of memory and an excess of history; the loss of the real and of experience at the hands of representation; the loss of a premodern mode of being in relation to instrumentalized historicism. "No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own," he writes.

> Not only by volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory

> disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal of history.[14]

Nora describes contemporary archivization as an obsessive-compulsive reaction against technological advancements. Interestingly, the problem that seems to plague (and that Nora takes to be a unique feature of) his own contemporary (the late 1980s) was already the subject of a similar lament by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s. In his essay "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," Nietzsche describes his own observations as "unfashionable" because they "attempt to understand something in which our age justifiably takes pride—namely, its historical cultivation—as a detriment, an infirmity, a deficiency of the age, and furthermore, because I am even of the opinion that all of us suffer from a debilitating historical fever and that we at the very least need to recognize that we suffer from it."[15] The culture's fervid relationship with history, which Nietzsche describes as indicative of the late nineteenth century, seems to have grown more scarlet in the digital age.

Although Andreas Huyssen deploys his terminology differently from Nora (for him, memory and history are not antagonists but nearly synonymous), he arrives at a similar diagnosis. He calls the contemporary condition a "memory boom" and argues that on one hand we are surrounded by mnemonic technologies, memorials, and museums, while on the other we feel an overwhelming sense of historical crisis, the threat of forgetting.[16] "Historical memory today is not what it used to be," he warns. "It used to mark the relation of a community or a nation to its past, but the boundary between past and present used to be stronger and more stable than it appears to be today."[17] This shift is, for Huyssen, the sign of a crisis in temporality brought on by high-tech information systems, global capital, museal culture,[18] and the overwhelming expansion of media. The contemporary, *this* Now, is characterized by seemingly infinite amnesia brought about by seemingly infinite memory (such as the decision by the Library of Congress in 2010 to archive every electronic tweet since the microblogging site Twitter was established in 2006). As the

curators of a 2009 exhibition titled *Lost and Found: Crisis of Memory in Contemporary Art* write: "No other period was as obsessed with the idea of memory as we are: it invades our daily lives, recalling our anxious need to continuously retain a huge amount of information; but it also shapes our biggest fears and worries. How many times a day do we feel the need to 'save' something: a phone number, a word document, an email, an mp3 piece, or any other 'file'?"[19]

To write about the contemporary (any contemporary) is difficult enough, but to write about *this* contemporary, when temporality itself has become the subject of inquiry and spirited debate, significantly complicates matters. "I would argue that our obsessions with memory function as a reaction formation against the accelerating technical processes that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways," Huyssen writes.

> Memory . . . represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload.[20]

He argues that excess memory is a symptom of our panicked attempts to slow down, to resist, to recover, to claim, to drop an anchor in a chaotic storm of new media. In the eye of that storm, he tells us, lies the dissolution of time and the nonsynchronous. *Huyssen's* contemporary, the period that he claims manifests what he terms this "sense of crisis" (he was writing in the early nineties), is situated in a former future, the end of the twentieth century on the eve of the new millennium.

On one hand, what he describes seems only to have gotten worse a decade or more into the globalized and techno-driven twenty-first century (Nicolas Bourriaud's cumbersome terms "altermodern" and "heterochronical," Agamben's "dys-chrony," and Dipesh Chakrabarty's "heterotemporal" are symptomatic of this),[21] while on the other, it seems important to point out, reports of a similar crisis occur at least half a century further back in time to a point just *before* the current

information age. Writing in 1945, engineer Vannevar Bush considered new technologies to be the solution to the crisis of memory rather than its cause. In his famous article "As We May Think" he argues that technology (he proposes the Memex, a protocomputer) must be brought to bear on the problem of the *then* contemporary researcher's limited memory in the face of information overload. "There is a growing mountain of research," he complains. "But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends. The investigator is staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers—conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear."[22] Bush is disjoined from his *own* contemporary—roughly the period surrounding World War II—to the degree that he anticipates a future in which machines will help organize and store the mountains of information in which his present is buried. He seems presciently to describe a twenty-first-century phenomenon: the ungraspable nature of the information age and the forgetfulness and temporal disorientation it induces.

At the same time, however, to use Agamben's phrase, even Bush "arrives too late" for the past. He indulges in anachronism by describing as present something that can be just as easily located in a former age, something from the previous century. For the feeling he describes as so contemporary—being bogged down by commerce and technology and staggered by the speed of life—may be said to coincide just as much with nineteenth-century modernity's disillusionment with the industrial age as with the Cold War or millennial eras. Thus we might see Nietzsche, Bush, and Huyssen as engaged in an awkward dance called "This Is So Contemporary," a repeated claiming of temporal disorientation as uniquely characteristic of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century presentness. It is surely no coincidence that this contradictory state of affairs, this pathological condition, has developed at precisely the same moments in which there have been wholesale reexaminations of historical method (for example, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Hayden White, Dipesh Chakrabarty), contentious debates within the academy, and society at large, about history's abuses and lapses, truths and lies; historians' biases and privileges; the purpose and function of the past.[23]

What all that historiographic reexamination suggests is that

history has become, as I will explain more fully in chapter 1, an impossible problem. It is impossible, though, not for the reasons Huyssen and Nora lay out (or not solely for those reasons), not because of epic historical events or trends such as the development of new communications technologies and the resulting archival compulsion. Rather, its impossibility is a consequence of how those events or trends are examined and understood—that is, it may have to do more with the misapplication of historical methods in the present that are mistakenly and stubbornly retained from the past. Such methods privilege stable and coherent origins (even as we question how we understand historical agency, cultural interaction, and the causes of historical change) that consider the past as a fixed ideal to which the historian must return and from which she cannot deviate (even as we pay more attention to the inherent biases and subjectivities of the historian), that adopt linear temporalities (even as our sense of time is undone by new technologies and scientific discoveries), and that enforce the rigid dichotomy between the real and representation (even as we debate how reality is itself a cultural product).

One example of this can be seen where Huyssen describes what he calls the "current transformation of temporal experience," that is, a profound change in the world, which has jammed or radically altered our natural reception of temporal information. Rather than see temporal experience as subject to interference from specific historical conditions, and time itself as linear, other scholars, such as neuroscientist David Eagleman, describe a revolutionary transformation in our understanding of how the brain experiences (and possibly always has experienced) temporality. Pronouncing time a "rubbery thing," Eagleman, inspired by the neurobiological experiments into the human perception of time undertaken by physiologist Benjamin Libet in the 1970s, makes the remarkable claim that there is an infinitesimally small yet extremely significant temporal lag between the moment when we experience something and the moment we recognize it as such.[24] During that lag, the brain is assembling all the data of experience into a coherent order, a kind of instantaneous historical narrative, and through that narrative it constructs what we understand reality to be. "We are not conscious of the actual moment of the present," Libet remarks in tacit agreement with Agamben. "We are

always a little late."[25] Contemporary reality is thus, from the neurobiological perspective, "a tape-delayed broadcast."[26] As though he were responding to Huyssen's and Nora's assertions about the contemporary preoccupation with memory, Eagleman claims: "Living in the past may seem like a disadvantage, but it's a cost that the brain is willing to pay. It's trying to put together the best possible story about what's going on in the world, and that takes time."[27] What this means is that, despite some historians' concerns that the contemporary simply cannot be historicized, that history as such cannot begin until an appropriate space of time (fifty or more years, for example) has elapsed, biologically speaking, we are always already living in historical consciousness.

The implications of this fact were made evident to me early on in my career when I was conducting dissertation research on Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, who had been killed only six years before I began my doctoral studies. At that time, the published literature on the artist's work consisted only of two small exhibition catalogs from one-person shows, a few catalogs from group shows, and a handful of newspaper articles and exhibition reviews. Since Mendieta made primarily ephemeral works of earth and body art, there was an archive of slides, photographs, and Super 8 films documenting that work, as well as some sculptural objects, but much of the archive had not yet been organized. It was with some trepidation that I pursued that research topic, because, intimidated as I was at the time by the prevailing art historical view of contemporaneity, I feared that it was not sufficiently historical. To my amazement, I discovered that despite these concerns Mendieta had *already been historicized*, that (like the human brain's efforts to organize sense perception) her life and work had been fitted into a narrative almost as quickly as it had been experienced. It wasn't that I arrived too early on the scene, as Meyer and others might fear, but that I arrived too late. The contemporary, as much as we may want to consider it otherwise, is being made history as it happens (which returns us to Agamben's notion of disjuncture and anachronism). The important question is not whether there is (or should be) contemporary art history, but how. And "how" is the primary concern of this book.

Prosthesis

Artist Dario Robleto has said that the architectural structures in and around which his works are displayed (handmade frames, cabinets, tables, boxes, shelves, drawers, and plinths)—whether inspired by the museum vitrine or pedestal, the commercial display case or shop-window—are "the stage the artwork is standing on while it performs its song."[28] One could describe an introduction as a similar type of structure—the pedestal on which the book stands, the frame or stanchion that circumscribes and draws attention to the ideas it contains. The miniature stage on which this book is propped, the inert object that holds it up for view, is the prosthesis, the concept and operation of the prosthetic. And the song that this book keeps trying to sing while it stands uncomfortably on its wooden leg is the one written by Sehgal, "This Is So Contemporary." Intentionally silly, ironic, but also deeply complex, the song is (in keeping with Robleto's sensibilities) a ballad in which the singer laments the heartbreak that the very word *contemporary* has created. She tries to understand the temporal disjunctions, the anachronistic contortions in which the historian is caught.

With its song and dance, this book tries to be a history of the contemporary (it tells stories about the recent past of contemporary artists, including Dario Robleto, Matthew Buckingham, Steve McQueen, Ross McElwee, and the performance group Goat Island) while at the same time trying to understand precisely *how* to be a history of the contemporary. It wants to know how it is doing history even as it's doing it; therefore, like Robleto, it has to think about its own apparatuses, to think about the stage on which it stands. Thus it must begin by articulating what is meant by the prosthesis.

From Robleto's perspective, the rather grim task of carving for oneself a prosthetic limb serves as a powerful image of the most sincere form of art making. In the Civil War era (a period Robleto has studied seriously), infamous for an extraordinarily high number of surgical amputations, soldiers routinely and pragmatically set about the task of making their own artificial arms and legs. "If you can just get your head around how strange that would be," he remarks in wonderment, "to remake your own body yourself with a piece of wood and

a knife."[29] Robleto has investigated the idea of the prosthetic limb in a few of his pieces, most powerfully in *The Creative Potential of Disease* (2004), in which he took an antique doll, originally handcrafted by a convalescing Civil War soldier, and sculpted a replacement leg for it out of femur bone dust and prosthetic alginate (a chemical polymer used in dentistry and medicine to cast body parts). The ragged doll, with its lumpy head crudely carved out of vegetable ivory, its glass-bead eyes with dabs of black paint forming misaligned pupils, its threadbare pant legs and fraying coat sleeves, its tiny scabbard made of rolled paper, is the very image of fragility (Figure 1). Its tiny new leg (a white bone leg designed to replace a lost doll leg made to stand for a human leg) peeks out from beneath a patch of new fabric that Robleto has stitched with white surgical thread to one of its tattered and soiled royal blue pant cuffs (Figure 2).

The doll is mounted on a dark burgundy fabric with a paisley pattern and set within a facsimile of a rectangular nineteenth-century picture frame, its corners decorated with simple flowers (perhaps dogwood blossoms) in bas relief, and its oval opening encircled by a sculpted twig motif. The battered frame, which is cracked in the lower right corner and missing a piece along the left side, was not carved in wood as its model likely was but was cast from melted shrapnel and bullet lead. A sepia-tone patina has been applied to it with a concoction of polyester resin and rust, which imparts an antique appearance.

The Union soldier who made the doll was an amateur artist of astonishing bravery, one who sought to heal his physical and psychological wounds through self-representation, to make a whole body stand as symbolic surrogate for a broken one. Robleto's obvious affection for this work of folk art and for the soldier's efforts in crafting it blooms in light of his aesthetic philosophy. In an interview with curator Ian Berry, he explains: "The thing I love about folk medicine is that it's intimately tied to magic and belief—or to the placebo effect, which is the way contemporary science would explain it. You know how your grandmother gives you a spoon full of some concoction that has no real scientific base to it, but it has some real effect? I love the idea that art can somehow be the medicine on the spoon."[30] Art is by definition a bit of fakery; the artist is a snake oil salesman, a flim-flam man, a forger, or, more quaintly, a well-meaning grandmother.

All such characters produce unguents and tinctures, the ultimate efficacy of which is a measure of belief more than of science. Robleto marvels at the soldier's crafting of the doll as an act of faith, of belief in the very real effects of simulation, the material consequences of affect. He sees art as prosthetic, as a treatment for the pathologies of history.

Robleto's effort to repair the Civil War doll is a manifestation of the vertiginous queasiness of the contemporary, the hypersensitivity toward and awareness of the past. "I believe my role as an artist is very much like a historian," he has said, a historian whose purpose is to find "these alternative roads of history that tell the same story but in a very different way. They're often things that have been forgotten in time or that have never really been investigated thoroughly."[31] More than simply a revisionist or a researcher following an untrodden path, however, in *The Creative Potential of Disease* the historian is a performer whose work takes the form of an echo, a repetition, of the soldier's original historical act. The artist-historian attempts to repair, to make whole, not just the material integrity of the doll itself but also a gesture from the past. About this work Robleto asks: "Can art finish something that never got finished? Can creative gestures that began at some distant point in the past be handed down like a baton through time and picked up, and can each generation contribute to that action?"[32]

His reference to gestures and actions places Robleto squarely within recent discussions taking place primarily among performance studies scholars about the degree to which the past can be archived in the body, history known through reenactment. Like the artist, scholars such as Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, Rebecca Schneider, and David Román understand performative reenactment as a crucial form of historical remembrance and as an important tool for those whose pasts are excluded from or do not fit neatly within the traditional archive. As Schneider asserts:

> Recurrence, of course, contests tightly stitched Enlightenment claims to the forward-driven linearity of temporality, the continuity of time, and challenges, as well, an attitude toward death as necessarily irrecoverable loss. There is, instead, a certain

FIGURE 1. Dario Robleto, *The Creative Potential of Disease*, 2004. A self-portrait doll made by a Civil War Union soldier amputee while recovering in the hospital, mended and repaired with a modern-day surgeon's surgical needle and thread, new pant leg material made from a modern-day soldier's uniform, cast leg made from femur bone and prosthetic alginate treated with *Balm of a Thousand Foreign Fields*, vegetable ivory, collagen, melted shrapnel and bullet lead, cold-cast steel and zinc, polyester resin, rust. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

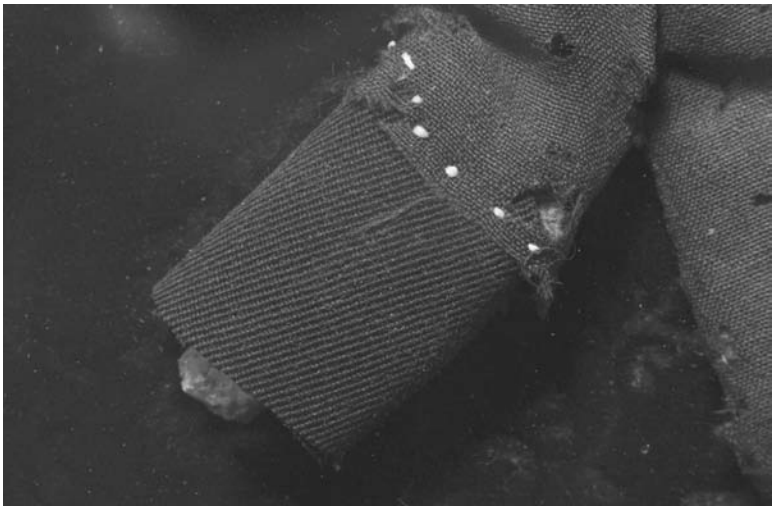

FIGURE 2. Dario Robleto, *The Creative Potential of Disease* (detail), 2004. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

> superabundance to reenactment, like a run-on sentence, as if an event in time, refusing to be fully or finally "over" or "gone" or "complete" pulses with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return (doubling as possibilities for error). The zillion details of the act of interpretation in an act of live repetition make the pastness of the past both palpable and a very *present* matter.[33]

Smashing the compass of time's supposed linearity and disorienting its sense of direction, performative reenactment revives what was thought to be lost, delights in the superabundance of detail, which it plays and replays in endless variation. Robleto's performance of repetition means that the soldier's sincere act of self-fashioning, the gesture of sewing a little doll or carving a substitute leg "with a piece of wood and a knife," is neither over nor gone. It is, as Schneider says, a very present matter.

This is just one sense in which I mean the word *prosthesis* in this book. A prosthesis is, simply put, something we craft to stand in place of something else that is lost, a history, for example, measured, shaped, carved, and polished like a wooden leg and put in place of an

amputated past.[34] More broadly, it might include a representation of something else (a photograph, archived text, or written narrative), a material artifact meant to spur a memory (an album, a lock of hair, a tattered doll), commemorative actions or gestures of both the intentional (staged reenactments) and unintentional variety (the quotidian acts and repetitions that Richard Schechner calls "twice-behaved behavior").[35] From the Greek meaning the act of placing something after or the act of putting or adding, *prosthesis* refers all at once to material objects, bodies, and words.[36]

Jacques Derrida discusses the prosthetic effect of the written word in his long essay "Plato's Pharmacy," which performs a close reading of the *Phaedrus* to understand how Western metaphysics was shaped by Plato's suspicion about writing as inherently false, a mere substitute for the spoken word, and thus evidence only of the speaker's absence. Taking his cue from Plato's "brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the *Phaedrus*," Derrida explains that writing is a pharmakon, a drug that is both poison and cure. Writing is a spur to memory, a means of history, and yet it promotes forgetting, destroys the actual, seduces and corrupts. "What Plato is attacking," he writes, "is not simply recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by a thing, here substituting the passive, mechanical 'by-heart' for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present."[37] History is thus always a prosthetic act of substitution, and, as such, it is (as Derrida would say) always already contaminated.

This book is not simply *about* the prosthesis; it *is* prosthetic. Its words stand in place of speech, its stories prop up events and experiences, its illustrations substitute for actual artworks, and as an object it tries to perform in lieu of the contemporary until such time as we know what the contemporary is (or was). At the same time, however, I want it to be active and alive rather than passive or mechanical. If it must set things in place of absent others, let those things be unexpected—not just a carved bit of wood for a leg, but prostheses made of songs, photographs, effigies, ideas, games, and gags. Emotional pain, nostalgia, racism, torture, and love all find their substitutes so that we might know them, but let nothing here be known by-heart.

Later, in his book *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida cites a meaning of the word *prosthesis* now fallen into disuse, which refers to the addition of a letter or syllable at the beginning of a word. Referring to the word's etymological link to "prosody" or the composition of verse, he uses it to refer to language itself. With regard to French, in a sense his native tongue, which was imposed on him as a Maghrebian Jew, he says paradoxically, "I only have one language; it is not mine."[38] This alien tongue, as bruising and uncomfortable and yet integral and necessary as a wooden leg, produces what he calls a "handicapped memory," a sense of the past that cannot but be hobbled.[39] I will have more to say about the specific background and features of Derrida's analysis in the first chapter, but for now his work serves as an ethical conscience for my deployment of the prosthetic. His work is a reminder that, if we are going to think of history as a prosthesis, we must understand the circumstances of its coming into being (Who crafted it? To what body has it been attached? By what force?) and recognize its inherent limitations and political as well as physical discomforts.

This is something Robleto acknowledges and seeks to address in his sculpture. He is concerned about the places where old and new, past and present, original and copy, dead and living connect, and he is cognizant that these sites of connection are always inherently painful, that the prosthesis (whether wooden leg or imposed language, memento or text) contuses and aches.[40] In other words, his work is, as I've said, a medicine prescribed for the pathology of history, but the medicine itself cannot help but produce what Robleto calls "historical trauma," and thus *The Creative Potential of Disease* also contains a balm concocted by the artist and applied to the place where the prosthetic limb is attached. This is a gesture that the artist-historian makes in acknowledgment of his own role in communicating (in at least two senses) history's pathologies.

Prosthesis, as I use it here, and this is crucial, is simultaneously historical (the placing after) and artistic (the representation of one by another). Inasmuch as it involves tactics of making and fashioning, to understand it I must watch artists such as Robleto closely. I inspect his little sculpture to learn how to craft a history about the pathology of history—its losses, phantoms, and delusions. I notice

the white thread on the miniature blue trouser leg, the way that the new patch and the old fabric aren't exactly the same color or the same weave. This is not the work of restoration, a self-concealing labor that finds some pure origin point for an object (or an event) and seamlessly, flawlessly puts it back the way it was. Rather, it is an amalgam that announces itself as such, that makes evident the labor of repair, that exults in anachronism (the ivory and the alginate, the moth-eaten broadcloth and the crisp serge, the bullet lead and the polyester resin). As Michel Foucault remarks, "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."[41] Neither seduced by origins nor driven by the telos, Robleto's is a hand-me-down history, one that gets passed along to and remade by each generation.

The approaches to history by which I am most captivated are all in evidence in this miniature figure, pathetic and moth-eaten, simultaneously rescued and destroyed in the name of art. As I've said, Robleto's emphasis on finishing something that never got finished, carrying forward a gesture from the past, suggests that fundamental to this historical methodology is reenactment, the redoing or repetition of events of the past in the present. Such a principle undermines linear historical temporalities and asserts a view of history in which the past is an always already told and always already repeated story. In addition, for Robleto, the work of repair is synonymous with the work of history, which inherently requires the sewing together of materials from different times so that present and past are imbricated rather than sequential.

His stitching of a pant leg or sculpting of a tiny bone also recalls Georges Didi-Huberman's concern for the continual tearing and mending of knowledge, the unraveling and reknitting of the net. In his study of the discipline of art history, Didi-Huberman describes "the veil that makes thought possible and the rend that makes thought impossible."[42] The veil is that device that shields enough of vision to allow us to see, to focus on the object of our attention. The rend or tear gives us a glimpse of what is beyond our knowing, the too much of seeing. "Such are the stakes," he remarks, "to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge."[43]

Viewers often express concern about some of Robleto's seem-

ingly more destructive practices, such as taking a historical artifact like this doll and using it in his art, melting down bullets from actual battlefields, melting down or tearing apart old vinyl records, and soaking the ink out of handwritten letters dating to the Civil War (a concern I will discuss in greater detail in the final chapter). "I think that if you want to really get into what I'm doing," he says in reply, "you have to let go of a few assumptions, the main one being that alteration equals destruction. . . . I'm drawing on the idea that alteration equals creation. . . . What's more interesting, a lost and dusty love letter of two lovers long gone and forever outside of public view and imagination, or the artistic reanimation of new life into that letter's molecules that makes it relevant to us today?"[44] In the defense of his practice, the artist asserts a method I refer to as "hollowing out," the taking of some artifact of the past (not only the material object, but gesture, song, word, story) and hollowing out its content so as to fill it with something else, something from another period entirely. I will have more to say about the ethics of this practice later on, but for the moment, I simply want to emphasize Robleto's positive appraisal of the work of alteration, imagination, and creation.

Robleto is of course not the only artist in recent years to engage in history. The significant number of major contemporary art exhibitions that have been organized around this topic testify to its importance: *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2014), *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance* (Guggenheim, New York, 2010), *Yesterday Will Be Better* (Aarau, Germany, 2010), *Lost and Found* (Milan, 2009), *Liquid Archives: Notes on Relations, Ruptures, and Silences* (Munich, 2009), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, 2008), *The Sweet Burnt Smell of History* (Panama, 2008), *Not Quite How I Remember It* (Toronto, 2008), *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* (Mass MoCA, 2007), *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Reenactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* (Dortmund, Germany, 2005), and the exhibition that seemed to many to embody this trend, Marina Abramović's famous redoing of five canonical performance pieces from the 1960s and '70s titled *Seven Easy Pieces* (Guggenheim, New York, 2005).

In an article about the artist Matthew Buckingham for the journal *October,* Mark Godfrey contends that historical representation is the concern of a growing number of contemporary artists who take on the role of historians in their work. (In this he follows Hal Foster, whose article "An Archival Impulse" appeared in 2004.)[45] In addition to examining Buckingham's art, Godfrey discusses a long list of artist-historians such as Mark Dion, Sam Durant, Renée Green, Fred Wilson, Pierre Huyghe, Steve McQueen, and Walid Raad. "Historical research and representation appear central to contemporary art," he writes. "There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives."[46] Along with the mimicry of archival structures and practices, Godfrey enumerates a variety of historiographic approaches taken by artists, such as the referencing of specific locations in which significant historical events took place, the examination of the intersection between the artist's personal experiences and bygone events, the critique of the commodification of the past, and the performative reenactment of historical occurrences.

Whereas Godfrey's purpose is to describe and analyze these and other strategies as they appear in an individual artist's work, the goal of the present volume is of a somewhat different sort. I am not interested in noting a trend in contemporary artistic practice, in defining the parameters of that trend and listing examples of it. Foster already did this when he observed and defined what he calls the "archival impulse at work internationally in contemporary art."[47] Rather than look at art as its object of study (as is commonly done), something to which the art historian brings a certain amount of expertise and upon which she exercises certain ways of knowing, but at the same time something that does not bear upon her own practice, this book will ask how the work of the artist implicates and interrogates the critic or historian. It asks how to emulate the artist-historian, how to do history differently. In other words, rather than trend spotting, my work here wonders out loud about what it would mean to take these artists' work seriously *as* history rather than simply as art. What if, for example, instead of calling on Doris Kearns Goodwin to learn about the Civil War, we consulted Kara Walker or Dario Robleto? With the premiere of Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln* in 2012, inspired by Goodwin's biography *Team of Rivals*—a film that she seems enthu-

siastically to have supported, which portrays Lincoln as the black man's hero in quite literally glowing, otherworldly terms—this question becomes more than just a clever conceit.[48]

Moreover, the vast majority of art historical scholarship that focuses on the problem of history and its correlate, memory (like Godfrey's and Foster's articles), describes how artists are thinking about the question but is not itself affected by the general crisis in history or by the particular approaches that the artists under examination take.[49] For example, Joan Gibbons, in her book *Contemporary Art and Memory*, offers this perfectly reasonable, but for our purposes limited, explanation of her method:

> It seems timely to conduct an overview of the approaches and attitudes that are taken towards memory in contemporary art practices, despite the obvious limitations of surveys (which, after all, have the virtue of leaving room for further study). Indeed, given the amount and variety of attention paid to memory in contemporary art, it is rather surprising that it has been written about only sporadically in relation to particular artists or particular exhibitions. One of my aims in writing this book, therefore, is to bring existing studies together and build on them to form a larger and more comprehensive picture of the varied and numerous forms or roles that memory is given in this arena of cultural practice.[50]

Here Gibbons employs a visual metaphor to describe her work. She is positioned to make an "overview" of events, artists, and works of art arrayed before her. She intends to survey these historical objects and produce a "comprehensive picture." While this is a worthwhile goal and hers is certainly a useful contribution to the literature on the topic, Gibbons does not ask about the role of memory in her own cultural practice; she does not see her own work as itself an act of memory and memorialization. Even in a chapter in which she discusses the work of artists who question the "methods through which knowledge and data, as aspects of memory, are ordered and stored by specialized and authoritative institutions, such as the museum and the archive," she does not consider those artists' work in relation to her own authoritative ordering of knowledge.[51] While it is clear that these

questions lie outside Gibbons's scope, even in those cases (Huyssen, for example) where the author's goal is to comment on the broader theoretical problem of how history does and should function, the author usually does not include her own work as an object of study, does not examine his own methods and assumptions. Richard Meyer's book is another important example. Although intelligent and beautifully written, *What Was Contemporary Art?* questions contemporary art history as a subfield precisely because traditional art historical methods cannot always be adapted to it. Throughout his book, Meyer thus reasserts the importance of archival research, close analysis, formal description, and objective distance. My project sets off in a different direction to catch myself in the act of history and to develop new methods, narrative strategies, and art historical models.

To undertake this project means to face a problem—history—the very impossibility of which is a source for creative thought (in the face of its contradictions, we must imagine that it *is* possible, we must act *as if*). I am aware that there are dangers here, that there are very real stakes in the practice of history and that there is an ethics at work in historical methodologies, training, and expertise. I have examined this question in greater depth in my previous book, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, which can be thought of as this book's conceptual twin. Whereas the purpose of that book was to examine the witness (of which the historian is a prime example) as a privileged subject position, and to question the assumptions to which that privilege leads, *Becoming Past: History in Contemporary Art* attempts to find new ways for thinking and writing about history. Here I begin from the position that history writing is always a creative act, that we imagine the past whenever we write about it, and that imagination is one of the special provinces of art. "And only when history allows itself to be transformed into a work of art," Nietzsche writes, "into a pure aesthetic structure, can it perhaps retain or even arouse instincts."[52]

In this, my work accords to some degree with that of historian David Lowenthal. I share Lowenthal's simultaneous skepticism about and dedication to history as an academic discipline when he writes that "there can be no certainty that the past ever existed, let alone in the form we now conceive it, but sanity and security require us to be-

lieve that it did."[53] I also share his interest in imagination as a historiographic tool, though it is clear that he does not take it as seriously as I do. He argues that the difficulties of trying to get into the past, to understand it in its authentic fullness,

> seldom deter those entranced by the promise of the past, and whose appetites for thoroughgoing returns are not assuaged by memory, history, or relics. Memories are partial and fleeting, history's evocations are often unimaginative, many physical remains are decayed or hard to reach or interpret; historical enclaves, whether actual backwaters or contrived reconstructions, seem tame or inauthentic. Thus addicts turn to imaginative voyages that will unlock gates to the past, let them see or roam there at will, and enjoy full-blooded experience of bygone times.[54]

About the imaginative work of what he calls the "tourists" of history, historical "addicts" and "would-be time travelers"—work that includes historical reenactment, science fiction writing, epic poetry, revivalist art practices, and living history—Lowenthal adopts a bemused air. These are people who cannot accept the plain fact that much of the historical past is long gone and inaccessible, or that what does remain of the past is often tedious and decidedly unglamorous.

"We can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future," he declares. "Save in imaginative reconstruction."[55] By situating imagination as an exception to what he presents as a self-evident truth, Lowenthal places far more negative emphasis on it than I. It is through imaginative reconstruction, I argue, that we *do* slip back to the past and forward into the future. As Schneider suggests, the past is never simply behind us; the future is never simply in front of us. Both categories are, as she delightfully remarks, "sticky."[56] "Yesterday is forever barred to us," Lowenthal continues in the same questionable line of thinking; "we have only attenuated memories and fragmentary chronicles of prior experience and can only dream of escaping the confines of the present. But in recent years such nostalgic dreams have become almost habitual, if not epidemic."[57] Here he sounds a bit like Nora and Huyssen when he characterizes "imaginative reconstruction," the obsession with the past, as an epidemic. At the same time, however, he recognizes that "we

cannot avoid remaking our heritage, for every act of recognition alters what survives."[58]

As an art historian, I am most intrigued precisely by the creative voyages that are charted in answer to the contradictions of history, the ways in which history is *always* and by definition a matter of imagination, a matter of remaking. For that reason, I have determined to consult artists on the question of making history. I follow them, watch them work, and see myself implicated in their methods, not because I believe they have all the answers to the question of history's impossibility (if someone did have the answers, it would no longer be impossible), and certainly not because I believe they are somehow immune to the errors and bias that plague history more generally, but because their work allows me to think creatively about my own practice, to embrace impossibility as potentially generative.

In this book, I examine and attempt to deploy unorthodox historical methodologies that I have witnessed in and distilled from the work of a number of contemporary artists. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Not only do they often overlap, but they are also primarily a set of diverse strategies for addressing a common concern: for the most part, they seek to disrupt, expand, or reimagine the linear (and often progressive) temporalities on which historical discourse is usually based. In that way, they seek to accommodate the disjuncture and anachronism that are, in Agamben's view, constitutive of the contemporary, and, simultaneously, they attempt to reckon with our changing understanding of time, the Now now. For example, in Robleto's little doll, repair is a rubric for understanding the work of the historian as an ongoing, nonteleological practice of mending what has been lost, damaged, or worn out in history. This materialist strategy eschews fixed origins; it questions the notion that historical artifacts exist in an ideal state to which they must be safely restored. Repair, in this sense, constitutes not a return but rather an invention on familiar themes. *Reenactment* and *repetition* are two more "re" words on which I rely that describe attempts to see time as "sticky," to see the past, present, and future as neither distinctly different nor strictly the same. Although, like repair, reenactment and repetition are sometimes thought of as returning to some discrete original, which they attempt to mimic in every detail, I see them as similarly

antilinear, unfaithful to a past that purports to be fully known or fully over with.

These methods have received a lot of scholarly and artistic attention in recent years, but nowhere more complexly and thoughtfully than in Rebecca Schneider's book *Performing Remains*, in which she explains:

> I am interested in repetitions, doublings, and the call and response of cross- and inter-authorships. I am interested in the citational "get up" of the before, during, and after of any action *taking place* in or as re-action: the affected effects and after-affects of art/events posed as relative to origin(al)s. I wonder here not only about the "as if" but also about the "what if": what if time (re)turns? What does it *drag* along with it? I am interested in the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose.[59]

One of the things we learn from Schneider is that repetition and reenactment are modes of action, forms of doing, and behaviors that, when performed by the historian, can reveal cross-temporal interactions, reverberations, and encumbrances that trouble what we thought we knew about temporal unfolding. Repetition, as she explains in her analysis of Santayana's constantly misquoted phrase ("Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"), is not in fact something we are condemned to do by virtue of mnemonic weakness or error, but rather something that remembering itself demands.[60] In the following pages, we will see that these historiographic strategies, these "re" words, sometimes go by other, no less familiar names, such as *anachronism*, or involve familiar figures such as the stand-in. Or they may make their appearance in other more awkward phrases such as *hollowing out*, *the skip*, *mnemonic deferral*, *temporal dissidence*, and *unending*.

In addition to their rethinking temporality by seeing even disparate historical events as potentially repeating one another and by eliminating progressive models of historical development, repair, repetition, reenactment, and their correlates help us think about how historical knowledge is disseminated outside of standard (and often privileged) sites such as archives, museums, universities, and

libraries. They make it possible to study those who have been excluded from the archive, those whose histories are not to be found there, and create history out of performative actions, oral narratives, and ways of being.

These strategies also allow us to think critically about an array of suspect scholarly habits, such as the ways in which historians, by establishing causality (one event or action causing and therefore presumably preceding another), assume a particular form of time. Inspired by Christine Ross's excellent study *The Past Is the Present; It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, I ask, instead of lining them up neatly, always in train—past, present, and future—what if we could study the future in order to know the past? In addition, these "re" words permit us to see more clearly how we circumscribe our objects of study—by period, by geography, by documented relationships—and too hastily lay to one side that which we deem to be irrelevant. What if instead we indulged in a narrative malfunction and allowed our study of the past to skip, like the skip in a vinyl record, from one track to another, from one past to another? What truths might we discover in the incorrect version of the past? Moreover, these experimental methodologies provide a lens through which to inspect the presumptions we make about different subjects' relationships to their own presents and pasts—one of which is that everyone is equally able to claim an untroubled relation to the then and to the now. With a more prodigious view of time, a more capacious picture of what we mean by the past, might we also begin to question the economy of scarcity in which history operates, its tendency to see historical artifacts as rare, precious, in need of conservation and entombment in the archive? Finally, these strategies may also endow us with ears to hear our own stories, to attend to how we arrive at conclusions, write the endings (happy or sad) of our own narratives.

With these methods in mind, the book's chapters investigate a range of historical problems, such as the difficulty of memory and misremembering, the structure of narrative, the excising of the other from the archive or from our stories about the past, and the relation between documentary and fictional accounts of history. In the first chapter, which thinks in greater detail about repair, repetition, and

hollowing out, I discuss a performance by Goat Island titled *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*. I argue that the group's work provides alternatives to entrenched historical practices and that the group's theory of repair (outlined in the book *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island*) can be productively adapted to the task of history. I discuss different forms of prosthetics, including a bioartificial heart, and examine each for the ways in which it frees history from its belief in fixed origins, linear temporalities, and the strict division between the real and its representation.

The second chapter, which involves repetition and reenactment, considers the historical methodologies manifest in a film by English artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen called *Deadpan* (1997). In the film McQueen repeats a stunt that Buster Keaton performed in his 1928 film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* in which the wall of a house falls over onto Keaton but he emerges uninjured through a second-story window. Because McQueen's version of the stunt is displayed on a repeating film loop, the viewer sees the stunt enacted over and over again. In this chapter I marshal philosopher Gilles Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition* to argue that repetition (and therefore McQueen's film) is an unorthodox archive, one that is preserved not in static documents from the past but in a continually renewed present. Placing McQueen's film in dialogue with an older work, a repeating video by Bruce Nauman, I also ponder how reenactment as methodology, what Schneider calls body-to-body transmission, remembers or forgets race, remembers or forgets the specificity of the bodies it references.

In chapter 3, I consider the historiographic philosophies of science fiction writer and memoirist Samuel Delany and documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee, especially their concern with the relation between fictional and factual accounts of the past. I think about how their work productively skips in time and place to produce profound historical revelations about race and sexuality and the relation between history and the paternal. The fourth chapter carries the question of race forward by contemplating artist Matthew Buckingham's 1996 film *Amos Fortune Road*, which focuses on the relation between factual and fictional representations of the past by looking at the archival record of the life of Amos Fortune, an African slave who purchased his own freedom in 1770. In this chapter I argue that, in

response to the historiographic problems of discerning fact from fiction and delineating past from present, Buckingham hollows out Fortune's eighteenth-century history and fills it with parallel events from the present. Rather than attempting to get at the pure truth of Fortune's life (which is elusive despite an abundance of archival documentation), Buckingham usefully subjects history to doubt and lines up two historical narratives in the same space, skips between the present and the past.

In the fifth chapter, I study Goat Island's final performance, *The Lastmaker* (2007–9), which sought creatively to serve as an ending for the group, whose members officially disbanded in 2009. I consider Claire Bishop's critique of the performance, in which she accused it of failing to be contemporary, and use this as a jumping-off point to examine a particular scene in which Mark Jeffery impersonates queer British comedian Larry Grayson in the guise of Saint Francis of Assisi. Bishop's response to *The Lastmaker* offers the opportunity to think critically about the degree to which different subjects have access to the contemporary, and to ask whether all subjects are automatically able to claim some part of the now. Jeffery's performance (re)enacts what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal dissidence," a refusal of the contemporary by minoritarian subjects for whom the present is untenable.[61]

Dario Robleto reappears in chapter 6, in which I study a series of works he has created that represent for me a maternal form of historiography, an understanding of the word *history* as figured in the relationship between child and mother. Unlike in chapter 3, in which I focus on the father as a metaphor for the demands of the historical past, here I'm interested in how the maternal relation, to the degree that it exists in a field of excess—overflowing with childhood artifacts, nostalgia, memories, sentiment, and affect—challenges history's typical economy of scarcity. In each of these chapters, I attempt not only to write *about* these artists and artworks but also to emulate some aspect of their practice. I attempt to *do* history differently.

In the book's conclusion, I revisit *The Lastmaker* to understand how it attempts to rewrite the conventional historical narrative, to reimagine its linearity and tidy conclusions; how it purposefully failed to bring Goat Island's work to a final conclusion but opened it

up to the future. The performance thus served as a treatise on temporality and how a conclusion can be the start of something else, in the same way (so Goat Island tells us) that the end of a runway opens onto flight. As a mirror reflection of the prosthesis with which the book begins, the conclusion considers the shoemaker's last (the wooden form upon which a shoe is built and stitched) as a stand-in, not for something lost but for something always in the process of being found.

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WOODEN LEGS
GOAT ISLAND'S ACTS OF REPAIR

> *Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive.*
>
> —Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*

Impossible Problems

This chapter begins (despite Jacques Derrida's suggestion that it be done otherwise) at a beginning. It is a borrowed beginning to be sure, but a beginning nonetheless. It is the story (a history, it seems important to emphasize, not of *my* making) of how the Chicago-based performance art group Goat Island began. Of this moment, Matthew Goulish (one of the group's founding members) writes:

> We began on Thanksgiving Day, 1986—Lin Hixson, the brothers Timothy McCain and Greg McCain, and I. . . . We agreed that we would share a kind of impossible problem from which we would generate material individually, and then come together: a starting point. *Create a specific incident from your past. Find a historical event that occurred at approximately the same time. Create an environment and/or a performance expressing the feeling of the memory in relation to the historical event.*[1]

In the context of the present volume, one that ponders and weighs the problem of history in the current moment, it is of some importance that the origin of this performance group lies in the directive to

engage with historical events. In 1986, the group set out and looked into the future (a twenty-two-year career of major national and international performance art works) by looking to the past. More specifically, I am intrigued by the questions raised by these artists about history's relation to memory, public narratives' relation to private ones, and, more broadly, performance's relation to historiography. Thus I am inspired by Goat Island's enthusiastic embrace of the impossibility of their task: their view that tinkering with historical problems, despite the inevitably disappointing conclusions to which they must lead, is inherently generative.

Repair

I am seated on a small one-legged stool. I am watching, taking notes, trying to keep my balance. It takes a great deal of concentration to stay upright. I want to learn how to repair history.

Lin Hixson, Goat Island's artistic director, has written and talked rather beautifully about repair as an organizing concept for their performance work from 2004–5, *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, about which she provides the following story:

> This is how it happened. I was in Aberystwyth, Wales, staying in a physicist's apartment in November, 2001 by the sea. There were nine books on the shelf in the living room. I read from two—a doctoral thesis on solar wind and a British repair manual from the 1970s called *Around the Home*. I particularly liked the instructions in the repair manual on how to re-grip a tennis-racket handle and how to re-face a table-tennis bat. Small acts of repair. Calming the hands in a troubled world. Restoring damage to renewed use.[2]

In addition to her encounter with *Around the Home*, she also reports that she later read the instructions in the *Better Homes and Gardens Handyman's Book* for repairing the float in a toilet tank. Given such precedents as the event scores used by Fluxus artists and her own extensive expertise in directing performances, it is not at all surprising that she began to read these instructions as performance scripts. "Lift cover off flush tank and pull upward on float rod" becomes, in Hixson's hands, part of a set of instructions for performative actions,

choreography for a dance. Indeed, Goat Island is known for the integration and repetition of everyday movements such as these in its carefully choreographed works.

Beyond these practical aspects, it is easy to see the enormous ethical implications of Hixson's discovery. As she describes it, the act of mending is first and most obviously an action, something concrete and calming that can be done in a world where it is easy to feel that nothing can be done. Thus this philosophy, if one can call it that, expresses a belief that the act of doing something small and local can have an effect on larger, more global problems.[3] This act is also useful; it has clear instructions, but those instructions, because they are directed toward the proximal, are not politically prescriptive, not teleological. The work of repair is, as we have seen in Dario Robleto's sculpture and as the handyman's book itself emphasizes, continual and ongoing. "Aside from saving you money, working with your hands can keep you calm in a troubled world," *Better Homes and Gardens* instructs. "You should be warned, though, once you start, you'll never finish."[4] Moreover, the very concept of repairing something as opposed to throwing it away is a gesture that turns away from commodity and toward ecological sustainability. The act of repair is therefore a politics in form more than in content, or, as theater scholar Alan Read would prefer, it is a profound catalyst of the social. "Between the incommensurability of the two terms theatre and the political," he writes, "emerges a brief moment, in a small network, in which something can be done."[5]

What would it mean to think about history as an act of repair? In some ways this idea seems simple enough—the past falls away, breaks off, or wears out over time, and it is the historian's task to repair it, to put it back or set it right. Unfortunately, that task is not as easy as it sounds. This is because, from a certain philosophical perspective, the act of representing the past inherently produces damage or loss as much as it is inspired by it. One might think of the events of the past as being broken, but a painful irony follows logically from that break. The very thing that seeks to ameliorate the lost past—that is, history as it has traditionally been practiced—works ultimately only to bring loss to bear more forcefully by being precisely the opposite of the events it seeks to depict. The historian's words, as Derrida explains in

his discussion of the pharmakon, may describe events, but as words, one of the things they signify, irrespective of their actual content or meaning, is the absence in which place they stand. For Derrida this is the paradox of supplementarity, which emerges in "the graphic relations between the living and the dead."[6] It is as though the very breath of the restorer, the very touch of the conservator threatens to disintegrate further the past each is trying to preserve.

The most useful understanding of repair, however, is not based on the restoration of a thing to some earlier fixed point at which that thing is presumed to have been in an ideal state. As Hixson cautions, repair cannot be thought of as teleological: "you'll never finish." And this is ultimately what is intriguing about the prospect of repair as historiography, since repair in itself implies not the negation of origin exactly but an acceptance of multiple origins, not the belief in wholeness but an act of imagining wholeness most especially where it is obvious that the object in question never was whole in any ontological sense. It is instructive to think about how the concept of repair troubles the notion of origins and ideal forms of the past. One assertion of this chapter is that repair accepts and embraces the loss of temporal continuity that Andreas Huyssen repeatedly laments and instead allows for different things from different historical moments to occupy the same space and the same time. Moreover, as I will show, although repair may rely on mimesis—the wooden leg imitates the shape of the real leg; the patch attempts to mimic the worn fabric to which it is sewn—it need not match up entirely in order to function. We have seen this already in Dario Robleto's *The Creative Potential of Disease*. Indeed, what is potentially most exciting about this concept is something that one can see in the work of Goat Island: that it is possible to use one text to repair another, a crutch to repair the sound of a voice, silence to repair a song, the sound of laughter to repair history's violent interrogation of the past.

Prosthetics

As inviting as the idea of refacing a table tennis bat is, the kind of repair with which this chapter is concerned is more along the lines of a prosthesis. As I've said, the word *prosthesis* refers to an addition, which includes both adding a body part where one is missing and

adding a prefix to a word. Its etymology suggests the act of putting something in place. I imagine history as a kind of prosthetic—a thing that gets put in place of something that is lost—but there are different ways in which one might think about the prosthetic and different means by which a prosthesis might be used to repair.

In general, *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, as is typical of Goat Island's work, draws on a wide variety of sources: the poetry of Paul Celan, an autobiography of Lillian Gish, the philosophy of Simone Weil, James Taylor songs, the *William Tell* overture, the Andrews Sisters, bad jokes by British comedian Tommy Cooper, and a memoir by Jean Améry about being tortured by the Gestapo. The performance repeatedly collapses time so that the past violence of World War II occupies the same temporal location as the torture of U.S. prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which had become public at the time of the performance. One might describe *September roses* as a history of disparate events, the main question of which is, according to Hixson, How does one repair?

The performance is extraordinarily difficult to describe because one had to attend the performance on two consecutive nights; on the second night, the players performed the same exact scenes from the previous night but in a different order. It is a performance the entire logic of which is repetition. In what I will call, for convenience's sake, the opening sequence (though of course that appellation is a lie), three actors enter an empty rectangular area between two facing rows of spectators and take their places by grabbing one-legged stools off the floor, sitting down on the stools, and balancing their weight so that, in an odd reversal, their own legs become prosthetics for the wooden stools and the stools become properly three-legged (Figure 3). The actors, in this sense, become chairs. They face away from the audience and disengage from the action like pieces of furniture. There is also an array of crutches, cobbled together of wood and brown packing tape. An actor (Karen Christopher) begins the performance with a dramatic gesture: she points urgently offstage in order to draw our eye to the distant ambiguous over-there (Figure 4). I should explain that the "stage" here is the floor marked off between two sets of risers on which audience members sit facing one another. The pointing is a gesture of mastery; the actor both sees and directs the members of

FIGURE 3. Goat Island (Matthew Goulish, Mark Jeffery, and Karen Christopher), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

FIGURE 4. Goat Island (Karen Christopher), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

FIGURE 5. Goat Island (Karen Christopher and Litó Walkey), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

the audience to see, and she effectively commands their eyes to look. But this mastery and erect posture are disabled by another actor, Litó Walkey, who insists on placing the first actor's foot on a small crutch and the wrist of her left hand palm up on another larger crutch (Figure 5). Walkey then assumes a pose in which she uses her own right arm as a crutch for her left, positioning her own wrist into the crook between her thumb and forefinger. By turns the two actors recite in German and then in English lines from a poem by Paul Celan.

In this scene, the actor played by Christopher, who is signaled by this stock theatrical pose that seems to have been taken, like so many things in Goat Island's performances, from elsewhere, is defined by the control she exerts over her own body and over her audience. That control is taken from her and the crutches put in place to reveal the fatigue and fragility of the body, its tendency toward error and uncontrollability. As Christopher explains, "As part of our effort to approach the idea of repair, *September roses* attempts to perform

incompleteness, to force a kind of fracture that does not automatically heal itself."[7] The enactment of fracture in this scene foreshadows a much more violent form of corporeal disability that emerges throughout the performance: the work of torture as that which removes the subject's ability to act, to see, to direct others. As will be shown, it presages one of the performance's key themes, which is the violence that history exerts on the past. John Tagg discusses that violence in his book on photography and history, *The Disciplinary Frame*, in which he draws a comparison between the violence exerted on prisoners to compel them to speak and the violence exerted on the historical document to make it give up its account of the past. "The formation of history," he writes, "was itself inseparable from the development and institutionalization of a regime of evidence, a technology of truth, and an apparatus of documentation, with its case studies, records, files, and archives." "In the name of the terror of the real," he continues, "there must be a cut. . . . Meaning must arrive. It is just violence."[8] In this, the word "just" has a double meaning: it is *simply* violence; it is *disinterested* violence appropriate to the law. As if enacting that idea, then, Goat Island's performance begins with a body gently being broken into pieces.

One of the things that signals breakage in this scene is Walkey's and Christopher's halting and repeating speech, the slow, deliberate sound of their voices. The two performers take turns speaking the words of Paul Celan, from his poem "Huhediblu" (1963), and although they are not trying to be Celan, in a theatrical sense, he seems to be there in the room with them, his own voice lingering behind theirs.[9] Christopher says, "Wann, / wann blühen, wann / wann blühen . . . ja sie, die September / rosen?" And Walkey responds, "When do they flower, when / yes they, the Septembers / the Seven ambers / Roses, when, when?" Goulish says of this exchange: "A stutter is a moment that overflows. It arrests itself in its overflow, its quality of being too much. The arrest makes time itself stutter—move forward haltingly, if at all—and thus become apparent."[10] In the breaking and mending of the voice, there is an exaggeration of time, a sensation of history.

To understand what precisely that history is, and how to think about it in terms of repair or prosthetics, it is useful to turn again to Derrida's book *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*,

in which he explains that language acts as a prosthesis. Growing up as an Algerian Jew in the Maghreb in the period of the 1930s and '40s meant learning to speak only French (not Arabic, Berber, or Hebrew), so that French, although it is his only language, is foreign to him. "I only have one language," he writes, "[and] it is not mine."[11] For him language has a decidedly disciplinary function, one visible in the smallest mark, the hyphen that separates Franco and Maghrebian. "The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything," he says bitterly, recalling the segregation of Jews in Algeria during World War II when he was a child and the violence of the nearly decade-long War of Independence, "not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs."[12] The hyphen is a profound silence, a stutter, a pause in speech that exercises violence, forcibly disabling one identity and attaching another onto it as though by surgical thread. Where one hears this silence, there is a prosthesis.

Although French is forcibly attached to him by his schoolteachers, the local government, and the academy, he cannot say that it replaces something that is lost, some language that is more properly his own. He therefore describes his grievance with French as "a mourning for what one never had."[13] From the perspective of this book, Derrida's is an apt description of history—*a mourning for what one never had*. For Derrida, that mourning is situated precisely in the sound of his voice, in his accent, the only trace of something he never knew. "I think I have not lost my accent," he remarks. "Not everything in my 'French Algerian' accent is lost."[14] The lingering of his accent is merely a trace of the languages he does not speak, the past he never had, the origin he cannot really claim. He has lost his history. "With whom can we still identify in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history?" he asks.[15] Earlier on he describes the experience of having a "*handicapped* memory."[16]

The violence of language that Derrida describes could certainly be applied to the life of Celan, who was born in a German-speaking family in Romania, where his given name was Paul Antschel. A Romanian Jew, he was sent to a forced labor camp by the Nazis in 1941. After

the war, he fled to Vienna and then Paris, in each instance working in the interstices between languages: Hebrew, Romanian, German, and French. In this scene from *September roses*, one can see the handicapping of memory, the hobbling of German, for which the English translation acts as a wooden limb, helping it to move. And what is repaired by the sound of the English words is not simply comprehension—the German words made understandable to a largely English-speaking audience—but a history. By doubling the sound of "Zeptember" and September, the performers reveal what is temporally imbricated in that name. The September in this poem brings into temporal and spatial synchronization multiple historic moments, including the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws on September 15, 1935, as well as the invasion of Poland on the first of September 1939.[17] In the context of this performance, September also brings to mind the violent attacks of September 11, 2001.

The recitation in two voices of lines from Celan's poem at the beginning of the performance (again, a provisional beginning) sets up the audience for a difficult scene later on in which all manner of voices, accents, and sounds echo. Goulish, costumed in a cardboard moustache, plays W. G. Sebald, the German novelist, reciting passages from a book called *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, written by the Austrian Belgian essayist Jean Améry. In this complex sequence, Goulish, costumed in several guises at once, slowly twists on his one-legged stool, stiffly holding, with his arms in a mannequin-like pose, a small table made of cardboard (Figure 6). He goes round and round, physically straining to stay balanced while for the most part shouting his emotionally charged lines for an exhausting period of some eight or nine minutes. Reciting from Améry, he describes the experience of being tortured, being twisted, hung up by his wrists until his shoulders dislocate. But Améry's text has been altered in a few places. Not only is it spoken through the character of Sebald, a writer famously engaged with the problem of memory, history, and fiction, but it is also shortened for time considerations and modified with a few crucial details. In addition, it is incongruously sprinkled with jokes by the popular British comedian Tommy Cooper.

The scene begins with British performer Mark Jeffery acting as

FIGURE 6. Goat Island (Matthew Goulish), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

an old-fashioned movie director (Figure 7), holding a paper megaphone and whispering Cooper's lines to Goulish: "My feet are killing me. They are." Goulish repeats the words in a louder, more strained tone. Then Jeffery whispers: "Every night when I'm lying in bed they grab me around the throat like that and try to strangle me." Goulish repeats, and what we recognize to be a joke, a literal interpretation of the metaphorical phrase "My feet are killing me," segues into Améry's description of being tortured.

> When I recall those past events I still see before me the boys who contented themselves with the cigarette and as soon as they were tired let me be. They were bureaucrats of torture and yet they were also much more. They tortured because by means of torture they wanted to obtain information. But in addition, they tortured with the good conscience of depravity. They martyred their prisoners for definite purposes, which in each instance were exactly specified. Above all, however, they tortured because

FIGURE 7. Goat Island (Mark Jeffery and Bryan Saner), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

> they were torturers. They placed torture in their service, but even more frequently they were its servants. I saw it in their serious tense faces, which were not swelling with sexual sadistic delight but concentrated in murderous self-realization. With heart and soul they went about their business and the name of it was power. Dominion over spirit and flesh, orgy of unchecked self-expansion. It was . . .

Jeffery interrupts the monologue and again feeds Goulish the lines of a joke, whispering loudly through his megaphone: "I had a dream last night. I ordered everything in French. Surprised everybody. . . . It was a Chinese restaurant." After repeating the joke, Goulish continues:

> It's still not over. Twenty-two years later, I am still dangling over the ground, my dislocated arms . . . panting and accusing myself. I cannot spare you the objective description of what happened. I can only try to make it brief. Forgive me.
>
> There hung from the vaulted ceiling a chain that above ran

> into a roll. At its bottom end it bore a heavy, broadly curved iron hook. I was led to the instrument. The hook gripped into the shackle that held my hands together behind my back. Then I was raised by the chain until I hung about a yard over the floor. When hanging this way, with your hands behind your back, for a short time you can hold at a half-oblique through muscular force. During these few minutes, when you are already expending your utmost strength, when sweat has already appeared on your forehead and lips, and you are breathing in gasps, you will not answer any questions: accomplices, addresses, meeting places. You hardly hear it. All your life gathered in a single limited area of the body, the shoulder joints, and it does not reach or exhaust itself completely in the expenditure of energy. But it does not . . .

Another interruption. Imitating a classic Cooper gag, Jeffery holds up one arm and wiggles his hand. "Look. See that?" he asks. Then he lifts the other arm and, wiggling his other hand, says, "This one's just the same." He launches into another joke, this time cuing Goulish to repeat: "I said to the waiter, I said, 'Look here, this chicken I've got is cold.' He said, 'Well, it should be, it's been dead two weeks.' Not only that I said . . ." Then Goulish continues:

> As for me, I had to give up rather quickly. And now there was the crackling and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten until this hour. The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from the Latin *torquere*, to twist. What visual instruction in etymology! Some of the blows from the horsewhip sliced cleanly through the light summer trousers that I wore on that twenty-third of September, 1963.[18]

A final interruption. Continuing in the vein of waiter jokes, Jeffery whispers and Goulish repeats: "I said, I said, 'He's got one leg shorter than the other.' He said, 'What you gonna do, eat it or dance with it?' So I said, 'Forget the chicken. Bring me a lobster.' So he brings the lobster. And I said, 'Wait a minute, this lobster's only got one claw.' And

FIGURE 8. Goat Island (Litó Walkey, Matthew Goulish, Bryan Saner, and Karen Christopher), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

he said, 'Well he's been in a fight.' So I said, 'Bring me the winner.'" As Goulish shouts this joke, he is bent at the waist, his hands flung up behind his back, imitating the pose in which Améry was tortured. Another performer, Bryan Saner, walks across the stage to Goulish's bent body, reaches into the sleeves of his suit coat, and pulls out two long-stemmed red roses (Figure 8). We recall Celan's question "When do they flower?" as Saner stands to the side, holding the roses upside down by the stems, the red buds dangling near the floor.

In this scene, Goulish plays both Améry and Sebald, who writes in his book *Austerlitz* of the narrator's visit to the site of Améry's torture in Breendonk, Belgium.[19] But Goulish, who wears dark trousers, a white dress shirt, and dark suit jacket, is also dressed as a magician positioned before a small table on which one expects he will perform tricks. And just as with an illusion, the revelation comes when he magically, though disturbingly, produces (with Saner's help) long-stemmed roses from his coat sleeves. This magic trick, like the one

where the magician pulls scarves or flowers from a sleeve that the audience thought was empty, is based on surprise. One is surprised to see a long flower, a prosthesis, standing in place of an arm. Finally, like Karen Christopher at the beginning of the performance, Goulish also portrays an actor, in this case being fed his lines by Mark Jeffery playing a theater director.

Like the opening sequence, this scene also stages an act of breaking and mending. What it repairs is not Améry's broken body but history itself. It takes an event from World War II, which Améry describes in his memoir as having taken place on July 23, 1943, and restores it to renewed use at a later date, 1967, the year in which Sebald's narrator claims to have visited the torture chamber, and to September 23, 1963, a date that Goulish inserts into Améry's text. In this segment of the performance, he is still practicing the exercise with which Goat Island began: create an environment and/or a performance expressing the feeling of a memory in relation to a historical event. In this case, the memory is of the civil rights era in general and perhaps more specifically the immediate aftermath of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in September 1963. The two dates, 1967 and 1963, are not the only temporal patches sewn to the fabric of Améry's text. When U.S. audiences in 2005 saw this performance, they surely would have been thinking about the revelation in 2004 of the torture of Iraqis by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison.

But before one begins to feel snug in this historical link, before one begins to think that *September roses* is merely drawing a simple comparison between two different wars and two different forms of torture, before one concludes that Goat Island's historiographic method lies in the clichéd belief in the idea that history repeats itself, one must contend with the jokes. What does it mean that the performers have combined Améry's text with Tommy Cooper's jokes? What does it mean that Mark Jeffery whispers these jokes through a megaphone to Matthew Goulish and that Goulish then repeats them in the agitated voice of Jean Améry? What does a joke about a chicken or a lobster have to do with torture? One could propose an array of answers, such as that the jokes are an attempt to deflate the drama of the torture scene, to manage its emotion and disrupt its explosion

into theatrical climax. Or one might point out that, given the performance's focus on World War II, it is important that Cooper, who was born in Wales in 1921, served as a trooper in the British army in the war and acquired his trademark fez while serving in Cairo. And there is the idea that, as Steve Bottoms explains, "Joke-telling and torture turn out to be strangely connected; both crafted to elicit involuntary responses from the victim."[20] Ultimately, however, these jokes are an act of hollowing out, a specific and very different sort of prosthesis from the ones we have considered thus far.

Making a Bioartificial History

Up to this point I have been seeking to understand Goat Island's aesthetic/historiographic practice via a discussion of the group's performance work *When will the September roses bloom?* Here I sew a seam, suture a wound, insert a prosthesis. To the body of Goat Island's performance (a set of actions that conventional history sees as over and done with, an event that, but for textual, photographic, and videographic documentation, it considers lost) I attach a beating heart. In this, I also emulate and repeat the group's multiple acts of repair, carry forward its habit of incorporating disparate references. The repair, keep in mind, is only temporary.

In the spring of 2008 at the University of Minnesota, a group of scientists led by Dr. Doris Taylor announced that they had produced a functioning bioartificial heart. The idea for their experiment was simple: Take a cadaveric heart, wash out all of its cells, and reveal what is called its extracellular matrix, or ECM. Then seed new cells in the matrix and see if a heart will grow. Once the organ develops, stimulate it with small electrical impulses, supply it with blood, and watch to see if it will beat on its own.[21] If one inspects the images documenting this procedure, one can see that it involves a strange process of hollowing out the organ, reducing what once was an intact rat's heart to what looks like a translucent plastic mold (Figure 9). One can see the heart being decellularized and then seeded with new cells. It is striking how utterly sculptural this little heart is, and how the method by which it was created seems to involve an artistic process of emptying or carving out a mold and then filling that mold with material, in this case not molten bronze but cardiac cells. The impetus for this experi-

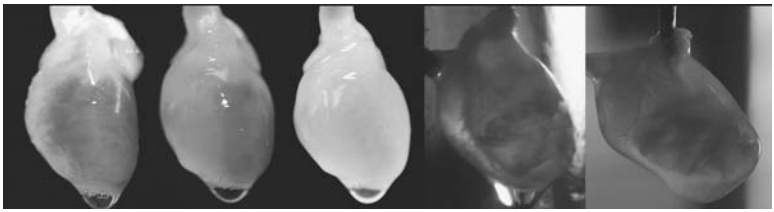

FIGURE 9. Rat heart decellularization *(left three images)* and recellularization *(right)*, 2006. AP photograph/The Canadian Press. Copyright Thomas Matthiesen.

ment was the epidemic of heart disease in the United States and the lack of viable donor organs, as well as a desire to circumvent the need for antirejection drugs, which are used with organ transplantation. In a number of media interviews and publicity videos that followed the announcement of the group's success, Dr. Taylor reported that if continued experiments in this area are successful, it could mean that organs could be made to order for patients with serious illnesses that would have traditionally required transplants.[22] To the degree that one can think of history as a prosthesis, the bioartificial heart offers an intriguing model for historiographic method.

In terms of repair, what Dr. Taylor and her colleagues propose is an utterly new kind of prosthesis. It is not a prosthetic limb attached onto the body. Nor is it an artificial heart—a tiny machine that is manufactured exterior to the body and then implanted within it. In this instance, the device produced to replace a body part is actually made from and generated by that part. In short, the copy is made from the original, and the two occupy the same space at the same time. In addition, the act of replication takes place first of all by emptying out, hollowing, the original so that only the most fragile and barest of structures remains. Finally, this process was developed in response to the need for immunological recognition. Presumably this heart, because it is made from the body's own original organ, will be recognized and accepted by that body even though it contains cells taken from elsewhere. Were this procedure listed in Hixson's handyman's book, it would contain three key directives: hollow, fill, and make recognizable and, thereby, functional. And just as she had the idea to use instructions for fixing a toilet as instructions for producing a

performance, so it is enlightening to think about what it would mean to misread these instructions for repairing a dead heart as instructions for producing history.

To do that, one need only return to *When will the September roses bloom?* and consider how the performance functions in ways similar to the bioartificial heart, and more specifically how it might be understood as a form of bioartificial history. First, the performance, like the new heart, disrupts traditional notions of representation. In history as with prosthetics it is commonly understood that there is a lost origin (an event or a limb) that is replaced by its representation. But in the case of the bioartificial heart, there is no meaningful difference between original and copy. One cannot be said to come before the other; one cannot be said to stand in place of the other. Original and copy are temporally synchronous and spatially coexistent. What is more, they are materially the same, just as one would consider the heart beating inside an adult human body to be the same heart with which that human being was born, even though a certain percentage of the muscle cells by which it is made will have been replaced over the course of a lifetime.[23] With this thought in mind, one can consider how a history might similarly trouble the category of the origin, and as a consequence how it might productively anachronize events, put them out of time.

We can see this idea at work in yet another scene from the performance. One of the many references on which *September roses* draws is the film *Buck Privates*, released in 1941 by Universal Pictures. The film stars Abbott and Costello as former vaudevillians turned street peddlers who escape from a policeman by entering an army recruiting office and accidentally signing up for military service. A baldly propagandistic fiction film, it begins strangely with documentary footage of Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the bill authorizing the peacetime draft in late 1940 and images of young men enlisting for service. Part of the film's purpose was to incite patriotism, publicize the draft, and encourage military enlistment in advance of the United States' official entry into the war in late 1941. Although it cannot be understood as a documentary in the conventional sense, it is indeed a historical document in that it is evidence of the kind of patriotic and jingoistic fervor that accompanied World War II in the United States.

This film and others like it attempt to present military service as a democratic ideal and as a great leveler, a manifestation of the much-mythologized antiaristocratic nature of American society. The film's main plot involves a young millionaire and his chauffeur, both of whom report to the draft board and become soldiers of the same rank in the same regiment. In this regard, *Buck Privates* presents a specific version of history, one that promotes U.S. exceptionalism.

In addition to its use of newsreel footage, the film makes historical claims by documenting real performers of the era—the Andrews Sisters and Abbott and Costello—appearing as themselves and performing some of their most famous routines. The Andrews Sisters had released "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" (written by Don Raye and Hughie Prince) as a single in early 1941, during the production of *Buck Privates*, and the song was nominated for an Academy Award in 1942 based on its appearance in the film. This famous set piece, filmed in black and white, begins with a trumpeter, dressed in an army uniform, playing the first few bars of reveille. A drum beats out the rhythm, and the Andrews Sisters, dressed as members of the Women's Army Corps (with A-line skirts, button-down shirts, neckties, and army caps), begin to sing in harmony: "He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way. He had a boogie sound that no one else can play . . ." The three sway their hips in unison and perform a series of simple dance steps while bobbing their shoulders up and down to the beat. In more than one sense it might be said that their performance lies at the heart of Goat Island's *September roses*.

In a segment that forms a dialogue with the Andrews Sisters, Litó Walkey mimics beat for beat the dance they perform in *Buck Privates* (Figures 10 and 11). She does so first silently and then to John Oswald's distorted version of Dolly Parton singing "The Great Pretender." Oswald released his *Plunderphonics* album, in which he digitally manipulated recordings by a number of pop singers, including Michael Jackson, in 1989. Parton had released her version of "The Great Pretender" in 1984, and Buck Ram wrote the original, which the Platters recorded in 1955. At first Oswald's version slows down Parton's recording to such a degree that her voice sounds like a man's as she sings: "Oh yes, I'm the great pretender / Pretending that I'm doing

FIGURE 10. Goat Island (Litó Walkey), *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*, 2005. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

well / My need is such; I pretend too much / I'm lonely but no one can tell." Then it is sped up so that Parton's famously childlike voice becomes piercingly high and Munchkin-like. What is remarkable about this scene is the way that Walkey continues to dance to the beat of a completely different song ("Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy") even while Parton's country version of a rhythm and blues song plods along and then races in the background.

Sped up and slowed down, male and female, the voice one hears in this scene refers simultaneously to multiple origins—not only to Oswald, Parton, and the Platters, but to the song's dissimulating narrator. Thus, in light of *September roses* as a whole, the song's lyrics appear to offer a wry comment on reality and representation: "Too real is this feeling of make believe / Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal." Representation, that which stands in place of an absent other, is a great pretender and yet its effects are all too real. As before, when Goulish performs Sebald reading Améry, here where Oswald manipulates Parton performing the Platters, one's sense of

FIGURE 11. The Andrews Sisters in *Buck Privates*, Universal Pictures, 1941 (Arthur Lubin, director).

origin and copy is undermined by the excessive regress of quotation. What Michael Taussig calls the mimetic function of the sound recording, its capacity for faithful mimesis, the seeming magic of its ability to bring the past into the present, is simultaneously posited and thrown into question.[24]

Just as Goat Island's performance disrupts common expectations of representation by disorienting the audience's sense of linear temporality and stable origins—where the copy is always distinct from and always comes after the real—it also destabilizes common expectations of sameness and difference. As I have noted, *When will the September roses bloom?* was performed as a double of itself. Audiences attended the performance two nights in a row, and the second night's performance was done in a sequence different from the first. Critics noted with surprise that the repetition produced, rather than tedium, remarkably different experiences, as though audiences were seeing two separate and distinct performances. Philip Stanier, writing for *Dance Theatre Journal*, remarks:

> After watching *September roses* on the first night I had a fitful night's sleep as my mind tried to process the dense event along with the rest of my life. I thought about the performance through the following day, and that night I expected to find the experience much as I had found it the night before. I was tired and not expecting my second engagement with the material to be radically different. On the second night, the piece unfolded and blossomed in front of me, and it was as if the performance had repaired itself overnight.[25]

That doubling structure, combined with all of the performance's quotations of other texts and songs, makes repetition and difference the work's predominant theme. Moreover, in Stanier's description it becomes clear that the second performance, though different from the first, is like the rat's heart: it is materially the same as that for which it stands as double. By saying that "it was as if the performance repaired itself overnight," he seems to be thinking of the performance as a bioartificial structure.

Conclusion

My concern in this chapter has been to think about the historical methodologies employed by Goat Island and to ask how the historian might emulate those methods. I am less concerned with the history that *September roses* tells (its interpretation of World War II, for example) or with providing a history of the performance itself than with its prosthetic techniques, its practice of repair. During the first moments of the "Great Pretender" sequence, when Walkey dances without any music, the audience watches with amazement as the Andrews Sisters' cadaveric performance gets washed out, emptied of affect and sound, perfused by the persistent flow of repeated movement, leaving only a pale extracellular membrane. This membrane is then seeded with living cells from a variety of donors, all represented at various moments in the performance: World War II and Iraq, concentration camps and Abu Ghraib, Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Lillian Gish, crutches, and the sound of James Taylor songs and the *William Tell* overture emanating from an old vinyl record player. The hobbled, stuttering, and distorted sound track that rises behind the dance seems to offer an

electrical impulse, a defibrillated jump start that sets 1941 to beating again. Somehow these cells, though alien to their host, manage to proliferate and create a prosthesis (a history) that is recognizable but different; a copy, but one made from the same material as the original. Unlike the organic wholeness of the rat's new heart, however, this performance imagines wholeness where it is obvious there is none. In the trembling sound of Dolly's voice, the obvious speeding up and slowing down of the recording, we are made aware, as with a stutter, of time.

Just as with the sequence discussed earlier in which Nazi torture is laid over the torture at Abu Ghraib, here war propaganda is imbricated with Dolly Parton singing about the nature of the real. In each instance, Goat Island does more than merely compare these different historical references; the group uses one reference to dislocate another, one temporal moment to trouble the originary status of the other, one strand of historical knowledge to entangle the other, one context to hollow out the other. From this sequence, as well as that in which Tommy Cooper and Jean Améry speak in tandem, we learn how to evacuate but not eliminate a proposed origin, how to repair without recourse to an ideal form, how to embrace the loss of temporal continuity, and how productively to complicate the definitions of and relation between the real and its representation.

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HOUSES FALLING DOWN
ARCHIVAL VIOLENCE IN STEVE McQUEEN'S *DEADPAN*

There's a joke that goes like this: Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off so who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off so who was left? Repeat.

Actor Walter Stevens tells this joke again and again, faster and faster, in Bruce Nauman's 1987 video installation *Clown Torture* (Figure 12). Dressed in a garish clown costume, with ruffled cuffs and multicolored stripes, and made up in white greasepaint, a red nose, and exaggerated red lips, Stevens moves quickly from laughter to agitation and panic. He is trapped by the logic of his own joke, by the logic of repetition, from which he cannot find escape. He sweats. He frowns. He claps his hands on his cheeks. He talks faster, as though the outcome of the joke might be different if he could just beat it to the punch. Nauman's installation, in which four different videotaped sequences of clowns stuck in various repetitive scenarios are projected on walls or shown on television monitors, seems to be the physical realization of a collective childhood revenge fantasy.[1] In that fantasy, repetition operates as a form of torture. In this particular scenario, the character called Repeat, and the logic of repetition that he simultaneously names and childishly demands, is the figure of derision, a man with a funny name who continually and ridiculously remains. Pete, by contrast, is the familiar origin who is always dropping away, always experiencing the trauma of the fall. In these terms, then, we might think of Pete as performance or the event, always in the process of disappearing, that is, in Peggy Phelan's terms, in the process

FIGURE 12. Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture*, 1987. Tape II, Reel C, "Pete and Repeat," four-channel video installation. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago. Copyright 2008 Bruce Nauman and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

of becoming itself.[2] And, to the degree that repetition is a conservative gesture, a mechanism of remembering and retaining, we might think of Repeat as performance's definitive opposite: history, the archive, that which remains. They are original and copy, the thing and its representation, actor and archive, the continuous overflowing present and the incomplete past. Pete and Repeat.

To describe Nauman's video in these terms, to use words like "falling away" and "loss," is to indulge in archive fever, the symptoms of which Derrida describes as follows: "It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[3] The pathology of archive fever lies in a fundamental contradiction: in one's desire to recapture the lost moment as origin, one develops a "nostalgic desire for the archive" (for the photograph, the film, the document, or record), which is ironically the opposite of that moment, but which

offers its promise nonetheless. One might say that both history and performance studies are plagued by this fever, by the desire to return to the moment when the action begins, a search for that moment's remains, and a perpetuation of that desire on account of the vacuities of the archive.

To the extent that contemporary art history is plagued by what Richard Meyer derisively calls "now-ism," that is, a focus on the immediate present of the (historical) actor, it shares performance studies' neurotic relation to the archive.[4] If one is present in the contemporary (a kind of ever-unfolding live performance), presumably one experiences the fullness of time as it happens and thus has no need for the archive, the repository of that which has been. And this seeming abandonment of or freedom from the archive is what causes scholars such as Meyer to challenge the contemporary's aspirations to history. "Where are the archives for your research on contemporary art?" he demands of the aspiring contemporary art historian. "In the files of a commercial gallery, in a drawer in the artist's studio, in a theoretical paradigm, in a series of interviews that you intend to conduct with the artist, or in the testimony of the works of art themselves?"[5] Paradoxically, without a proper archive (just a collection of files tainted by commerce, the detritus stuffed in drawers, some interviews, an abstract theory) we cannot obtain access to the historical moment in which we currently live (or recently have lived) and presumably have directly experienced. We tend to look at the distant past with wistful longing. If only we could have lived in the Renaissance and were able to see Leonardo's inventions and artworks at the time of their creation! The present, by contrast, although seemingly replete with firsthand experience, inspires not longing but suspicion. Although we are here now, ironically, the historian demands that we access that now at one remove, via archival documentation.

There is a peculiar logic at work where the archive takes on a greater reality, a truer truth than experience. Arlette Farge describes that logic in her book *The Allure of the Archives*, which describes her work in the Library of the Arsenal in Paris poring through eighteenth-century judicial documents. She explains that the handwritten texts she has spent her career examining (court records, depositions, transcribed testimony, police inventories, and so on), precisely because

they were not "compiled with an eye toward history," precisely because their authors "never intended to be authors," produce "the sensation of having finally caught hold of the real, instead of looking through a 'narrative of' or 'discourse on' the real."[6] Like Farge, Meyer looks skeptically on those archives that are compiled by financially interested parties (the commercial art gallery), the testimony of those who are in the business of crafting their own brand (the artist), and the assertions of agenda-driven professional historians and theorists. The unintended record, by comparison, "gives rise to the naive but profound feeling of tearing away a veil, of crossing through the opaqueness of knowledge and, as if after a long and uncertain voyage, finally gaining access to the essence of beings and things."[7]

Whereas the historian imagines an essential being or pure origin accessed through the archive, the performance studies scholar imagines an origin, a singular performance or action, unavailable to the archive. "Performance's only life is in the present," Phelan famously remarks. "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[8]

Rebecca Schneider thinks critically about the feverish tendency to mystify performance as a pure, singular origin always already lost, because that tendency implies that the body in performance is inherently excluded from the archive, its logic of origins, the historical knowledge it secures, and the legitimacy it confers. The mystification of performance in turn produces a privileging of its remains and of the archive as the repository of relics. "If we consider performance as a process of disappearance," she asks, "of an ephemerality read as vanishment (versus material remains), are we limiting ourselves to an understanding of performance predetermined by our cultural habituation to the logic of the archive?"[9] She attempts to reimagine the body and its actions as themselves archives, which preserve their contents not in things but in repetitions. From her point of view (to return us to the joke with which we began), Pete is no origin—neither solo nor pure. Rather, he might be described as "the original [that] is always subject to, and the subject of, repetition."[10]

In her advocacy of history in the form of what she calls (following Mary Edsall and Catherine Johnson) body-to-body transmission,

Schneider echoes (or should I say repeats) Gilles Deleuze, who insists, "Difference inhabits repetition."[11] Deleuze's project, in which he offers a nuanced reading of Hegel so as to challenge the dominant view that the philosopher's thinking is characterized by binarism, is to trouble binary logics that place self and other, origin and copy, identity and difference, Pete and Repeat always in opposition and hierarchical relation. He explains:

> In every way, material or bare repetition, so-called repetition of the same, is like a skin which unravels, the external husk of a kernel of difference and more complicated internal repetitions. *Difference lies between two repetitions*.[12]

This means that, while repetition is normally understood to denote the recurrence of two or more of the same things at different moments, even those things which appear to be the same—Pete and Pete, for example—are, in Deleuzian terms, different. Their similarity to each other and to themselves is only superficial, like a skin or husk. Thus we can think of Pete's falling as like any action, which, in Schneider's words, "is already a palimpsest of other actions, a motion set in motion by precedent motion or anticipating future motion or lateral motion." For her, a beginning, "by virtue of its 'again-ness,' is never for the first time and never for the only time—beginning again and again in an entirely haunted domain of repetition: image, text, and gesture."[13] Pete is always already Repeat.

But what does it mean to say that? How can the rejection of pure origins, the recognition of Pete's always being a repeat, help us think in historical terms about the contemporary, about the performative? And what is the "difference" that lies at the heart of repetition, at the heart of sameness? In general, understanding repetition and difference helps us to think afresh about historical temporalities that assume a linear sequence in which a singular originary event always precedes all subsequent reiterations, representations, and reenactments. More specifically, examining the sameness of things thought to be different and the differences in those things thought to be the same will have important implications for learning how historical narratives are written in relation to subjects who are marked by race difference and those who are unmarked by it.

One could argue that the joke Walter Stevens tells is haunted, that in telling it he repeats and reembodies a former violence that the medium of videotape, and its seemingly endless capacity for repetition, simultaneously preserves, reenacts, and hollows out. This white man made up in whiteface tells a joke that was once a staple of blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville. The characters Pete and Repeat also lent their name to the titles of blues songs, to 1920s blues musicians,[14] and to at least one early film. Fatty Arbuckle, under the pseudonym William Goodrich, directed a short titled *Pete and Repeat* in 1931. The film featured two African American vaudevillians, Lee "Bud" Harrison and Peenie Elmo, who worked in blackface comedy as the duo "Seben 'n' Leben."[15] In its earlier incarnation, the joke would have been told by two men in the form of a riddle. One man says, "Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off, so who was left?" The second man guesses the answer and says, "Repeat," thereby unwittingly commanding the first man to begin the joke again and consigning himself to hearing it. When he gets the joke that has been played on him, the repetition stops. But in Nauman's video the telling of that joke is a kind of self-torture, a compulsive repetition from which there seems to be no escape. Stevens thus surrogates in shades of white a legion of earlier black and blackened performers, touches an earlier history in which he becomes entrapped, and at the same time his constant repeating of the joke, his relentless putting into play of the past from which it comes, inures us to its complex historical origins. No one, so far as I know, has ever drawn a connection between Stevens's performance in whiteface and the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. Commenting on the range of clown types (baroque clown, circus clown, jester) that appear in his series of clown videos, Nauman remarks: "They were picked because they have a historical reference, but they are still anonymous. They become masks, they don't become individuals. They don't become anyone you know, they become clowns."[16] Historical and yet anonymous, how does repetition both tie us to the past and estrange us from it?

That Stevens's whiteness is routinely ignored in discussions of this work begs a historiographic question of Schneider's approach: If one body in performance transmits an earlier performance by another body, but does so unintentionally or unknowingly, can it still

be said to function as an archive of that earlier action, particularly when the contemporary performance jams the transmission with an endlessly repeating video signal? Schneider puts this question more plainly when she asks, "What kind of historical 'lineage machine' can *fully* adopt this [bodily transmission] as scholarly practice?" Would it matter if Stevens and Nauman were unaware of the heritage of this joke, if for them the joke's origins lie somewhere else? "Since such a history could not offer a lineage that allows for singularity or discrete or unitary origins," Schneider answers, "'lineage' seems like a profoundly inadequate word. Perhaps an illegitimate history, a history of illegitimacy—that which we leave out, put back—is more (im)precisely the point."[17] I am interested in trying to see this performance as an illegitimate history, one in which things (such as the racial heritage of the joke or the racial connotations of the performer in whiteface) are left out and put back, but I am also concerned about the ways in which the repetition of the video creates surplus—the proliferation of the joke, the action, the audience—at the same time it evacuates and empties. In short, I want to think about the skin (black and white) that unravels in repetition and about how the body-to-body transmission gets jammed. For if we are to use repetition as a historical method or way of thinking about temporality, we need to weigh carefully its generative ability to disrupt linear time against its troubling tendency to obscure difference (the clown is white and therefore has no race) and to legitimate some points of origin while disowning others (Nauman's video does not make reference to blackface minstrelsy).

There's a joke that goes like this: Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off so who was left? *Repeat.* Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off so who was left? *Repeat.* Repetition, yes, but with a difference. Another clown, another joke, another act of falling.

In 1997 British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen, who went on to win the Turner Prize and later the Academy Award for Best Picture for his feature film *Twelve Years a Slave*, produced a silent, black-and-white film installation called *Deadpan.* In this roughly four-minute film, the artist stands stock still, unflinching even while the gable-end wall of a house falls down around him and he narrowly escapes being crushed (Figure 13).[18] Mimicking a trick that Buster Keaton performed in the 1920s, he is carefully positioned at precisely the spot where

FIGURE 13. Steve McQueen (director), *Deadpan*, 1997, 16 mm, black-and-white film, video transfer. Silent, 4:30.

the window opening in the wall will come to rest on the ground (Figure 14). The stunt is shown again and again from a variety of angles, and the entire film runs on a continuous loop, so that a cloud of dust is silently blown into the air over and over every time the wall hits the ground. Wearing a white T-shirt, denim pants, a dark belt, and boots without shoelaces, McQueen expresses no emotion. As a result of *Deadpan*'s emptied aspects—McQueen's stoic face, which hides a terrible danger; the silent fall, which smothers the sound of tearing wood, the crash of enormous weight—the slapstick scene has been described as stripped of comic effect. "The repetition turns an hilarious lucky escape and spectacular stunt into an ordeal and endurance, implying a sense of entrapment and punishment."[19] Because the scene is filmically deconstructed (shot and reshot in different ways), and because the film runs continuously, this work, according to critic Michael Archer, "produces a strange sense of suffocation."[20] Like the story of Pete and Repeat, *Deadpan* is the repetitive reenactment of a fall. It conserves and holds in suspension the lost act, the finality of the wall come down, by replaying it again and again. So here again

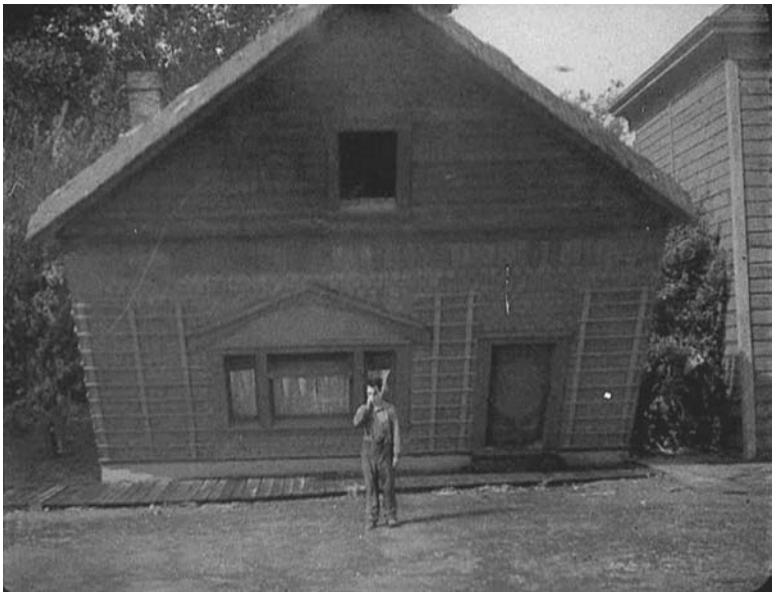

FIGURE 14. Buster Keaton, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, 1928, Joseph M. Schenck Productions.

is repeated the problem of the fall, the problem of performance and bodies for the archive.

"In privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain," Schneider asks, "do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently?"[21] Contemplating performance's ultimate refusal to disappear, she advocates thinking of performance as itself an archive, of the body not as that which eludes archivization but as itself a means of memory and history. It is not difficult to see *Deadpan* in these terms since it quite deliberately archives the famous scene in the Buster Keaton film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) in which Keaton innocently escapes being crushed by the wall of a house in exactly the same manner as McQueen. It is easy to read the deadpan expression that McQueen wears as a surrogation, a transmission of Keaton's face, to see McQueen's body as haunted by Keaton's. *Deadpan* is thus the scene of both internal and external repetitions, a film that pays homage to another film, a performance piece that repeats another, earlier performance. It is the

record and reenactment of a body-to-body transmission. To concede to performance the status of archive, however, leads to a confrontation with the fact that as an archive it preserves and remembers only to the degree that it alters and forgets.

Therefore, in order to understand this film as an archive, to see it as a history of an earlier performance (or rather an earlier set of performances), it is necessary to think more carefully about the archive. "Let us not begin at the beginning, or even at the archive," Derrida writes,

> but rather at the word "archive"—and with the archive of so familiar a word. *Arkhē*, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history *there* where things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle.[22]

The archive is empowered to create origins, the place from which things commence, the site where history begins. It also names, gives order to, and interprets its contents. "The meaning of 'archive,'" he continues, "its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded."[23] Derrida asserts that the archive develops from two sources—the home (it is the site of origins) and the law (it is the site of the jussive, that which commands). It shelters artifacts and documents in a place where they can be gathered together, unified, identified, and classified.[24]

It is important to note in this context that, in addition to its connections to the house, the architecture of the archive includes the body. Like the *arkheion*, Derrida argues, the body can be marked with an organizing logic; it can bear the inscription of the law, as, for example, in circumcision, which classifies and draws a line between Jew and Gentile even as it violently imposes its law and remembers the past.[25] Even though it is affiliated with the law (even God's law), with magistrates and hermeneutics, there is one other principle of the ar-

chive that we must bear in mind: "The archive always works," Derrida insists, "and a priori, against itself."[26] That is, the archive stands as a monument to forgetting.

It is its amnesiac function more than its order, commandment, or law that Carolyn Steedman experiences in the archive. For her, the archive is Kafkaesque: she experiences no origins, only the feeling of being caught in the middle of something vaguely oppressive; she confronts the law, certainly, but finds it incompetent, disorganized, incomplete, and irrational; she finds no ontological or nomological clarity. The archive, she says, "never has been the repository of official documents alone. And nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities."[27] What is more, as she explains later on, "in actual Archives, though the bundles may be mountainous, there isn't in fact, very much there. . . . And *nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive.* It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost."[28]

Though Farge finds the archive more emotionally moving than Steedman does, more materially vibrant (to borrow Jane Bennett's word),[29] describing its manuscripts as "living documents" that "immerse and invade the reader," she too notes its tedium, inexplicable gaps, and interruptions.[30] The historical registers she consults "consist of long, tiresome lists, usually written by a single clerk. Sometimes the lists are interrupted, for reasons that we will never know, and never resumed, despite titles promising long chronological spans." Ironically, even as the plentitude of the archive overwhelms, it is lacking. "The spoken word, the found object, the trace left behind," Farge declares enthusiastically, "become faces of the real. As if the proof of what the past was like finally lay there before you, definitive and close. As if, in unfolding the document, you gained the privilege of 'touching the real.'" And yet, she admits, "no matter how much the real seems to be there, visible and tangible, it reveals nothing more than its physical presence, and it is naive to believe that this is its essence."[31]

Steve McQueen's *Deadpan* is, I argue, precisely this kind of archive: close and seemingly real, yet forgetful and incomplete. While

on one hand the film indexes and catalogs the original performance, it also loses hold of that performance's details. In the original film (well, it's not quite original, but we'll call it that for a little while), Keaton plays Willie, the son of a steamboat captain, who was raised on the East Coast and has recently graduated from Harvard. Willie arrives in the fictional midwestern town of River Junction just in time to help rescue his father's steamboat business, which is threatened by a wealthy competitor with a brand-new steamer. Willie, a hapless nerd dressed in a college sweater and bow tie, is a huge disappointment to his father, and he becomes even more so when he falls in love with the daughter of his father's competitor. The famous scene occurs when a cyclone tears through town and blows Willie through the streets while buildings collapse and debris flies through the air. He stops in front of a house, as though trying to decide what to do, while the wind pulls terrifically against him. Suddenly the facade of the two-story house behind him is blown loose and falls down, threatening to crush him, but the open second-floor window passes, with only a three-inch margin of error, around him. At first he seems completely unaware of what has taken place, but then, after stepping over the collapsed wall, he does a double take and runs away in terror from other falling buildings and flying debris.

We must admit, though, that even this scene, which forms an origin for McQueen's film, is neither original nor singular. After the wall collapses in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, the collapse is repeated at least two other times in the tornado sequence, when Keaton emerges through doorways of descending walls. Moreover, all of this repeats an earlier film from 1920 titled *One Week*. In that short, Keaton plays a newlywed who tries to assemble a prefabricated house, which of course results in all manner of calamities, including a brief shot of an unfinished wall falling down on Keaton, who emerges unscathed out of its roughed-in window opening (Figure 15). And this, in turn, repeats a gag performed by Fatty Arbuckle in *Back Stage*, a short from 1919 in which Buster Keaton costars, where Arbuckle plays a stagehand in a theater who is thrust unwittingly into the part of the romantic lead. During the play within the film, he serenades the leading lady, who looks on him lovingly from the second-story window of a prop house. As a result of Keaton's blundering behind the scenes, the stage

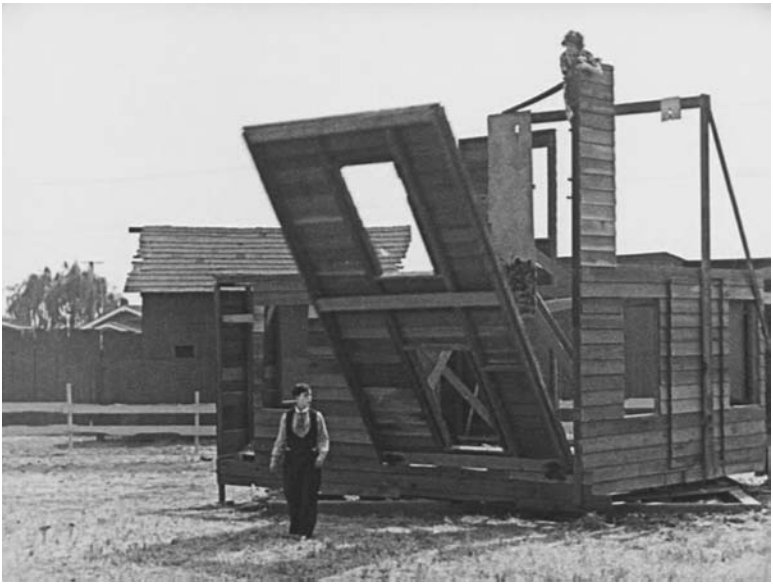

FIGURE 15. Buster Keaton, *One Week*, 1920, Joseph M. Schenck Productions.

flat representing the wall of the house falls on Arbuckle and, as in the other renditions of the stunt, he emerges safely through an open window, strumming his ukulele all the while. Of course the 1928 version, because it occurs in a feature-length film and was famously shot in one take with a real building and a real wall, is most often identified with the gag. And thus it is *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* that is most often discussed in relation to McQueen's *Deadpan*.

Unlike *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which shows the house falling only once, only from the front, and not in close-up, McQueen's version employs a catalog of filmic techniques. Historian and critic Michael Newman describes it this way:

> The first shot is from inside the building, beginning when the fall of the wall lets in light; the last shot is of the wall falling onto the camera, and ends in darkness. The shots in between analyse the gag from all points of view: feet from the front (shoelaces missing); centered on the window, which reveals the interior of the building when it falls; the window to the left, with the

> camera following the movement of the falling wall ending with McQueen's legs; the artist's body in an "American shot" cut above the legs; a side view of the upper torso as the wall passes; a downward shot from the upper window rapidly repeated; a frontal shot of the window cut by the frame; oscillating still-shots of the face; and the face with the wall falling across it.[32]

The sheer proliferation of all these shots and their endless repetition makes the film resemble the "mountainous bundles" that Steedman characterizes as occupying the space of the archive. Indeed, as in the archive, though Keaton's story has ended up there, it is a story caught halfway through. "While in the source of the gag," Newman writes, as though emphasizing this point, "Buster Keaton is in movement, running through the windstorm, McQueen is motionless. Whereas the actions in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* are causally motivated, the repetition of the gag in *Deadpan* eliminates causality. This leaves the gag open for reinscription: by withholding a plot, it invites interpretation by the viewer."[33]

One of the consequences of this repeating and nonrepeating is that Keaton's film is, to quote Steedman again, "indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost." This is evident in the surprising number of descriptions of *Deadpan*'s citational source that remember it incorrectly. Barry Schwabsky, writing in *Art/Text*, describes *Deadpan* as "a set of variations on a famous scene by Buster Keaton, in which the imperturbable silent-film comedian *walks out of* a house falling down around him without noticing that anything has happened."[34] Tim Adams writes in *The Guardian* that "*Deadpan* is a return to Buster Keaton's famous stunt which involves the gable end of a *barn* crashing down over him; the window of the *barn* wall falls around Keaton, and he walks away unscathed."[35] And Robert Storr somewhat erroneously claims, in the Institute of Contemporary Arts catalog on McQueen, that *Deadpan* is a reference to Keaton's earlier *One Week* rather than *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*[36] While from a historical point of view the inaccuracies about Keaton's film that seem to arise from the archive of McQueen's film are troubling, they are not at all unusual. Indeed, Steedman argues that history almost always goes awry when we think of it as an accumulation

of *stuff*, which we delude ourselves into thinking will help us get the details right. Rather, she suggests that history be thought of more as a process, a process of repetition, if you like.[37] "This is not to say that *nothing* is found [in the archive]," she explains, "but that thing is always something else, a creation of the search itself and the time the search took. . . . The object sought is bound to be 'not the lost [one], but a substitute.'"[38] It seems that the repetition and consequent proliferation of Keaton's gag leads ironically to its being emptied out; its original contexts, details, and significances are lost even in the face of the image's seeming plentitude. And just as it is drained, it is simultaneously filled with something else.

What people seem often to be looking for in McQueen's film is something about blackness, a critical commentary about the experience of the black man, perhaps, or the history of racial inequality. Many of the viewers who examine it ponder what it can mean that a black man is performing Keaton. They compare the violence of Keaton's tornado (and all those falling walls) with the violence of a wall falling over and over again, seemingly without cause, around a man whose black face registers no emotion, remains, like Keaton's, deadpan. *This* violence, they reason, is not funny. Holland Cotter, in a review for the *New York Times*, claims that, "unlike Keaton's film, Mr. McQueen's keeps the idea of disaster rather than comedy to the fore." Moreover, the disaster is something Cotter reads not in the artist's performance but in his skin: "Seen in an American context, the house suggests a sharecropper's cabin; its destruction evokes Abraham Lincoln's Civil War caveat, 'a house divided against itself cannot stand,' referring to a nation riven by the question of slavery." Just in case we have missed the connection here, he notes in parentheses, "(Mr. McQueen is black.)."[39] Mark Durden provides another example when he writes, "As his impassive face fills the gallery wall screen, these shots call to mind the frontal and stark portraits of black subjects within colonial anthropometric photography, measured and framed."[40] And describing a show of McQueen's films in 2005, Roberta Smith declares: "One way or another they all return to the theme of race."[41]

It strikes me as odd that in the case of Nauman's video the potential emergence of a history of race and racism has been forgotten,

ignored, or simply evacuated by virtue of a repetition so complete as to obliterate precedents, while in the case of McQueen's film race occupies the site of origination so completely and the history of race and racism is thought to be so self-evident as to overflow the flickering image. As a result, critics tend to be skeptical when McQueen claims that his film is simply about film itself—about film history and Keaton's role as a major innovator of the medium—or when he describes it in aesthetic or visual terms as involving "a building passing through a person, of a horizontal passing through a vertical."[42] He has repeated the latter claim in the catalog accompanying a major retrospective of his work, where he remarks that "*Deadpan* was all to do with sculpture—the horizontal and the vertical." "It was a lot to do with being framed," he continues, "about frames, window frames and frames of houses. Also being framed within the environment of the institution, being framed within the broader, wider society, and then the individual within the window frame standing up. So, can you escape? Even when you're out, you're in."[43] When asked directly by Tim Adams if he views himself as a black artist, McQueen replies, "I would say no." "But," he continues, referring to his 1993 film *Bear* and repeating the word *escape*, "if you watch my film, you see two black men wrestling. If I watch it, I see two men wrestling. If I spit on the floor here, it is black spit. I can't escape from that."[44]

Here we see the potentially negative consequences of hollowing out as historical method. In chapter 1, I discussed how Goat Island attempted to hollow out specific historical events and actors so as to fill them up or bring them into proximity and conversation with others. The advantages of this strategy are that it undermines the reactionary constraints of origins, makes possible different temporalities, disrupts causality, and troubles the relation between the real and its representation. But in the context of McQueen's experience, is there any meaningful difference between Goat Island's hollowing out of the tragic violence of World War II only to fill it up with other scenes of terror (the bombings in Birmingham or the attacks of 9/11) and the reviewers' seemingly mistaken hollowing out of McQueen's work and filling it with their own concerns, their own preoccupation with or guilt about race? This returns us to an idea I proposed in the intro-

duction: that it matters who is creating the prosthesis, how it is being attached and to whom.

In this case, the black artist is a perverse victim of the insatiable demand by white audiences that he continually perform his victimization, continually be nothing if not black. Inasmuch as it is important to be attentive to the conditions of history's possibility, to think critically about whose history is being applied to whom, I do not want to turn away so rashly from these critics' narratives as to put forth an unthinking intentionalism, that is, a belief that the artist is the sole arbiter of the meaning and importance of his work. Indeed, his intentions seem to change a bit depending on the context in which he discusses them. When *Deadpan* was shown on the huge MTV screen in Times Square during the month of July 2009, McQueen drew a connection between the film and the violence of Hurricane Katrina, which had destroyed much of New Orleans in 2005, and the economic crisis of 2008, both of which disproportionately affected African Americans. "So many people were made homeless post-Katrina, and I think the image—a house, a home—is very apt for what's going on in the economic climate right now."[45] Moreover, given the extensive media coverage of *Twelve Years a Slave*, which was routinely described as brutal, wrenching, and a powerful indictment of racism by critics, bloggers, and entertainment show hosts, it would be incorrect to say that the artist is disinterested in the politics of race.

Instead, I argue that to excise or prune away the interpretations of the dominant so as to clear a space around the subordinate risks falsely eliminating the very thorniness of the problem, dangerously simplifies the complex intertwining of our views about the past. As regards *Deadpan*, bearing in mind that history is always a matter of imagination, always a matter of creation and of mistake, what Rebecca Schneider calls "the error-ridden mayhem of trying to touch the past," then we begin to focus in more complex ways on how McQueen's and his critics' distinct understandings of history can in fact nest inside each other like little dolls, how hollowing out nestles (sometimes in uncomfortable ways) multiple events, multiple experiences, multiple viewpoints each inside another.[46]

There's a joke that goes like this: Pete and Repeat were sitting on a

fence. Pete *fell off* so who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete *fell off* so who was left? Repeat.

So what exactly is to be found in the archive of McQueen's film? I'll tell you. It is the archive. By this I mean that the film both acts *as* an archive of a performance and is *about* the archive's white-cultural logic and its relation to performance and to the contemporary. It remembers Keaton, yes, but it also remembers a particular form of violence. Perhaps it is the violence of slavery, the sharecropper's cabin, the ethnographic portrait, or the hurricane that seems to target the poor and black more directly than the rich and white, but when McQueen describes not being able to "escape" from the connotations of race, that particular word suggests that his film might be as much about the violence of interpretation as about anything else, the violence of the fall. Derrida remarks, "What is at issue here . . . is the violence of the archive itself, *as archive*, *as archival violence*."[47] Remember that the word *archive* comes "from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded."[48] So when this house falls apart—that is, when the archive falls apart—the gag is that the performer escapes its violence, is saved by a well-placed window. In Steedman's words, "The Archive then is something that, through the cultural activity of History, can become Memory's potential space, one of the few realms of the modern imagination where a hard-won and carefully constructed place, can return to boundless, limitless space, and we might be released from the house arrest that Derrida suggested was its condition."[49] *Deadpan* is a performance that is an archive, a performance that multiplies and repeats McQueen's and Keaton's actions, at the same time knowing that there is no original action yielding to its repetition. This is a repetition that is, in Foucault's words, "devoid of any grounding in an original, outside of all forms of imitation, and freed from the constraints of similitude."[50] In this sense, like the house that is the film's central motif, the archive, the *arkheion*, is repeatedly, obsessively blown open. The walls, like Pete, are always falling down.

INCORRECT AND INCOMPLETE
ROSS McELWEE'S FICTIONS AND SAMUEL DELANY'S LIES

If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories?
—Roland Barthes

Bear in Mind Two Sentences

Samuel Delany's memoir begins with this laconic sentence: "My father had been sick almost a year."[1] His journey of remembering sets out from and is oriented toward the emotional landmark of his father's illness and death. That landmark, however, is no signpost, stone marker, or architectural structure heavily anchored to a place and drawn on a map. It is more like a scratch in a record that makes the needle stutter and skip. "For most of my life," Delany recalls, "if it came up, I would tell you: 'My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen.'"[2] He was made aware of the error in this claim, however, when two scholars from Pennsylvania (Michael Peplow and Robert Bravard) looked into the record and discovered that he could not have been seventeen the year that his father died.[3] It is from this error that Delany's philosophy of history emerges. He writes:

> Bear in mind two sentences:
>
> "My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen."
>
> "My father died of lung cancer in 1960 when I was eighteen."
>
> The first is incorrect, the second correct.
>
> I am as concerned with truth as anyone—otherwise I would

> not be going so far to split such hairs. In no way do I feel the incorrect sentence is privileged over the correct one. Yet, even with what I know now, a decade after the letter from Pennsylvania, the wrong sentence still *feels* to me righter than the right one. Now a biography or a memoir that contained only the first sentence would *be* incorrect. But one that omitted it, or did not at least suggest its relation to the second on several informal levels, would be incomplete.[4]

The father's absence turns the son's head back to face the past. Indeed, one might say that it is the father's absence that constitutes history. At the same time, such a history is in fact *for* the father, it is offered for his approval, and his potential disapproval governs it, determines its contradictory logics: history demands that the truth of the past be contained in representation, the opposite of the real; it requires the correct and the complete, even when the complete includes that which is incorrect. The father's disapproving stare is what Delany refers to as the "awful gaze of History."[5] That gaze is particularly fearsome for histories of the contemporary, the contemporary being, by definition, a period of transition between the then and now, the becoming past and the becoming present, the father and his son.

It is because he is "as concerned with truth as anyone" that Delany argues for the inclusion of the incorrect sentence. That sentence, that prosthesis, even as it prevaricates about the date of his father's passing, swears to (stands in place of) another truth about the pain it caused and the ways in which that pain dislocates points of temporal orientation. So deep is the scratch of his father's death in 1960 that when he plays the record of his past the needle keeps skipping backward again and again to 1958. That malfunction, what Fred Moten calls a "temporal-affective disorder," is likely brought about by his repeated return to this one track and by the softness and malleability of the waxen disk of memory, which is painfully marred by the very device designed to preserve the moment faithfully and give it a voice.[6] Yet another of history's contradictions.

Inasmuch as he is concerned with the past's relation to mnemonic imagery, Delany rehearses an ancient philosophical debate about whether imagination is necessary for memory. Socrates said

that we retain images of the past in our minds like impressions on a wax block (for Freud it was the palimpsest, the Mystic Pad), and yet we are constantly in danger of confusing the image (always in some sense erroneous because it is only a representation) and the event itself. Memory is thus guilty by association with the image, with imagination. The father is degraded by his copy, his representation by the son. In his rehearsal of this debate, Paul Ricoeur writes:

> As a countercurrent to this tradition of devaluing memory, in the margins of a critique of imagination, there has to be an uncoupling of imagination from memory, as far as this operation can be extended. The guiding idea in this regard is the eidetic difference, so to speak, between two aims, two intentionalities: the first, that of imagination, directed toward the fantastic, the fictional, the unreal, the possible, the utopian, and the other, that of memory, directed toward prior reality, priority constituting the temporal mark par excellence of the "thing remembered," of the "remembered" as such.[7]

To rescue memory from history's repudiation, he suggests, philosophers have attempted to uncouple what is correctly remembered from what is incorrectly imagined. Even in his phenomenological reading of memory's relation to history, even in his attempt to reappraise memory positively, Ricoeur asserts fatalistically "that we have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself. . . . To put it bluntly, we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened *before* we declare that we remember it."[8] Whereas he can only bring himself to argue that in spite of the dangers of memory becoming fantasy, in the end "we have nothing better,"[9] Delany more boldly demonstrates the necessary and mutually productive relation between the fact of the past and our eidetic memory of it (unreal and fictional though it may be). He recognizes that the past is not just a stable real to which we append some image by way of remembrance but it is in itself imagistic and insubstantial. In short, he recouples memory and imagination and promotes a history that is both correct and complete in its inclusion of even those incorrect or imaginary details to which the mind repeatedly returns.

This chapter is an attempt to bear in mind Delany's two sentences, that is, to remember Delany by misremembering him, to write a complete history based knowingly on an incorrect image. Just as he keeps confusing 1958 and 1960, so my mind repeatedly skips from Samuel Delany, the queer, African American science fiction writer from New York, to Ross McElwee, the straight, white documentary filmmaker from North Carolina. This malfunction is not as unlikely as it might first appear. I see the two men, Delany born in 1942 and McElwee born in 1947, as distinct embodiments of the same historical narrative, two men whose memories of that past lie side by side like two tracks on the same record, which, if this were a different kind of chapter—a history of a distinct era as opposed to a meditation on history itself—I might clumsily name something like "Masculinity and Race in Postwar America." If I am in the mistaken habit of remembering Delany *as* McElwee, or of imagining McElwee when I remember Delany, it is because of the surprising similarities in their historiographic philosophies, which emerge in both cases in response to the death of the father. Delany's views on history, which I have only tentatively introduced, may be found throughout his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* (first published in 1988), and McElwee's can be seen in many of his films, but I am especially concerned here with *Bright Leaves* (2004) and one of his earliest films, *Backyard* (1984). Despite the obvious differences in their backgrounds and in their choices of media, the two are driven by what Derrida calls "the paternal and patriarchic principle" of the archive, of history, which for Derrida as well as for Delany and McElwee is inherently a fatherly affair.[10] As a result of this common principle, the two men engage in very similar speculation about the nature of history and memory, as well as the relation between documentary and fictional accounts of the past. Both men take seriously the incorrect or fictional in relation to history, and both show how necessary those modes are in response to history's paternal gaze, how representation becomes an essential part of the priorness, the priority, of the past.

Tracing the etymology of the word *archive*, Derrida famously presents it (as noted in chapter 2) as a structure of what he calls "domiciliation." The archive, he explains, "has the force of law, of a law which is the law of the house *(oikos)*, of the house as place, domicile, family,

lineage, or institution."[11] Thus the enterprise of history, inasmuch as it relies on the archive and is carried out by the archons, those ancient Greek custodians of memory, is entwined with the establishment of patriarchal lineages, the maintenance of borders, and the philosophical establishment of the past *as* past. As an epistemological structure governed by thought, therefore, the archive has a single-minded concern. "But where does the outside commence?" Derrida asks. "This question is the question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others."[12] What is archive and not-archive? What counts as worthy of remembering, of preserving? When does the past itself begin? Both patriarchal and border drawing, the archive suggests a special relationship between the father and the margins, the law and the limen wherein the law most authoritatively applies its force. We have seen how Delany tries ardently to respond to these twin concerns. As the site of the paternal, the past (the father) expects completeness—it demands everything—but at the same time it sets limits, determines where the margins are. Perhaps even more troublesome than history's awful gaze, its regimentation, delineations, and strict authority, is the revelation of its phantasmal nature. What shocks Delany so is his realization that the stalwart and singular historical fact of the father is an illusion. He is disfigured. No true north, but only an oscillation. McElwee too is traumatized, not simply by the loss of his father (the fact or at least idea of which is, as I've said, constitutive of history) but also by the revelation of the father as eidolon. "The search for descent," Foucault remarks, "is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[13]

I argue that Delany and McElwee understand history through these patriarchal archontic principles. In addition, it is my claim that each attempts to respond to history's awful gaze and paternal demands by trying obsessively to produce a complete accounting of the past (complete in Delany's sense) and by repeatedly tracing the place where what is outside of history commences. My aim is to read their different texts side by side to tease out their philosophies, to understand their respective claims about fact and fiction, to watch each man work. I also want to use those philosophies, the two artists'

historical methods, to read the past that their own works present, to read that past from the point of view of its sexual and racial margins. For Delany, it is gay male (and in some cases black) bodies that lie along the margins, invisible and isolated in subway station bathrooms, truck depots, and art galleries; for McElwee, it is black bodies that work along the fence at the back of the yard, or stand in corners holding white men's hats, or decorate the set of a Hollywood version of Dixie. It is in these margins, these sites of commencement, I argue, that the father as oscillation, as illusion, is most keenly felt.

Skip

Before I begin in earnest, there is one methodological lesson I need to learn. When I watch Delany working, I notice how he skips, how he moves back and forth in time or back and forth between two sentences or between two moments of emotional crisis. He describes, for example, an incident in 1977 when he received a call from an editor who ten years earlier had read Delany's enormous manuscript (of more than eight hundred pages) *Voyage! Orestes*, which Delany considered his first great novel.[14] Several presses rejected the manuscript because they considered it too long and unwieldy. The editor explained that he loved the novel at the time, when he was only an editorial assistant, but that now he was in a position to publish it. Delany was forced painfully to explain that the manuscript was lost, with no surviving copy. It is here that I watch in awe his dexterous way with history:

> Take the ache, now, and move it, very carefully—don't jostle it, because the slightest jar will make the buttocks, belly, and jaws clamp and the eyes blur with water, breaking the world into flakes of light—just to the start of what comes next. Not the motivation for the feeling, certainly. . . . But rather the feeling itself: the absence, the obliteration, the frustration, the absolute oblivion—for such a feeling was at the center of what I'm going to write about now.[15]

He then describes a nervous breakdown he experienced in 1964, which manifested itself in the feeling of wanting to throw himself in front of a subway train—suicidal thoughts that resulted in his being sent to a psychiatrist and to the mental hospital at Mount Sinai. In this nar-

rative gesture, Delany produces a deep scratch. The story skips from one experience of intense emotion (the loss of his manuscript and the years of labor that went into it) to another (the feeling of losing himself), from one historical moment in the late seventies backward to another in the mid-sixties, so that the first experience is overlaid with the second, and the scratch that connects the two tracks is a single affect. In a similar way, though far less skillfully, this chapter will skip between tracks, will try carefully to move aches from one place to another.

Bear in Mind Two Images

I ask you to hold two images (rather than Delany's two sentences) in your mind. The first is a photograph, a rather famous photograph, taken by Fred McDarrah, of Allan Kaprow and his fellow performers rehearsing for *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959). The black-and-white image shows a rank of four people. Two face outward and two face inward, with their backs to the viewer. From left to right they alternate out, in, out, in. At the far left a petite African American woman, Shirley Prendergast, wearing a black leotard and tights, strums a ukulele. Next to her Rosalyn Montague stands in a dark shirt and narrow-legged pants; her white ankles and bare feet are visible. We cannot see it, but she is holding a drum. Allan Kaprow, a white man, bearded, stands at the center of the image. He wears a white button-down shirt and blue jeans, and he plays a recorder. On the far end, Lucas Samaras, the tallest in the group, stands, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants and holding a violin erect in his left hand, with the neck and tuning pegs just visible and a bow dangling from his right hand at his side. The seriousness of Kaprow's and Prendergast's expressions, along with the erect postures and precise choreography, not to mention the recorder and drum, give the configuration a vaguely military air (Figure 16).

The second image is a black-and-white film still from a rather obscure B movie called *Bright Leaf* (1950), directed by Michael Curtiz, which stars Gary Cooper, Patricia Neal, and Lauren Bacall. It is an exterior shot at night in which Cooper, dressed in late nineteenth-century costume, wears a long gray coat with a dark velvet collar (Figure 17). He is kissing a blonde Patricia Neal, who wears a diaphanous white

FIGURE 16. Allan Kaprow, with Shirley Prendergast, Rosalyn Montague, and Lucas Samaras, prepares for *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959. Photograph by Fred McDarrah. Courtesy of Getty Images.

dress of the period, the ruffled sleeves of which partially obscure her delicate left hand. The two are posed in front of a wicker lawn chair, and a brightly lit antebellum columned porch stands as background. As Cooper grabs Neal, with his large hands clasping her shoulders, she raises her pale chin upward to reach his lips and lifts her left hand ever so slightly but does not touch him. To the extent that the first image is a documentary photograph of a performance (or rather a rehearsal for a performance) we may say that it is correct. The second image, from a fictional film, is in this sense incorrect. But without that second image, my history would be incomplete.

FIGURE 17. Michael Curtiz (director), *Bright Leaf*, 1950, Warner Bros. Pictures.

18 Happenings

Samuel Delany attended *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in the autumn of 1959, although he remembers it as having taken place in "the late summer of 1960."[16] Kaprow's performance happened to coincide with that difficult year in which Delany's father was sick from lung cancer, the temporally dislocated chasm when his father died. Since Delany misremembers the date of his own father's death, it is not surprising that he has trouble with some of the details surrounding this now famous performance. It was held at the Reuben Gallery on Fourth Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets in New York, though Delany recalls it as having occurred in a loft apartment on Second Avenue (Figure 18).[17] Theater historian Michael Kirby says the performance started at 8:30; Delany says 7:30.[18] Although Delany's account of the performance is marked by factual inaccuracies, his is a rare description of the event written by one of its viewer-participants and, more important for my purposes, by a viewer who was aware of being on the event's margins.

Delany comments at length on the confusing spatial divisions that were set up for the performance:

> Most of the space was taken up by temporarily erected polythene walls on unpainted wooden frames. These walls divided the performance area into what I assumed, at this distance, was six square chambers, each about eight feet by eight feet, each accessible from a door-wide space on the outside, but separated from one another, and through whose translucent wavering walls, you could make out only the ghost of what was going on in the chambers beside or across from yours.[19]

The performance confounds Delany, who remembers the three plastic-shrouded rooms as six, who isn't sure when it started or when it was done. "The only truly clear memory I have of the performance proper," he remarks, "was that I wasn't very sure when, exactly, it began."[20] And apparently Kaprow had to stick his head into the room where Delany was sitting and announce, "Okay, it's over now" before he was convinced it was safe to leave. Afterward, he wonders whether elements that seemed to be errors were actually planned—a young woman mistakenly entering the cubicle in which he sat, a windup toy that seemed to wind down too quickly and had to be restarted. He describes seeing ghostly shapes on the other side of the plastic, a small wavering yellow light from a candle, the sounds of other spectators laughing and of a drum being pounded. Of this event he concludes:

> I, of course, had expected the "six parts" to be chronologically successive, like acts in a play or parts in a novel—not spatially deployed, separate, and simultaneous, like rooms in a hotel or galleries in a museum. I'd expected a unified theatrical audience before some temporally bounded theatrical whole. But it was precisely in this subversion of expectations about the "proper" aesthetic employment of time, space, presence, absence, wholeness, and fragmentation, as well as the general locatability of "what happens," that made Kaprow's work signify: his happenings—clicking toys, burning candles, pounded drums, or whatever—were organized in that initial work very much like historical events.[21]

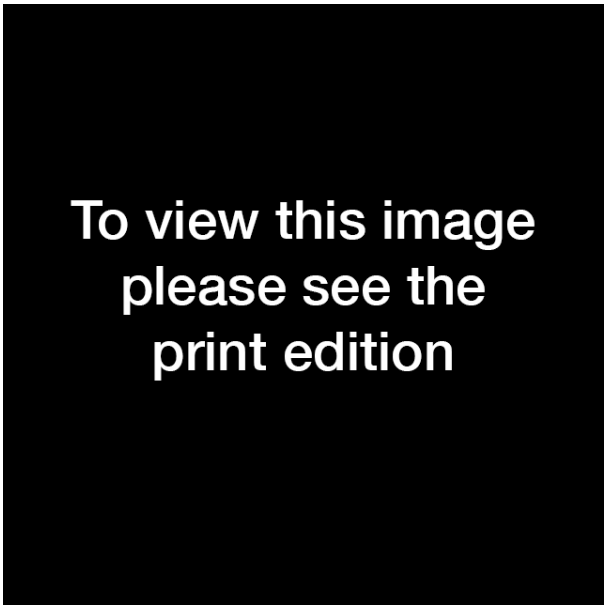

FIGURE 18. Allan Kaprow, Room 2, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959. Photograph copyright Scott Hyde. Courtesy of Getty Research Institute. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Delany uses the story of seeing this now canonical work as a metaphor for the incomprehensibility of history. For him, historical events occur in a confusing and unreliable manner; they occur simultaneously in various adjacent but still separate spaces; they are quotidian, mysterious, and incoherent. We cannot be sure when they begin or end.

Of this account, Gavin Butt writes that

> there is little or no recourse . . . to the authority and priority of a knowledge that supposedly derives from "being there" at the event itself. There is little suggestion that his narrative is either more comprehensive, or more truthful, than any other that one might read, scholarly or otherwise. Instead, it comprises a remarkable narration of the epistemological uncertainties which attend the scene of embodied interpretation, and enables us to entertain the possibilities for a critical and historical

> writing marked by its implication within the scene of performance itself.[22]

Butt questions the common understanding of performance as an intensely presentist experience, an understanding that privileges *being there*. Rather, he reads Delany to show how the "event itself" (what we have already likened in the previous chapter to the contemporary) is fundamentally characterized by uncertainty. On one hand, Delany seems to use the image of the polythene walls to remind his reader of the membrane that separates us from what we experience and remember, the thin boundary between the event itself and our memory of it. This gives Delany license to misremember details and to comment on how perceptions of events, unreal though they may be, are crucial to the telling of the past. "Delany attempts," Moten explains, "a double distinction between the impossibility of a calculus of the world, the event, art, the happening, subjectivity, objectivity, and their reality and between experience and calculation."[23]

On the other hand, however, Kaprow's plastic set also symbolizes for Delany a series of subtle but seemingly insurmountable social barriers. Delany went to the performance almost by chance, having seen a mimeographed flyer advertising the event posted on a mailbox in the East Village. He was accompanied by his older cousin Boyd, who was in town visiting from medical school. After the performance, while talking to a stereotypical denizen of the art world, a white woman wearing what he describes as a "voluminous caftan in a green print," he notes that he and his cousin "were probably the only two black people in the audience." "Today," he remarks, from the perspective of the memoirist, "I also suspect we were two of the very few there that evening unknown to the others, at least by sight."[24] His sense of not being part of the work's ideal audience did not seem to be mitigated by the presence of a black person in the performance's cast. Although Shirley Prendergast was there, and although the piece made reference to race via the windup toy, with its racist portrayal of a dancing black Sambo character, neither her role nor the theme of race has ever been taken up at length in the histories of this performance. Kirby, for example, despite the detail of his account, mentions Prendergast only as "a Negro girl" in a black leotard.[25] He de-

scribes the toy as "the brightly colored figure of a Negro dancing on a drum; the legs jiggled and swung frantically and erratically when the toy was started," but makes no further comment.[26] André Lepecki, who directed a redoing of *18 Happenings* in 2006, mentions that in Kaprow's notes for the performance he refers to this toy as a "Black Sambo." "The inclusion of this Sambo," he remarks briefly, "dancing mechanically to the cacophony of an avant-garde orchestra playing in the next room in an environment lit by red, white, and blue light bulbs was not an innocent gesture in 1959."[27]

That Prendergast's role and the presence of this toy have gone so often unremarked in the historical descriptions of the performance suggests that, in this regard, the polythene walls and the simultaneity of the performance were perhaps *too* effective at rendering the piece's elements—projected slides, simple movements, recitations of written texts, games, music, marching, bells ringing, lit matches, sprayed kitchen cleanser, disconnected phrases broadcast from speakers, squeezed oranges, cans of paint, colored lights, and racial images—meaningless and seemingly random in and of themselves. The performance, viewed in this way, fully satisfies Kirby's claim that happenings include what he calls concrete materials, which function as "direct experience." "This does not mean that the concrete details may not also function as symbols," he remarks. "They often do. But the symbols are of a private, nonrational, polyvalent character rather than intellectual."[28] In other words, even if the work does make reference to social issues such as race, these references are of no greater significance and cannot be said to have a greater claim to the ultimate meaning of the work than any of its other elements.

For Delany, the story of *18 Happenings* serves not only as an illustration of historical memory's constitutive fragmentation but also as a way of visualizing the painful spatial and emotional dislocation experienced by racial and sexual others. The Reuben Gallery is a site where Delany feels himself to be, as he says, "unknown," and the performance that took place there thus becomes associated with the ache of un-belonging. Nearly a hundred pages on from where he describes having attended the performance—both the historiographic confusion attached to its temporal simultaneity and the racial isolation produced by the presumed homogeneity of its audience—it

appears again as an image of homophobia. He directly compares the phenomenon of gay male cruising in subway johns or truck depots to the experience of *18 Happenings*. "No one ever got to see its whole," he laments. "These institutions cut it up and made it invisible—certainly much less visible—to the bourgeois world that claimed the phenomenon deviant and dangerous. But, by the same token, they cut it up and thus made any apprehension of its totality all but impossible to us who pursued it."[29] Here the plastic compartments of Kaprow's performance take on a more violent connotation; they have the effect of "cutting up" and rendering invisible that which is unfairly deemed a threat by dominant culture. Compartmentalizing and rendering ghostly the experience of gay men in the 1950s and '60s not only made gay sexuality safer for heterosexuals, but it also, perhaps most painfully, isolated gay men from each other and from their collective political power.

It is unclear to me what Delany intends by these two different deployments of his experience of *18 Happenings*, whether (in accordance with his discussion of the performance) the fragmentation of historical memory is simply inevitable, ontological, and therefore without differential power or intent, or whether that fragmentation, to the extent that it partakes in the iniquitous cutting up of gay experience, is a problem to be redressed, a form of power to be questioned. In the first instance, there is a measure of liberty associated with accepting history's anachronisms, its disintegration and misremembering. In the second instance, there is something nefarious in the fact that historical accounts depend on the active and strategic production of invisibility, what Joe Roach has disparagingly called "strategic erasures."[30] Fred Moten's analysis of "the period between 1955 and 1965 when the avant-garde in black performance . . . irrupts into and restructures the downtown New York scene" similarly notes a contrast in Delany's descriptions of his fragmented, modular, and postmodern experience of *18 Happenings* and his totalizing and sublime experience of a mass of bodies engaged in homosexual sex in the St. Mark's bathhouse.[31] Rather than disparage the former and exult in the latter, rather than see the performance and its invisibilities as strictly a metaphor either for the radically innovative disorientation

of the avant-garde or for the repressive obscuring of gay sexuality, Moten argues, Delany "improvises through the gap between the unseen totality" of the performance and the "iconic dynamism of a seen totality" in the bathhouse.[32] This improvisation is, for Moten, neither a simple critique nor a naive desire but a virtuosic playing with familiar themes.

These are two sides of the question of incorrect and incomplete histories: in one case, what is incorrect (Delany's misremembering details of *18 Happenings*) can be a valued signifier of something more complete (the revolutionary nature of the performance, its great capacity to decenter experiential knowing); in another case, what is incorrect (that gay people either do not exist or are inherently dangerous) is truly painful. I see this contradiction as endemic to history's patriarchal logics, to its strict authority on one hand and its evanescence on the other. Rather than settling the question (Moten suggests it can't be settled, that we can only syncopate its already established rhythms), let's hold on to that pain for a moment and move the ache of it somewhere else.[33]

Bright Leaves

Ross McElwee's 2004 film *Bright Leaves* (not to be confused with the Hollywood film *Bright Leaf*, the image of which I've asked you to hold in your mind) begins with a voice-over narration in which McElwee describes his longing to return to North Carolina, where he was born and raised, from his current home in Boston:

> So I had this dream that I was standing in a field surrounded by these immense prehistoric-looking plants. The leaves seemed to give off their own heat, almost a kind of body heat, and the air was very humid. I felt strangely comforted by these leaves, very happy to be surrounded by them. As I was telling my wife about this dream I realized that the leaves were probably tobacco leaves. My wife then said she thought my dream might be about missing the South. She said that no matter how long I lived in the cold crowded North, I would always be a Southerner, that the South was in my blood, and lately I was looking a little anemic, maybe in need of a transfusion, my periodic transfusion of

> Southern-ness. So I decided to head home for a while, back down South.

We soon learn that one impetus for McElwee's journey home is the pain of having lost his father, who, at the time the film was released, had been dead for several years. Although *Bright Leaves* is ostensibly a documentary about tobacco and the South, as in most of his films, McElwee splices in home movie footage and clips from some of his earlier documentaries. Viewers familiar with his films are bound to recognize a bit of footage shot in 1975, which shows his father sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper (Figure 19). This footage, which becomes shorthand for McElwee's fraught relationship with his father, who never seemed to understand or support his career as a filmmaker or his practice of filming his family, first appeared in his short film *Backyard* (1984). Reincorporated here in *Bright Leaves*, this bit of film comes to stand for the problem to which the film addresses itself. It is accompanied by a new voice-over in which we hear McElwee say, "As time goes by, my father is becoming less and less real to me in these images . . . almost a fictional character. The reality of it is slipping away." As film scholar Josep Català explains, "McElwee cannot avoid coming back time and again to the paternal figure and his environment, as much through his home movies as through the recollection of these films, converted, over the years, in archive material."[34] Thus for both McElwee and Delany the problem of history—its fragmentation and elusiveness—seems to begin with and is represented by the traumatic loss of the father. In both cases, the father presents a problem: he eludes mnemonic capture, and, although real, he seems more and more a fiction. As Delany remarks, "I'd always thought problems were by definition associated with fathers."[35]

McElwee's lamentable admission that the documentary is sliding into fiction is central to the filmmaker's philosophy of history as it is revealed throughout the film, the narrative of which is driven by McElwee's attempt to investigate whether the fictional Hollywood film *Bright Leaf* is in actuality a documentary about his own family. *Bright Leaf* is a melodrama that tells the story of two rivals in the nineteenth-century North Carolina tobacco industry. Cooper plays Brant Royle, the brash and ambitious son of poor tobacco farmers

FIGURE 19. Ross McElwee (director), *Bright Leaves*, 2004, Channel 4 Television Corporation, Homemade Movies, WGBH.

whose land was stolen by powerful tobacco magnate Major James Singleton (Donald Crisp). Royle uses new industrial technology to manufacture cigarettes and drive Major Singleton out of business; he also marries Singleton's daughter Margaret, played by Patricia Neal. Royle, who, by virtue of his lower-class upbringing and cutthroat rise to power, symbolizes the New South, ends up losing everything, including Margaret, with her ties to old money and antebellum gentility. In *Bright Leaves* McElwee is introduced to *Bright Leaf* by his second cousin John McElwee, a lawyer and avid movie buff, who lives in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. In a way similar to the events portrayed in the Hollywood film, Ross McElwee's great-grandfather, John Harvey McElwee, lost his fortune to his rival James B. Duke when the formula for the Durham Bull cigarette was stolen. McElwee describes *Bright Leaf* as "a version of my great-grandfather's rise and subsequent fall to ruin" and as "a surreal home movie reenacted by Hollywood stars."

Just as Delany's memoir begins with his father's illness and death, McElwee's film is driven by the loss of the father. His return home to the South, his investigation of the McElwee family tree, his reincorporation of filmic images of his father, and even his

contemplation of the history of tobacco farming in North Carolina are all aspects of and attempts to come to terms with this loss. In one humorous scene, McElwee visits the campus of Duke University and ponders what might have happened if the Dukes hadn't driven his great-grandfather out of business. He daydreams wistfully about his family's enshrinement in "McElwee University." He films inside Duke Chapel on the university's campus and shows the sepulchers of Washington Duke and his son James "Buck" Duke, founder of the Duke tobacco and cotton empire. He comments that on his deathbed Washington Duke was reported to have said that there were three things he would never understand: "electricity, the Holy Ghost, and my son, James." It's a funny line, but one tinged with the pathos of father–son conflict. We feel a sense of familiarity here, knowing that McElwee's own father—a politically conservative surgeon—might have said the same thing about his son the left-leaning filmmaker. McElwee carefully moves the pain of his misrecognition by his father to his larger examination of history and documentary. Just as Delany argues for both accuracy and completeness in history, both the truth and the truth-telling lie, so McElwee suggests that within fiction there is what he calls "a documentary moment," and even within the documentary (as with the film footage of his father) reality/truth slips away.

It is here, in McElwee's contemplation of the respective veracity of the documentary and the Hollywood melodrama, that he pauses to consider the image of Gary Cooper kissing Patricia Neal (Figure 17). He is captivated by Neal's hand as it reaches toward Cooper. He notes that during the making of the film, which was released in 1950, the two were having an illicit love affair (Cooper was married at the time to Veronica Balfe and during the same year is said to have persuaded Neal to have an abortion). He suggests that "Cooper and Neal's fictional performances might reveal truthful aspects of their real lives" and sets out to find "photographic evidence of this." When he freezes the frame showing Neal's slight hesitation in this shot, where she lifts her hand briefly and then lets it fall again, he believes he has found it. Her gesture is at first too familiar, she is reaching for her lover, and then it is too awkward, as though she checks her-

self and pulls away self-consciously. "Does this not constitute a little documentary moment?" McElwee asks. "A secret little home movie nestled in a Hollywood production?" So convinced is he that this hand gesture gives away some truth about the actors' real lives and real passions that he pursues and is surprisingly granted an interview with the actress. Seated across from Patricia Neal in her hotel room in Durham, he asks hopefully, "When you look at films that you've acted in like *Bright Leaf*, even though they're fiction films, they have a certain documentary content in a way because you're looking at yourself as you were twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago. Does it help you remember things about your life then?" With a wave of her hand, Neal dismisses him: "No. I don't even think that way." But in a voice-over McElwee insists, "I just can't accept Miss Neal's denial of my little theory about the possibility of home movie content residing in a Hollywood production."

Obviously here he's thinking about the ways in which photography is always in some sense documentary, so even a lavish Hollywood film documents a particular moment in the lives of the actors who perform in it, a particular moment in the existence of the objects and scenery that dress it. If this is true, then it raises the question: If Neal's hand gesture betrays a truth about her relationship with Cooper, what about the other actors in the film? What kinds of relationships are revealed in their gestures?

Bright Leaf is a film that uses black bodies to decorate its sets; they denote Southernness, the kind of slow-moving gentility with which Hollywood routinely imagines the South. If, under McElwee's direction, we become attentive to small hand gestures, we might be struck by an image of William Walker, an important actor who, as a member of the board of directors of the Screen Actors Guild, was instrumental in advocating for greater representation of African Americans in film (Figure 20). Walker spends a lot of his time in this film by the front door, taking white men's coats and gloves, and at the dining room table, serving and clearing away white people's dishes. If Neal's hand gesture betrays a secret love affair, to what does Walker's gloved hand testify? And how does Walker figure into McElwee's philosophy of history?

FIGURE 20. Michael Curtiz (director), *Bright Leaf*, 1950, Warner Bros. Pictures.

Backyard

We begin to find answers to these questions if we skip back from 2004, when *Bright Leaves* was released, to 1984, when McElwee produced his short film *Backyard*, a poignant documentary about McElwee's family, including his mother's death from cancer, his troubled relationship with his father, and his uncomfortable awareness of the economic and racial disparities that exist in his hometown. The film takes place in late summer as McElwee's brother Tom is preparing to go to medical school to become a surgeon like their father. While no animosity is displayed between the two brothers, no angry words exchanged, it is clear that Ross is, as he says, a "stranger" to his family, who call him the Yankee, and it is Tom on whom their father's favor rests. The film begins with a kind of preface in which we are shown a series of still photographs of the filmmaker (bearded, wearing a white oxford shirt and blue jeans, holding his film camera) and his father (clean-shaven, wearing a light-colored suit and plaid tie, standing with his arms crossed) (Figure 21). We hear McElwee's voice-over narration:

> Before this film begins, I have to tell a story about my father and me. When I was eighteen, I left my home in North Carolina to go to college in New England and ended up living in Boston. Ever since then, my father, who was born and raised in the South, and I have disagreed about nearly everything. When I graduated from college, my father, who is a doctor and conservative Republican, asked me what I planned to do with my life. I told him I was interested in filmmaking, but that there were several other alternatives such as working with black voter registration in the South or getting involved in the peace movement or possibly entering a Taravarden Buddhist monastery. My father thought this over for a moment and said, "Son, I think your concept of career planning leaves something to be desired, but I've decided not to worry about you anymore. I've resigned myself to your fate." I didn't exactly know how to respond to this, but finally I said, "Well Dad, I guess I have no other choice but to accept your resignation."

Funny and bitter, this joke forms the emotional backdrop for a film in which McElwee tries to counter the "awful gaze of history," his father's disapproving countenance, with his camera, which his father disparagingly calls "the big eye." That the two gazes are in conflict is shown when McElwee attempts to film his father performing surgery. McElwee explains that his own queasiness at the sight of the body's viscera disappears when he looks at it through his camera lens. It is as though he adopts Walter Benjamin's famous comparison of the cameraman and the surgeon to confront his father's disappointment: with the movie camera, he is the surgeon son for whom his father wished.[36] But filming the father often ends with the camera's malfunction, which McElwee identifies here and in his later film *Time Indefinite* (1993) as a form of Oedipal breakdown (Figure 22). He says of his father: "He seems to give off some Freudian force field that plays havoc with my equipment."

Moreover, as we see through the camera's eye, his father seeks to exercise control of the archive, that which is worthy of preservation in the filmic document. For example, Ross films his father setting up a volleyball net in the backyard for Tom's party and has to hold the camera with one hand while he holds a microphone and the end

FIGURE 21. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

FIGURE 22. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

of his father's tape measure with the other. His father, seeing the enterprise of filming such banal moments as nonsense, expresses disapproval that Ross is wasting his expensive film stock. Ross pursues his unique form of cinema verité undeterred. The quotidian abounds in footage of Ross inexpertly playing the piano in the living room, of his father performing surgery, of his brother Tom peering through a microscope or learning to tie sutures by testing various knots around the neck of a table lamp, of his stepmother laughing at the television, of Tom brushing his teeth and shaving, and of preparations for his brother's going-away party. This seemingly ordinary imagery also includes, uneasily, shots of Melvin and Lucille Stafford, a black couple who work for the McElwee family. Lucille is shown cooking, vacuuming, and doing dishes (Figure 23); Melvin rakes leaves near the fence at the back of the yard, starts the lawn mower, and scatters grass seed (Figure 24). As we watch these scenes, McElwee remarks in a voice-over: "As I grew up in the South I never questioned the fact that black men were taking care of the yard while their wives were taking care of *me*." The fence at the back of the yard thus becomes the place where the McElwee archive commences; it is a border overseen by the father (associated with his home, his way of life) and fraught with racial and class allusions. Ross's filming of the goings-on there draws the viewer's critical attention to the place where the archontic law commences, the place where that law asserts itself most forcefully.

The full implications of the film's title become evident not only as we catch glimpses of Melvin in various moments working in the yard but also in a scene in which McElwee's grandmother, seated outdoors at a patio table, sings a version of a song called "Mama's Little Alabama Coon," which tells the story of a sad pickaninny with whom no white children will play (Figure 25). In the original lyrics of the song, the child's mammy counsels him, "Why don't you play in your own back yard / Never mind what the white chile do / Nobody ever would want to play / With a little black coon like you." Here the pastoralism of the backyard stands for a social ideal in which racial harmony is produced by the races remaining separate. As she finishes her song, McElwee's grandmother, in a close-up shot, smiles broadly. McElwee makes no comment but cuts to another scene in which Lucille is working in the kitchen. From the sharecropper's cabin to

FIGURE 23. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

FIGURE 24. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

the stately homes in McElwee's neighborhood, we watch as the filmmaker traces the contours of the backyard. His handheld camera limns that space again as it follows his stepmother, Anne, cutting through the shrubbery at the back of their property to attend the wedding of their next-door neighbor's daughter at the country club, which abuts both families' properties. Afterward, as they ride home from the wedding in golf carts, the father of the bride jokingly pretends not to know where the McElwees' house is. When Ross says, "It's right next door to yours," the neighbor replies, "That's right, you live in my backyard!" He might just as well have said, "You work for me." To emphasize this point, McElwee returns to the country club to film the black caddies who work at the club and the black cooks and dishwashers who labor in the kitchen behind the scenes of the posh wedding reception (Figure 26). As if echoing his father's views about what is worthy of the document, and his mystification at his son's methods, one of them asks, "Why you rollin' that film on us?"

If, with McElwee's encouragement, we can see *Bright Leaf* as a kind of "documentary" of McElwee's family and its role in the tobacco industry, surely we must pose questions about those scenes in which, like the kitchen staff at the country club in *Backyard*, the film was rolled on William Walker standing by the doorway or serving food in the dining room. Walker, a veteran actor with a forty-year career in films and television, played a long series of roles as porter, butler, waiter, servant, cook, and occasional Bantu chief. His most famous, though uncredited, role is probably that of the Reverend Sykes in the 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As a board member for the Screen Actors Guild, he worked for what he called "the negro artist's scope and participation in all types of roles and in all forms of American entertainment."[37] Of his role in *Bright Leaf*, we might ask, as McElwee does of the film as family archive, "What exactly is being preserved here? What is being passed down?" Within the context of the original Hollywood film, such images are unremarked upon; the body of the black man is mere set decoration, the nostalgic signifier of a bygone era in the old South. In this regard, we might say that what is being passed down is Walker's careful erasure, what is being preserved is an incorrect or incomplete history. When McElwee uses this fiction as a documentary, however, he self-consciously directs our gaze toward

FIGURE 25. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

the black bodies on the margins, where they make evident a paternal logic, a racist structure that is so banal as to be, under normal circumstances, unworthy of comment or record. Walker, the son of a freed slave, becomes—just as much as Neal and Cooper—one of the stars in McElwee's surreal home movie.

As was the case with Delany's experience of *18 Happenings*, McElwee's experience of and engagement with *Bright Leaf* is both damaging and potentially liberating. The film is what McElwee calls a "Frankensteinian creation," a hybrid melodrama and documentary, and thus productively troubles what he understands history, the memoir, the documentary to be. At the same time, however, it renders invisible the black actors who work along its margins; they become unknown. Walker's white gloves are like the thin plastic membrane from which Allan Kaprow's sets were built, or the fence at the back of the yard, or the film as it moves through the projector. They are a slender boundary that marks the site of history's (the archive's) "commencement" and in turn the site of oblivion for those things deemed

FIGURE 26. Ross McElwee (director), *Backyard*, 1984.

unworthy of the appellation. They have the capacity to cut up experience, to make "any apprehension of its totality all but impossible," to use Delany's language. At the same time, however, these boundaries reveal history (despite its awful gaze) to be dispersed, simultaneous, fragmented, and ultimately unknowable. Where we expect to find the father, he is always gone.

Not Quite a Conclusion

> Fathers have only to mistake effects for causes, believe in the reality of an "afterlife," or maintain the value of eternal truths, and the bodies of their children will suffer. —Michel Foucault

In his explanation and appraisal of Nietzsche's understanding of the word *Ursprung*, or genealogy, Michel Foucault uses the term to advance a theory of critically engaged history. Genealogy, an alternative to history, rejects origins, abjures evolutionary narratives, is unconcerned with human destinies, and relinquishes legacies. Rather, it is interested in dispersion, accident, deviations, errors, falsehoods,

and faulty calculations. It is also something that, unlike history, attaches itself to the body.[38] "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations," he writes, "on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[39] The object of history as genealogy is thus to trace the paternal, but in such a way as to recognize that "the origin lies at a place of inevitable loss."[40]

Not only do Ross McElwee's films attempt to picture that loss, the father turned into an unrecognizable blur, but they are also made in recognition of the loss that is to come. In *Bright Leaves* there is a sequence showing McElwee's son Adrian as a child, some fragments from the mountainous pile of footage he has recorded and then forgotten. In a voice-over, McElwee laments: "And I keep filming him as he gets older here—collecting more and more footage—as if the sheer weight of all of these accumulated images could somehow keep him from growing up so fast, slow the process down. But of course filming doesn't slow anything down." It is as though Adrian were being propelled forward in time away from his father and toward some remote horizon. "When I'm on the road, shooting," McElwee says, "I sometimes imagine my son, years from now, when I'm no longer around, looking at what I've filmed. I can almost feel him looking back at me from some distant point in the future . . . through these images and reflections, through the film I'll leave behind." Although he speaks in the future tense, he implies the future anterior: "the film I will have left behind." From the vantage point of the father rather than of the son, McElwee speaks of the past (himself) in the future (his son). He wants desperately to suspend time, freeze his son in place and forestall his own death and disappearance.

In this, he is positioned in the contemporary, squeezed uncomfortably between temporal moments that press on him, between the awful gaze of history and the future's backward, pitying glance. Janus-faced, he looks back toward the past of his father and forward toward the future of his son. He experiences what Agamben calls the "untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time in the form of a 'too soon' that is also a 'too late'; of an 'already' that is also a 'not

yet.'"[41] This temporal "dishomogeneity" troubles his attempts at history making, makes his camera stutter and jump.[42]

One of the film's key themes is thus time, and its affective content is generated by the search for how to slow it down, stop it from proceeding forward into a future in which Adrian will search his father's films to catch a glimpse of him, to bring him back, just as Ross searched the same film frames to retrieve his own lost father, to stop him from turning into a "fictional character." It is here that McElwee draws a connection between the film's ostensible subject matter—tobacco and its history in the South—and its emotional content—the father–son relationship. He repeatedly draws parallels between smoking and filming as two activities that seem to stop time, to slow things down and keep the world in stasis. Remembering his own experiences as a former smoker, he muses, "Smoking could put me in kind of a trance state—make me feel both that time has stopped and that time would go on forever." Later in the film he remarks, "Come to think of it, for me, filming is not unlike smoking a cigarette. When I look through the viewfinder time seems to stop. A kind of timelessness is momentarily achieved."

In this, McElwee advances a theory of history similar to Foucault's genealogy, a history that seeks not to recover lost origins but to suspend and reimagine time, to show the ways in which history and temporality are written on the body. Descent "inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus," Foucault remarks, "it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate body of those whose ancestors committed errors."[43] We are used to thinking about genetic and environmental legacies, about how our bodies constitute an archive of biological information, past behavior, lifestyle choices, and environmental contamination. Foucault, McElwee, and Delany urge us to go beyond this paradigm to think about history itself as having biological effects, to understand the body as a repository of pasts (in addition to and beyond those that we experience physically), and to conceive of time as something that the body can accelerate, pause, or repeat. As I struggle to bring these thoughts to a conclusion, to draw profound insights from a chapter that was designed to skip and stutter, I try to bear in

mind Delany's admonition about the bodily nature of historical writing. I try to accommodate myself to the itch of the past as I type this sentence: "'History' is what we create by the scratching, the annoyance, the irritation of writing, with its aspirations to logic and order, on memory's uneasy and uncertain discontinuities."[44]

THE EMPTY STAGE
A STORY ABOUT THE PAST BY MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM

I

I begin at the end. I begin in the melancholy and portentous mise-en-scène of the graveyard, the place where the dead lie among the living, where, as Joe Roach provocatively suggests, the tomb functions as a stage on which history is enacted. Roach, who argues that history is a theater of surrogates who stand in place of the dead, makes an intriguing comparison between the grave and performance. "A theatrical role," he writes, "like a stone effigy on a tomb, has a certain longevity in time, but its special durability stems from the fact that it must be re-fleshed at intervals by the actors or actresses who step into it."[1] I am curious about what is staged in relation to this particular tomb, what histories are turned to stone, what roles gain longevity in its shadows. Near the end of Matthew Buckingham's 1996 fictional film *Amos Fortune Road*, about a *real* historical figure, the main character, Sharon, explores a small cemetery near the meetinghouse in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. She studies two sets of graves erected 146 years apart. The first pair of stones mark the graves of Amos Fortune and his wife, Vilot. Fortune, a freed African slave, died just after the turn of the nineteenth century. The second pair of stones lying side by side for all eternity mark the resting places of the novelist Willa Cather, who died in 1947, and her lifelong companion, and some say lover, Edith Lewis. None of these headstones is actually shown in the film. A more anonymous, more ancient-seeming unmarked crypt,

FIGURE 27. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

buried under a mound of earth and flanked by two small obelisks, stands heavily and symbolically in their stead (Figure 27).

Here we glimpse something of Buckingham's historiographic method, his interest in, as he describes it, "investigating how we know what we think we know, how we construct stories about the past." "Foucault said," he continues, "that one of the things historians do is negotiate between documents."[2] This flickering black-and-white image is a perplexing document. The intertitles that are shown just prior to its appearance on the screen misdirect the viewer, make it seem as though this grave belongs to Amos Fortune. It is, in this sense, an empty tomb, an empty stage.

Indeed, this grave is the first of the empty stages to which this chapter's title refers. It seems to invite the kind of performance that Roach describes as a form of effigy, a prosthetic device that allows us to body forth something from the past, "a set of actions" that, as he remarks, "hold open a place in memory."[3] It may seem at first that this tomb is not much of a stage: no body appears, no action takes place in or around it in Buckingham's film, except of course for the body and the action of the photographer/filmmaker. It is that role in

which I am most interested here, the photographer as unseen actor who fashions effigies out of the flesh of the photograph.

This is a comparison that Roland Barthes invites in his famous book *Camera Lucida*. "We know the original relation of the theater and the cult of the Dead," he remarks. "The first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead. . . . Now it is this same relation which I find in the Photograph; however 'lifelike' we strive to make it . . . Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."[4] For Barthes, the photograph is a strange species of thing that, like theater, seems to present an immediate, indexical, and lively reality, but at the same time, like the corpse, is heavy with absence and loss. (In this, the photograph mimics the dys-chrony of the contemporary.) Buckingham's photographic practice, wherein he combines still photographs with 16 mm and Super 8 film, is a kind of mortuary science; his tomb is very lifelike, it seems to be a picture of the real graves of either Fortune or Cather to which the film's intertitles refer; it seems to serve as evidence of some reality. But in that practice the faces of these dead are obviously made-up, are ruddy with the bright powder of the photograph's reputed and rather garish truth. If we apply Roach's description of performative surrogation—the reenactment in the present of bodies and actions of the past—to photography, we see that, like theater, the photograph constitutes the doomed search for originals by continuously offering stand-ins.[5] The photograph, need I say it, is prosthetic.

Amos Fortune Road is a peculiar film with two seemingly distinct plot points, one involving a theatrical performance and the other the pursuit of historical information. It tells a story—entirely through intertitles, with no dialogue—of an artist named Sharon (played by the real-life artist Sharon Hayes) who leaves New York one summer to go to New Hampshire, where she teaches a summer school theater class and directs the children in a play, which they perform in nearby small towns. She is relieved to have a summer away from her girlfriend, with whom she has been in conflict. While in New Hampshire,

she befriends one of her students, a girl named Maryanne (played by Maryanne Cullinan). Every day Sharon passes the same busy intersection and sees a historical road marker commemorating Amos Fortune, about whom she becomes curious. Maryanne, who has learned about Fortune in school, tells Sharon the details of Fortune's life. The film focuses on the problem of memory, the ways in which Fortune's biographers have invented details such as his original African name, his feelings about his owners, his experiences in Africa and his journey to the New World, his relationships with his wives and to the communities in which he lived. In addition to the information Maryanne gives her, Sharon asks local townspeople about Fortune, consults historical markers, goes to the site of Fortune's homestead, and visits his grave in the local cemetery. When she finally returns to New York, she reads the two existing biographies of Fortune and learns, to her amazement, that they are fictionalized. She also studies a road map of rural New Hampshire from 1795, made during Fortune's lifetime, on which she discovers the same roads that she had traversed over the summer. I am interested in reconciling these two narrative strains—theater and history—in order to better understand the film, but more important, I want to understand Buckingham's historiographic method to see what lessons it offers for my own practice.

Historian Mark Godfrey and curator Sara Krajewski are among those who have commented on Buckingham's engagement with history. Krajewski explains:

> Matthew Buckingham casts his films, slide projections, and photographs from an array of historical characters—from the well-known to the anonymous, the real and the fictional. By revisiting these personae and restaging their stories, Buckingham distinctively points to the ongoing resonance of particular historical moments in the here and now.[6]

Though she is intrigued by Buckingham's atemporal view of history, by his study of the relation between historical fact and fiction, her own writing of history, her own method, remains unchanged, as though he were simply an object of her study and she were not implicated in his work. My project here is to consider how theater, history, and photography are braided together in Buckingham's film and what

their entanglement means for my own historical practice. How, in other words, does this film do the work of history?

I argue that on the somber and dimly lit stage of this tomb, with his photographic effigies in hand, Buckingham performs the role of history, a role that, in Roach's terms, has a special durability. In his interpretation of that role, Buckingham performs very broadly the comic misunderstandings that arise in history's relation to fragile memory and more dramatically the consequences of history's fictions and what Roach calls its careful erasures. The bodies buried in the cemetery in Jaffrey are marked by race, gender, and sexuality. They are the bodies of African slaves and queer women, and thus they are potentially subject to hegemonic amnesia. Roach is just one of a large number of scholars who, in the last forty years or more, have documented the official forgetting by which dominant histories are formed. "Forgetting," he writes, with reference to the circum-Atlantic slave trade, "like miscegenation, is an opportunistic tactic of whiteness."[7] The consequences of that forgetting on the life of a black man are the stakes of the performance here, and those stakes weigh heavily on all of those actors who step into the role of history, actors who include not only Buckingham but also the main character Sharon, who seeks the historicity, the truth of Fortune's life, and the viewer, who reads the film as a perplexing form of evidence about the past. As Godfrey, writing in *October*, explains, "Broadly speaking, the film concerns a present-day encounter with the history of slavery. But the work does not merely show how its protagonist confronts the past: it places the viewer in an analogous position to her, encountering both the textual traces of history and the possibilities of historical understanding."[8]

For what purpose do these actors re-flesh history; to what ends do they carry on the role of confronting the past? I want to suggest that they do so in order to make vivid something that Roach describes as the imperfect deferral of memory. In answer to the violence of historical amnesia—the forgetting that attends grotesque forms of injustice such as slavery—Roach reminds us that "the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible: the most persistent mode of forgetting is memory imperfectly deferred."[9] Official histories, inasmuch as they depend on long series of substitutions, may effectively

postpone memory, may effectively force it to submit to authority, he instructs, but they inevitably do so imperfectly. They let slip their own fictions. The stand-ins they employ bring too much or too little to their roles. The scenes they perform contain gestures and speeches of uncertain origin, which employ unintended references to events and people that were assumed to have been safely consigned to oblivion. (By way of example, we might think here of Bruce Nauman's inadvertent reference to blackface minstrelsy in his work *Clown Torture*, discussed in chapter 2.) By attending to the imperfect deferral of memory, Roach ironically locates history in the future, where what has been kept in suspension—the pasts of those who are deemed unfit for remembrance—will one day be met. It is important to emphasize, however, that for Roach the past is never found in a definitive or teleological way. "Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely," he cautions, "surrogation rarely if ever succeeds."[10] I read *Amos Fortune Road*, with its images of graves, its still photographs of stages (both empty and full), its black-and-white imagery so reminiscent of documentary, and its main character's pursuit of a historical phantom, as a study of mnemonic deferral. As such, it offers a lesson to the historian to look for the past in the future.

Roach's attention to deferral is reminiscent of historian Reinhart Koselleck's discussion of what he calls "futures past," or, as he puts it "the perspective we possess from the onetime future of past generations or, more pithily, from a former future."[11] One of Koselleck's concerns is to chronicle ways in which the future is imagined at various moments in the past (what sort of future is foretold in a famous painting documenting an important historical battle, for example). His is an effort not simply to examine the science fictions of previous epochs, however, but also to understand the ways in which past and future are created together as they are in performance where the past will be continuously re-fleshed.

For my purposes, the emblem of that futurity and pastness is an empty stage, a recurring image in Buckingham's film. José Muñoz has described the empty stage as a space of utopian performativity, which, he explains, is "often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time

and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness."[12] Again, this quality of performance is mirrored by photography, which, as Barthes explains, designates both "*this will be* and *this has been*."[13] The photographic image captures the thing that appears before the lens, the moment, now past, in which the shutter clicked. It also captures a future not yet realized—the eventual death of the sitter, the datedness of costume or pose, the falling away of the immediate present that the photograph seductively offers. In this sense, the photograph is the device par excellence of the contemporary.

II

In the preface to his 1964 biography *Amos Fortune's Choice*, F. Alexander Magoun laments the task of "writing a book about someone concerning whom not enough is known for a real biography, and yet too much is available to ignore."[14] This quality of "not enough and too much" is indeed the conundrum that Fortune presents for history, the intellectual problem to which Buckingham's film is directed. Though Buckingham never mentions them by name except in the film's closing credits, his work is in dialogue with that of Fortune's two biographers, Magoun and Elizabeth Yates, and their respective approaches to this problem. Despite the fact that his is a fictionalized account, throughout his book Magoun repeatedly draws attention to his own conscientiousness as a historian who properly respects the archival record—that which can be reliably known about the past—or, in his words, makes "clear what can be documented and what is at best an educated guess."[15] Magoun's attempts to re-flesh the past, to, as he remarks, "feel what [Fortune] felt, see what he saw, think what he thought," begin on the stage of Fortune's grave. "Many a time I have been to his grave with reverent footfalls," he writes, "and wished we might spend an afternoon more intimately."[16] It is clear that Magoun is attempting to perform the role of Amos Fortune on the stage of his grave, to give voice to his unrecorded memories and desires, to express his innermost thoughts.

Elizabeth Yates's book for children, *Amos Fortune: Free Man*, was published in 1950 and was awarded a Newbery Medal in 1951. The scene of the graveyard similarly inspired Yates in her performance of

the role of Amos Fortune. In an article written at the end of her own life, she recalls the circumstances surrounding her decision to write a book about Fortune: "It was when I was standing by the stone that marked the grave of Amos Fortune in the old cemetery in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Reading the eloquent though brief words about a man whose life spanned from Africa in 1715 to America in 1801, I wanted to know more, to find the story within those lines. The idea took hold of me, or I of it, and I knew that nothing must keep me from following it."[17]

The "not enough and too much" of Fortune's life is most fully felt in the handful of records kept in the public library in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. His manumission papers are dated December 30, 1763. He was to be freed from slavery in four years, in 1767, when he paid his full bond to his owner, Ichabod Richardson, a tanner, but receipts show that he was unable to do so until 1770, when he was around sixty years old and Richardson's heirs agreed legally to grant him his freedom. There is a deed for land he purchased in Woburn, Massachusetts, in 1774. There are also receipts for two female slaves whom he purchased from bondage and married: Lydia Somerset, who was purchased in 1778, but who died within three months of her liberation, and Vilot, who was purchased in 1779 and was married to Amos Fortune for twenty-three years. The public record shows his having moved to New Hampshire from Woburn, Massachusetts, in 1781, and another receipt documents Fortune's purchase of twenty-five acres of land near Jaffrey, where he established a tannery. Promissory notes show that he was economically successful enough to lend small sums of money to others, and articles of apprenticeship show that he was able to employ two assistants. From the inventory of his estate, we know that he died in November 1801 at nearly ninety-one years of age.

It is in Fortune's will and grave marker that we can see something of the future he imagined. Not only did his will provide for the futures of Vilot and his adopted daughter, Celyndia, awarding them money, land, and personal property, such as a loom through which Celyndia would make her living, but it also created an endowment of about $230 to support Schoolhouse #8 in Jaffrey. Starting in 1809, money from the endowment was given to sustain public schools in Jaffrey, and then in 1928 the town voted to use the funds

as prize money for public-speaking contests in the schools. In the mid-seventies funds from the endowment were used for a book of creative writing by local high school students; more recently, the endowment has served to support the Jaffrey Public Library.[18] Thus it was that in 1801 a literate black man who had purchased his own freedom in a country that would not outlaw slavery until sixty-three years after his death set aside funds to support the education and literacy of future generations. Amos Fortune's imagined future involved a series of as-yet empty stages—both real and metaphorical—on which have stepped two hundred years' worth of schoolchildren attending public schools, giving public speeches, and visiting the public library. We might imagine the character Maryanne to be Amos Fortune's past future, the embodiment and realization of the future he imagined when he pledged his money to the Jaffrey public schools. His grave marker reads: "Sacred to the memory of Amos Fortune, who was born free in Africa, a slave in America, he purchased his liberty, professed Christianity, lived reputably, and died hopefully, Nov. 17, 1801."

With the unfolding of this paper life, we feel a sense of amazement at this very unusual bounty of material evidence about a black man's past. But even with this plentitude, we recognize along with Magoun that although "too much is available," "not enough is known." (History's uses of scarcity and surplus will be a topic of discussion further down the road.) And this might be thought of as the slogan of the imperfectly deferred memory about which Roach writes; it is memory that is both too much and too little, memory that must be continually reperformed and surrogated. In this context, performance, Roach explains, "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and replace."[19] The public record, which consists of fewer than twenty documents and two headstones, plentiful though it may be, remains confusing, contradictory, and unclear.[20] Fortune's manumission papers were never signed, his owner's will makes no mention of Amos as property, there is no record of how he adopted Celyndia, and so on. Into the space of that unknowing, into the deferral of memory, Fortune's two biographers insert fabricated pasts and invented themes suitable to their present.

Magoun's book, for example, which appeared in 1964 in the midst of the civil rights era, eponymously centers on the theme of "Amos

Fortune's choice," by which Magoun means the choice of whether to respond to the cruelty of slavery with anger and violence or self-controlled dignity. Of course Magoun, a white scholar who taught at MIT during the 1950s and '60s, imagines and emphasizes Fortune's dignity and pacifism. He invents a name for Amos's first owner, calling him Deacon Fortune as a way of explaining Amos's last name, and creates a character that acts as a benevolent father figure rather than a slave master. He goes on to represent those who respond to their enslavement angrily and aggressively in terms of their suffering a prolonged adolescence due, presumably, to a lack of benevolent paternalism. In a scene that recalls an episode of *Father Knows Best*, Amos accidentally injures his master in a violent outburst that springs from his anger and sense of injustice at his enslavement. Finally summoning the courage to apologize to his paternal master, Amos says in pidgin English, "I wish I not hate so much." To which the slaveholder responds, "I hope very much that you will stop hating. What happens to you is never as important as what you do about it. Now see whether you can be happier by trying to do some honest work."[21] Magoun's invented character, somehow inverted to become the victim in this scene, expresses a view common to sympathetic though still racist whites in the sixties, that the Negro will achieve equality most effectively by abjuring violence, engaging in hard work, and maintaining exemplary social conduct. In saying this, I am not proposing violence as an answer to institutionalized racism; rather, I am pointing out that it's always easy for white people to stand on the side of pacifism in response to obscene forms of violence that they (we) have never experienced directly.

Yates takes up similarly noble themes in her book, emphasizing Fortune's nonviolent and Christianity-inspired pursuit of freedom for himself and others. She describes him as a gentle black lamb needing care and protection. Her rhetorical approach has been the topic of much criticism. "Christianity," as Ann Trousdale explains, "involves for Amos an attitude of racial submission, acceptance of mistreatment at the hands of white people, and forgiveness of white oppressors. In Yates's book, Amos Fortune is, in essence, the stereotypic 'good Negro'—submissive, nonthreatening, respectful of white people. The implication that it is God who has shaped Amos's char-

acter to be so is added leverage for what is basically a white supremacist view of the appropriate role and attitudes for blacks in American society."[22] Thus at one and the same moment we have a boon of verifiable factual information so unusual in African American history that it, in turn, seems to foment wildly fictional narratives with expedient political applications and clearly delineated futures. In Yates's and Magoun's books, the colonial American past emerges as a period of great struggle in which heroes such as Fortune worked virtuously (presumably with the help of sympathetic whites) against the tragedy of slavery and imagined a future when slavery would be abolished. In their own dissatisfying present, the two authors witness the betrayal of former futures, played out in bitter struggles for racial equality and, during the mid-sixties when Magoun was writing, in the spread of Black Nationalism and black militancy in the United States. Although it is clear that both authors admired Fortune and felt that they were charged with the important responsibility of accelerating the arrival of a memory that had been, for nearly 150 years, deferred, their portrayals of this role have their own deferential effects. In the end, both writers submit to the authority of white privilege and defer once again the memory of Amos Fortune.

III

That one of the key themes in *Amos Fortune Road* is the problem of memory and history is made clear near the beginning of the film, where the shots of Sharon driving in her car are accompanied by the ambient sound of the car radio, from which we hear a talk show on the topic of forgetfulness and aging (Figure 28). The host performs the kind of mnemonic disorientation prevalent in contemporary American culture. He asks, "Where are my keys? Where are my glasses? Where did I park the car?" and comments on what he describes as "other frustrating things that happen to all of us as we get older."

In the scenes where Sharon pursues information about Amos Fortune, where she hears about the past, her informants seem similarly to suffer from lapses in memory as she is given a variety of accurate and inaccurate facts. Because Maryanne's precocious ability to recall the historical details she learned in school (primarily, it seems, from Yates's book) comes to seem unrealistic, we are unsure how to

FIGURE 28. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

interpret her perpetuation of the inaccuracies created by Fortune's biographers: that Amos had been born a king named At-man (there is no record of his real name); that he was sold in Boston in 1725 (there is no record of this); that in 1769 he bought his freedom (he did not pay off his bond until 1770); that he purchased and married three women (there were only two); and that he rode a one-eyed horse named Cyclops. Maryanne also provides some accurate information, such as that Fortune bought his tanning business in 1781 and died in 1801. In addition to Maryanne's account, a waitress tells Sharon vaguely that Fortune had something to do with the public schools, which is true, but a woman at a gas station tells her that Fortune's house had been torn down, which is not. Sharon also inspects the road marker that originally captivated her attention and finds out later that it was erected in the 1920s, not as a memorial to history but in an effort to promote tourism.

It may appear from my description that Buckingham's film simply seeks to sort out fact from fiction, that it tries to bring a definitive halt to the centuries-long deferral of memory about Fortune, but that isn't the case. Buckingham does present factual and fictional information side by side, and he does raise doubt in response to what

we hear from various informants about the past, but he also raises considerable doubt about even that information on which we might be tempted to rely unquestioningly, the archival document. This is because memory and history are not only themes presented *by* the film but also effects that the film's very materiality, its status as photographic record, produces. As Godfrey points out, the film's deconstructionist strategies—the ways in which it shifts among Super 8 footage, 16 mm film stock, and still photographs; its use of intertitles; and the doubling of the character named Sharon and the artist named Sharon, the character named Maryanne and Maryanne Cullinan—ultimately make us uncertain about how the film itself constructs the past and lead us to question how our perceptions of fact and fiction are discursively produced.[23] "The different types of footage," Godfrey writes, "the soundtrack components, and these titles interrupt the narrative flow, serving as a constant reminder of its construction, of the construction of all we 'know' about the past."[24] In short, Buckingham does not attempt to perform the role of Amos Fortune, does not linger by Fortune's actual graveside and re-flesh Fortune's ghost. Rather, he stands before another grave and performs the role of the historian, bodies forth *that* character with all its habits, gestures, and familiar tropes.

Punctuating the accounts of Fortune's life and serving as pauses in that narrative, Buckingham inserts still photographs of empty stages, presumably the ones on which Sharon's students perform their play (Figures 29, 30, and 31). These images remind the viewer of the film's premise, the ostensible reason for its main character's presence in New Hampshire, but they are, in the context of the twin story line about a former slave, decidedly odd. They are followed by simple titles in the present tense: "The class travels to small towns to perform its play," or "The class performs its play." We see three such empty stages depicted in the photographs, and each appears as though it could be found in a small New England meetinghouse or school. There are engaged columns and pilasters; some of the walls have decorative moldings and plaster filigree, others have wainscoting. The seats are simple wooden benches such as one would expect to find in a Quaker meetinghouse; one can see a period chandelier, wide-plank wooden floors, mullioned windows. These images, blurred and

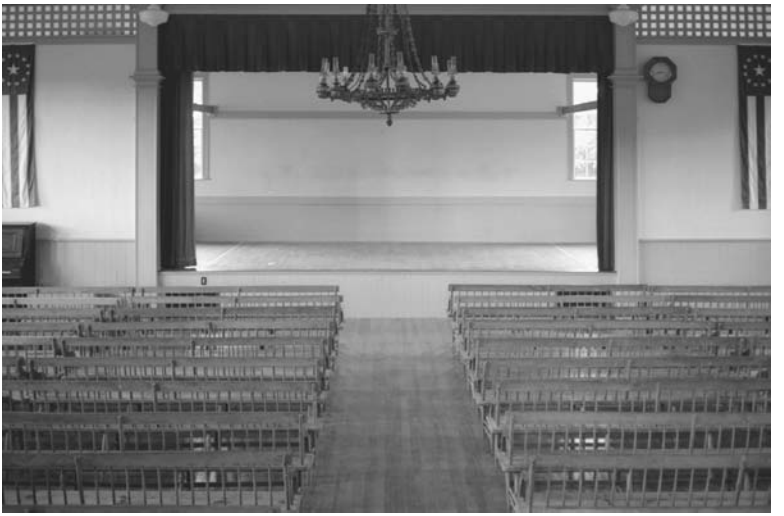

FIGURE 29. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

FIGURE 30. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

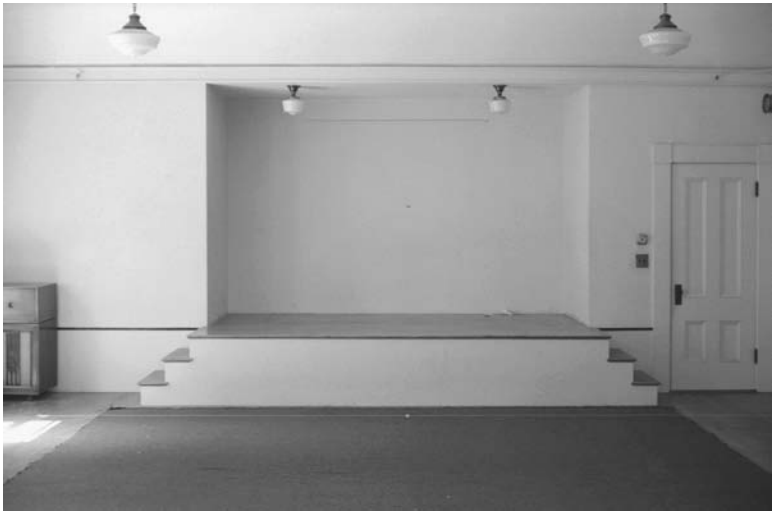

FIGURE 31. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

heavy with the dust of the colonial past, simultaneously stage futurity, expectantly await the entrance of something not yet arrived, and gesture toward imperfectly deferred memories.

But as soon as the moment of expectation is held in equipoise, Buckingham shifts from the scene of potentiality to the documentary; he moves from future to past. He displays a series of still photographs of the stage at the Jaffrey meetinghouse, where, we are told through the titles, the final performance takes place.[25] In contrast to the earlier images of empty stages, here we are shown still production shots of children filling the stage space, the only documentation Buckingham presents of the children in performance (Figures 32, 33, and 34). Interestingly, this takes the form not of a film or video record but of still and peculiarly deadening images. The titles inform us early on that the play is about a bear that solves a crime at a boarding school, and that Maryanne plays the thief. It seems important that a film about historical memory centers on a play involving a detective, presumably charged with determining truth from lie, reconstructing an accurate picture of the past. In the photographs, there are twelve children in the cast, all dressed in school uniforms except

FIGURE 32. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

for one child who appears to be headmistress and another who plays the bear (it appears to be a talking teddy bear as opposed to a talking grizzly). The girl playing the bear wears what look like white overalls and a broad-brimmed hat with pompons to suggest plush ears poking through the brim. As archival documents go, these photographs are contradictory. In some images we can see an audience, whereas in others it is clear that the auditorium is empty. The first photograph we see is frustratingly disrupted by a white diagonal that cuts across the bottom third of the image. It is unclear whether this shape is the record of some real accident—whether a protruding balcony railing for which the photographer did not account or a fault in the printing process—but even as the image records this accident, it fails to record its ostensible object, the play being performed.

The sheer weirdness of these photographs, their frustrating ambiguity and the mysterious circumstances by which they were produced, makes them dubious forms of evidence indeed. Was there actually a performance, which Buckingham witnessed and documented with a still camera, or was the appearance of a children's play merely staged ("Let's play that we are doing a play") to represent a part of his

FIGURE 33. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

FIGURE 34. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

fictional narrative? Did he even take these photographs, or were they perhaps simply found images from some other unknown play for which Buckingham made up a story? What accounts for the continuity errors, the appearance and disappearance of the audience? With these documents, Buckingham performs a rather curious sort of historian, one who fashions effigies out of the flesh of photographs.

Because of the questions they raise, these black-and-white photographs function in ways similar to the ones used by novelist W. G. Sebald, especially the image from his novel *Austerlitz* reproduced here as Figure 35. *Austerlitz* tells the story of the title character's search for his origins. Having been sent to Wales from his native Prague at the age of four to escape the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Austerlitz returns to find what traces may be left of his parents: his mother, Agáta, who was sent to a death camp by the Nazis, and his father, Maximilian, who escaped to Paris but was never seen again. In Prague, he meets a former neighbor who reports the details of the couple's final days. She produces a photograph, which she first takes to be a picture of Austerlitz's parents, an image somehow connected to his mother having been an opera singer.

> At first glance, said Austerlitz, Vera said that she had thought the two figures in the bottom left-hand corner were Agáta and Maximilian—they were so tiny that it was impossible to make them out well—but then of course she noticed that they were other people, perhaps the impresario, or a conjuror and his woman assistant. . . . Minutes went by, said Austerlitz, in which I too thought I saw the cloud of snow crashing into the valley, before I heard Vera again, speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion. One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désepoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives.[26]

Within the novel the photograph functions as a tease: at first as the image for which Austerlitz has been searching, an image of his lost

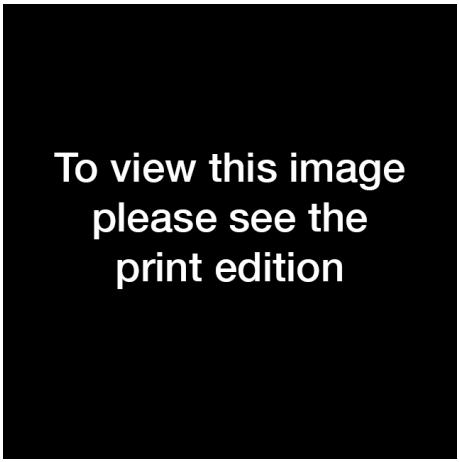

FIGURE 35. Image from *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald. Copyright 2001 by W. G. Sebald; reprinted by permission of the Wylie Agency, LLC.

mother, and then an image of strangers, an unknown conjurer and his assistant.

The photographs that decorate Sebald's books are ones that he found and collected from thrift stores and other sources,[27] images that seem to tell their own stories. About his habit of accumulating such random photographs generally, and about this photograph in particular, Sebald remarks:

> There are always those one simply cannot get rid of. For example, several years ago I found a letter-sized photograph on cardboard that shows two people standing on a stage. And in the image they are standing towards the left side. The stage has a receding backdrop that shows a very naively painted Alpine landscape, in which a kind of glacier stretches onto the stage through a forest. The two people, a man and a woman, wear winter clothes. Perhaps the impresario and his wife, possibly two performers in this play, you don't know. This is one of the images I frequently think about and which haunts me all the time.[28]

For Sebald, found photographs tell stories that haunt him, and it is through such images that he constructs his novels. In some instances,

those photographs seem to be illustrations of the text, pictures of the people, places, and objects that are described in it. In others, however, the text and images seem disconnected, their details a little off, as though the photographs found their way into the novel by accident. Although *Austerlitz* is the story of fictional characters, they participate in real historical events such as the Jewish genocide and the displacement of people from their homes and their memories in the context of World War II. The book seems to offer a particular philosophy of history, to operate via a particular historiographic method. Sebald's photographs, as his unnamed narrator suggests, "seem to have a memory of their own." They do not, however, remember some ontological truth about the individuals they depict; rather, they remember the roles that those individuals play—not who they are, but whom they portray. In this regard, Sebald echoes Roach's assertion that the theatrical role has a "special durability" inasmuch as it must periodically be re-fleshed.

Matthew Buckingham deploys photographic imagery in a way reminiscent of Sebald. His film does not pretend to find the real Amos Fortune; it does not seek to expose Magoun's and Yates's errors or to hold up their privileged assumptions to critique. Such a project, satisfying though it might be, would ultimately only reify the methodological approaches that are prevalent in dominant histories, the same opportunistic tactics that tend to exclude racial and sexual others from the archive. Instead, the film disillusions the historiographic belief in fixed and stable origins, the notion that there ever was a single Amos Fortune to be definitively and thoroughly discovered, a secret Amos Fortune to be fought over and claimed. It considers what Sebald's character Vera describes with regard to photographs, but which is evident in other historical documents, that which "stirs" in them. It is a remembrance of the roles that Fortune played, which, when we think about it, must have constituted a considerable range given what would have been required of a black man in the America of the eighteenth century. It is equally a remembrance of the roles played by a queer woman writer, who likewise would have had to display a great degree of dramatic virtuosity given what would have been expected of her in the first half of the twentieth century. For Cather's sexuality and the real nature of her relationship with Edith Lewis are

FIGURE 36. Matthew Buckingham (director), *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996. Copyright Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy of Murray Guy, New York.

just as subject to speculation and discourses of discovery as the life of a former slave. The film is also a remembrance of those who have stepped into the role of Amos Fortune, those, like Magoun and Yates, who have spoken and acted in his name. Through Buckingham's story, we are reminded that such performances are always enacted for particular ends and with different dramaturgical goals in mind.

In this way, *Amos Fortune Road* turns its viewers' heads from gazing at the past to looking down the road to the future, and this road is the last of the empty stages to which my attention is drawn (Figure 36). It is a recurring image in the film, one that diegetically refers to Sharon's eventual discovery that she had spent the summer traveling the same roads that existed in Amos Fortune's lifetime, that her most vivid encounter with his memory may have been in retracing his movements. In addition, it serves the artist's interest in the relation between place and history, about which he reports that his emphasis on "site over persona" is a "way of de-familiarizing biography."[29] That is, his attention to place is a means of depopulating the stage wherein the past is enacted. Our eyes are focused not on historical actors but on the road's converging orthogonal lines and elusive horizon. The road serves as the site through which bodies pass over time; a place

where past, present, and future coexist; a geography where memory is brought forward and postponed in the same stuttering motion. Mark Godfrey has remarked that he considers Buckingham's work to be "forward thinking as it encourage[s] viewers to imagine new possible futures."[30] From the vantage point of this stage, we can see that one future we are encouraged to imagine is that of history itself, a future where history recognizes its role in the imperfect deferral of memory.

STUPID BIRDS
TEMPORAL DISSIDENCE IN *THE LASTMAKER*

I hate a style speckled with quotations.
—George Eliot

I'm a living, walking, breathing mistake.
—Larry Grayson

Where you see an epigraph or a quotation, I am standing in the place of another, speaking in the voice of another, repeating the words of another. I am compressing and distorting time.

A Museum like Me

It starts with that stupid mechanical bird. In a scene near the beginning of Goat Island's *The Lastmaker,* Matthew Goulish (one of the company's performers, whom we met in chapter 1) positions a simple wooden chair on one side of an otherwise empty stage, pulls a small mechanical goldfinch from his pocket, starts it chirping by sliding a little switch on its feather-covered plastic belly, and sets it gently on the floor. The goldfinch chirps for about seven seconds and then stops, a minor malfunction that, in retrospect, I am tempted to see as a harbinger of failure. It starts up chirping again, inexplicably, when Mark Jeffery enters the stage dressed as Saint Francis of Assisi in a brown tunic with a knotted rope tied around his waist and an ill-fitting wig with its reddish-brown hair styled in the traditional

monk's tonsure. He circles the stage, which lies between two audiences seated on two sets of bleachers facing each other across the rectangular performance space, his right hand gesturing in a half-wave half-benediction. He returns to the chair and begins a campy monologue, which serves as an explanation of and introduction to the performance as a whole (Figure 37). Although he is dressed as Saint Francis, Jeffery's script is derived primarily from the last public performance made by beloved British comedian Larry Grayson at the Royal Variety Show in 1994. Grayson, who was seventy-one years old at the time of that appearance, died the following year. Jeffery, who is himself British, repeats Grayson's monologue:

> So I was lying in bed, I lay there and I thought, "I feel better this morning." My fairy godmother waved her magic wand, "Get out of bed. Shave your legs and get out!" So I got out of me hammock. I sleep in a hammock you know. Well I wanted to be in the navy, you know, but I never quite made it. The nearest I got to being in the navy was an all-male review called "Come Peep through My Porthole."[1]

Grayson's gentle comedy had the flavor of casual and gossipy stories involving his stock characters—his confidante and neighbor Slack Alice, Pop-It-In-Pete the postman, his friend Everard Farquarharson, and Apricot Lil, from the local jam factory. The stories, always full of broad sexual innuendo (such as a friend named "ever hard"), combined accounts of his and his friends' predicaments and their perennial aches and pains with showbiz gossip about his career in nightclubs, musical reviews, and British pantomime performances. There were also his famous catchphrases, such as the exuberant "What a gay day!" along with withering glances and bitchy comments to raucous audience members.

Continuing in this vein, Jeffery attempts to affect the same casual, chatty tone and queer double entendre, the same catchphrases and cast of characters for which Grayson was well known. He mimics Grayson's pose, grasping the chair with his left hand and leaning against it casually, his right hip tilted up at a swishy angle. "So anyways," he continues,

FIGURE 37. Goat Island (Mark Jeffery), *The Lastmaker*, 2008. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

> I went downstairs and Slack Alice came to the door. *[Looking with annoyance offstage]* There's a draft in here. Slack Alice came to the door and she said, "I've had a phone call for you, Francis." She said, "I've had this phone call from this bishop man. He wants you to do a show up at the dome." And I said, no. After I appeared as Friar Tuck in *Robin Hood and His Merry Men*, I said, I've done enough. I said, well, I felt like I had done enough. *[Rubbing his thigh, plaintively]* My leg is giving me hell. So this vicar, bishop bloke says, "Well what can you do?" I said, "Well I don't really know."

Here Jeffery inserts more references to Saint Francis into the otherwise verbatim Grayson bit.

> He said, "Well you used to always finish your acts very big, Francis, the way you used to throw your handkerchief on the floor and bend back and pick up your handkerchief with your teeth." "I can't do that," I said. "I can't do anything like that, all those days have gone by, you see, the years have gone by."

> *[Casually glancing at the fingernails of his right hand]* Somebody's been biting my nails. Anyways so I says, "I don't know what to do." So this bishop, what's his face, from here says come down here. . . . So I opened up a wool shop called Knit One, Purl Two. I had to close it tonight to come here and do this. Let's have a change of scenery. *[Lifts the chair over his head and sets it down on his right side]* I thought, I'll come here tonight. You know I've gone ever so dizzy; I've gone as faint as a robin. I thought, people haven't seen me in such a long time and people keep asking, "What's happened to him? Where's he gone to?" What with me being the patron saint of animals and the environment, and they're such big causes these days, aren't they? Well when I came in tonight without me frame [walker] they nearly fell on the floor. They said, "He looks all right doesn't he, you know." I only came out tonight so that people can see I'm still alive. That's all I've done it for. It's true. All these people asking, "Where is he? What's he doing?" Well, I'm all right you see. I can walk without a frame. Still got me hair; face hasn't been lifted, so, well, here I am.

In the original appearance at the variety show, the humor was partly generated by familiarity. Audiences wanted to hear Grayson's well-known catchphrases—"There's a draft in here" and "Someone's been biting my nails"—and they wanted to see him with his signature prop, the wooden chair. The humor was also produced by his willingness to perform his own growing obscurity, to engage with his own absence from the stage and television and the showbiz gossip that absence had generated. As if quoting Mark Twain's famous quip, "The news of my death has been greatly exaggerated," Grayson made a joke of the fact of his still being alive.

In the context of Goat Island's performance, all of this fit perfectly with one of *The Lastmaker*'s main compositional strategies, which is the assemblage of last words, last poems, last performances by an odd assortment of people, including not only Grayson but also Lenny Bruce, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Stanley Kunitz, E. E. Cummings, and Robert Creeley. Designed to be the group's final performance work, the piece thinks self-reflexively about the problem of "lastness," about how to draw a conclusion that has, as the group

remarked in press materials for the show, "lasting resonance."[2] The monologue also works instrumentally to lay out the performance's goals. Dressed as Saint Francis and speaking in the voice of Grayson, Jeffery departs from the comedian's script to explain:

> It's lovely being with you all and I thought, to keep this bishop chap happy and say goodbye, what we thought we would do for you tonight is a little trick, and I'm going to ask me friend Pop-It-In-Pete the postman to help me. I am imagining Pete playing Houdini slipping out of his chains, or even Joan Crawford in *Chained*, or me, Saint Francis, doing something superworldly, supernatural . . . spooky. I don't care. Anyway what me and Pete are going to do for you . . . is build the Hagia Sophia. You may not know it, it being in Istanbul . . . it being really so wondrous, a lovely piece of architecture, once a Byzantine church, then a mosque with minarets, and now a museum with all those things together, like me. What we will do here for you, lovelies, and don't laugh or I won't be able to do it, is build the Hagia Sophia with just what we have in front of us—this little floor, the little walls, our little bodies, a little dance, a few songs.

This part of the monologue, though still referencing Grayson's characters and still spoken in his voice, deviates entirely from Grayson's shtick so as to introduce a key theme of *The Lastmaker*, a central image of which is the Hagia Sophia. This revision to the original monologue allows Jeffery to establish the impossibility to which the performance as a whole is addressed, the impossible project, destined to fail, of building the Hagia Sophia onstage using only the performer's bodies, a few props, songs, and sound effects.

The Hagia Sophia is a contested space and loaded signifier in this performance, which, particularly for audiences who saw the piece between 2007 and 2009 at the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, brings to mind the centuries-long history of conflicts between Islam and Christianity. In this context, it is somewhat ironic that this particular character introduces the topic of the Hagia Sophia to the audience, since Saint Francis attempted to advance Christianity against infidels in Jerusalem, Morocco, and Egypt in the thirteenth century.[3]

Similar allusions to religious fervor and violence appear at various points in the performance with references to Roberto Rossellini's film *Francesco, giullare di Dio*, known in English as *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950), and Robert Bresson's film *Lancelot du Lac* (1974). Moreover, the building functions in the performance as a chronotope in Bakhtin's sense: a structure that occupies different historical periods and culturally charged spaces simultaneously (mosque, church, museum). It is a spatiotemporal amalgam. As Jeffery (performing Grayson) says, it is "a museum, with all those things together, like me." In the context of the present volume, it is its status as amalgamation rather than its religious or political connotations that is of key interest.

Although the audience is made aware of the imminent failure of the performance from the outset—it is difficult to muster faith in this ersatz saint, and one seriously doubts his ability to do anything supernatural—he does accomplish something important even before the performance gets fully under way. He makes himself and the performance of which he is part into a museum, if not the Hagia Sophia per se, at least something like it: a site in which multiple temporalities and multiple artifacts converge and are tenuously held together. He is the seventy-one-year-old Grayson glancing back at and citing his own past routines, repeating his (and others') famous bits from the stage at the Royal Variety Show; Grayson as a younger man spoofing Friar Tuck and Robin Hood in his television series; Jeffery performing Grayson; Jeffery performing Saint Francis; Jeffery performing Brother Nazario Gerardi, the real-life monk whom Rossellini cast as Saint Francis in his *Francesco, giullare di Dio*; Saint Francis performing as Friar Tuck; Saint Francis as Larry Grayson; and on and on. As I have discussed in chapter 1, a defining characteristic of Goat Island's work since the group's inception in 1987 is its play with temporality and historical self-awareness, which is evident in the numerous historical references and quotations it employs and its performers' portrayals of multiple historical characters simultaneously (tactics we've already seen in *When will the September roses bloom?*). Of the nine performances that the group produced during its existence, perhaps this one, in which, as reviewer Rachel Anderson remarks, "the group constructed a self-reflexive image that transfigured 'lastness' into a performance that never exactly ends and disappears, but always engages

in the process of making and remaking, forever creating newness and possibility," is the most self-consciously aware of time.[4]

As a museum "with all those things together," the performance—not just this scene but the whole of it—is a failure, not because it is too meager (a few planks of wood and a dance sequence or a small scale model to stand for a building some 180 feet high) but rather because it is too much. It's an extremely dense and layered performance, rich with themes of war and violence, endings and beginnings, memory and childhood. It is laden with references to eulogies and comedy acts, to filmmakers, musicians, poets, comedians, and one saint. It is cluttered with things: shoes and shoemaker's lasts; neighing horses and singing birds; wooden chairs and wooden boards and small wooden stepladders; a beautiful architectural scale model of a colossal, fantastical building cast in the role of that which is impossible. It is full of repetition. After the opening sequence, there is a twenty-three-minute dance composed of inexpert movements and set to an electronic metronome—twisting at the waist, bending the knees and taking a giant step forward, falling to the floor, a precise series of slaps on the floor with an open palm, a swinging arm, a slow forward somersault . . . it goes on and on, repeating in complex mathematical patterns. The whole thing is excessive. It is too big. There are too many. Failing before I've begun, I read *The Lastmaker*—an archive forever being made and remade—as a treatise on history.

I'll start by declaring my ignorance. —Claire Bishop

Now

In a panel discussion held after one of the performances of the *Lastmaker* sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in April 2008, historian and critic Claire Bishop questioned the performance's legitimacy on two related counts. First, she experienced in it a "kind of theatricality" that, as she said, "I find sticking in my throat." She went on to explain that this theatricality (a suspect form of dissembling that she contrasted with the authenticity of performance art) took the form of the overefficaciousness of breaks between scenes, the purposeful movements and blank expressions of

the performers, the matching costumes in some scenes, the respect for the stage's confines, the dated music, and the general artificiality of the performance elements.[5] The theatricality of the performance, which she described as "romantic" and which is perhaps best exemplified by Mark Jeffery's appearances as Saint Francis, has been noted by other critics, such as James Hannaham, who, in a review for the *Village Voice*, refers to Jeffery's portrayals as "a bit of schmaltz" and a "smidge of sentimentality."[6] Second, Bishop found the performance to be out of time with the present, thoroughly uncontemporary. "My feeling about *The Lastmaker,*" she said, "is that [it] could have been made at any point in the last thirty years or so." "Why," she asked the audience rhetorically, "are there these mechanisms of self-conscious removal from the present day?" Moreover, she continued, "To what extent . . . might [theatrical performance art] be *obliged* to be contemporary and engage the present?"[7]

By raising the question of the contemporary relative to Goat Island's performance, Bishop opens up a pretty large can of worms containing philosophies of temporality and history, about which many scholars have been vexed in recent years. Precisely when is or was the contemporary? (For Bishop it seems to be distinct from the last thirty years.) How is it possible to think historically about the contemporary (a word that, as I've said repeatedly, means simultaneously the recent past, the present, and the near future)—in other words, what does it mean to be a contemporary art historian? And, perhaps most important, for whom do these questions matter and how?

The contemporary is, by nature, stupid. By this I mean that there is a certain unknowing or getting it wrong immanent in the attempt to think historically about the present and very recent past, an unknowing that is different from simple forgetting, more profound than the run-of-the-mill gaps in knowledge that are endemic to all historical endeavors.[8] As I've noted before, whereas we can debate the precise historical nature or specific temporal limits of "the seventies" or "modernity," "the contemporary" designates a temporal category that is simultaneously historical (in the past) and yet never fully arrives (in the near future). Indeed, its unknowability is part of its allure; it is perpetually *to be discovered* in its newness. Thus stupidity (the failure to know, the failure to represent adequately) is not an aberration that

threatens from outside the present, the way it does with other historical designations (e.g., getting the facts wrong, making erroneous assumptions, misunderstanding key concepts of the period, excluding certain evidence); it is structural. Here I repeat (we have talked a great deal about the uses of repetition) Giorgio Agamben's description of the contemporary as paradoxically characterized by disjunction and anachronism.[9] "Those who are truly contemporary," he remarks, "who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands."[10] "Contemporariness," he continues, entails "a certain quality of being out-of-phase or out-of-date, in which one's relevance includes within itself a small part of what lies outside of itself."[11] As soon as the contemporaneity of the now is reached and declared, it is lost, is anything *but* contemporary. In other words, contemporaries are, in Avital Ronell's terms, like the stupid, for they "cannot see themselves."[12] There is simply not enough time for reflection in the mirror of the now.

Perhaps the point is made more effectively in a scene from *The Lastmaker* when Karen Christopher reperforms a famous routine by comedian George Carlin, who died during the run of the show in 2008: "There's a moment coming . . . there's a moment coming. It's not here yet. It's on the way . . . it's still in the future. Here it is! Ah it's gone man. There's no present. Everything is in the near future and the recent past. No wonder we can't get anything together. We got no time, man." The radical instability of the present is a central focus of the performance and its interest in last words, that is, words that jump in parallax fashion from one temporal position to another, that inhabit a kind of presentness (the subject speaks, the present lasts) even as they come to stand as a *terminus post quem* (the subject has spoken his last), a fixed point where the past commences.

This chapter is an attempt to take up Bishop's two questions, to pick up (as one would a rejected playing card) the epithets of "contemporary failure" and "theatricality" and play them anew as interrelated forms of queer cunning. First, it tries to think through Mark Jeffery's monologues in *The Lastmaker* as performances that function as history (for what *is* history if not a "self-conscious removal from the present day"?). I argue that these monologues are examples of what Judith Halberstam has called the "queer art of failure" so as to show

the ways that history is always a matter of a removal from the present and, at the same time, an inability to occupy the past.[13] In short, I seek to think about the "dishomogeneity" of the contemporary.[14] Second, this chapter examines Bishop's other critique, the problem of the theatrical for performance, the inauthenticity and stupidity of theater's pretenses, of its failed attempts at representation, of the resulting masking of the performer and the supposed suppression of his or her politicized body. In contrast to Bishop, Sara Jane Bailes has recently investigated the question of theatrical representation and found its inherent failures generative rather than disabling.[15] Of Goat Island's performances in particular, she argues that impossibility is the group's praxis. Impossibility and failure manifest themselves in "the intention to perform activities and tasks that from the outset appear difficult to accomplish within the temporal and spatial limitations of live performance."[16] This praxis is perhaps best emblematized by the attempt to build the Hagia Sophia out of bodies, gestures, and dance—an attempt that the least giggle will destroy.

In addition to their inherent failures, Jeffery's performances carry with them very real political stakes; they reveal how the contemporary is a politically fraught category to which not everyone has the same access. As José Muñoz and Elizabeth Freeman have argued, time and history weigh heavily (and differently) on minoritarian subjects. And as Nicolas Bourriaud has explained, the West has only recently begun to acknowledge how time functions very differently in cultures across the globe.[17] "Queers," Muñoz writes, "especially those who do not choose to be biologically reproductive, a people without children, are, within dominant culture, people without a future." More pertinent, within the context of Bishop's critique, "they are cast as people who are developmentally stalled, forsaken, who do not have the complete life promised by heterosexual temporality."[18] It is not my contention that accusing the performance of being uncontemporary (developmentally stalled) is a form of homophobic name-calling by other means; I don't think Bishop had queer sexuality (or any sexuality) in mind at all (indeed, she seemed not to recognize that Jeffery was performing Grayson or even, perhaps, who Grayson was, describing much of the performance as "opaque" and "hermetic"). But I do think it is dangerous to presume that the contemporary and the authen-

tic are categories that are equally available and equally legible to all. To do so is to fail to recognize the ways in which, as Freeman writes, nonsequential forms of time can "fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye."[19] It is important to acknowledge how dissemblance (another name for which might be closeting) might be a strategic, even if stupid, form of play, one that, in Ronell's words, "wears down history."

> Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. —Kurt Vonnegut

Temporal Dissidence

Larry Grayson certainly had a lot of reasons not to be contemporary, not to live squarely in the present. He was born William Sulley White in 1923 to an unwed mother in a small mining town in central England.[20] Edith White gave him up for adoption to a couple named Alice and Jim Hammond, who had two older biological daughters named Flo and May. Alice Hammond died when Bill was just ten years old, and his adoptive sister Flo subsequently raised him (the third person in his life to take on the role of mother). He dropped out of school at age fourteen to perform in a drag act under the stage name Billy Breen in comedy clubs, male revues, and drag shows. When asked by an interviewer on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday what he was like as a boy, Grayson responded, "I was a mess . . . I was very thin and pale, as pale as death. I had every illness in the book . . . twice. I wasn't very fond of school. I didn't like it." When the interviewer asked what his family said about his being in show business, he replied: "Ignore him. He'll grow out of it. It's just a phase he's going through."[21] For Muñoz, this response is reminiscent of "the way in which worried parents deal with wild queer children, how they sometimes protect themselves from the fact of queerness by making it a 'stage,' a developmental hiccup, a moment of misalignment that will, hopefully, correct itself."[22]

I imagine the queer adolescent Grayson seeking out the stage as a site of what Muñoz calls utopian performativity, a place of hope in which to conjure both "future and past to critique presentness."[23] Perhaps the stages of local gentlemen's clubs in the late 1930s and the 1940s functioned for the teenage Bill White the way that punk stages

functioned for Muñoz in the 1980s. "Through what I'll call the utopian critique function of punk rock," Muñoz writes, "I was able to imagine a time and a place that was not yet there, a place where I tried to live. LA and its scene helped my proto-queer self, the queer child in me, imagine a stage, both temporal and physical, where I could be myself or, more nearly imagine a self that was in process, a self that has always been in the process of becoming."[24] The stages on which Grayson performed as a young man were similarly utopian. It was there that he could audition forms of his already fluid self (White, Hammond, Breen, Grayson) in places that were surrogates for the Hollywood film stages that he idolized, and on which he longed to appear for decades, his big break seemingly always deferred. He made a brief television appearance in 1956 on the *8 O'Clock Show*, but his act was considered too outrageous, and he was prevented from returning. At about this same time, under the advice of a manager, he decided to change his name to Larry Grayson, imagining a new self, taking the name of yet another mother, one of his favorite actresses, Kathryn Grayson.

It was not until 1972, when Grayson was nearly fifty, that Michael Grade, a television manager and producer, caught his nightclub act and signed him to appear on variety shows on ATV (Associated Television Network, similar to American networks such as CBS and ABC). He starred in a series of shows in the 1970s, including variety shows *Shut That Door!* and *The Larry Grayson Show*, as well as *The Generation Game*, a silly low-stakes game show in which contestants were interviewed by Grayson (in a manner similar to Groucho Marx's on *You Bet Your Life*) and then attempted to complete assigned tasks demanding specialized knowledge, such as frosting a cake, throwing a pot on a ceramics wheel, or playing a musical instrument. By this point, in the period of women's and gay liberation, the fey performance style and bawdy references that had seemed too illicit and the rumors of homosexuality that had threatened his career in the 1950s were rather tame and old-fashioned. By the early 1980s, when he officially retired, Grayson seemed not gay enough, never having admitted to any sexual relationships with either men or women, never appearing scandalously in the British tabloids. Thus his fame, though widespread, came rather late in life, was quaintly desensationalized, and lasted only about a decade.

That Grayson was out of sync with his own time, with his own contemporary, is evidenced not only in his disrupted childhood, queer identity, and late-blooming fame but also in his act, which seemed to be decidedly nostalgic when he appeared on television in the 1970s. He made a special point of his dissatisfaction with the decade's trends in a one-hour variety show he hosted in 1974 called *The Larry Grayson Hour of Stars*.[25] The show included dance numbers, songs, monologues, skits, and celebrity interviews all pointed toward the theme of old Hollywood. It opened with a comedy bit in which Grayson complains about his low-rent stardom, having to share a "dressing room" (in actuality a tent) with "two red Indians and a Mountie." He recounts a conversation with his agent who got him the TV gig: "I said, 'Look here, Bill,' I said, 'a kiss and a promise won't do. I want something firm.' *[The audience laughs knowingly.]* 'I want a bit of glamour,' I said, 'glitter and glamour like Hollywood in its heyday,' I said, 'not two tatty Indians with half their feathers missing.'" The monologue segues into a raucous disco number in which Grayson forces his way through a crowd of young people wearing halter tops, bell-bottom pants, and fright wigs, humorously bumping into them as they gyrate to the beat. He interrupts the dance, disparagingly calling it a fracas and a melee, and pleads for something different: "I want heavenly music, chandeliers, strings, choirs . . ." The disco ball removed, the set is changed to a grand white staircase and the dancers reappear now clad in gray rhinestone-covered tuxedoes and tails, purple ball gowns, sequined elbow-length gloves, and elaborate feathered headdresses. They sing, "Here's to the beautiful ladies; here's to the Hollywood girls."

Later in the program, Grayson interviews British film actress Anna Neagle. He asks her what it was like working for RKO in the 1930s and '40s and remarks, "Hollywood was really Hollywood in those days, not like today." Here he asks Neagle about how she got to be an actress, how she moved from being a dancer to leading roles. "Of course you have to be very fit to be a dancer," he remarks. "It's no good for me with my legs. With my arthritis, I wouldn't even get off the ground. It's true. I'm a living, walking, breathing mistake." From the perspective of the interview, this statement is simply more of his comedy persona—ever complaining about his ill health and advanc-

ing age (like a lower-class British matron gossiping over the back fence), self-deprecating about his talents, lamenting his "B-list" stardom. The same broad performance of error and stupidity was also a technique he used to good effect in *The Generation Game*, in which he would attempt to perform the contestants' challenges with comedic ineptitude and disastrous results. I want to read this statement more pointedly, though, as encompassing his bastard origins and orphanhood (he was a "mistake"), his queer identity and his temporal dishomogeneity, the decided uncontemporariness that I argue inspired his portrayal in *The Lastmaker.* His comedy old-fashioned, his punch lines well-worn, even his fey queerness seemed quaint, mistakenly not queer enough in the post-Stonewall era.

What would it mean to consider Larry Grayson's cheerful observation "What a gay day!" as an assertion of temporal as much as sexual dissidence? In addition to aligning happiness and homosexuality in a playful double entendre, the utterance is a performative that draws his audience into an alternate contemporary, a differently calibrated present that may appear to be mistaken, out of phase, or stalled in time but that is nonetheless happening now.

> Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history.
>
> —Avital Ronell

Now Then

If Larry Grayson's nightclub performances were anachronistic in the 1970s, Goat Island's surrogation of him in 2007–9 was even more obscure. American audiences had likely never heard of Grayson (I certainly had not) and thus viewed Jeffery's performance more generically as an oddly camp portrayal of Saint Francis. Moreover, within the vocabulary of the group's oeuvre, in which performers do frequently quote from or momentarily play famous historical figures or fictional characters, but usually with only the most minimal props or costume elements (e.g., a pair of shoes, a moustache cut out of cardboard), Jeffery's more elaborate costume and wig were unexpectedly theatrical. We might contrast this scene with another—for example, one in which Karen Christopher portrays Lenny Bruce doing the ul-

timate performance of his stand-up act (Figure 38). Although she adopts Bruce's postures and gestures, imitates his voice and comic delivery, there is little attempt to make her look like him. There is no five o'clock shadow, no dark jacket; her hair is not styled to match his. She wears no wig. Despite these differences, I argue that theater is not an error made by otherwise visual performance artists, nor is its presence limited to obvious signifiers like ill-fitting wigs. Christopher's portrayal of Bruce is just as concerned with the theatrical as is Jeffery's portrayal of Grayson. She acts the role of Bruce who acts the role of a policeman who acts the role of Bruce:

> Here's what happens: I do my act at perhaps . . . uh . . . 11 o'clock at night. Little do I know that at 11 a.m. the next morning before the grand jury somewhere there's another guy doing my act who's introduced as Lenny Bruce (in substance)—a peace officer—who's trained to recognize clear and present danger—not make-believe—does the act. The grand jury watches him work, and they go: "That stinks!" But I get busted and the irony is that I have to go to court and defend *his* act.

When Bruce originally explained the bewildering logic of the legal system to his audience in San Francisco in 1966, he instructed them about the serious political difference between the make-believe of theater and the perversity of reality (of real and present dangers). It is only when his nightclub act is pulled from the stage of the theater and performed as though it were sworn court testimony (complete with profanity and references to Jews, Catholics, and Spanish Harlem) that he can be indicted and jailed on obscenity charges. Within the confines of the court, the policeman is not performing Bruce's act, he is reciting a suspect's statements and describing actions to which he was an eyewitness. (This is equivalent in Bruce's mind to someone testifying that he saw a man named Hamlet murder a man named Claudius.) Bruce must defend the theatrical performance, which has now been made real and present, by convincing the judge that it is in fact make-believe, even though it has been so badly, so amateurishly, performed by the policeman.

The lesson we learn from Lenny Bruce, which I'd like to apply to Mark Jeffery's performance, is that, despite the supposed historical

FIGURE 38. Goat Island (Karen Christopher), *The Lastmaker*, 2008. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

trajectory of performance art since the mid-sixties away from theater and toward the actual, the law of reality falls more heavily on some subjects (the obscene, the queer) than on others, making theatricality an important strategy of being and mode of eluding the police (whatever form they may take). This is a point that I think Claire Bishop misses. During the question-and-answer period following the panel discussion of *The Lastmaker,* an audience member asked Bishop to clarify her critique of the performance. "Since the '60s and '70s," she explained, "the body's presence in a gallery has been associated with some kind of political potential because of the association between protest and presence, and because of the body being inscribed with various gender or racialized or economic markers of difference, that the body is always implicitly political in a space. And I don't think that translates to a theatrical context." The assertion here is that theater, by virtue of its elaborate pretenses and layers of dramaturgical devices (costumes, makeup, props, lighting, sets, clearly demarcated stages, and so on), obscures the politics of difference, blunts protest. I

have questioned this particular understanding of performance art's history elsewhere, this emphasis on escaping the theatrical, breaking the bounds of art and advancing toward "life" so as to achieve the actual.[26] I will not rehearse that critique here, but simply point out, first, that the boundary between the theatrical and the actual, between presence and absence, between the self and the role one plays is not nearly as rigidly drawn as such narratives suggest, and second, that subjects are positioned and interpreted differently relative to these terms. Do women, for example, who are often considered to be dramatic, natural-born masqueraders, have the same chance of getting to the actual as men do?

As Bruce's parable teaches and Grayson's performances suggest, we ought to consider the possibility that there can be significant political benefits to theatrical performance, *particularly* for bodies "inscribed by gender, race, or economic markers." This is true not only in Muñoz's terms, where the theater, precisely because it is not the actual disappointing or dangerous reality in which the minoritarian subject normally lives, offers the possibility of hope and a chance to rehearse for a utopian future, but also in Grayson's. The theater provides a place to hide, to evade the question of one's "real" sexuality (where what constitutes reality is circumscribed in very narrow terms) so as to insert a queer sort of doubt into spaces heavily guarded by heteronormativity.

> Sing a bit more softly. —Brother Nazario Gerardi as Saint Francis

Stupid Birds

The failure to be real is endemic to theater and to representation more broadly. As Bailes argues: "This perceivable gap—between thing and thing expressed—a gap that can easily be widened but never entirely closed, is one of the most compelling problematics exposed through art practice which all acts of representation in some way acknowledge. That worrisome gap that persists, and which engenders a state of constant deferral and substitution, also proposes an ontological challenge towards which much experimental theatre has willingly oriented itself in the latter decades of the twentieth century."[27] In contrast to those who imagine an artistic real, an unvarnished actuality

and pure presence, which theater's dissemblance threatens, Bailes sees only the failure of the real as a poetics and politics "wherein the very notions of progress, development, and cognition are disrupted."[28] In this, she echoes the claims of other contemporary scholars such as Judith Halberstam, who want to reexamine failure as a potentially antihegemonic category that questions capitalist, heterosexist, patriarchal, and racialized ideologies of success. Describing failure as an "oppositional tool," Halberstam writes, "The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."[29] What makes this failure queer precisely is not only that it is a strategy sometimes practiced by homosexuals but also that it is specifically a failure to conform to categorical distinctions (such as, but not limited to, straight/gay, male/female) and to share in dominant standards of success (such as marriage, children, and the accumulation of wealth).

Theater's (art's . . . representation's) inherent failure is one of the things performed and new artistic goals imagined by Goat Island in *The Lastmaker*. In a scene near the very end, Mark Jeffery reappears as Saint Francis, this time verbally deconstructing the theatrical components of the performance that the audience has just watched. He enters the stage as before, waving at and blessing the audience, but this time takes a tour of the stage area, hands held in a prayerful attitude, looking silently, contemplatively at the bodies of the other performers, now seated or lying on the floor, the props strewn about the space. He approaches a microphone on a stand and announces what seems to be the title of the performance's final section: "Last Words." Matthew Goulish sets the goldfinch chirping again and places it on the floor by the mike stand. He hands Jeffery a script and Jeffery reads it with an echoing intonation as though delivering a eulogy. He is less Larry Grayson this time and more the gentle monk turned preacher speaking in self-consciously pious language. The real-life monks who famously performed thirteenth-century Franciscan brothers in Rossellini's film inspire his portrayal.[30] As he delivers the monologue, reading to the end of each page, one by one, he tosses the pages to the floor.

> My children, the time has come to go our separate ways. From now on, each will travel on his own. God bless you and good-bye. Good-bye blessed walls, who sheltered us in your shade. Good-bye dear little microphones who adorned our speech when we were dull-witted and senseless. Good-bye sister lights, smiling down on us when we confounded others, wallowing in worldly things and rosy flesh. Good-bye blessed boom box who played our songs with everlasting grace. *[Goulish removes the boom box]* Good-bye beloved shoes and shoelaces, who leapt upon the earth, eagerly running to the summit. *[Goulish hangs a series of pairs of shoes by their laces across his arm and carries them off]* Good-bye horses, good-bye magpie. We praise you who are very useful, humble, precious, and chaste. Your neighs and chirps cast themselves into the darkness of my heart. Good-bye little wig, full of sweetness, crowning my glory, my head so sweetly, undisturbed and happy. *[Tosses wig to the floor, Goulish picks it up and folds it, carrying it off]* Good-bye tiny bits of white tape on the floor, glittering like snow, firm in your purpose, consistent in your virtue, persevering in your productivity.[31]

At this point in his monologue, Jeffery moves the mike stand so that the microphone is pointed at Karen Christopher, who is seated on the floor (where she has remained since the previous sequence). Doing her now familiarly halting and circumspect impression of Lenny Bruce (Figure 39), she says, "Uh . . . I'm sorry if I wasn't very funny tonight. Um . . . I'm not a comedian, I'm Lenny Bruce." Just as Goulish physically dismantles theatrical illusions in this scene—striking the sound effects, costumes, and props—so Christopher dismantles the theatricality of character, citing Bruce's canny interrogation of the real, the question of who precisely is playing whom, in order to unmask her portrayal of him. So too does Jeffery perform Nazario Gerardi performing Saint Francis of Assisi in a dizzying merry-go-round where real/staged/real/staged go flying by like elaborately painted horses.

Jeffery returns the microphone to its upright position and continues his speech, now integrating a stanza from an E. E. Cummings poem and returning the performance to the question of the mechanical bird:

FIGURE 39. Goat Island (Karen Christopher and Mark Jeffery), *The Lastmaker,* 2008. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

> We rejoice over such small ones on the floor. Good-bye Hagia Sophia. *[Gestures to a small wooden scale model of the church, which is being taken apart and removed by Goulish]* Your naves, apse, galleries, and aisles. Your noble structure rising, rising, rising. Good-bye sister birds. Small in stature, humble in attitude, and lesser by profession. Cast aside your earthly concerns. Swift you fly beyond the vale of tears. May my heart be open to little birds, who are the secrets of living, whatever they sing is better than to know. And if men should not hear them then men are old. Good-bye. Good-bye. Good-bye.

In this, Jeffery stages the breakdown of representation. One might say that he and the other performers deconstruct it (both physically and philosophically), not to discredit it, but rather to show how it is built on a series of untested assumptions. He takes off his wig, offers a ridiculous blessing, acknowledges the theatrical apparatus—lights,

sound, glow tape, costume, props—all of the tools of invention and pretense. With his elaborate farewell to the bird, by encouraging it to "fly beyond the vale of tears," he makes a play of its fakery. Stupid. It can no more fly than he can. "Stupidity stages itself on stage as the undoing of the scene," Ronell writes, "when things are scrambled and 'are being shifted and everything seems upside down.' It occurs between the acts, when illusions cease and workers are on the scene. In a sense then, stupidity is the irruption of the real, of that which is unassimilable."[32] But this irruption, these Brechtian gestures, it is important to point out, like Christopher's performance of Lenny Bruce, never leads to authenticity, does not uncover anything in itself. When Bruce pulls off the mask of the comedian, he is still performing onstage, his real experiences having always already been a part of his act. When Jeffery pulls off his wig, revealing his own, real, reddish-brown hair and receding hairline beneath it, there is no sense of having gotten to the bottom of things, no clarity about when precisely he is Mark Jeffery and when he is Grayson, Saint Francis, Nazario Gerardi, or E. E. Cummings.

Moreover, when he recites Cummings, he inserts doubt into our confidence that the bird is only a simulation by questioning the epistemological grounds of right, in both the senses of factually correct and morally righteous. Cummings's poem disputes a logic that contrasts birds (dumb animals) and men (those who know). Birds are, for Cummings, "the secrets of living." If Ronell's book had been available to him, he might have called the birds stupid, since, in her words, stupidity consists "in the absence of a relation to knowing."[33] Instead he says, "whatever they sing is better than to know." Associating self-satisfied knowledge, self-righteousness, and self-assuredness with old age, he continues, "if men should not hear them then men are old." The rest of the poem, from which the fragment above is taken, continues along these lines, contrasting the young, hungry, thirsty, and supple mind with the minds of old men:

> may my mind stroll about hungry
> and fearless and thirsty and supple
> and even if it's sunday may I be wrong
> for whenever men are right they are not young

and may myself do nothing usefully
and love yourself so more than truly
there's never been quite such a fool who could fail
pulling all the sky over him with one smile

The speaker declares himself a fool and a failure, and Cummings performs that failure in a series of off rhymes—known/old, wrong/young, usefully/truly, fail/smile—each of which consists of an aural stumble, words that trip like a comedian on stage. When Larry Grayson played stupid, when he flubbed a dance number, he seemed to show the underside of the performance, the failure that lies behind every display of mastery, the human truth that undermines theatrical virtuosity. But of course both Cummings's stumbling words and Grayson's missteps were part of the script. The line between the real and the illusion, the actual and the theatrical, is ever harder (Everard-er) to locate.

A last movement in the monstrous pile of armour. —Lin Hixson

History

What draws me repeatedly to the work of Goat Island is the group's abiding interest in history, in the task of historicizing by performing and referencing, the task of "self-conscious removal from the present" so as to try to stand in the place of the past. Although it is commonly read as an anthology of last moments (Grayson's and Bruce's last performances, Bach's last fugue, one of Creeley's last poems, and so on), one could also interpret this performance as a historical narrative about the violence of religious fundamentalism (the Hagia Sophia, Lancelot, Saint Francis), or warfare more generally. Reflecting on the sound effect of horses galloping by, which is used intermittently throughout the piece, the group's artistic director, Lin Hixson, explains: "Paul Revere rides his horse in 1775 during the American Revolutionary War. Robert Bresson releases his film in 1974 during the last months of the Vietnam War. Goat Island makes *The Lastmaker* during the second Iraqi War—*a last movement in the monstrous pile of armour.*"[34] This book ponders what it would mean to take such a history seriously—qua history. What would we learn about war from the sound of horses' hooves or from a campy Saint Francis, or about the French in Vietnam from the French in Algeria that we couldn't learn

from a more conventional scholarly history? While I am not prepared here to answer that question fully, the very act of asking it suggests that this work of performance art troubles historiographic practice, thinks critically about the doing of history. All of which returns me to the claim I made at the outset, which is that this performance is a treatise (a word that beautifully contains the word *entreaty*) on how to conduct history. What are the principles it sets forth, and why do they matter?

The work urges us to recognize the stupidity of the contemporary as a temporal category (and, presumably, as a scholarly subfield). By suggesting that the contemporary is as destined to fail as the attempt to construct an enormous church on a theater stage, Goat Island does not recommend that the historian should quit writing historically about it, but rather that we must seek to understand its special temporality, seeing its stupidity, its dishomogeneity, as potentially useful. *The Lastmaker* also urges us, entreats us, to recognize that the contemporary, indeed any period of time that the historian cares to designate or delimit, is not universally available and is not experienced, read, or known equally by everyone. Time and historical periodization are just as politically fraught as are identities, and thus the historian must think about temporality as a politics requiring its own unique forms of dissidence. This does not mean that there is a "right" time or "right" way of dividing it up, but rather that time is itself a representation, an image or measure of change, and thus inevitably constituted by failure. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the time of the contemporary is often out of step or out of phase with what we might consider to be "now." And if we believe in history at all, then we must concede that because time is itself a form of representation, the truth of past events (or present events, for that matter) might be shown through falsehoods, dissemblance, what I described in chapter 3 as the "truth-telling lie."

Thus, in the spirit of Goat Island and with the themes and references of *The Lastmaker* in mind (the little birds, the pile of armor, the comedians and monks), I come out onstage dressed as a historian (wearing an ill-fitting false moustache), approach the mike stand, and say in the voice of the novelist:

People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore.

I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.

This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet?[35]

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS
DARIO ROBLETO'S SPOOLS

> *Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are—in fact—the book of our history opened before us.*
>
> —W. G. Sebald, "As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp"

> *I use artworks and reenactment events in tandem with critical and cultural theory not only as needle and thread, but also as seam cutters and stitch rippers, working to loosen the* habit *of linear time.*
>
> —Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains*

The Game of "Gone"

I begin with a game called "gone," the rules of which Sigmund Freud describes in his famous account of his grandson Ernst's peculiar behavior whenever his mother left him. "This good little boy," Freud dotingly explains,

> had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get a hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. . . . I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play "gone" with them. . . . The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. . . . What he did

> was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da."[1]

I want to think about what it means to play "gone," that is, to play what seems to me to be the game of history, in which we respond to the disagreeable departure of the past by sending symbolic objects (stories, documents, artifacts, works of art) rolling away from us only to reel them back in, to discover and claim them anew. Keeping in mind the special features of this game—spools and strings, the repetition of a distressing experience, mastery over the lost object, and the maternal as a locus of excess sentiment—I ask what it would mean to think of contemporary art history as a matter of play (playing games, playacting, the wiggle or play of a spool on a string), that is, as a means of compensating for the newly or not yet fully absent past figured as absent mother.

In addition to its other concerns (psychoanalysis, memory, nostalgia, art, photography, and the queer effeminacy of boyish men), Carol Mavor's book *Reading Boyishly* helps us to begin answering that question because it both describes and seeks to enact a historical method inspired by boyish games. It offers a history of childhood remembrances and of the maternal by such boy men as Marcel Proust and Roland Barthes. Where the book describes a process of reading (texts, images, bodies) and where it contemplates the relation between mothers and sons, it sets me to thinking about contemporary historical practices. In one provocative passage, Mavor, summarizing British psychologist D. W. Winnicott's theory of the "good-enough mother," writes:

> Gradually, as the child begins to be able to tolerate any "failure" of maternal adaptation, the mother lessens her constant presence and this role of nearly satisfying Baby's every need. Her necessary "failure" makes space for what Winnicott refers to as "disillusionment." Here the infant fills in these first pangs of loss (the loss of the mother and the breast) with cooing songs (Baby's first music), rubbing his thumb and forefinger on the satin trim

> of a "blankie," clutching onto a soft toy: song or blanket or both, these transitional objects are the first inklings of creative life.[2]

The transitional object, as she explains, is a token that helps the child to separate from the mother and assume a distinct subjectivity. While Mavor recognizes in this moment the origins of creativity—the art of creating representations and surrogates that stand in for the mother—I see the origins of history, which, as I've suggested throughout this book, we might well regard as a specific form of creativity. History as prosthesis (the use of one object to stand in the place of another that is ostensibly lost) is analogous to the baby blanket or stuffed animal, which helps the child transition away from dependence on and identification with the mother. Among the transitional objects (prostheses) we have studied are wooden legs and wooden stools, photographs, songs, artificial hearts, language, tombs and effigies, falsehoods, and a variety of surrogate performers. Each is a response to the present's "necessary failure," the lessening of its constant presence and the disillusioned "pangs of loss" that are that failure's consequence.

The present's diminishing presence makes the transitional object a form of historicist creativity directed at the problem of the contemporary in that it is mobilized in response to a loss or disillusionment that is *in progress*; the blanket, toy, or song is a physical manifestation of the child's coping with an immediate and ongoing transition into historical consciousness. In this phase the child begins to experience the attenuation of what ties the past, which the mother will come to embody, to the present, which the child occupies. In this, the child mimics the historian. As Michel de Certeau notes, "Modern Western history essentially begins with differentiation between the *present* and the *past*." This differentiation operates on more than a superficial similarity to the child's separation from the mother, since both involve the emergence of the self–other relation, of which the child–mother dyad is the first instance. "The other is the phantasm of historiography," he remarks, "the object that it seeks, honors, and buries."[3] Although de Certeau is concerned on some level with those particular others on whom Western history's gaze falls—the Native, the people, the insane, the Third World—his primary "other" is the

broad category of the dead. History, he states, is "a labor of death and a labor against death."[4]

The youthful, yet-to-be-determined contemporary, like the child, occupies and is constituted by the space of transition from identification to difference, present to past, living to dead. As Janet Kraynak writes (following Foucault following Kant), "The present is not a spatially fixed moment, but a process predicated on difference."[5] Unlike the child, however, and unlike other historical periods, the contemporary never achieves complete development. An ongoing, unfixed, and overdetermined category, the contemporary presents a peculiar challenge to history. Although it might be said that the past is never fully gone for any historical period, the game of "gone" is more keenly felt and more playfully enacted in the contemporary. Grant Kester comments on the period's proclivities for this game when he describes it as an indeterminate, unstable, temporal phase: "It remains the case that contemporary art history has a vexed relationship to the discipline as a whole. In fact, the very idea of contemporary art history would seem to be an oxymoron. How can something 'contemporary' be treated with the gravity and scholarly detachment of a safely historical object?"[6] The contemporary past is not yet "safely historical" but rather in the process of becoming history. Like the baby who has not fully "detached" from the mother, the present maintains an umbilical connection to the immediate past. The one cannot occupy an objective position relative to the other, cannot yet see the other at a distance from the self. The "contemporary" and "history" remain in constant, oxymoronic tension. Therefore, as Pamela Lee writes, "we might think of the study of 'contemporary art history' in terms of its *prematurity*."[7]

If we are willing to think of history in terms of the maternal, to think of the recent past as a mother figure, it is necessary to ask by what historical method we might research, understand, and narrate the contemporary past as such. If we cannot treat it with gravity, seriousness, and detachment, what other approach is there? Some might suggest that we should simply *not* treat it, that we should let it alone, allow it to mature more fully into history. But as this book has argued, the historicization of the contemporary is, in the first place, inevitable (it will happen, with or without us) and, in the second place, ex-

tremely important, both for understanding the period in which we live and for thinking critically about historical methodology as the very condition of possibility for reconceiving time.

This chapter, inspired by and tangling up Carol Mavor's, W. G. Sebald's, and Dario Robleto's engagements with the maternal, offers the game of "gone" as a historiographic method that resists linear temporalities, which commonly set the pace for history. The game involves "the disturbing habit" of repetition, Ernst's compulsion to play and replay his spool, to stage and restage the moment when his mother leaves him, when his past is "gone." It utilizes a series of transitional objects, the accumulation of which radically challenges the economy of scarcity on which history so often depends. (A lengthy chapter, it hoards things, piles them up in precarious stacks, and knocks them down again.)[8] The game also requires that we think about the role of objects in history, their ability to know us, as Sebald says (and thus our work here touches on new materialism and the efforts of scholars such as Jane Bennett and Manuel De Landa to imagine things as historical agents). In addition, as a historical method, the game luxuriates in dismay ("o-o-o-o") and joy ("da"), produces an embarrassing excess of sentiment (and thus it also nods in the direction of affect theory).

Moreover, the game of "gone" involves the tying of strings, the binding together and making of provisional connections between one thing and another. "I have seen my own boys do it," Mavor writes, "looping string inside and around a bureau drawer, up and over a bunk bed, down and through the axle of a toy truck, up and over and around the doorknob, through a box of toys and back on over to yet another handle on a bureau drawer. To open the bedroom door is to feel the tension of the domestic, the maternal tied up."[9] A fundamental technique of the child's historical practice (for Mavor it is specifically boyish) is the tying, looping, and winding of strings that draw (and let go of) connections between seemingly unrelated objects and spaces—a bureau drawer, a bunk bed, a toy truck, a box of toys, a doorknob. The tying of strings is provisional, makeshift, and creative. It is also an activity that Mavor especially associates with mother and child (umbilicus, apron strings, spools of thread, strings gathered in birds' nests, kite strings, yo-yos, speech, ribbons, banderoles, yarn,

the cable release on a camera), an activity of which Sigmund Freud's grandson Ernst is the undisputed master. Ernst famously plays with his spool and string by repeatedly relinquishing his pretend mother and then summoning her return.[10]

To think of this game in terms of history, as I want to do, is to understand the mother as both the site of our past (she is the bodily home from which we emerge into the world and is symbolic of the childhood home that we relinquish as adults) and traditionally the curator of our personal archive (the collector and caretaker of baby teeth, locks of hair, blankets, tiny clothes, teddy bears, photo albums, school awards, and artworks). When we tie strings, draw narrative connections between things, we are, like baby Ernst, pretending to have dominion over our relationships with a past becoming history, a past figured as mother. "The mother," Mavor writes, "holds onto the burden of holding onto the boy. She encourages the hold, she selfishly demands it, as she tries to make the boy accept the maternal demand."[11] The past, like the mother, tugs at us, insists on our attention even as it must at the same time push us away.

Austerlitz and the Mother

The maternal demand is an important theme of W. G. Sebald's book *Austerlitz*, a story about a boy man who, as we've already seen (in chapter 4), emerges from an unhappy childhood among emotionally distant strangers to spend his adult life trying to find out what happened to his parents and, when he learns that they are dead, searches tirelessly for an image of his mother, Agáta. Like the subjects of Mavor's investigation of the topic (Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott), Austerlitz is described as "one of those bachelors who retain something boyish about them all their days."[12] The boyish character is a professional historian, and his search for his mother is ultimately a form of research into the legacies of the Holocaust. While the book can be described as a historical novel, it refers to the war and the events of the genocide only tangentially. Rather than a narrative of events or historical actors, it is a story of war-induced psychosis. It is a history of affects—of the pervasive feeling of displacement, of the loss of history, of the breaking of ties to places, languages, customs, and people—affects that find

expression in the image of the child having been torn from the arms of the mother.

The maternal demand is most keenly felt in *Austerlitz* in the main character's long quest—a search that is both personal investigation and historical research—to know what became of his parents. Upon returning to Prague from an exile imposed on him in childhood, Austerlitz meets his former nanny, Vera (a name that means truth), who tells him about his parents' "origins so far as she knew of them, the course of their lives, and the annihilation, within the space of only a few years, of their entire existence."[13] She shows her now grown Jacquot a few photographs she has saved, including the one of the two figures on a stage that we've already examined (Figure 35) and an image of him as a small boy dressed for a costume ball. He searches for, but cannot find, his mother's image. Later he discovers a videotape copy of a Nazi propaganda film produced in 1944 for visiting Red Cross officials called *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt (The Führer Gives a City to the Jews)*, which attempts to show the Theresienstadt ghetto, to which his mother was sent, as a model Jewish settlement. Austerlitz plays the tape over and over again in a prolonged game of "gone." He has the tape slowed down so he can watch frame by frame a sequence in which an audience in the camp watches a musical performance.

> In the course of the performance the camera lingers in close-up over several members of the audience, including an old gentleman whose cropped gray head fills the right-hand side of the picture, while at the left-hand side, set a little way back and close to the upper edge of the frame, the face of a young woman appears, barely emerging from the black shadows around it, which is why I did not notice it at all at first. Around her neck, said Austerlitz, she is wearing a three-stringed and delicately draped necklace which scarcely stands out from her dark, high-necked dress, and there is, I think, a white flower in her hair. She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face, which seems to be both strange and familiar, said Austerlitz, I run the tape back repeatedly, looking at the time indicator at the top left-hand

> corner of the screen, where the figures covering part of her forehead show the minutes and seconds, from 10:53 to 10:57, while the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read and capture them.[14]

Though he fixates on the image of this anonymous woman with the three-stringed necklace, though he plays and rewinds the tape again and again, he learns that it is not, in fact, his mother. Redoubling his efforts, he becomes more rigorous in his historical research and pursues his mother's trace in the city archives. "I also spent several days searching the records for the years 1938 and 1939 in the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetná," Austerlitz recounts.

> And there, among letters, files on employees, programs, and faded newspaper cuttings, I came upon the photograph of an anonymous actress who seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother, and in whom Vera, who had already spent some time studying the face of the woman in the concert audience which I had copied from the Theresienstadt film, before shaking her head and putting it aside, immediately and without a shadow of a doubt, as she said, recognized Agáta as she had then been.[15]

This passage startles because the main character's lengthy search for his mother produces suspense and emotional tension that, rather than coming to some kind of meaningful climax, is deflated by the brevity with which the retrieval of the searched-for object is described (Figure 40).

In Avi Kempinski's study comparing Sebald's and Roland Barthes's respective texts in pursuit of what he calls the mother-image, he explains that even this revelation, the discovery of Agáta's image, is unsatisfying. "This photograph," Kempinski cautions, "is equally dubious as a realization of the mother-image (not despite, but rather because of Vera's magnanimous and comforting gesture of assenting to the resemblance)."[16] By this point in the novel, the reader is cautious—well aware of the vagaries of memory and the falsehoods of history, well schooled in the tenuousness of our grasp on the past. Far from a precious memento (the past presumably recaptured and held in the hand), the photograph is merely a likeness (the likeness

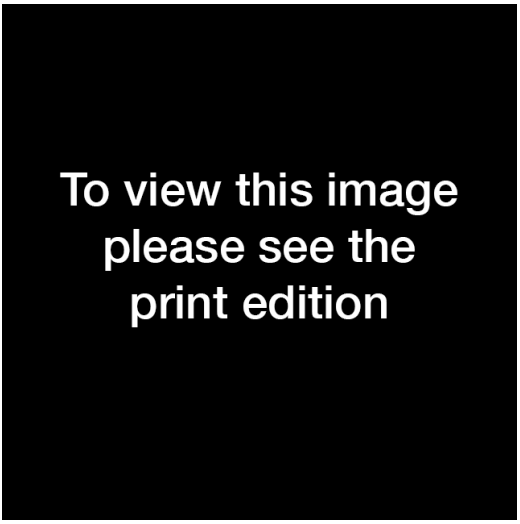

FIGURE 40. Image from *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald. Copyright 2001 by W. G. Sebald; reprinted by permission of the Wylie Agency, LLC.

of an actress, a professional dissembler), which Austerlitz ultimately gives away to the book's narrator as a memento. "Likeness, 'the almost,' seems to be the only visual means available to Austerlitz in pursuit of the mother-image."[17] Out of keeping with traditional narratives where history is depicted as the heroic pursuit and capture of the past, the satisfying denouement, Sebald's story tells the tale of a transitional object, a likeness (rather than the hard, incontrovertible evidence that photographs are often taken to be), an "almost," that momentarily stands in place of the lost mother, momentarily comforts disillusionment and failure, and then is set aside. Austerlitz creates a spool of the photograph, uses it to play at commanding the past. He throws it out, draws it back, and throws it out again. This is the maternal demand. The demand of the contemporary.

As promising as this model may be for reimagining the work of contemporary art history, the time of the transitional object proves to be very difficult to maintain and occupy.

> A clock has always struck me as something ridiculous, a thoroughly mendacious object, perhaps because I have always resisted

> the power of time out of some internal compulsion which I myself have never understood, keeping myself apart from so-called current events in the hope, as I now think, said Austerlitz, that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish.[18]

Austerlitz describes what we've already noted about the interstitial nature of the contemporary via a remarkably current understanding of time (the past as a rubbery thing), an understanding that Christine Ross claims to be a product of what she calls the temporal turn and that Terry Smith has named "(alter) temporality."[19] The character expresses his desire to distance himself from current events (e.g., the twenty-four-hour news cycle, which grinds the present into the past at breakneck speed) and to reject the linearity of clock time in favor of a temporality in which "all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously." The contemporary, that name we give to a collective childhood in which the past is not yet past and the present is not yet fully present, invites an antilinear chronology where previous events have not yet happened but are reexperienced anew every time we think of them. "This historical reordering," Ross writes, "basically corresponds to an aesthetic turning of the *futuristic* regime of historicity of modernity into a *presentifying* regime in which the articulation of the past, the present, and the future is rethought as the past is brought closer to the present and the present brought closer to the future."[20]

With the contemporary (the smashing of the clock, the dislodging of linear time), however, comes "the prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish," the perpetual reoccurrence of the traumatic past. "Looking back over all the past years," Sebald has his eponymous character say, "[I] could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation

which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement."[21] Suffering from a mental breakdown, Austerlitz confronts his own fragmented, perpetually present story, what Mavor would describe as the "dwelling" of his childhood past split open by the loss of his mother, by the Jewish genocide, by his own inevitable growing up, but his story is never definitively resolved, never fully excavated and glued back together. He speaks of what we might understand to be the historian's complaint: the sense of being cast out of the past, of feeling the strings that bind the child to his mother stretched and snapped, and of the resulting mania "breaking through." Such is Ernst's mania, the reason that his behavior is worthy of study by his psychoanalyst grandfather. The game of "gone" is driven not by the promise of recovering the lost object but by the carefully controlled repetition of loss itself.

Infinite Heaps

Sebald endows inanimate things with historical knowledge. Our things constitute, he says, "a book of our history opened before us." Of what, we might wonder, is thingly knowledge constituted; what kind of history do things tell? This is, of course, *the* question of art history, a question to which Martin Heidegger famously addressed himself when he wrote about the "thingness" of the work of art.[22] History is commonly conducted in relation to objects—archival documents, photographs, records, and material artifacts—which the historian attempts to read and narrate. Art history, in particular, as the name implies, tethers history to objects. Inherent in this view, though, is a set of assumptions about the object that I seek to question—its material endurance ("things outlast us"), its fixity and original material integrity (against which change and time are measured), its availability or relative scarcity, and, in the end, its value.

We might understand the historical object's value and the economy in which that value is produced by reading Carolyn Steedman's book *Dust*, which offers a history of the modern writing of history. Steedman, a scholar of nineteenth-century British history, counters the image of the archive's foundations in order, power, and law—its logic of containment and exclusion—with an account of its astonishing disorder and abundance. Remarking on the banality of the

archive's contents, she writes, "Commentators have found remarkably little to say about record offices, libraries and repositories, and have been brought face to face with the *ordinariness*, the unremarkable nature of archives, and the everyday disappointments that historians know they will find there."[23] What are commonly conceived to be the repositories of rare and precious artifacts, the archive, record office, and library, are in fact dumping grounds for everything and nothing. "You know perfectly well," she says, "that the infinite heaps of *things* they recorded, the notes and traces that these people left behind, constitute practically nothing at all. There is the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything, and then there is its tiny flotsam that has ended up in the record office you are at work in."[24] What end up being saved, the material remains of history, are, from Steedman's perspective, largely useless, overwhelmingly abundant though fragmentary, and the logic of preservation, to the degree that there is one, is aleatory.

Oddly, the material abundance by which the historical past is constituted, and by which the historian is plagued, has done nothing to challenge history's logic of scarcity, but rather has turned it into doctrine. As Hannah Arendt explains in her essay on history, "What is difficult for us to realize is that the great deeds and works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as parts of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures." History is keen to tell us about what Arendt describes as the "extraordinary," that which is rare.[25]

Sebald's incorporation and transformation of things (primarily found photographs) in his novels constitute a particular kind of historicism that takes part in but also works against traditional historical practices and beliefs such as these. Black-and-white photographs decorate the pages of the German author's books, but they are not, strictly speaking, illustrations. Found images, they were not originally made for the books, and, uncaptioned, their relation to the texts in which they are inserted is obscure. Sebald gives no indication of what his photographs *were*—where he got them, what they depict—nor does he tell what they *are*; they seem purposefully to fail in their presumed role as simple depictions (if depictions are

ever simple), to the point where the reader wonders what precisely they're doing there.

Lise Patt locates an example of the not-quite-rightness of his photographs in an image of a castle in Sebald's 1990 book *Schwindel. Gefühle. (Vertigo)*. "In the opening pages, he gives us a tightly cropped image of, we assume, the medieval castle referred to in the surrounding text. At second glance, however, we realize it is in fact a cactus planter in the form of a castle."[26] The cactus planter is a thing that presumably offers itself to us as a book of history, though perhaps not the one we were expecting. With the miniature made giant (we read the planter as a castle), the giant made miniature (we realize our error, our overestimation), there is a bit of play at work in the author's historical method. "The famous boxes of images the late author kept squirreled away from friends and family," Patt explains, "from which he would pull pictures and *realia*—always shuffling them and often losing them only to find them years later—had no labels beyond *Bildmaterial*."[27] Not only is the planter moved from one context to another, transformed from being one kind of thing to another kind of thing (tacky kitsch object made medieval castle), but also the photograph itself can be thought of as a transitional object, a token that moves from some past reality to the present.

In his influential essay "The Cultural Biography of Things," anthropologist Igor Kopytoff argues that one approach to the study of commodities in societies is to track these things' life stories. Such a biographical approach begins with such questions as "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?"[28] All of these questions are helpful for assessing the cultural value of things, which is determined in inverse proportion to the frequency of their exchange, a process in which they are, in Kopytoff's words, commoditized. "The counterdrive to this potential onrush of commoditization," he argues, "is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anti-cultural."[29] While

capital-*C* Culture (and with it power) "singularizes" objects, that is, makes them unique and scarce, capitalism creates excess, homogenizes, and depletes the value of things. This is an old argument of course, reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the culture industry and Clement Greenberg's evisceration of kitsch. Sebald, I argue, doesn't buy it. He gestures toward culture by singling out these image-things, by making them appear to be meaningful for the stories he is telling, but ultimately refuses to discriminate or singularize, pulls back from the logic of scarcity. It is not *the* medieval castle that he's talking about in the text, or even *a* medieval castle, which might serve as an illustration of a general medievalness, but a mass-produced object having little to do with either the medieval period or actual castles. In this sense, it might seem absolutely useless from the point of view of history, except that it really is very effective at helping to place the reader in the specific affective environment, one where she feels the tug of the past's failure to remain in the present precisely by feeling the planter's failure to remain a castle. In this way we might say that the photograph is, by virtue of its disillusionments, "almost" historical.

Sebald's view of history is one that I think Dario Robleto shares, and that is why I am brought repeatedly to these same questions by Robleto's work, which, like Sebald's, is deeply committed to materials as against superficial appearances or concepts. Like Jacques Austerlitz, Robleto may be thought of as a "boy man" who has a very specific and instructive relation to the maternal and to historical methodology. Not only is Robleto (like Mavor's boys) youthful in appearance, not only was he raised by his single mother, and not only did he have a profound relationship with his grandmother, but also his artistic interests in pop music, DJ culture, wars and battles, rocks and bones, nineteenth-century medicine, Ouija boards, and the mysterious practice of alchemy hold a stereotypically boyish fascination. Moreover, like Mavor's child archaeologist, Robleto plays History by stacking up and knocking down. He engages in destruction and transformation, the tying and untying of threads and strings (both literally and metaphorically), and, like Proust or Barthes, he suffers from and threatens to propagate an especially potent strain of nostalgia. Robleto understands contemporary historicism as a series of

transitional objects put in play as a response to the ongoing separation from the mother-as-past. Such objects, affective tokens that are picked up and set down, reeled in and let fall, must be exchangeable and provisional. They must, as a consequence, proliferate.

One aspect of Robleto's devotion to things, to matter, is his indebtedness to and serious practice of alchemy, a science devoted to distilling the essences of material substances and to the transmutation of things, one to another. But his is not a science of gold, a get-rich-quick scheme in which the common is made rare. In his work one sees human bones transformed into wood, love letters made into a dress, bullets turned into thimbles and spoons, vinyl records made into thread, spools, buttons, prosthetic limbs, human bones, or braided hair. Moreover, the transformations he effects are never final but always in process—the gold always contains the potential for lead; the lead always contains the potential for gold. The question I repeatedly confront when looking at the resulting works of art is the same one asked by Sebald's photographs: Are these things what they *are* or what they *were*? Am I meant to be amazed that they are made of pulverized bones (what they originally were) or that the bones look so convincingly like wood (what they are now)?

What they were certainly seems very important to Robleto, who, in contrast to Sebald, crafts detailed descriptions of the material sources for all of his sculptures in the manner of alchemical recipes. For example, in a work titled *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives* (2004–5) there is, among a great many other things, a miniature wooden rocking chair, slightly less than two feet high, made of "bone dust from every bone in the body." I don't know if I'm meant to approach the chair as a skeleton or the skeleton as a chair, the human as a thing or the thing as human; whether I'm meant to envision the work of an ogre who grinds bones to dust or that of the mad scientist who brings them newly to life (Figure 41). Just as the letters can no longer be conserved, the bullets no longer restored to their "original" state, so the materials out of which he made the chair or dress or spoon do not find rest in their new forms. Even in the absence of labels or captions, as with Sebald's newly contextualized photographs, there is a not-quite-rightness in these things, an almost-ness—the chair is a little too shiny, too plastic seeming. The dress is too stiff; the spoons

FIGURE 41. Dario Robleto, *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives*, 2004–5. Chair: Cast and carved bone dust from every bone in the body, stained and sealed with homemade balm (almond oil, beeswax, honeysuckle, resurrection plant, life everlasting, motherwort, mistletoe, sundew, lady's mantle, eternal flower, life root, immortal root), zinc, nickel, silver, water extendable resin, polyurethane. Sewing materials, tools, and rug: Thread and fragments of American soldiers' uniforms from various wars, wool from combat casualty blankets, silk, cotton, carved bone, melted bullet lead and shrapnel from various wars, zinc, nickel, silver, walnut. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

too rusted; the scraps of thread on the spools too ragged, coarse, and wiry; the buttons too lumpy; the hair too thick.

In answer to the problem of overabundance producing a well-guarded scarcity in history, we have Dario Robleto's enactment of what seems to me to be, following Mavor, a boyish form of memorialization. To understand what precisely that might entail, I look again to Steedman. Interestingly, in plotting her history of history, she winds a string around historical narrative and pulls it taut on the

concept of childhood. "'History' is one of the great narrative modes that are our legacy from the nineteenth century," she remarks.

> And as a way of plotting and telling a life (of giving shape and meaning to the inchoate items of existence) it is useful to compare it with the modern idea of childhood, and the way in which the remembered childhood—the narrative of the self—has become the dominant way of telling the story of how one got to be the way one is. In the practices of history and of modern autobiographical narration, there is the assumption that *nothing goes away*; that the past has deposited all of its traces, somewhere, somehow (though they may be, in particular cases, difficult to retrieve).[30]

Here, from the point of view of the adult, childhood is looked at and idealized from the present, from within a moment in which that past is fully over and fully coalesced into a tidy origin story. So here again we have the idea that history, and now autobiography, is based on the premise that nothing goes away, and yet, paradoxically, some traces are rare, valuable precisely because they are difficult to retrieve.

What Steedman is describing here is the same archaeological view of the past that Mavor holds up for inspection and ultimately rejects. Everything lies buried and preserved. All we must do is dig it up and make it whole. But Robleto's view—a view of history that seems deeply entwined with both the maternal and the childlike—involves what Mavor describes as an "archaeology that unmakes."[31] The historical connections that this archaeology draws are provisional, the objects it unearths are valuable only for the time being, only until they are toppled over and replaced by something else. Rather than exulting in abundance in order to increase the value of what is deemed scarce, the artist plays with excess, dispersal, destruction, and transformation. He produces a history that is contemporary (and of the contemporary) because it is not yet done (is not yet gone).

The artifact, from the child's point of view, is not waiting to be rescued. It is not the thing itself but the game that matters. It is thus a thing to be played with (or, as in the case of the spool, played out), an object that, with regard to its relation to actual people and events, is just pretend, but no less important and serious for that. The mother

understands the excess of remnants from childhood in a similar way: each pair of baby booties, lock of hair, storybook, crayon drawing, photograph, or report card is just one object in the vast archive under her care. While the objects might be precious, they also might not be. In any case, they are never confused with the baby that once was; they are instead repositories of affect (something the proper historian must not allow himself). They remember history in terms of how it felt rather than as a sequence of events that occurred. With his boyish emulation of maternal forms of memorialization, I argue, Robleto, playing at the feminine arts of remembering, answers scarcity with excess.

But I am too quickly drawing my spool back in, going for the satisfying return, the solution ("Robleto answers scarcity with excess"—Da! How tidy!), as though I have tossed out an intellectual problem and now possess the answer I have safely retrieved. Ben Anderson sets that spool to wobble when he explains, with regard to the field of affect studies, that, on one hand, scholars have seen an "unassimilable excess of affect," which, because it challenges traditional relations between subject and object and knocks the wind out of "systems of signification or narrativization," promises "a new way to attend to the social or cultural in perpetual and unruly movement." "On the other hand," Anderson reminds us, "the transitive excess of affect is precisely what is targeted, intensified, and modulated in new forms of power—forms of power that themselves function through an excess of mechanisms that saturate and invest life."[32] Here he gestures to the category of biopower, which, as Michel Foucault explains in his 1976 lectures on the subject, operates by means of the manipulation of every aspect of life and living—from demography to disease control, advertising to surveillance, sex to birth control, branding to the manufacture of consumer subjectivities, efficiency to productivity—and one of its tools is affective labor, the work of manipulating feeling.[33] Therefore, a history based on affect, rather than on facts about people or events, promises to reimagine historical method (although there are few affectless facts), but it is not of course immune to instrumentalization; it does not easily escape the strictures of history's traditional economy of scarcity. So we must proceed with caution. We must be willing once again to toss out the spool.

Unwinding

In 1997 Dario Robleto performed a sacrilege. He took apart his first baby blanket, ripped the seams out and utterly destroyed it in order to harvest its white thread. He then took various lengths of those fibers and spliced them into eight spools of Coats brand thread (white cotton-covered polyester all-purpose thread and 100 percent glacé cotton quilting thread), which he had purchased at craft and thrift stores. He rewound the altered filaments carefully and very patiently so that each spool looked as if it had just rolled off an assembly line. He then secretly returned the spools to the shelves from which he had originally selected them, a conceptual artwork he called *Deeper into Movies (Buttons, Socks, Teddy Bears & Mittens)* (Figure 42). Seemingly rejecting the cult of childhood that pervades contemporary American culture and openly flouting the pervasive sentimental fetishization of baby things and childhood artifacts, Robleto's conceptualist gesture de(con)structs a particular form of historicization. It first destroys a unique and presumably irreplaceable artifact preserved from his own infancy and then turns it into a bland mass-produced commodity situated in a retail setting and subject to its processes of exchange. That commodity is then presumably purchased and used to create a unique handmade craft object or to repair an existing piece of clothing or domestic linen. Or, purchased in a fleeting moment of ambition and enthusiasm, it is utterly forgotten about and left at the bottom of a sewing basket. By shifting back and forth between personalized and "commoditized" object, between domestic and commercial sites of experience, the work thereby undermines history's dependence on an economics of scarcity, insisting instead on a history produced from excess (the excess of mass production), proliferation (the commodity/blanket is dispersed into other people's homes, into their own projects, which circulate still further), and transformation (the blanket becomes thread becomes commodity becomes something newly handmade, which is to say, in a culture of mass production, something newly old-fashioned).

Routinely questioned about what viewers often consider to be destructive methods, Robleto has become skillful at confronting the historicist presumption of scarcity that underlies that interpretation, key tenets of which are that historical artifacts are exceedingly

FIGURE 42. Dario Robleto, *Deeper into Movies (Buttons, Socks, Teddy Bears & Mittens)*, 1997. Baby blanket, spools of thread. "The thread from my first baby blanket was completely unraveled. Various lengths of this extracted thread were then seamlessly spliced into thread purchased from various fabric stores, thrift stores, etc. The united threads were then respooled and returned to the shelves from which they were purchased." Photograph by Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy of the artist.

rare and must therefore be carefully conserved and protected in their "original" state (some expertly determined ideal moment in the life of the object). Having melted down or torn apart old vinyl records, stretched and braided strands of audiotape, shredded his own love letters, soaked and pulped vintage war correspondence, melted down bullets from various wars, pulverized human bones, and unraveled his baby blanket, Robleto seems to some viewers to be working against rather than for history. When asked about his destructive methods at a visiting artist's lecture in 2006, he responded as he always does: he asked his audience to consider the idea that what he does is a kind of transformation rather than obliteration. "There are two big points," he said, "[first] my materials are never ones that someone is waiting for in a museum somewhere, and [second] I believe transformation is a positive process." In addition, with regard to the question of rarity, he stated flatly, "We really don't have a sense of how much of this stuff is out there."[34] Elaborating on this point in an interview with curator Ian Berry, the artist remarks:

> It's also important to consider the uniqueness of the material. For example, a lot of the bullets I've used are from the Civil War. To this day, 150 years after the Civil War, there are still thousands and thousands of bullets excavated from battlefields every year. That can give you a mental picture of just how much lead is buried out there, and the Civil War was a little blip on the scale of the wars compared to World War I or II, for example. When you start to grasp how much metal was exchanged to destroy each other and consider the fact that I am using ten bullets, a lot of the questions fall away.[35]

Drowning under the deluge of bullets and ordnance, photographs and letters, phonograph records and childhood memorabilia, Robleto turns his attention not only to the sheer abundance of historical artifacts but also to the ethical irresponsibility of seeing scarcity (scarcity of material resources, of labor, of production, of exploitation, and of violence) where there is excess. (Was this not also Hannah Arendt's concern when she invented the famous phrase "the banality of evil," which urges an understanding of evil not as extraordinary, not as the extreme conduct of rare individuals, but as the product of ordinary

behavior?) His audience's nervousness about his use of those ten bullets is, for the artist, "evidence of how removed we've become from what it takes to wage a war."[36] That removal—emotional, intellectual, and informational—persists despite the United States' decade-long pursuit of its most recent war, a fact that is in itself evidence of power's capacity to instrumentalize affect, alternatively to whip up emotion or desensitize us to it.

With regard to the question of his artistic techniques, Robleto has said that his "process is very much at its core a creative process, not a destructive one." To defend his methods, he referred in this same lecture to a work called *A Century of November,* created in 2005 (Figure 43), which consists, as we are told by the lengthy object label appended to the work (a detailed description that Robleto considers to be analogous to the liner notes that once appeared on record albums), of a "child's mourning dress made from homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body)."[37] Robleto's fragile paper dress is modeled on one made of white cotton with a black soutache braid from the 1850s, which is pictured in Maureen DeLorme's book *Mourning Art and Jewelry*. The rigid paper, the bottom of which is cut in a semicircular shape, evokes the stiffly starched dress, its skirt flared out to reveal the decorative pattern stitched at the hem. Robleto mimics the complex pattern of the black braid with black ink (retrieved from the war letters from which the dress was made) and supplies real decorative details such as bone buttons, a belt made of black silk from a period mourning dress, white lace accents, and a hair flower "braided by a Civil War widow." "When you look at the object," he remarked, "I understand that it may seem like a destructive act, but if you want to get into the way I think about art, you have to let go of certain things, and one of them is that alteration means destruction."[38] He has stated repeatedly in interviews, publications, and public lectures that his interest in the transformation of materials grows out of his study of alchemy, a belief system he takes very seriously in which transformation takes on spiritual dimensions. Thus Robleto's is a very particular form of historical thinking, one based on the excess and transformation of material artifacts, and one that therefore questions history's

FIGURE 43. Dario Robleto, *A Century of November*, 2005. Child's mourning dress made with homemade paper (pulp from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), carved bone buttons, hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, mourning dress fabric and lace, silk, velvet, ribbon, World War II surgical suture thread, mahogany, glass. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

traditional economy of scarcity, its concern with restoration (and the belief in a fixed and stable point of origin for material artifacts that attends that concern), and its claims to objective preservationist reportage rather than the creative and affective production of historical accounts.

How might we see *Deeper into Movies* as an example of excessive, transformative, affective, and creative historiography? On its face, the work seems perhaps to be a rather arid conceptualist gesture involving

store-bought spools of white thread and the artist's secret knowledge of how they were altered. From this perspective, one could argue that the stern minimal blandness of the piece works against the original blanket's preciosity as a historical artifact, that it strictly contains the artifact's sentimentality rather than producing what I'm claiming is an aesthetic of excess.

But when I see an object like the spool in Robleto's work, an object engineered to spin, I cannot help but think of the prominent place that vinyl records play in his oeuvre. And if we read the spool as a record, we discover its rich affective potential. For Robleto, records are wondrous magical objects. Yielding nothing to vision, they are obscure, enigmatic, and silent until they are tickled into bursts of sound by the needle on the tone arm or by the DJ who scratches and pops. It is as though they are haunted by ghosts who must be called and beckoned to make their presence known. The spin of a record on a turntable, the spin of the film reel, and the spin of the spool and bobbin on the sewing machine wind and unwind tiny tracks, narrow threads. And just as the record or the film encodes its information, guards its secrets, so Robleto's spools must be played to reveal what lies hidden in them—not sounds, as with vinyl records, or images, as with movies, but material remains, affective associations.

The homology between spool and record is made vivid in an untitled work Robleto produced a year after *Deeper into Movies* in which he took a 45 rpm record (Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces") and sliced it into a long thin spiral (like a black apple peel) and wound the resulting black vinyl thread onto a golden spool (Figure 44). The spools recall the magical transformation of materials in fairy tales, such as the spinning of straw into gold in Rumpelstiltskin or the infertile queen in Snow White pricking her finger with a needle and the resulting drop of blood securing her wish for a child. They also suggest enchantment, as though by some witchcraft a person has been turned into an inanimate object—Patsy Cline's voice silenced though still potentially animating this little golden spool; Robleto's childhood self trapped in and "sampled" by the threads of his blanket and hidden away in the reels of white cotton thread.

The original baby blanket from which Robleto harvested his thread was commercially manufactured out of a silky white mate-

FIGURE 44. Dario Robleto, *Untitled*, 1998–99. Vinyl record, iron pyrite (fool's gold), glue. Patsy Cline's "I Fall to Pieces" 45 rpm vinyl record was slowly sliced along outer rim until reaching center, then connected into one long thread and spooled. Photograph by Thomas R. DuBrock. Courtesy of the artist.

rial (perhaps nylon or polyester), its edges sewn with white thread. It was twenty-five years old, yellowed and stained with time, when he unraveled that thread, cut it into various lengths, and spliced it with glue into the pristine white spools. This was not intended as an act of sabotage; Robleto did not hope that the thread would break under a sewing machine's tension or its glued splices get stuck in the eye of a sewing needle. But he did imagine the seamstress pausing over her work to inspect the anomalies, and, like the artist who must decide whether or not to embrace the happy accident, she might consider whether and how she should continue, decide on the nature and limits of her own creative project. "Whoever bought this thread,"

he explains, "when they get to that section, they find the thread is a little less sturdy. The color is a bit dingy. Something is a little off." "Is it an annoyance," he asks, "or a moment of wonder?"[39] The thread is *almost* what they were expecting. In neither case is it necessary or even possible for the user to recognize the thread's hidden truth; she is not meant to save, from among the yards of thread in her possession, or even to recognize the fragments of Robleto's blanket as precious. Though Spartan in appearance, his altered spools are patched with affect, spliced with the sentiment and emotion that clings to childhood and maternality. The commercial product made of broken threads, though seemingly bland and devoid of meaning, is invested with emotion at the point of purchase.[40] But that feeling—the ache of being cast out of one's childhood (Austerlitz), of rupturing the transitional object and breaking the maternal bond (Mavor)—is diverted, moved somewhere else (Delany): "Not the motivation for the feeling, certainly. . . . But rather the feeling itself: the absence, the obliteration, the frustration, the absolute oblivion."[41]

With a motherly approach similar to the one made famous by artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose commercially produced candy piles and stacks of paper free for the taking were based on the generosity of dispersal rather than the parsimonious hoarding of objects and emotions, Robleto's bits of thread proliferate, become excess. That Robleto is a devoted student of Gonzalez-Torres's strategies of mourning is evident in a work titled *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away* (1997, 2008), in which the artist took shiny candy wrappers from one of Gonzalez-Torres's candy piles, *Untitled (USA Today)* (1990), folded them into small paper airplanes, and hung them from the ceiling to create a colorful mobile (Figure 45). The whimsical homage gives material form to Robleto's indebtedness to Gonzalez-Torres, whom Robleto admires for having expanded his view of art making, for his willingness to indulge in sentimentality, and for awakening him to the idea that "love is subversive and romanticism can again be a critical tool."[42] Robleto's efforts to disperse the fiber remnants of his baby blanket mimic what curator Nancy Spector describes as the willingness of Gonzalez-Torres's pieces to give themselves "away to any admiring beholder."[43] The stacks of printed paper and piles of candy for which Gonzalez-Torres is famous began out of a deep sense

FIGURE 45. Dario Robleto, *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away*, 1997, 2008. Candy wrappers, thread. Paper airplanes constructed of candy wrappers from Felix Gonzalez-Torres's piece *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990. Photograph by Thomas R. DuBrock. Courtesy of the artist.

of mourning and loss over the death of his partner, Ross Laycock. "I was losing the most important thing in my life—Ross, with whom I had the first real home, ever. So why not punish myself even more so that, in a way, the pain would be less? This is how I started letting the work go. Letting it just disappear."[44] Like Robleto's unwound snippets of thread, Gonzalez-Torres's pieces of candy are abundant (the artist specified that his works constitute "endless piles") and expendable. Participants can use the thread or not, eat the candy or not, but need not ever uncover some inherent value in either.

Ironically, the abundance that marks both artists' work comes under threat in the normal course of artistic display. Robleto's original version of *I Miss Everyone Who Has Ever Gone Away* was lost in the mail after an exhibition, and when he attempted to re-create it for another show in Toronto, he had difficulty obtaining the raw materials, that is, more candy wrappers from *USA Today*. Cynthia Daignault, of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, explained in an e-mail to

exhibition curator Helena Reckitt that she would be "happy to send you three candy wrappers from the *Untitled (USA Today)* installation." "I'm sorry I cannot part with more," she continued, "but as you can imagine our archives are very precious."[45] Robleto re-created his mobile in 2008 for an exhibition called *Not Quite How I Remember It*, in which context its title, materials, and manner of construction took on an even more melancholy quality, since by that point Gonzalez-Torres himself had been dead for twelve years. Seemingly betraying the generosity of Gonzalez-Torres's work, because of his untimely death the archivist is bound by the laws of scarcity to retain what little she has, even of an artwork (a kind of mourning craft) that was imagined to be endless.

Sentimentality and Nostalgia

In a review of Robleto's 2006 exhibition provocatively titled *Fear and Tenderness in Men*, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith describes his work in a manner that is all too familiar to the artist and to scholars who study his art. She characterizes it as involving "the selective destruction of keepsakes once treasured by people who are no longer alive." She goes on, in a rhetorical vein equally common in the criticism surrounding his work, to link the artist's tactics of ruination to what she describes as the artworks' "mawkish sentimental[ity]."[46] This may at first seem like a contradiction in terms—the artist is aggressively destructive but also feminized as sentimental—but the implication is that Robleto destroys the fragments of the past precisely because he wants to sentimentalize them. His destruction, such analyses imply, is almost an act of hysterical mourning. He does not, it seems, respect the artifacts' evidentiary value but only the affects they might be made to create. Michael Duncan, writing for *Art in America*, applies the same term, which seems to cling uncomfortably to the artist, when he writes, "Robleto channels the heightened sentimentality and expressive passions of . . . [Victorian] culture."[47] Barry Schwabsky and Gerry Craig are more hesitant. "Robleto both indulges in sentimentality," writes Schwabsky, "and maintains a critical distance from it."[48] Craig hedges too when he writes in a 2007 review, "While the work would appear to wallow in sentimentality, nostalgia is overridden by a generally morbid, bizarre sense of accuracy in the

small details of a world off-kilter."[49] Such characterizations suggest that there is an excess of sentiment, of feeling and emotion in the artist's work—an excess that is commonly associated with the feminine. To describe something as mawkish, according to the word's etymology, is to refer to something dirty, nauseating, a slovenly woman, a prostitute.[50] Its nauseous effects and feminine qualities are what tie sentimentality to the Victorian (an entire period named for a woman) and what require an appropriate critical distance. To be sentimental is to indulge in a surfeit of emotion, to be swayed by the overabundance of feeling rather than by the strictures of reason.

Another suspect word often associated with Robleto's art is *nostalgia*, meaning an emotional state that, as Svetlana Boym reports, was named by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in a medical dissertation of 1688 in reference to the desire to return to one's native land.[51] The word did not come into widespread use in the United States until the nineteenth century, with the emergence of traumatized Civil War soldiers. Nostalgia's appearance in Robleto's work seems both a matter of historical research—his attempt to emulate a particular mode of nineteenth-century sentimentality—and a matter of the work's own affectiveness on its contemporary viewers. Nostalgia was invented to describe a longing for home, which, according to Boym's important book on the subject, was often considered in the Civil War era "a shameful disease that revealed a lack of manliness and unprogressive attitudes."[52] She points to Theodore Calhoun, assistant surgeon of the Union Army, as an exemplar of this belief. He recommends in his paper "Nostalgia as a Disease of Field Service," presented to the Medical Society in 1864, a gender-specific remedy:

> Any influence that will tend to render the patient more manly will exercise a curative power. In boarding schools, as perhaps many of us remember, ridicule is wholly relied upon. . . . [The nostalgic] patient can often be laughed out of it by his comrades, or reasoned out of it by appeals to his manhood; but of all potent agents, an active campaign, with attendant marches and more particularly its battles is the best curative.[53]

Comparing the nostalgic by turns to an emotional woman and a schoolboy, Calhoun feminizes and makes boyish the disease, and thus he

prescribes ridicule, marching, and battle as antidotes. Clearly, from Calhoun's perspective, Robleto's willingness to associate himself with "fear and tenderness," to produce works of art that seem nostalgic for a specific historical past, for old-fashioned domestic arts, and for the maternal, would be considered unmanly.

Boym, however, looks critically at such negative appraisals, suggesting that nostalgia is more than simply a malady, more than an emotion or sentiment to which some people are prone. It is, rather, a means to subvert modernist temporalities and traditional historicism. "I realized that nostalgia goes beyond individual psychology," she writes.

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.[54]

Boym's description of the nostalgic's longing, rebellion, desire, and refusal to surrender to the onslaught of linear time once again puts me in mind of Jacques Austerlitz. We might call him a nostalgic for his belief that "time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously."[55] To the extent that the disease of nostalgia seemed to have spread virulently in the nineteenth century, Boym considers it a product of and a response to modernity. "Nostalgia," she argues, "like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time."[56] While on one hand she recognizes in the nostalgic a worthy form of temporal dissidence, a rejection of progressive linearity, on the other Boym perhaps accepts a bit too readily the historicist conceit of time's irreversibility, which she says "plagues the human condition."

The question then becomes, of what use is nostalgia as a stratagem in the contemporary moment, a moment in which time's ir-

reversibility has been thoroughly questioned, when it is no longer taken as self-evident? Indeed, as Christine Ross argues, a great many contemporary fields of inquiry, including art, offer a critique of modern temporality and, as a consequence, modern historicity. She describes "contemporary assessments of temporal passing in the realms of art, philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, ecology, communication, and physics."

> These accounts claim that time cannot simply be said to flow and pass like a river (according to what shore could it be proven to flow?); that temporal passing is most often experienced in distorted ways; that time does not universally pass at the same rhythm for different social groups; that temporal passing is often messed up with emotional knots, inversions, and denegations; that it can be experienced as unproductive and leading to loss; that the spread of the internet (its insertion of quasi-instantaneous communication over great distances) has compressed it; that temporal passing might simply be an illusion, or that it is unreachable as an objective reality.[57]

In *this* contemporary, it is not the *times* but time itself that is changing. But if that's true, if we no longer really believe in or can conceive of a purely linear temporality, then why would we need to deploy nostalgia as an anachronistic device? The answer is that, even if we recognize this temporal paradigm (and many are unable or unwilling to do so), it is far from clear how we can proceed from that premise to the work of history, the work of conceiving, researching, and narrating events that are past (if only by virtue of a historicist conceit). Dario Robleto's work offers, as I am attempting to suggest, a method we might use. In this context, it seems necessary to examine Robleto's nostalgia more carefully, to understand the ways in which he models a distorted temporal passing, one that is "messed up" or tied with "emotional knots." I want to try to comprehend his desire to "revisit time like space," and to see it in tandem with sentimentality, destruction, excess, and the maternal.

In this regard, it is instructive to take another look at one of the works introduced earlier, *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives*. Arranged almost like a small stage set, the work consists of a small

FIGURE 46. Dario Robleto, *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives* (detail, needlework), 2004–5. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 47. Dario Robleto, *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives* (detail, basket), 2004–5. Photograph by Ansen Seale. Courtesy of the artist.

rocking chair, which appears to be made of wood with turned legs and a decoratively carved back slat. Laid across the chair's seat and draped over one of its arms is a rectangle of white fabric embroidered with flowers and a trailing green border in the center of which the phrase "You will outlive the one you are used to loving" is stitched in red thread (Figure 46).[58] The project is presented as though it were still in progress, an embroidery hoop gripping a circular patch of the fabric on the right side, a pink flower embroidered in the center. Two spools, one with red and the other with blue thread, lie on one corner of the fabric swatch. The chair sits on a circular rag rug that seems to have been made from scraps of predominantly olive green wool or felt. Next to the chair lies a small sewing basket containing a piece of white fabric on which flowers are embroidered, as well as a small pair of sewing scissors, some rusted thimbles, and two more spools of thread. The basket is lined with the same olive green fabric, and the phrase "Holland 1945" is embroidered in a yellow chain stitch along the basket's rim (Figure 47). A detailed wall label that explains the manner of its execution and the materials of which it was made accompanies the piece:

> Chair: Cast and carved bone dust from every bone in the body, stained and sealed with homemade balm (almond oil, beeswax, honeysuckle, resurrection plant, life everlasting, motherwort, mistletoe, sundew, lady's mantle, eternal flower, life root, immortal root), zinc, nickel, silver, water extendable resin, polyurethane. Sewing materials, tools, and rug: Thread and fragments of American soldiers' uniforms from various wars, wool from combat casualty blankets, silk, cotton, carved bone, melted bullet lead and shrapnel from various wars, zinc, nickel, silver, walnut.[59]

Just as *Deeper into Movies* is an amalgam of fragments past and present, private and commercial, just as that project began with the unwinding of thread (the affects of which are revealed in the playing), so in this work the fragments of thread, swatches of blankets and uniforms, particles of bone, botanicals, and bullet lead evince a complex historiography. There is, in equal measure, death (pulverized bones) and war, as well as "life everlasting," "life root," and "resurrection plant."

A Soul Waits for a Body is a domestic maternal scene loaded with sentimental feeling for hearth, home, and family—a space where we feel the tug of filial strings wound around and tied tight. The rocking chair is the mother's seat, where she rocks her children to sleep, practices her domestic arts, and, as she teeters back and forth, clicks the chair's runners like a metronome counting out the passage of time. The chair is simultaneously the child's seat—its diminutive scale retains a memory of the child's small body, a body that is soon outgrown. Mother and child at once, the work also presents a scene of art making: the place where the sampler is embroidered, the quilt pieced, and the suit of clothing sewn or mended. Robleto presents these acts of making in their affective contexts, a sort of primal scene for art: the mother crochets the baby blanket out of love for her child, sews a military uniform for her husband out of pride in him, and embroiders her needlework out of mourning and loss. The artist has replayed the scene of art making many times in his work: the Civil War amputee who sculpts his own prosthetic leg; the field soldier who fashions trench art from the detritus of war; the convalescing

soldier who crafts a therapeutic doll; the war widow who produces a mourning wreath or tats human hair into elaborate lace flowers; the grandmother or nurse who artfully combines herbs and oils to make an unguent to salve a wound. In each case, art arises where there is emotional need; indeed, the work of art, by which I mean the work of creating it, is an affective labor.

Robleto has said that he considers these expressions of creativity, these sentimental labors and feminine arts, to be undervalued and underexamined forms of bravery.[60] In conducting research for a series called *Chrysanthemum Anthems* (of which *A Soul Waits* and *A Century of November* are a part), he studied mourning crafts and nineteenth-century sanitation fairs. The Sanitary Commission was a U.S. government agency established in 1861, the purposes of which were to raise funds to fight the Civil War, to collect medical supplies and furnish health inspectors for Union Army encampments and field hospitals, and to provide uniforms, blankets, lodging, and meals to Union soldiers. While male officials administered the organization, thousands of women served as volunteers and used their vital contribution to the war effort as a platform for women's suffrage.[61] They staged what were called "sanitary fairs," large public events at which financial contributions were collected, crafts were put on display and sold, curious objects (including historical artifacts as well as items of natural history) were exhibited, and war supplies such as bandages and blankets were collected. Like world's fairs of the period, the sanitary fairs also often included refreshment tents, fancy-dress balls, raffles, and agricultural displays.

On one hand, *A Soul Waits* consists of an emotionally charged mise-en-scène that simultaneously recalls the antebellum rural homestead, the Depression-era fireside chat, and the storied home fires that presumably kept burning throughout World Wars I and II. On the other, it is an amalgam of material remains—"bone dust from every bone in the body," "fragments of American soldiers' uniforms from various wars, wool from combat casualty blankets"—that have been laboriously disassembled and then pieced and sewn, molded, carved, and put together. Here are more blankets, more transitional objects, more thingly histories that have been chopped up and reconfigured,

destroyed and transformed. As was the case with Robleto's unraveling of his own baby blanket, here the dual threads of nostalgic emotion and painstaking toil, sentiment and materiality, are stitched and knotted together.

But this work, for all its sensitivity to the soldier's sacrifice and to the agony of those who wait at home, is not an attempt (as the sanitary fairs were) to incite particular displays of patriotism or to change the terms of the debate about women's suffrage. Nor is it an attempt to instrumentalize affect for more contemporary political or commercial goals. Rather, I argue, Robleto uses nostalgia and sentiment in contrarian fashion to show time as repeatable and reversible, to assert what might be called an antiessentialist view of materiality and history, and to answer the historicist's scarcity of meaning with the poet's excess of reference.

To understand of what use nostalgia is for the contemporary, it is necessary to know what philosophy of materiality is at work in Robleto's art. "The artist's (often) radical transformation of historically weighted materials, many of them virtually brimming with cultural indicators," Xandra Eden writes, "only seems to encourage a feeling that these materials carry within them some essence of the historical events of which they were a part. Personal and cultural significance appear to have fused to the very elements of the artifact, so impossible are they to cover up, remove, or destroy."[62] By this, Eden seems to suggest that Robleto's materials have intransigent meanings, irreducible essences (like lead or gold) that maintain themselves even when they are melted down or torn apart. My interpretation of Robleto's work is somewhat different in that, to the extent that these material things are transitional objects, like little Ernst's spool, they can never actually become the thing in whose place they stand, neither the mother nor the past for which they serve as token. Nor are they strictly what they once were—the spool is no longer just a spool, the blanket no longer just a blanket. In this regard, I am not especially interested in material essences, though I know that notion is a real concern for Robleto; rather, I am interested in the failure of materials to be what they represent, a limitation that seems less limited if we understand those materials to be, as I've said, in play.

Teenage Girls

One useful example of that play may be found threaded around the rim of the small basket in *A Soul Waits*. The basket is lined with a green khaki fabric reminiscent of (and presumably made from) U.S. government-issue uniforms and blankets. This bulky woolen material, folded down around the basket's rim, is embroidered in yellow with the words "Holland 1945" in cursive script. The basket, the sewing materials it contains (scissors, thread, thimble, pins, pincushion), and the domestic scene in which they are positioned imbue this inscription with historical significance, just as the needlework label seems to fix the work as a whole to a very specific place and time. "Holland" and "1945" immediately recall the story of Anne Frank, the Jewish girl whose family left Germany in 1940 to seek refuge in Holland and then hid in secret rooms at her father's business for two years until they were discovered and taken away by the Nazis. In part, the work involves, as Robleto explains, "trying to visualize living in the physical space Anne Frank inhabited. It's partly why the piece is at such a reduced scale. Not quite miniature but not quite child size. . . . I was imagining her small body having to quietly maneuver in a cramped space and an activity that occupied her mind."[63] Anne Frank, the forever-girl who died before she could fully transition out of childhood, perpetually occupies this cramped domestic space. As the presumptive author of the embroidered slogan, she warns the viewer in the second person that "you will outlive the one you are used to loving," a prediction that refers to the child's outliving of the mother, but also the mother's loss of her child, who, through either the normal process of growing up or an act of violence, no longer exists.

But this scene of childhood awkwardness, boredom, and trauma, the scene that we thought was set in 1945, turns out to be another place entirely; the feeling we had initially invested in it is moved unexpectedly somewhere else (a movement that ultimately thwarts any propagandistic use of affect). As much as "Holland 1945" might put us in mind of the brutal treatment of Jews by the Nazis in the Netherlands, and of the tragic story of Anne Frank in particular, this inscription refers as much (or perhaps more) to the title of a song by the

contemporary indie rock band Neutral Milk Hotel, which released "Holland 1945" on its 1998 album *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* on Merge Records. Sung by the band's leader, Jeff Mangum, the song refers to persistent dreams he had about a Jewish family in the Holocaust and to his own curiosity and compulsive reading about Anne Frank. Interestingly for our purposes, the figure of the mother appears in the song's lyrics:

> But now we must pick up every piece
> Of the life we used to love
> Just to keep ourselves
> At least enough to carry on. . . .
> And here's where your mother sleeps
> And here is the room where your brothers were born
> Indentions in the sheets
> Where their bodies once moved but don't move anymore
> And it's so sad to see the world agree
> That they'd rather see their faces fill with flies
> All when I'd want to keep white roses in their eyes.

The singer refers to the pieces that remain from "the life we used to love," the tokens and artifacts, the affective content of which allows him to "carry on." As though inviting the listener on a tour of her own childhood home, her own past, the song's narrator points out the places where "your mother sleeps" and "where your brothers were born." Here two tragedies are conflated. The brothers have grown up, emerged from childhood so that, although there are still indentations in the sheets on the beds where they were once swaddled, they don't move there anymore. The brothers have also died, presumably in war. Now shrouded in sheets, prepared for burial and pursued by flies, they are stilled by death. Rather than strictly making historical reference to "Holland" and "1945," these historical containers are hollowed out and filled with something else, with "1998."

Just as was the case with Robleto's unraveled baby blanket, the gesture of hollowing out "Holland 1945" should not be mistaken as an act of material destruction, nor does it constitute a voiding of the affect that we initially thought attended the particular time and place that the work (uncharacteristically for Robleto) identifies, for such a

view would constitute a belief that there is a finite amount of emotion (a scarcity) that can attend a historical reference. The work is neither an attempt to mythologize Anne Frank nor an attempt to betray her; it seeks neither to make of her a martyr nor to diminish what she suffered, nor to devalue the very real consequences of the Holocaust. It is rather an act of historicizing emotions, plotting a trajectory of teenage sentiment, as one would events or persons. It is an effort to gain insight about the past by moving it to a new context.

The peculiar scale of the rocking chair recalls the cramped quarters in which the Frank family was forced to live, the awkward annex in which they silently conducted their lives for two years. It also stands as witness to Anne Frank's awkward thirteen-year-old body, her in-between status—no longer a child and not yet an adult. It remembers her as a teenager who famously recorded her feelings, annoyances, loves, fantasies, anxieties, and vanities in her diary, which she was given as a birthday gift. I am reminded of a headline that appeared in 1998 (the same year as Neutral Milk Hotel's song) in *The Onion*, a parody newspaper: "Ghost of Anne Frank: 'Quit Reading My Diary.'" The story is humorous because it helps the reader to imagine the perspective of a teenage Anne Frank who wilts in embarrassment at the thought of countless strangers reading what she had meant to be private. The fake article reports: "Shocked to learn that the diary containing her most intimate thoughts and feelings has been read by millions of people worldwide, the ghost of Anne Frank held a press conference Monday to tell the world to 'stop reading my diary, and put it back where you found it right this second.'"[64] The headline situates Frank as an actual teenage girl rather than as a global symbol of Jewish victimization and Nazi atrocity. It repositions the diary from a priceless historical artifact to a personal memento, a transitional object.

Similarly, by tying a string between Frank and a contemporary indie rock band, Robleto invites the viewer to consider a particular emotional state (adolescence) and a particular historical moment (the contemporary) as awkward sites of transition. We might be more inclined to view *A Soul Waits* as the scene of adolescence, the reconstruction of a childhood bedroom, if we consider it in relation to an earlier work titled *Some Memories Are So Vivid I'm Suspicious*

of Them (2000–2001), which consists of a miniature reproduction of Robleto's mother's teenage bedroom (Figure 48). The tiny room includes two twin beds painted white with pink chenille bedspreads, a wooden bookcase, white vanity table, and white dresser. The walls are lavender and the two windows are draped with white lace curtains. A tiny Monopoly box protrudes from underneath one of the beds. A telephone hangs on the back wall, miniature books fill the bookcase shelves, and a plush teddy bear sits on one bed. A portable record player covered in green vinyl is on the floor, with diminutive records—Elvis, Buddy Holly—scattered on the green simulated carpet. The wall label accompanying the piece describes it as follows: "A miniature reproduction bedroom was constructed based on my mother's general memories of her room when she was a teenager. The record on the record player is the sole copy of an original composition I wrote for her, imagining what she may have liked as a young girl and what she might like today, entitled 'I Thought I Knew Negation Until You Said Goodbye,' which was recorded, pressed to vinyl, ground into powder, melted, and cast into a miniature record."[65] While his mother is not depicted in her room turned dollhouse, one can imagine her there—a tiny doll that Robleto could hold in his hand, that he could move about in simulated walking, that he could make speak through his own voice in a rather girlish fashion. The mother becomes a transitional object with which the boy man plays.

Just as *A Soul Waits* skips back and forth between 1945 and 1998, so *Some Memories* enacts temporal play. It time travels in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes's famous search for the mother-image. "There I was," Barthes writes, "alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it."[66] He "studies the little girl" in what he calls the Winter Garden Photograph "and at last rediscovered my mother."[67] Robleto too moves back in time to find his mother in her teenage bedroom. He brings her a gift from the future, a song written and recorded by her not-yet-son. There is no way of calculating, he has said, the true casualties of war because no matter how accurately one counts the dead, one can never tote up the not-yet-living, the children who might have been born to them in the future.[68] These are,

FIGURE 48. Dario Robleto, *Some Memories Are So Vivid I'm Suspicious of Them*, 2000–2001. Wood, cloth, glue, cardboard, melted vinyl record, paint. "A miniature reproduction bedroom was constructed based on my mother's general memories of her room when she was a teenager. The record on the record player is the sole copy of an original composition I wrote for her, imagining what she may have liked as a young girl and what she might like today, entitled 'I Thought I Knew Negation Until You Said Goodbye,' which was recorded, pressed to vinyl, ground into powder, melted, and cast into a miniature record." Production assistance by Justin Boyd. Photograph by Thomas R. DuBrock. Courtesy of the artist.

as the later work's title suggests, the souls who wait for bodies that never arrive. Robleto thus presents the girl—the one for whom the little mourning dress was made, the one sewing trinkets for the sanitary fair, Anne Frank, his own mother (perhaps even Amos Fortune's adopted daughter with her loom)—as the origins of the future. The mother travels forward in time; the son travels back. The place where their journeys cross, that awkward space of becoming, of transition, is the ever-shifting time of the contemporary.

Conclusion

In 2009, Hal Foster and the editors of *October* sent a questionnaire to seventy art critics and curators asking them to write short essays

about what they understood to be the ontology, origins, causes, and consequences of the contemporary. The questionnaire was premised on the idea that, as Foster put it, "in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination."[69] With no satisfying period name to apply to the current moment, with no scholarly or artistic consensus as to what dominant trend can be said to define art of the last few decades, and with no agreement about what exact historical conditions have led us to this point, Foster contends that we are floating free of history. Curator Mark Godfrey responded by calling into question Foster's premise. "We should take up the suggestion of art practice," he advises, "in order to imagine new forms of temporality, new models of relations between art, and time, and history, models which do not imply a 'lightness of being' or a 'floating-free' from the conditions of history (nothing of the sort!) but instead less linear and more entangled forms of historical connection."[70] Because I had not read Godfrey's essay when I began working on this book, I cannot say that I have knowingly followed his recommendation, but rather, parallel to it, I have attempted to "take up the suggestion of art practice" to imagine new forms of temporality and new models of history for the contemporary. With regard to Dario Robleto's "entangled" art practice, it remains to be considered what sort of contemporary history Robleto models.

I find myself repeatedly tripping over "Holland 1945," the strangely specific signifier embroidered on the basket lining in his installation *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives*. (It is not as though Robleto's inclusion of a date is unprecedented, as can be seen in another work from the same year titled *The Button Collector*, which includes a handkerchief embroidered with "Sullivan 1918" in one corner, but it is somewhat rare.) I stumble as one does when, walking down the street, one unexpectedly catches a glimpse of oneself in a plate-glass window or the side-view mirror of a parked car. What I see in that reflection is the *terminus post quem* upon which my own work as a scholar and teacher is so often based. Amelia Jones explains the significance of this date for contemporary art history in the introduction to her popular textbook *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*:

> Certainly since at least the mid to late 1970s departments of art history, visual culture studies, or visual studies in Britain and North America have at least explored the possibility of teaching courses on art practices dating from the end of WWII onward—with 1945 taken as a key turning point in Euro-American history because of the shift of cultural, political, and economic power from Europe to the US that took place during and after the war, and because of the way in which the war marked the tortuous death of European colonialism.[71]

Like Jones and possibly hundreds of other scholars of contemporary art history, I routinely teach a course called "Art since 1945" in which the conclusion of World War II is assumed to be the end point after which something important begins. My lectures in that course typically start out by describing postwar economic and material privation in Europe and Japan, the U.S. occupation and the Marshall Plan, the Cold War, postcolonialism and Indian independence, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the GI Bill. In so doing, they position the present moment (my students' contemporary) as the inevitable one-way conclusion of the events (or of World War II as a super-event) of the past. As useful as that approach may be, it views 1945 as a static hinge on which Europe and the United States (and presumably the rest of the world with them) turned. And as much as that approach might include an enumeration of the horrors of the war and the tragedies of its aftermath, it is not too worried about how 1945 functions as a locus of affect, a date we return to and start off from because of the sheer enormity of feeling that surrounds it.

Thus, in addition to all the other references it makes or interpretations it beckons, *A Soul Waits* presents for me an innovative syllabus for "Art since 1945." By superimposing temporal moments—2005, 1998, 1945, 1918, and the 1860s—the work seems to begin not with the typical question "How did the past change the present?" but with the question that Janet Kraynak asks, "How does the present change the past?"[72] Its entry point into the contemporary is not 1945 proper (indeed, it disillusions any such notion) but "1945" as seen through the lenses of other dates, other eras, other emotions. It takes apart and splices together these moments, ties one to the others with strings.

Instead of the usual historicist presumption that the present has safely separated from the past (a presumption that continually seems to present an intellectual crisis, of which Foster's questionnaire is just one manifestation), Robleto's work urges that the present is still in the process of becoming itself. As such, it proffers the contemporary, as I have argued throughout this chapter, as a childlike thing conditioned by the maternal, as something constituted by, in Lee's terms, prematurity. The contemporary, as I said before, exists in the atmosphere of failure: the past's failure (like the mother's) to remain connected to the present (the child), the transitional object's failure (i.e., history's failure) to replace completely what has been lost.

In addition to its radical point of entry, Robleto's work plots an innovative narrative trajectory that uses music rather than chronology as a means to travel through time. Neutral Milk Hotel's song "Holland 1945" is not simply about the war or Anne Frank, it is a conveyance through which the artist mnemonically transports himself, like a rock skipping on the surface of a pond, from the present into the time during which he was working on *A Soul Waits* in 2004, and again to the late nineties when the song was released, and again back to Anne Frank. Music, Robleto seems to argue, because of its affective resonances, has the capacity to transport us instantly to another place and time, and as such, can serve as a tool for history. His devotion to this means of transport and mode of research is also evident in *Deeper into Movies (Buttons, Socks, Teddy Bears & Mittens)*, the title of which refers to a song ("Deeper into Movies") by the alternative rock band Yo la Tengo, released on the Matador label while he was working on the piece in 1997. "I had this album playing a lot in studio as I worked on this piece," the artist reports, "and I liked how the title evoked fading home movies to me as I worked on it, which seemed appropriate to the piece. I never had any personal home movies (we didn't have a camera), but the blanket and objects of youth were carriers of similar memories."[73] The song "Deeper into Movies" not only served back then as the aural backdrop for the artist's work on the spools of white thread, but it also offers to us now an alternate archive, an immaterial repository built of sound and filled with memory and affect. This is Robleto's "cooing song," sung in the nursery of the contemporary.[74]

WOODEN FEET
FRANCIS ALŸS AND SYNCOPATED TIME

About halfway into Goat Island's final performance piece, *The Lastmaker* (2007–9), Karen Christopher is seated with erect posture on a simple wooden chair (Figure 49). With careful diction and precise enunciation, she gestures toward her shoe and instructs the audience: "The strip above the sole . . . that's the welt. The frontal area that covers the instep . . . it's called the vamp. The flap under the lace . . . the tongue. Laces, sole, heel. A front and a top. When I take my shoe to the shoemaker and he places it on a form to make repairs—a block shaped like a foot—that's called a last." Here is explained just one of the meanings of the word *last* in the performance's title: shoemaker's last, the final occurrence or end, the remainder, or what lasts, what endures. All of these lasts self-reflexively resonate with the performance itself, which was the group's last, the ninth and final piece they would produce together under the name Goat Island.

One theme of the performance is famous last things. Karen Christopher reenacts, in a series of short segments, Lenny Bruce's last public performance, which took place at the Filmore Auditorium in San Francisco in 1966. Mark Jeffery performs Larry Grayson's last performance and later recites a passage from Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) with the two-word sentence "Last words." Matthew Goulish hums the last minute of Bach's last uncompleted composition, *The Art of Fugue*, which was posthumously published in 1751. Bryan Saner recites part of the last interview with poet Stanley Kunitz, and Goulish recites one of Robert Creeley's last poems, titled "When I Think."

FIGURE 49. Goat Island (Karen Christopher), *The Lastmaker*, 2008. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy of Matthew Goulish.

Along with all these good-byes and profound conclusions, the performance is also concerned with that which remains, that which lasts. The most potent symbol of that concept, appearing throughout the performance in various ways, is the Hagia Sophia, which was dedicated in 360 CE and has survived for sixteen hundred years. As Lin Hixson, the group's artistic director, explains, "We began by researching the lifespan of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, a building that began as a Byzantine church, became a mosque, and then a secular museum. We wondered what alterations might have been made to the space to accommodate these uses and what kind of a performance we might make in response."[1] The absurdity and incongruity of the image of this famous architectural structure in the midst of Goat Island's performance comes to stand, as we've already discussed, for a colossal impossibility. As Rachel Anderson explains in her review, the performance "questioned the impermanence of live performance by staging the impossibility of ending rather than the inevitability of disappearance."[2] While her remarks are meant primarily to rejoin

the debates within performance studies scholarship about the ontological centrality of disappearance to performance, I read them more broadly, in the context of a study of history, to rethink the pastness of the past, to assert the impossibility of teleology, to consider the futurity of history, the ways in which historical accounts serve as lasts on which future events are cobbled.

The meanings that coalesce around and richly flavor the word *last* have provocative implications with regard to the problem of history as we have been examining it here. One meaning—the last as final, ultimate—draws our attention to the temporality of history, the ways in which historical narratives are directed toward specific ends/endings. Another—last as that which endures or remains—bears on history's understanding of what survives of the past in archives, documents, photographs, memories, and performances. This is the focus of Rebecca Schneider's scholarship, in which she challenges the notion that performance (happenings, events, bodies, the past) is constituted by disappearance—a notion that accepts too readily the antinomy between bodies and texts, between performing and recording—and the concept of "a 'now' understood as singular, immediate, and vanishing."[3]

These ideas have all been of interest to me in this book, of course, but my attention here is strangely drawn more directly to the shoemaker's last. This wooden form situates itself in perfect symmetry with the prosthetic limb with which I began this study. The prosthesis, the wooden leg, for example, is, as I said at the outset, something that stands like history in place of something that has been lost. In this sense, the prosthesis is always directed backward, always focused on the past. The last, by contrast, is a form (here sculpted to resemble a human foot) on which something new will be made, an object that faces and anticipates the future.

Contrary to the typical denouement of historical narrative, it offers a model for un-ending. The wooden foot answers the melancholy wooden leg, symbol of loss and longing, injury and trauma. Generic in its form, it comprises a scene of creativity and making, a space of artistic labor (the block shaped like a foot, the shoe shaped like a block). It also acts, more darkly, as unyieldingly ideological, the material embodiment of received ideas and the conformity of

thought, as stiff and blistering as a pair of new shoes. As a metaphor for history, the last suggests repetition and inevitably Santayana's famous condemnation to those who cannot remember the past (a condemnation that, as Schneider entertainingly explains, no one seems able to remember correctly).[4] Surveying the artists and artworks we have studied here, we might think of Goat Island's *When will the September roses bloom?* and the ways in which the torture of prisoners in Breendonk, Belgium, is a last on which is sewn the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Or the ways in which racism, homophobia, and war are patterned again and again on forms that are as banal as they are abundant. Or how history is a last that often unpleasantly produces the future—World War II having been manufactured on the shape of World War I, Operation Iraqi Freedom stitched to fit Operation Desert Storm. All of which is to say that, by ending my book with this figure, with this small wooden foot, I am ending it warily within sight of art and history, which are potentially forms of constraint as well as transformation. This book has been concerned with both.

Just as we changed our understanding of the prosthesis by considering the bioartificial heart, I want to conclude by thinking about another kind of last. Instead of a block of wood in the form of a foot, let's think about a block of time and try to imagine the ways in which such a block might be used to create a new form of history. It can be hard to visualize time as a last, but we might recognize that peculiar form in Francis Alÿs's work *Bolero (Shoeshine Blues)* (1999–2006). The Belgian-born artist spent eight years producing an enigmatic animated video of about nine minutes' duration, which shows a simple line drawing in pencil of a lace-up dress shoe being polished with white and red cloths by a pair of disembodied hands (Figure 50). The artist wrote the music and lyrics for the song that serves as the video's sound track, eerily and haltingly sung by a female voice in English: "No-thing we are / Nothing will be / I see you are I tell you be / No-thing to see / I see you are I tell you see / Nothing to be / For nothing we are / And nothing will be."[5] Variously interpreted as a political critique of class disparity and the exploitation of unskilled laborers in Mexico (the artist's adopted country) and as a "meditation on life," the work

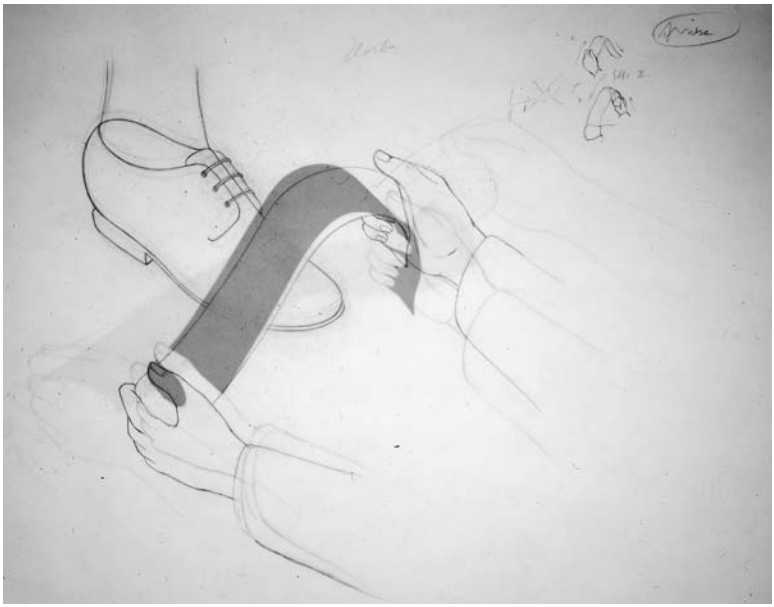

FIGURE 50. Francis Alÿs, *Bolero (Shoeshine Blues)*, 1999–2006. Graphite, tape, and collage on vellum; 1 of 384 framed drawings, installed with DVD animation, 9:40 minutes, maquette, wooden table, and string. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London.

is hypnotically repetitive.[6] When it was displayed at the 2007 Venice Biennale, it was shown together with the 511 drawings on vellum that were used to create the hauntingly simple animation.

Image and voice seem as though they are trying to synchronize with each other in this video, which is composed of nine musical phrases and nine distinct movements made by the shoe shiner.[7] The animation slows down and speeds up—the hands pull the cloth back and forth across the toe of the shoe, then reposition it around the heel, and then to the sides. The number of strokes on any given portion of the shoe seems to be determined by the rhythms of the song and the singer's starting and restarting, repeating, and moving quickly through the words. In one segment, an oboe plays the simple melody once through, and then the voice sings, "No-thing / No-thing we are / No-thing we are / No-thing will be / No-thing will be / No-thing / No-thing will be." As Alÿs explains:

> The animation is structured in the mode of a rehearsal, where the musical score strictly dictates the construction of the image. But *Bolero* is a trick of the mind: while the shoe shiner applies himself to translating each newcoming musical phrase into a new gesture and shine; and while he tries to perfectly phase the movement of his cloth to the rhythm of the melody, he finds himself trapped in an impossible equation: as in film an audio accent takes four frames to occur and a visual accent happens in just one frame, true synchronization of sound and image is impossible to achieve.[8]

The video presents an "impossible problem," where the shoe is the site of a rehearsal for a performance that is never mastered, where the time of the image and the time of the sound will never be lined up, will never be the *same* time. This seeming error is an example of what Schneider calls "the warp and draw of one time in another time."[9] "The musical score," the artist asserts, "strictly dictates the construction of the image." Thus the music serves as a kind of last, a form, on which the animated shoe is fitted, continually and repetitively repaired. But repair, as we've said before, is an ongoing, never-to-be-completed process.

This productive unproductiveness, a phrase I borrow from Christine Ross, is characteristic of Alÿs's other artworks, such as *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), in which he pushed a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it melted completely away, or *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), in which he and a group of five hundred volunteers attempted to move a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. Historians and critics have viewed this kind of futility in a couple of different but related ways. Boris Groys, for example, argues with respect to *Bolero* that "practicing literal repetition can be seen as initiating a rupture in the continuity of historical life and creating a non-historical excess of time by means of art."[10] This animated film is generative, in other words, because by repeating again and again the same image and the same syllables, seeming never to progress, it drowns history in time. From another vantage point, Ross argues that the artist's works deploy a Latin American view of temporality to question Western mo-

dernity ever directed progressively toward the future. She considers Alÿs's works to question "the modern regime of historicity which promotes a form of futurity that obliterates the present and distances the past." "Unproductive time," she asserts, "is made to weigh on modern historicity."[11]

While I share Groys's interest in disrupting the staid habits of history, I would like to suggest that repeating (along with the other modes of skipping, hollowing out, reenacting, and repairing that I have discussed in this book) is not "nonhistorical" but rather the means by which we might imagine novel forms of history. What if we were to study art as a last, as a block of time (like music) on which we craft history? Just as with *Bolero*, where the image is created on the temporal form of music, and where the time of the music and the time of the image do not match up, cannot be made to synchronize smoothly, so history, formed on the block of time called art, will never be on the same beat. Therefore, the one will continue to pursue the other in an impossible equation. All of which returns us to the impossible problem with which we started.

So we are brought to the un-end.

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This book is dedicated to my teachers, and that's a big category full of wonderful people going way back to Mrs. Eye in the third grade and Mr. Colon in eighth. I remember Mrs. Eye cautioning me not to rush to complete an assignment just to get it done, but to linger and craft it the way it deserved to be, and I think about that advice nearly every day. The inspiring teachers to whom I am indebted also include professors such as David Dunlap and John Beldon Scott at the University of Iowa. I still remember sitting in their classrooms as though it were yesterday. Of course my current thinking is most strongly shaped by my graduate advisers Carol Mavor and Della Pollock, who opened my mind in so many amazing ways. I thank them for continually inspiring me with their generosity, their lifeways, and their astonishingly innovative work. They have given me the worlds in which I now live and work. I never formally studied with Kevin Parker, but he is included here, too, because he is such an incisive interlocutor and brilliant man; simply knowing him has been a master class in responsible, engaged scholarship.

My book is also dedicated to my students, another large (and ever expanding) group full of remarkably bright, imaginative, and clever people. Those talented graduate students whom I burdened over the past few years with this book project deserve special mention and have earned my deep gratitude: Cecilia Aldarondo, Anna Chisholm, Lauren DeLand, Melissa Geppert, Melissa Heer, Aron Lorber, Ceri Myers, Erika Prater, Adair Rounthwaite, Susan Swanson, Erica Warren, and Laura Wertheim. Their individual research trajectories are so diverse,

their approaches so unique, that they pulled my ideas and thoughts in unexpected new directions.

Many thanks to my colleague and dear friend Michael Gaudio for his beautiful writing, insightful advice, and seemingly inexhaustible patience. He may consider this book an IOU redeemable for free beers for as long as he is willing to put up with me. One of Michael's most generous acts has been to share Kerry Morgan, who shines so brightly it sometimes takes my breath away. I thank Diane Mullin for glasses of wine and knowing looks; Diane Willow for her infectious laugh and innovative spirit; Rod Ferguson for stylish brilliance and fierce independence of thought; Juliette Cherbuliez for wry humor and bilingual institutional critique; J. B. Shank for his excellent mind and boar's-bristle hair, and for introducing me to Alison, whose love of the world is astonishingly brave. I am honored to name John and Claire Steyaert among my dear friends, and I thank them for sharing their boundless knowledge and good cheer.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to share pieces of this work with Lin Hixson, Matthew Goulish, Mark Jeffery, Dario Robleto, and Ross McElwee, and to receive their thoughtful comments and encouragement. It is a remarkable gift to be able to work with artists whose prodigious talents are matched by their generosity and keen intelligence. If I am ever in Houston, Texas, I promise to buy Lori Cassady a drink for her gracious help with Dario's photographs.

I owe a great debt to those who invited me to present this work at conferences, lectures, and symposia, and to those in the audiences who generously and patiently attended me. I tried out chapter 6 in conversation with the amazing Rebecca Schneider at the Contemporary Art between Time and History Lecture and Conversation Series at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal in 2013. I presented two early versions of chapter 4, one at the Performance Studies International Conference in 2010 and one for the Speakers Series of the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University in 2011. I delivered a version of chapter 3 for the Art History Lecture Series at the University of Georgia in 2011 and drafts of the first chapter as a visiting scholar for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Summer Performance Institute in 2008 and as part of the American Art Lecture Series at the Palmer Museum of Art and Penn State School

of Visual Arts in 2009. Chapter 2 started as a talk for the Performance Studies International Conference in 2007. Chapter 5 began at a dinner with Paul Clinton and Andrew Hennlich at which Paul, in an attempt to answer my inquiry about his dissertation topic, replied simply, "Stupidity." I warmly thank them for opening this avenue of inquiry for me and for their helpful suggestions on my work.

I had the extreme good fortune to receive thoughtful and supportive reviews of this book manuscript from Branislav Jakovljevic and an anonymous reader who revived my enchantment with the project after it had lain untouched for some months. I owe them both my sincere gratitude for setting aside their own work to help me stop neglecting my own. It has been such a great pleasure to work with Richard Morrison on all three of my books published with the University of Minnesota Press that his departure from Minnesota for New York toward the final stages of this book's production has been deeply distressing. I hope there is no correlation between his desire to explore new opportunities and my having monopolized his time over the past decade; I suppose it was inevitable that someday I would have to share his talents with other scholars. Erin Warholm-Wohlenhaus has stepped in to reassure me, and I greatly appreciate her help and calm guidance.

The College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota supported this project in a variety of ways, large and small, including a single-semester leave in the fall of 2013 and two modest grants from the Imagine Fund, which allowed me to invite a series of speakers to a graduate seminar I taught in 2009 called "Imagining Histories, Creating Pasts." The engagement with key thinkers on pertinent questions at an early stage in my work was of incalculable benefit to me.

I thank Roger once again, though he says I don't need to . . . precisely *because* he says I don't need to.

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Introduction

1. Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 683.
2. Notice how easily the word *recent* pops up here. Meyer's book came out after I initially finished this book manuscript and sent it out for peer review. But in that short time, his work took on a pastness, which is less and less recent with each passing day.
3. Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 12.
4. Jones, "Introduction."
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Meyer surveys these concerns in the introduction to *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 1–35.
7. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 47, 41.
8. Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 31.
9. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 48.
10. Ibid., 41.
11. Bonami, "Tino Sehgal," 48.
12. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 49.
13. Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse," 127.
14. Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13–14.
15. Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," 86.
16. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 21.
17. Ibid., 1.
18. Huyssen takes this term from Hermann Lübbe.
19. Iovane and Ramos, *Oggetti smarriti*, 99.
20. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 7.
21. Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, 12, 20; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
22. Bush, "As We May Think," 102.

23. Klein dates the entanglement of memory and history to the 1970s. Klein, "On the Emergence of *Memory*."

24. David Eagleman, quoted in Bilger, "The Possibilian," 60.

25. Benjamin Libet, quoted in ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Eagleman, quoted in ibid.

28. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 273.

29. Robleto, public lecture, Visiting Artists Lecture Series, Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2006.

30. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 275.

31. Robleto, postlecture discussion, Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2006.

32. Ibid.

33. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 29–30.

34. While I will discuss some actual prosthetic devices in the course of this book, I mean to think about the prosthesis metaphorically and linguistically rather than literally. I am aware that there is a burgeoning literature on disability studies that is keenly interested in prosthetics as it attempts to think critically about the "disabled," a category of subjecthood that is discursively, economically, culturally, and politically produced. My work here is more indebted to Derrida and his study of language and representation.

35. Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 36.

36. *OED Online*, s.v. "prosthesis," accessed June 28, 2011, http://www.oed.com.

37. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 108.

38. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 1.

39. Ibid., 54.

40. Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 2, 2011. "*Balm Of A Thousand Foreign Fields* was my attempt at making an actual medicinal balm that was meant to treat my idea of historical trauma. I use real folk medicine thinking and traditions in it. I have applied this balm to the spot where the new leg bone I constructed physically attaches to the hip area under the uniform. I know you are sensitive to where things 'connect' as I am, so this section of the sculpture, although unseen under the uniform, is crucial to the whole point of the piece because this is where the two timelines actually connect. One of the number one problems of prosthetic technology, even to this day, is where the new limb connects to the body because of the pain and abrasions this can cause. It is quite shocking to me when I reflect on and see the prosthetic technology of older wars and how painful these limbs were to wear. So where the flesh meets the foreign material I found to be an essential

metaphor as well as the actual prosthetic. The balm I made is meant to metaphorically heal this problem but also practically since it is in balm form and acts as a lubricant in this area to ease the pain of the connection."

41. Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 142.
42. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, xxvi.
43. Ibid., 7.
44. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 264–65.
45. Foster, "An Archival Impulse."
46. Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 142.
47. Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 3.
48. For a brilliant reading of the seemingly unending portrayals of Abraham Lincoln in contemporary American culture, see Schneider, *Performing Remains*.
49. Lisa Saltzman's book *Making Memory Matter* is another example. The book uses Pliny's ancient story of the origins of art as a frame in which to position memorial practices in contemporary art. By retelling the story of the ancient potter Butades, whose daughter traced the shadow of her departing lover on the wall, Saltzman sets up a study of contemporary artists who, like the famous Corinthian maiden, create memorials using light, shadows, and architectural structures. While she discusses the problem of memory and the memorialization of traumatic experiences, she does not comment on her own act of historicizing the artists and artworks to which her study is addressed.
50. Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory*, 7.
51. Ibid., 118.
52. Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," 132.
53. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, xxii.
54. Ibid., 21.
55. Ibid., 4.
56. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 36–37.
57. Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 4.
58. Ibid., 412.
59. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 2.
60. Ibid., 40.
61. Freeman, *Time Binds*.

1. Wooden Legs

1. Matthew Goulish, "Response," in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 128.
2. Lin Hixson, "Minor Repair," in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 130.

3. The relation between small acts of repair and larger social concerns is explained in the group's book, in which they contemplate how the attacks of September 11, 2001, were carried out using very small household tools, which produced enormous destruction. Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 25.

4. *Better Homes and Gardens Handyman's Book*, quoted in Hixson, "Minor Repair," 131.

5. Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*, 45. Describing the work of Goat Island, which he considers exemplary in terms of its ethical engagement, Read writes that the group has produced "a legacy of work that ha[s], with unusual sensitivity, concerned itself most rigorously with a spare choreography of rehabilitation, rescue and recovery, of an overtly politicised and yet never political aesthetic treatment of a dominant, hegemonic super power in an age of retreat and right-wing retrenchment" (252).

6. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 71, 65.

7. Karen Christopher, "Silence Is a Memorial," in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 106.

8. Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*, xxxiv, xxxviii.

9. For an English translation and lengthy discussion of the poem, see Golb, "Celan's 'Tones.'"

10. Matthew Goulish, "Stuttering," in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 105.

11. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 1.

12. Ibid., 11.

13. Ibid., 33.

14. Ibid., 45.

15. Ibid., 55.

16. Ibid., 54; emphasis added.

17. Golb, "Celan's 'Tones,'" 74–75.

18. The text from which this scene is derived comes from Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 32–35.

19. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 26.

20. Stephen Bottoms, "Rhizome," in Bottoms and Goulish, *Small Acts of Repair*, 63.

21. Ott et al., "Perfusion-Decellularized Matrix," 213.

22. Morrison, "Researchers Create a New Heart in the Lab."

23. Bergmann et al., "Evidence for Cardiomyocyte Renewal in Humans."

24. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 212–35.

25. Stanier, "Process, Repair and the Obligations of Performance," 38–39.

2. Houses Falling Down

1. The other video sequences, all shown in continuous loops, are as follows: *Clown Taking a Shit* shows a clown sitting on a toilet in a public bathroom as though captured by a surveillance camera; *Clown with Goldfish* shows a clown balancing a fishbowl on a pole against the ceiling until he is unable to hold it up any longer and it falls; *Clown with Water Bucket* shows a clown walking through a door over and over again as a bucket of water balanced on the door repeatedly falls and drenches him; *No. No. No. No.* shows a clown shouting "No" in a range of vocal inflections.

2. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

3. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91.

4. Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 11.

5. Ibid., 12.

6. Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 7–8.

7. Ibid., 8.

8. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

9. Schneider, "Archives," 100.

10. Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," 40.

11. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 76.

12. Ibid.

13. Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," 41.

14. Singers calling themselves "Pete and Repeat" contributed two tracks—"Hymn Singing Bill" and "Toodle oodle oo"—to the recordings of George Williams and Bessie Brown. Williams and Brown, *George Williams and Bessie Brown*.

15. Young, *Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle*, 208.

16. Nauman, "Breaking the Silence," 337.

17. Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," 37.

18. The film is meant to be projected floor to ceiling, wall to wall in the empty gallery space.

19. Durden, "Viewing Positions."

20. Archer, "Steve McQueen," 20.

21. Schneider, "Archives," 101.

22. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.

23. Ibid., 2.

24. Ibid., 3.

25. Ibid., 45–46.

26. Ibid., 12.

27. Steedman, *Dust*, 45.

28. Ibid., 68.
29. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter.*
30. Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 14–15.
31. Ibid., 13, 11.
32. Newman, "McQueen's Materialism," 26.
33. Ibid.
34. Schwabsky, "*Steve McQueen*," 77; emphasis added.
35. Adams, "Steve McQueen"; emphasis added.
36. Storr, "Going Places," 14.
37. Steedman, *Dust*, 67.
38. Ibid., 77.
39. Cotter, "Art in Review," 35.
40. Durden, "Viewing Positions."
41. Smith, "Art in Review," E41.
42. McQueen, quoted in Adams, "Steve McQueen."
43. McQueen, in Rondeau et al., *Steve McQueen*, 197, 198.
44. McQueen, quoted in Adams, "Steve McQueen."
45. Steve McQueen, quoted in Stenske, "A Can't-Miss Flick from Steve McQueen."
46. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 14.
47. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 7.
48. Ibid., 2.
49. Steedman, *Dust*, 83.
50. Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 177.

3. Incorrect and Incomplete

1. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 3.
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Peplow and Bravard, *Samuel R. Delany.*
4. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 16.
5. "No matter how dispassionate or nonjudgmental the elder actually is, the younger can only read it as the awful gaze of History." Ibid., 171.
6. Moten, *In the Break*, 153.
7. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 6.
8. Ibid., 21.
9. Ibid., 7.
10. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 95.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid., 8.

13. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 147.

14. Delany wrote the manuscript in 1963.

15. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 330.

16. "Four years later, in the late summer of 1960, only years after this postindustrial point (only a few weeks before or after I returned from Breadloaf to regale my mother and dying father with the summer's literary anecdotes), Allan Kaprow first presented a new work, *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*. It was repeated on several evenings in a Second Avenue studio apartment." Ibid., 201.

17. Ibid.

18. Kirby, *Happenings*, 68; Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 201.

19. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 203.

20. Ibid., 204.

21. Ibid., 206–7.

22. Butt, "Happenings in History," 118.

23. Moten, *In the Break*, 158.

24. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 205.

25. Kirby, *Happenings*, 72.

26. Ibid., 77.

27. Lepecki, *Allan Kaprow*, 50.

28. Kirby, *Happenings*, 20.

29. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 293.

30. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 6, 71.

31. Moten, *In the Break*,152.

32. Ibid., 155.

33. Ibid., 153.

34. Català, "The Man with the Movie Camera," 104.

35. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 82.

36. "How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician—who is still hidden in the medical practitioner—the surgeon at the decisive moment

abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him. Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233–34.

37. William Walker, Screen Actors Guild website, accessed October 13, 2010, http://www.sag.org/content/aad-department.
38. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 146.
39. Ibid., 147.
40. Ibid., 143.
41. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 47.
42. Ibid., 52.
43. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 147.
44. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 253.

4. The Empty Stage

1. Roach, "History, Memory, Necrophilia," 26–27.
2. Matthew Buckingham, in Buckingham and Godfrey, "A Conversation between Matthew Buckingham and Mark Godfrey," 20.
3. Roach, "History, Memory, Necrophilia," 26.
4. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 31–32.
5. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 3.
6. Krajewski, "History Here and Now," 47.
7. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 6.
8. Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 151.
9. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 4.
10. Ibid., 2.
11. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 11.
12. Muñoz, "Stages," 15.
13. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
14. Magoun, *Amos Fortune's Choice*, vii.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., viii.

17. Yates, "Facing Up to Time," 5.

18. Lambert, *Amos Fortune*, 14.

19. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 3.

20. For example, Amos's owner, Ichabod Richardson, wrote a will in 1752 promising Amos's freedom six years following Richardson's death. Then in 1763 he commissioned a formal manumission paper promising Amos his freedom in four years—1770—or upon Richardson's death, whichever happened first. Unfortunately, he did not sign the document, so it had no legal force. A few days before his actual death in 1768, he drew up a new will in which he made no mention at all of Amos Fortune. In 1769 Richardson's heirs commissioned a new manumission paper stipulating that Amos would be free once he paid his debts, which he did in 1770. Lambert, *Amos Fortune*, 5.

21. Magoun, *Amos Fortune's Choice*, 61.

22. Trousdale, "A Submission Theology for Black Americans," 126–27.

23. Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 151–54.

24. Ibid., 153.

25. The meetinghouse is adjacent to the cemetery where Amos and Vilot Fortune are buried. It is also the site where Willa Cather and her partner Edith Lewis are buried. Sharon lingers outside to look at the graves and, we are told, "doesn't want to start the show."

26. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 181–83.

27. Patt, "Searching for Sebald," 31.

28. Sebald, "'But the Written Word Is Not a True Document,'" 109.

29. Buckingham, in Buckingham and Godfrey, "A Conversation between Matthew Buckingham and Mark Godfrey," 16.

30. Mark Godfrey, in ibid., 23.

5. Stupid Birds

1. This and all subsequent references, Goat Island, *The Lastmaker*, unpublished script.

2. "From the Artists," promotional materials for *The Lastmaker*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2008.

3. For the members of Goat Island, Saint Francis was a complex figure, a Christian crusader on one hand, but also one who (according to accounts of his life) advocated for peace in the battle with the sultan, whom, in the end, he failed to convert. Matthew Goulish, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 31, 2012.

4. Anderson, "The Lastmaker," 667.

5. Claire Bishop, postperformance discussion, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, April 4, 2008, DVD. The performance's dated references

include not only Grayson, Friar Tuck, Rossellini, George Carlin, and Lenny Bruce but also Tom Waits, Stanley Kunitz, and *Puff the Magic Dragon.*

6. Hannaham, "The Lastmaker," 32.

7. This and all subsequent references, Bishop, postperformance discussion, April 4, 2008; emphasis added.

8. I mean *stupidity* in its most conventional sense here, as the act of getting it wrong, of not knowing, but I recognize that for Avital Ronell the term is far more complex; as I discuss later on, she claims that stupidity consists "in the absence of a relation to knowing." That is, stupidity is not simply the opposite of knowledge, but rather exists more powerfully as independent of it. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 5.

9. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 41.

10. Ibid., 40.

11. Ibid., 49. It should be noted that Agamben, not unlike Bishop, tends to apply the contemporary in universalizing terms.

12. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 18.

13. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure.*

14. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?*, 52.

15. Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 2.

16. Ibid., 112.

17. Bourriaud, *Altermodern.*

18. Muñoz, "Stages," 10.

19. Freeman, *Time Binds*, xi.

20. This and all subsequent information about Grayson's life is from *The Unforgettable . . . Larry Grayson* on *Shut That Door!*

21. Larry Grayson, interview by Janet Street-Porter, *At Home with Larry Grayson* on *Shut That Door!*

22. Muñoz, "Stages," 10.

23. Ibid., 15.

24. Ibid., 12.

25. This and all subsequent references, *The Larry Grayson Hour of Stars* on *Shut That Door!*

26. Blocker, *What the Body Cost.*

27. Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 10.

28. Ibid., 22–23.

29. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

30. Matthew Goulish, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 12, 2012.

31. Andrew Hennlich has pointed out to me that this speech also reads like a benediction, a temporally dishomogeneous performative that calls for

the faithful listener to "go forth" into the future while it simultaneously brings the religious service to an end, consigning it to the past.

32. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 50.
33. Ibid., 5.
34. Hixson, "How Do You Want to Say Goodbye?," 53.
35. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 25.

6. Transitional Objects

1. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 599.
2. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 61.
3. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Kraynak, "Art History's Present Tense," 96.
6. Grant Kester, in Foster, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 7.
7. Pamela Lee, in ibid., 25.
8. Mavor writes: "When we dig up the home that our former small self once occupied in order to hastily repair it and make it an unsplit dwelling with an unfragmented story to tell, we overlook the unmaking of childhood that keeps the stacking, knocking, and splitting at hand. In opposition to the adult archaeologist putting the house of childhood lost back together, I am arguing for a continual stacking, knocking, and splitting—what we might call a 'child's eye-view of archaeology.'" Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 125.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 599–601.
11. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 436.
12. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 40.
13. Ibid., 166.
14. Ibid., 251–52.
15. Ibid., 252–53.
16. Kempinski, "'Quel Roman!,'" 466.
17. Ibid., 467.
18. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 101.
19. Ross, *The Past Is the Present*; Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 700.
20. Ross, *The Past Is the Present*, 12.
21. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 228.
22. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art."
23. Steedman, *Dust*, 9.
24. Ibid., 18.
25. Arendt, " The Concept of History," 42–43.

26. Patt, "Searching for Sebald," 25.
27. Ibid., 31.
28. Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 66–67.
29. Ibid., 73.
30. Steedman, *Dust*, 75–76.
31. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 125.
32. Anderson, "Modulating the Excess of Affect," 162.
33. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended."
34. Dario Robleto, postlecture discussion, Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, October 5, 2006.
35. Robleto, "Medicine on the Spoon," 265.
36. Dario Robleto, interview with the author, June 21, 2012.
37. Dunbar, *Alloy of Love*, 162.
38. Robleto, postlecture discussion, October 5, 2006.
39. Robleto, interview with the author, June 21, 2012.
40. Ibid.
41. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*, 330.
42. Robleto, "When You Cry, I Only Love You More," 6.
43. Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 154.
44. Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in ibid., 154–56.
45. Cynthia Daignault, e-mail correspondence reproduced in Reckitt, *Not Quite How I Remember It*, 17–18.
46. Smith, "Art in Review," E33.
47. Duncan, "Remixing the Past," 203.
48. Schwabsky, "Dario Robleto Galerie Praz-Delavallade," 202.
49. Craig, "Dario Robleto," 41.
50. *OED Online*, s.v. "mawkish," accessed June 1, 2015, http://www.oed.com.
51. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 3.
52. Ibid., 6.
53. Theodore Calhoun, quoted in ibid.
54. Ibid., xv.
55. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 101.
56. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 13.
57. Ross, *The Past Is the Present*, 6–7.
58. This same slogan appears, made from cut-paper letters, in another work from 2005 titled *Alloy of Love*.
59. Dunbar, *Alloy of Love*, 183.
60. Robleto, interview with the author, June 21, 2012.
61. For more on the Sanitary Commission and Sanitary Fairs, see Attie, *Patriotic Toil*.

62. Eden, "The Benevolent Efforts of Dario Robleto," n.p.

63. Dario Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 19, 2012.

64. "Ghost of Anne Frank: 'Quit Reading My Diary,'" *The Onion*, February 11, 1998.

65. Dunbar, *Alloy of Love*, 59.

66. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 67.

67. Ibid., 69.

68. Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 19, 2012.

69. Foster, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 3.

70. Mark Godfrey, in ibid., 32.

71. Jones, "Introduction," 3.

72. Kraynak, "Art History's Present Tense," 97.

73. Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 19, 2012. Yo la Tengo's song, in turn, seems to refer to a book of the same title published by film critic Pauline Kael in 1973.

74. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, 61.

Conclusion

1. Lin Hixson, in Goulish and Hixson, "A Lasting Provocation," 2.
2. Anderson, "The Lastmaker," 666.
3. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 87.
4. Ibid., 40.
5. Alÿs, "Francis Alÿs," 16.
6. Francblin, "Francis Alÿs," 63.
7. Alÿs and Medina, "Entries," 107.
8. Alÿs, "Francis Alÿs," 14.
9. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 6.
10. Groys, "How to Do Time with Art," 191.
11. Ross, *The Past Is the Present*, 87.

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JANE BLOCKER is professor of art history at the University of Minnesota. She is author of *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minnesota, 2009), *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minnesota, 2004), and *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile.*