

III. Remediating Visual Arts

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In Between Frames 2.0.: Time, Image and Remediation in Photography and Video Art (Two Case Studies)

Abstract:

The present essay addresses a number of issues related to contemporary visuality such as manipulation, quotation, remediation, unstable mediums, hybrid art discourse, and cross-referentiality, proposing the concept of In Between Frames as the main theoretical instrument. The term In Between Frames describes the median zone in arts and media productions, the "interstice" that breaks with appearances and conventions, and that defies any predictable accounts and established principles related to medium, technology, cultural patterns, or power configurations. Crucial in defining the conceptual and functional dimensions of being In Between Frames is the time factor. The artworks discussed here – Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) and Adad Hannah's "video stills" – opt for an atypical temporality, one that undermines not only the narrative, understood in the traditional sense as a flow of sequences in time, but also – and this is my main argument here – the very definition of their own medium (photography and video, respectively). Undermining, as I will demonstrate, is not simply an act of negation, but rather a process of *remediation*: photography turns into film, and video aspires to the condition of photography – a way to recuperate, reevaluate, recite and recycle a medium by turning into its opposite.

Keywords: Medium, temporality, visual manipulation, photography, video, remediation, spectatorship.

Introduction

Firstly, *In between Frames* was an exhibition.¹ Actually, this came second since the concept was first, a concept born from a dialogue between an artist, a curator and a theorist. The present essay expands the theoretical premises formulated in the exhibition's catalogue and implicitly in our initial dialogue – hence the mark 2.0. – to address a number of issues related to the avatars of contemporary

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EKPHRASIS, 2/2013

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visuality: manipulation, quotation, remediation, unstable mediums², hybrid art discourse, and cross-referentiality.

In this sense, I propose the term *In Between Frames* to describe the median zone in arts and media productions that breaks with appearances and conventions. At the same time, it is a potential instrument for analytical and critical reflection on the same production area. Thus, *In Between Frames* is the locus of the “interstice,” of that controversial in-between-ness that defy any predictable accounts and established principles related to medium, technology, cultural patterns, or power configurations. In this sense, *In Between Frames* reflects equally the unstable condition of the medium in specific cases in photography and video, and the changeable nature of the conceptual models (or “frames”) in today’s culture and society.

The notion of “frame” is employed here in both literal and figurative senses, that is, it is understood both as an instrument of visualization, and as a conceptual pattern. On the one hand, “frame” is seen in a formal, phenomenological and technological sense, as the element that defines an artistic or media image and its spectatorship. From this perspective, frame is what defines art or media, the matrix of visuality, a meaning that is rooted in Roland Barthes’ definition of “the tableau” (formulated via Diderot, Brecht and Eisenstein). The latter, writes Barthes “is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view.” (1986, 173) Elaborating on the idea, Barthes continues: “The scene, the picture, the shot, the cut-out rectangle, here we have the very *condition* that allows us to conceive theater, painting, cinema, literature, all those arts, that is, other than music and which could be called *dioptric arts*.” (1986, 173). It is precisely this definition of the frame as a cut-out rectangle, “irreversible and incorruptible,” that is questioned by the works analyzed here, thus deliberately engaging a polemic with their own visual identity. On the other hand, “frame” is understood here in a metaphorical sense, as a conceptual framework, as an interface for different mechanisms of signification. Seen from this viewpoint, the works discussed here represent a way to explore what lies between or behind these frames, established as definitive models through various aesthetic, institutional and ideological imperatives.

Crucial in defining the conceptual and functional dimensions of being *In Between Frames* is the time factor. Both cases discussed below opt for an atypical temporality, one that undermines not only the narrative, understood in the traditional sense as a flow of sequences in time, but also – and this is my main argument here – the very definition of their own medium (photography and video). Undermining, as I will later demonstrate, is not simply an act of negation, but rather a process of *remediation*: photography turns into film, and video aspires to the condition of photography – a way to recuperate, reevaluate, recite and recycle a medium by turning into its opposite. My analysis takes the works of Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) and Adad Hannah’s “video stills” as test cases for the arguments formulated above.

Movement, time and image in assorted combinations

Most commentators consider Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) “canonical” examples of contemporary photography, but also an emblem for what was loosely called postmodernism. Such a claim is based on the ability with which Sherman uses mass-media codes, manipulates techniques of representation, employs self-referentiality and feminist discourses, makes parodic comments and ingenious image appropriations. The latter refers to her photographic strategy to appropriate or re-construct well-known images and icons from the art history (e.g. Caravaggio) or contemporary popular culture (e.g. cinema). The series in discussion here, *Untitled Film Stills*, are organized in a series of 69 black-and-white photographs, where Sherman poses herself in various melodramatic guises that evoke the stereotypical feminine characters of B-grade movies from the 1950s and 1960s. The characters she creates are either ingénue girls or eye-catching vamps, either housewives or party “Lolitas”. Although the images look exactly like the scenes from the films they try to imitate, the photographs enact a “drama” which *we know* is not real and in which the protagonist is not a Hollywood star, but the artist herself.



Fig. 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*. 1978. Black and white photography. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #15*. 1978. Black and white photography. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Adad Hannah's trademark works are still videos, a sort of *tableaux vivants* depicting, sometimes, banal scenes with ordinary people, other times highly staged and elaborated compositions. Unusual is the fact that the sequences are not unfolding: the actors are motionless, the scene is frozen, the time is suspended, thus giving the viewer the impression of a perfect still in spite of the fact that the video is actually running.

In front of these *tableaux vivants* the viewer realizes only after a while that what he/she is watching is not a photography, or a static image, but a video recording of a performance now played back on the screen. The “trick” is unveiled only by the little, almost indiscernible, imperfections of the actors’ playing: eye blinking, breathing, swaying bodies. Among Hannah’s stills we should mention *Room 112* (2004) a series of videos in which a few actors enact typical moments of TV broadcasts taking place in domestic interiors: interviews, soap-operas, sitcoms; *Mirroring the Musée* (2008), a performance-based video staged in a museum in which “actors” holding a mirror remain immobile for the entire duration of the shot. The video is showed on two flat monitors hanged on the wall in the exhibition. Thus, the video looks like a picture among pictures, a framed view among other frames – a way to comment and critically manipulate museum’s typical display solutions. Another series is *The Russians* (2011), a body of work that exists somewhere between the candid documentary snapshots of Robert Frank, the highly staged images of Jeff Wall, and the mid 19th century parlour pastime of *tableaux vivants*.



Fig. 3. Adad Hannah, *Mirroring the Musée*. 2008. Video still. Video installation with two HD videos (4 min 42s and 6 min 5s). Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec.



Fig. 4. Adad Hannah, *Room 112*. 2004. Video still. Two-channel video installation, 14 min 11s.

What both Sherman’s and Hannah’s works have in common is the specific manipulation of time that affect their visuality and mediality. In the case of Cindy Sherman, the work persuades the viewer that the image one sees is actually part of a larger filmic narration. In this sense, each depicted sequence becomes a moment of “hyper-time”: something that refers and links to other moments of the story that presumably exist yet are not effectively present or visible. This is a way to outsource the narrative in the hands and minds of the viewers: the latter are left to construct their own a story starting from the image they see, while linking it to other imaginary moments of the story (however, with links that prove to be broken). If it is to keep the same cyberculture-in-

spired vocabulary, then Adad Hannah's suspension of time can be deemed "runtime error." If in computer science this phrase names an error that occurs during the execution of a program, in our case, it describes a deviation from the usual "execution" of narration, of the time-flow, leaving instead for the viewer an image with a scene stuck in a unique moment.

So, can we speak about Sherman's photographs as an image of movement, now frozen by the intrinsic limits of the medium of photography? Or, to invert the terms, are they possibly movement-images? The analogy with the famous notion developed by Deleuze is tempting. Especially because it might be helpful to better explain the manipulation of temporality in this series of works. As Deleuze himself so very often has proceeded, I will borrow freely the term and give it an adapted sense. Deleuze defines movement-image as following:

"[t]he movement-image gives rise to an image of time which is distinguished from it by excess or default, over or under the present as empirical progression: in this case, time is no longer measured by movement, but is itself the number or measure of movement (metaphysical representation). (...) The movement-image is fundamentally linked to an indirect representation of time, and does not give us a direct presentation of it, that is, does not give us a time-image. (C2, 271)

We can comment Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as particular instances of Deleuze's "movement-images" and this is due to their capacity to provide "an image of time" expressed not through excess but, obviously, by default. Thus, *Untitled Film Stills* provide only an *indirect* image of time. The latter exists in this series only as a fiction; it is not measured by movement (the photography is a static medium par excellence), but it is a measure of movement: there should be – we are told – a "movie" from which these images are extracted. But, as we find out, in *Untitled Film Stills*, neither the action *per se*, nor the films do exist. However, these images are able to produce a "cinematographic illusion," one that has the power to change, if not the ontological status of the photography, then its perceptual status, that is, to turn, perceptually, photography into film. Nevertheless, the result is neither "pure" photography nor "pure" film, but something in between. Something in between frames...

In contrast with Sherman's images that tend to be a measure of movement (or movement-images) Hannah's images are a pure representation of time. Or, to keep the Deleuzian analogy, they might be assimilated to time-images. According to Deleuze,

[t]he time-image does not imply the absence of movement (even though it often includes its increased scarcity) but it implies the reversal of the subordination; it is no longer time which is subordinate to movement; it is movement which subordinates itself to time. It is no longer time which derives from movement, from its norm and its corrected aberrations; it is movement as *false movement* as aberrant movement which now depends on time" (C2, 271).

Indeed what one can firstly remark to Hannah's videos is their scarcity of movement. The actors "frozen" in the middle of their actions cannot "generate" time; their

movement is a “false movement” which is subordinated to time. At Hannah, in the words of Deleuze, “the anomalies of movement become the essential point instead of being accidental or contingent.” (C2, 128) Thus, they become direct presentations of time. Consequently, as Deleuze explains,

“We no longer have an indirect image of time which derives from movement, but a direct time-image from which movement derives. We no longer have a chronological time which can be overturned by movements which are contingently abnormal; we have a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily ‘abnormal’, essentially ‘false’. It can also be said that montage tends to disappear in favour of the sequence shot, with or without depth.” (C2, 129-130)

Certainly, the minimal role assigned to montage (seen mostly in its cinematographic sense, as a dynamic and logic correlations between shots), or perhaps even more often, its complete absence is something that characterizes Hannah’s videos. But the most evident feature of his works – both aesthetically and technically – is the use of “movements necessarily ‘abnormal’, essentially ‘false’” produced by a “chronic non-chronological time”. Video images are after all a static moment that refuses to unfold. This way of using time – and the fake movement it subordinates – is precisely what questions, if not quite collapses, the video as a medium. Video ceases to be video in its typical utterance – i.e. a continuum of images unfolded in time, appropriating instead the status of photography.

What can be deduced from the examples discussed above is that both artists use temporality in an illusionist manner: images present a story that doesn’t exist, they rely on an absent temporality, although they suggest the presence of both story and temporality. Instead of presenting a story these works act to *presence-ing* it: they put forward an arrested moment, a present moment without past or future, of an equally illusionary narrative. It is then, particularly this *trompe le temps* effect that functions as a disturbing element for both narration and the medium.

It’s about time (manipulation)

If we take a quick look around the art world, we find out that Sherman and Hannah are not the only artists who are preoccupied by manipulating time with visual consequences. One of the artists who effectively employ the image of time passing in his art is the Japanese-American On Kawara. His famous *Today Series*, begun in January 1966 and which still continues until today, consists in, until now, over 2000, canvases. Each panel contains nothing but the date and year in which it was painted, executed in a precise calligraphy. Talking about this amazing enterprise, art historian Pamela M. Lee writes that, “the intelligence of his work rests in its endless questioning of the presentness of art” (289). Indeed, his series depicts an “interminable now”, where “*every day* – even tomorrow, even yesterday – is today” (Lee, 293). Like On Kawara’s date panels, Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* seem to be unable to rise above their par-

ticularity, i.e. of their particular time. But in fact, what they present is not an “interminable now” of our time, but a “permanent moment” of a certain story situated somewhere in time; of a certain pastness and futurity of an imagined film.

Another way to deal with time as material for art, this time pointing not so much to presentness, but rather to endlessness, are the experimental films of Andy Warhol. For example, the film *Sleep* (1963) is a real-time recording (six hours) of a... sleep. In this case, time is controlled not at the level of narrative but as projection. The time is “actually faked,” as Warhol describes it, not in the performance, though, but in the looping of the footage. Another film that manipulates time as a “perpetual present” is *Empire* (1964), an eight-hour static footage of the Empire State Building from dusk until dawn: the image is (almost) unchanging, but the medium that plays the film continues to move. The film was described by art critic Gregory Battcock as a “timeless ‘real’ time” (45), where, I would add, “timeless” is the apparent infinite duration of the film, while the “real” is identifiable in the slowly atmospheric and light shifts. As Pamela M. Lee suggests, *Empire* stands as an allegory for time located elsewhere; it speaks about a time with a future vector, while our body is anchored in the present. By watching it, we experience our body as a duration machine. Lee very pertinently observes that “these films, then, are one and the same time both *representation* and *experience* of duration, both subject and object. And that movement between the literalness of real time experienced by the viewer, its manipulation by Warhol as representation, and the projection into the future as constructed by the medium is a kind of bad infinity” (a term to which I will return shortly) (280-281). These films, to which we should add the twenty-five hour experiment “****”, also known as *Four Stars* (1967), are remarkable particularly for their insightful and, surely atypical, treatment of temporality. “Their brilliance”, writes Pamela M. Lee, “lies in their *seemingly* literal relationship to time – of extended duration – and this feature, coupled with the works’ deadpan systemacity, amounts to the cinematic equivalent of minimalism” (279)³.

Indeed, Warhol’s films represent a literal relationship to time: they present certain fragments of reality, recorded in a certain moment, offered *as they are* to the viewer. The only way in which subjectivity is involved – if one might call it that way – is in the extreme length of the films, unbearable for any viewer. Warhol films’ resistance to spectatorship, their inherent boredom was read by some commentators, including Pamela M. Lee, as a possible ironic strat-



Fig. 5. Andy Warhol, *Empire*. 1964. Black-and-white film, silent. 8 hours 5 min. at 16 frames per second. Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

egy against technology's speed, or a satire upon the distracted masses. What seems to be certain is that Warhol himself never saw his films entirely. This is obviously not the case with Adad Hannah's "stills". Not only that they don't rely on an impossible spectatorship, but their video images, static as they are, do not have a literal relationship to time: what they show is not a direct image of a motionless object or body being there, but an indirect image of an action that refuses to unfold. *Representation* and *experience* of duration seems to be split.

Two other artists should be mentioned in this context, both committed to challenge the medium and spectatorship via means of time manipulation, but in a different manner than Warhol's. Michael Snow's *See You Later* (1990) and Douglas Gordon's *24 Hours Psycho* (1993), treat the moving image as a fluid substance with no clear (time or otherwise) limitations. In Snow's work, a banal sequence of, normally, 30 seconds is stretched in Super-Slow-Motion to last for almost 18 minutes. The staged action is intentionally mundane, but the extreme slowness of the image transforms it into an exceptional visual piece where the viewer is prompted to discover the subtlest of details. Gordon's work, instead, treats a Hollywood film as a readymade: he took a classic Hitchcock oeuvre and spread it out to a length of 24 hours (on a running time of two frames per second). Even more evident than in the case of Warhol's films, here spectatorship seems impossible, as is any comprehensible reading of the piece. The fundamental strategy of these films is the control and the manipulation of time at the level of projection, hence transforming time in duration and motion in stasis.

Unlike these artists, who use the literal time of the action (Warhol) and the extended time of the projection (Snow and Gordon), Hannah manipulates time *at the level of footage*: this precise moment is the faked time (actors frozen in pose and filmed as such). Even if there is a "technical" duration (the real-time running of the video player), the image tries to annul the time as a flow and to bring video to the condition of photography. If at Warhol, the viewer's body is the "duration machine" (Lee, 280), at Hannah, it is the actors' bodies that function as a duration machine: their frozen position induces an apparently perpetual time.

There is yet another aspect that makes the above examples and the works in discussion here dissimilar: while Warhol, Snow and Gordon's works have a marked beginning and a clear end (whatever extended in time would those be), this is not the case with Sherman and Hannah. Bringing up a certain moment from an uncertain place and then postponing its continuation *ad infinitum*, the narration refuses a fixed scheme, limited in time. Its boundaries go far behind and ahead the viewed moment in front of us. This occurrence of a continual or perpetual time can be related to Hegel's concept of "bad infinity". Hegel defines the term as an infinite repetition toward a goal that is never reached. This infinite "progress" is indeed the negation of the finite but not its overcoming. Bad infinity represents a permanent failure to sublimate the inherent contradictions of the finite, or to transcend a certain (historical) moment. Bad infinity negates the very conditions of its possibility; it is a perpetual provisional state.

Seen from this perspective, Sherman's images fail to transcend the "immanence" of a single shot: functioning under the imperative of stillness, there is a reiterable definition of the respective "film" by the same image; the whole flux of the film is represented by a single image according to a circular logic. There is no *visible* progress, but a perpetual deferral, or, in other words, a "bad infinity". Hannah's videos illustrate in a more evident way the impossibility to reach the end and to accomplish the whole. One image equals the other, in no progression or logical development. Or, as Hegel writes, "Something becomes an other, but the other is itself a something, so it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*" (149). Being frozen in a scene that refuses to progress, each frame is practically equal with the other in a flux that points not to an end, but to a "bad infinity".

The medium is the passage

If artists such as Kawara, Warhol, Snow and Gordon contributed – assumedly or not – to undermine the perceptual "purity" of the medium, they remain, however, within their respective mediums: painting, film, video. Their works, radical as they are, don't negate the medium as such, but work with it, reaffirming it in its specific form (for example, slowing a film down is nothing but a way to point to its fundamental characteristics: that a film is a succession of shots in motion). Nevertheless, this is not the case with Sherman and Hannah's works, which strive to challenge and actually reverse the respective medium's established visual standards and technical principles. In other words, to manipulate medium's specificity. The latter much disputed expression is used here not in the positivist sense art critic Clement Greenberg (in)famously has given to it, but rather in the sense proposed by art theorist Rosalind Krauss, as "a pointing-to-itself" (4). In this sense, the works analyzed here point to their medium, but they do so by undermining its specificity.

A photograph, as it is usually defined, can only present an image of *what-has-been*. Not only that Sherman's photographs indicate also a sense of *this will be* (Barthes 1982, 96), but they also suggest a possible *this could be*. Not unlike the plot of a film. Although they don't have a discursive unity, they do have a certain imaginary possibility. The corollary is the fact that photography supersedes its own condition now translated into a filmic specificity. Or "nearly specificity" since, inevitably, their visual regime remains caught somewhere In Between Frames.

On the other hand, one of most important theorists of video, Yvonne Spielmann, defines video as "transformation imagery". As Spielmann explains,

Whereas for photography and also for film the single image or a sequence of framed single images is what matters, video distinguishes itself by the fact that the transition between images are central and, even more so, that these transitions are always explicitly reflected and tested in new processes" (4).

It is precisely this transition between images that Hannah's videos challenge and contradict. Lacking any transitions and devoid of any movement *within* the individ-

ual frame, the videos condense time, thus remaining still in their photographic pose. Or, in other words, giving up the specificity of their video medium, just to make a passage towards a photographic condition. It is therefore stillness that facilitates this reversal. Deleuze sees the stillness of the cinematic image as a confrontation with photography. For him, the moment when film breaks down into stillness is a moment of self-referentiality of the medium; it is the moment when the viewer becomes aware of the film's existence as film, as a moving medium. However, this is not the case with Hannah's *Stills*. Lacking the immediate reference to images in movement (there are no other moving sequences with which still images to stand in contrast), they have a life of their own as *stills*. They tend to become – visually, although not technically – photography.

This process of transition from one medium to another is what media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin called *remediation*: “the representation of one medium in another” (45). The concept of remediation is an important contribution to the debates about (new) media, especially because it conceptualizes the relationship between old and new media not in opposition (or in a linear progression), but as part of a media genealogy that is based on connections and affiliations. While Sherman and Hannah's works “represent one medium into another”, they are, however, particular cases of remediation. On the one hand, the particularity relies on the fact that while Bolter and Grusin insist that “remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media”, the works in discussion here are not what is generally called new media (they are, technically speaking photography and video, respectively). On the other hand, they are atypical remediation cases as long as the transfer, i.e. the remediation between one medium to another, takes place within the same work or media object. What is important to emphasize though, is that the source of the object's meaning, in this case, relies not in the absoluteness of the medium, but rather in its transitory character. The famous adage of Marshal McLuhan “the medium is the message” points to the non-specificity of the medium since the message can inhabit and refer to other mediums. Taking this idea a step further, Sherman's photographs and Hannah's videos prove that *the medium is the passage*. The passage to another medium.

Conclusion

As we have seen, time – or, to be precise, the unusual manipulation of temporality – equally defines and defies the meaning and the function of the medium in Sherman and Hannah's works. *Untitled Film Stills* are frontier-images between a pre-supposed previous (time) frame and an expected subsequent one; they belong to neither one, nor the other. They apparently link to other images but there is no real cinematic referent. There are only the recycled typologies depicted in the images that indicate that what we see should be pieces in a larger cinematic ensemble. But they have no clear position as they have no concrete context. As a consequence, they inevitably remain In Between Frames. If Sherman's image is the metonymic frame, Hannah's

image, is the sequence-plan; one is reduction, the other is extension. Since Hannah's video stills have no cuts, images are not referring to each other according to an internal (or external) correlative logic, dictated by diegesis or other visual determinants, but they are their own equal. Images are correlative as far as, frame after frame, they repeat themselves theoretically *ad infinitum*. "False continuity, then, takes on a new meaning, at the same time as it becomes the law" (Deleuze, 180). The image of this series breaks with the typical video art not by using juxtapositions and ruptures, but proposing a stasis of the visual flux, a halt somewhere in between actions, affections, and perceptions; or, in other words, *In Between Frames*.

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- 1 Exhibition *In between Frames*, curated by Horea Avram and Marius Tănăsescu. Artists: Adad Hannah, Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová, Bettina Hoffmann, Jason Arsenault, Jérôme Delapierre, Perry Bard, Rozalinda Borcilă. National Museum of Contemporary Arts, Bucharest, 2011.
 - 2 I prefer the plural form mediums instead of "media" in order to avoid confusions with the more general term mass media.
 - 3 It is surely tempting to make a parallel between Minimalism and Warhol's slow time films. But, I argue, one aspect related to time makes them different. Minimalism's temporality belongs first and foremost to movement – the beholder's presence and deambulation within gallery – while Warhol's films are defined by motionless (non)action. His films can hardly be defined "movies". While minimalism is characterized by presentness, Warhol's films are characterized by a kind of "absentness". Minimalist works do not measure the time, but they create it through the viewing body. Warhol's films measure the time and simultaneously suspend it. It is important to remind here Michael Fried's comments on Minimalist art (in "Art and Objecthood", 1967) who points out the opposition between cinema and Minimalism. Cinema, he writes, is the "art that, by its very nature, *escapes* theater entirely" (140), and we should remind that "theatricality" was one of the main characteristics of Minimalist art. This is due especially to the differences of scale, to the phenomenological distance between what is projected and where we are standing as spectators.

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