



Legacies of Resistance

by Juli Carson

You are here, next to a young man with beautiful hair, en route to the Bastille, May 13, one day before the general strike, two days after the Sorbonne reopens, ten days since the police occupation, four months following the riots at Caen, in the wake of wildcat strikes in Lyons, longer since the matroquage: October 17, 1961, Algerian workers, clubbed to death, thrown into the Seine from Neuilly Bridge.

Behind you, the photographer, seconds before the shutter clicks, immuring the moment, not long before you are born.

- Mary Kelly, Circa 1968

In a photograph taken by Jean Pierre Rey published in *Life Magazine* on May 24, 1968, we are given the following scene: a demonstration in the streets of Paris on May 13, 1968. The photograph definitively marks the moment. It serves as an eyewitness to the event. And yet, when Mary Kelly appropriates this image for an artwork, she adds the word “circa” to the date. The word “circa” means literally “about.” When a date appears in historical writing without the word “circa” preceding it, we assume to know the exact date with certainty. What, then, should we make of Kelly’s use of the word “circa” vis-à-vis a famous photograph that unequivocally documents an historical event? Indeed, there is a mystery at the heart of Kelly’s *Circa 1968*, a mystery unfolding in the “scene” between the date Rey took his photograph and the date the depicted event returns to us. This scene constitutes the ellipsis of cultural legacy – the productive space between one generation and the next through which historical memory is made. And since history is always a question of that un-traversable divide between an event that happened “then” and our recollection of it “now,” history is at once a question of *longing to be where we are not*. It is precisely this question of desire in the space of critical analysis that’s at stake in *Circa 1968*, a stake that has characterized all of Kelly’s artwork since 1973.

On this question of longing, Jacques Lacan’s comment at the end of *Seminar XI* is useful: “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – *You never look at me from the place from which I see you*. Conversely,

what I look at is never what I wish to see.”¹ In love, there is thus the problem of an un-traversable divide; a gap initiated by the primordial instance of the infant grasping sight of him/her self, which, in turn, initiates the simultaneous identification with, and alienation from, oneself as Other. Forever after the subject will try to close this gap. It is this “scene” that the historian analogously faces vis-à-vis his object cause of desire in the form of a “lost” past event. According to Lacan, on the matter of the subject never being able to complete himself romantically by way of truly coalescing with the Other, *there is no sexual relation*. His claim may be extended, allegorically, to the historian and his event when we say: *there is no historical relation*. There is simply no way to close this gap, though the subject may try insistently to do so. And necessarily so. While there exists the conscious wish to be closer to the loved object or to the historical event, there is an unconscious pleasure concurrently at work in never obtaining it. In the right artist’s hands this question of the unconscious does not mark a critical blind spot nor an analytic quagmire but an opening to an ethical space of self-reflection on the question of historical memory in relation to contemporary art. We are then left to unpack the following question: *to what do we return and why?*

Let’s return to Kelly in conversation with a young curator about *Circa 1968*:

In terms of returning to this moment for those born between 1963 and 1973, May 68 was what I would call the political primal scene – the mystery of conception in the social and historical sense. . . . My generation was preoccupied with our parents in the context of WWII. . . . I might say, well how could my parents have allowed something like the Holocaust to take place, and your generation might think, why wasn’t the Cultural Revolution ever realized?

Jean-Luc Godard raises these same questions in his 2001 film *In Praise of Love*, where he causes the sites of historical analysis, political resistance and the scene of “love” or desire to collapse. Edgar, the film’s protagonist, is an intellectual trying to make a film about three couples representing three generations: young, adult and elderly. Their love stories, in turn, can be perceived as allegories of three historical events: 9/11, 1968 and the Holocaust. Each of these moments is further comprised of four stages (in love as in history): meeting, passion, separation and

reconciliation. In life, though, these four moments always arrive either too early or too late for the subject – what Freud called “deferred action” – producing a crisis of historical agency for the actors and their real-life referents. To invoke this crisis in the love story one needs to collapse the operation of historical time onto the narrative arc of love. Edgar warns his young actress: *It is not Eglantine’s story, but a story of history moving through her. . . it is the moment of “youth,”* though this is not Eglantine’s *conscious* experience of the love-event. At the other end of the generational spectrum, Edgar follows the older couple, both Resistance survivors, in the process of selling their story to a Hollywood film director. The couple’s historical moment is one lived *before* the story that will be sold to Hollywood, and, paradoxically, one that will be lived by others (and by them) only *after* its Hollywood representation. Caught in the middle, finally, is Edgar who tries unsuccessfully to be an “adult” – to experience the political presence of 1968 – between the moments of youth (today) and old age (then). But adulthood, like the historical event itself, is a very slippery, fleeting object because the adult is neither in the primordial moment of youth (pure experience) nor in the elderly space of reflection (pure representation). And as we introduce the idea of the photograph, this question of “presence” – allegorically the question of “adulthood” – becomes even more elusive.

Which brings us back once more to *Circa 1968*.

What’s so compelling about *Circa 1968* is that the clues to unraveling this mystery of time, memory and the unconscious are actually embedded in the artwork itself. The “meaning” of *Circa 1968* springs from the material technique Kelly employed in its making, an intentionally outmoded procedure that underscores the non-distinction of the work’s form and content. Using the lint trap of her household dryer as a ready-made mould, the casting process required six months of washing and drying more than ten thousand pounds of laundry. Kelly began by reducing Rey’s photograph to a line drawing and then breaking the drawing into a grid, each section of the grid corresponding to the dimensions of her dryer’s lint trap. By inserting vinyl graphics based on the

Cover: *Circa 1968*, (detail), 2004
 Left: *Circa 1968*, compressed lint and projected light, 100” x 105” x 1.25”, installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2004
 Center: *Circa 1968*, (detail), 2004
 Right: *Circa 1968*, (diagram), 2004

line drawing into the trap, Kelly produced a re-presentation of Rey's photograph through the ready-made process of lint collection. The original image was then re-established by arranging the sections to form a single panel measuring 101 x 105 inches. On the surface, the finished work tonally simulates the look of photography, which circles us back to the original photograph and the more general tradition of photojournalism, the very medium of the historical event. And yet, in *Circa 1968*, both the original historical event and the photograph continue to slip from our grasp. If we think of the "event" in terms of something one can't directly encounter or discern, then it's especially meaningful that the bits and pieces of Rey's image are pressed into something as non-substantive as lint, through which a filtering process posits a symbolic yet enigmatic trace in the place of a representable event. In terms of "filtering," the lint trap can thus be likened to what Freud called the preconscious, that which paradoxically produces something in the process of its effacement or censorship. Mirroring the viewer's own subjectivity, the primordial event in *Circa 1968* is simultaneously *there* and *not there*. Something in the picture is thus *out of place*, but it is precisely this "something" that drives our cognitive experience of the picture.

Roland Barthes derives that the thing "out of place" in all photographs, that thing to which his famed notion of the "punctum" guides us, is time itself. He clarifies this point in the following passage from *Camera Lucida*: "This new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ('that-has-been'), its pure representation." Barthes saw this punctum clearly in the Alexander Gardner photograph of a young Lewis Payne, the man who tried to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward in 1865, photographed in his cell as he was waiting to be hanged. "The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*," Barthes remarks. "But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*." As a result, we read two things at the same time: "... *this will be* and *this has been*." We experience the uncanny horror of an "anterior future of which death is the stake."²

Again, the intellectual paradox of an "anterior future" is laid bare in the materiality of *Circa 1968*. By recessing the reconstructed image into the wall and projecting a two-minute fade of light noise onto the surface, the compressed lint image resembles not just a photograph but also a screen. In his essay "Screen Memories," Freud responds to the question "Do we have *any* memories at all from our childhood?" with the answer that we only have memories *related* to our childhood. Which is to say, the nature of childhood memories – the manner in which they suddenly appear and disappear in simultaneous modes and forms – demonstrate that one's earliest experiences are never remembered *as they were*. Rather, these past moments are paradoxically experienced in the present as a *screen*, triggered by related events taking place at the time of the memory's (present) formation.³ Standing in front of *Circa 1968*, what the viewer thus "remembers" about the Paris demonstrations is thus screened through the present conditions of his/her reception of Kelly's work. And as the white noise pulses over the lint surface, one's gaze pauses on the various details of the image, details that Kelly diagrams separately with accompanying captions. In the picture, is it the "shoulders of an artist, supporting his

companion who has *mal aux pieds*" that touches us? Or is it "a flag neither communist nor anarchist, but Vietnamese" that makes us pause? Perhaps it is the lyrical slogan "We want more time to live!" combined with the smell of "*les marronniers*, in bloom" that stays with us. What we locate in the image relies as much on where one was *there* in the moment of the picture *then* – was I even born yet? – as it does on where one is *here* in the moment of looking at this image/event *now*.

Bertolt Brecht's observation from "Popularity and Realism" is helpful: *Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.*⁴ However, as we see in both Kelly's and Godard's work, reality is not just the progression of events as they unfold in time, but the events themselves as they change upon our continual re-encounter with them. In normative realist representations, such as photojournalism, the following question arises: How does one maintain fidelity to the cultural moment of an event that has passed but nevertheless returns within a different set of cultural and ideological conditions? Moreover, what are the means of representing the event as *defined* by this temporal paradox; a paradox that mirrors the viewing subject's own historical position? The lessons of *Circa 1968* suggest that we must continually go to work on the very *means* of representing an event, which is to say that the artwork must *re-enact* the dilemma of the subject's divide such that one is forced not only to confront the moment of the 60s cultural revolution, in this case, but also to consider his/her *relation* to it in contemporary terms. For any authentic return to the 60s is as impossible as any dismissal of its inevitable return. In this way, the questions that *Circa 1968* ultimately leave us with are these: What is the legacy of the 60s cultural revolution today between the generations that Godard allegorically indicated as the young and the elderly? Moreover, who are the so-called "adults" that will critically negotiate this divide for us? *Circa 1968* does not presume to answer these questions. Rather, it beckons us all to ask them.

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 103.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 96.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *Collected Papers*, Vol. 5, (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 69
- 4 Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism," in Charles Harrison, ed. *Art in Theory: 1900 – 1990*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1995).

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