The Persistence of Identity

Alan Rutherford, MA3 2019

Introduction

National Identity is incredibly resilient and can persist and sustain itself through traumatic social events ranging from colonisation to conflict and occupation. This study will examine this *resilience of identity* in the context of a recent shift within my own creative practice that has gravitated towards philosophical concepts that were defined by Deleuze and Guattari and their use as tools within the context of the 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary art. Of particular interest are the concepts of *Assemblages*, *De/Re-territorialisation* and *Lines of Flight*. Assemblage theory can be described as the forming of composite parts that are fluid and find meaning in their arrangements, however temporary. In relation to contemporary art, such concepts can be mapped to the frameworks of 'trauma culture' and the 'ethnographical turn', as originally proposed by Hal Foster (1996) in his seminal book 'The Return of the Real'.

Within these Assemblages, identity can manifest itself in everyday objects and cultural activities that can act as signifiers of both the colonised and the colonisers. These signifiers can be latent within the agency, motives and psychology of both sides. Cultural outputs such as textile design, music, art, language, customs and traditions become the physical and metaphysical bodies of identity resilience, and eventually the reclamation of national identity through their endorsement is regained. However this is not a straightforward process and national identity is never crystallized, as it is always in a state of absorbing and expanding as it moves from assemblage to assemblage.

Fieldwork investigations engaged with the 'ethnographical turn' have consisted of site visits, local research, interviews, sound recordings and filming in Latvia. This has informed an awareness of the artist as ethnologist: the artist as observer rather than participant (observer/participant or self/other). The duality of exploring a particular concept and developing a working process around it, informs the possibility of using art as a lens to explore and interrogate a *resilience of identity* that exists in social and historical structures. Recent studio work seeks to analyse the complex set of relationships between social groups and society, their historicity, and the role that narratives have collectively played in this context.

The study also seeks to place the work within the space of a post-'ethnographical turn', a field that is becoming ever more complex. It investigates the duality of a practice that involves making site-specific and gallery-based work. A further layer is added through the gathering of documentation of ethnographic data. Finally, the experience of the audience is considered, exploring viewer involvement, understanding and response.

Assemblage Theory

Deleuze and Guattari formulated the concepts of *De-territorialisation & Re-territorialisation* and *Lines of Flight* as part of their Assemblage theory in 'Anti-Oedipus' (1972), which culminated in 'In A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia' (1980). In Assemblage Theory, assemblages (or relationships) are formed through the processes of coding, stratification, and territorialization. Any one philosophical context never operates in isolation. Edward Thornton (2018, p11) observes that:

> An assemblage is a set of connections that come together for a period of time and
> which, when taken together, produce a recognisable behaviour or effect…
> Throughout their work, Deleuze and Guattari will refer to the connections that constitute an
> assemblage as 'lines'...As an assemblage is not a static entity, but something dynamic, it is
> not always useful, or even possible, to answer the question 'what is it?' but only 'how does
> it function?' or 'what can it do?'

An art practice is similar, as it only temporarily settles because it is in a constant process of transformation - a Hegelian flux where new meanings and ideas are generated.

Lines of Flight

'Lines of Flight' suggests trajectory - a sense of passing in and out of spaces, the process of leaving territory. In 'A Thousand Plateaus', they are described by Thornton (2018, p11-12) as:

> These lines, which hold the assemblage together, are referred to as lines of rigid
> segmentarity, or molar lines. On the other hand, for the assemblage to reproduce
> itself in such a way that it survives over time, it must also be able to adapt or change.
> The lines which bring about these revisions are referred to as lines of supple segmentarity,
> or molecular lines. Finally, there are those lines that reach outside of the assemblage,
> those   parts of the assemblage that escape the structure of which they are a part and
> serve to connect such an assemblage to that which is outside itself. These lines are
> referred to as lines of flight.

Deleuze and Guattari were very much interested in identity, and the concept of the 'Line of Flight' was particularly influential in their analysis of social structures. Thornton (2018. p12-

14) notes that:

> Assemblages can only come into existence through the creative capacities that lines of flight expose...Deleuze and Guattari constantly warn that lines of flight have both a creative and a destructive capacity. The lines that escape the apparatus of the assemblage can open it onto new possibilities.

De-territorialisation & Re-territorialisation

In 'A Thousand Plateaus', the terms de-territorialization and re-territorialization are used by Deleuze and Guattari to characterize a constant process of transformation. De-territorialization is the process in which to undo what has already been done; to take control away from places that have already been established, or in other words, where "articulations are disarticulated" (Slack & Wise: 2015). Re-territorialization usually follows as a process to re-do what has been undone to what has already been done. The act of re-doing may incorporate new power, seeking to dissolve the past.

Figure 1: 'Sites of Memory' - Exploring Soviet cold war sites in Latvia

To understand the psychology, agency and motives for De-territorialisation & Re-territorialisation, we can look at some examples. One example may be pre-war Nazi propaganda: de-territorialization took the form of the banning and burning of books that contradicted Hitler's values, re-territorialization comprised replacing them with his own. Another example proposes the human body itself as a locus for de-territorialization and re-territorialization. Deleuze and Guattari claim that de-territorialization can be physical, mental or spiritual. It is intended to free up and disintegrate the fixed relations that contain a certain body and make new organisations available out of this (1994).

Nadhirah Nadzri (2015) outlines an argument for this, stating that "the Soviet Union territorialised Estonian women into the role of the working mother. However, the fall of the Soviet Union de-territorialised the women under its regime". Anthropologists use the term de-territorialized in a cultural sense to refer to a weakening of ties between culture and

place. This implies the removal of cultural subjects and objects from a certain location in space and time.

In recent work, I explore the contrast between factors such as historical events and geography that contribute to collective cultural identity, and agencies such as ideology, which can attempt to overwrite or suppress this identity. There are power relationships between the past and present in terms of ideologies, and power struggles between the past 'built environment' (such as monuments and Cold War sites) and present attitudes towards them. Within these struggles, there is an obvious tension, a construction and deconstruction of cultural identity.

Figure 2*: Alan Rutherford, My Job Is for my People, 2019*

The materials used address these relationships that exist between the past and present.

The work explores the type of historical places and cultural values that can act as a continuum that ultimately creates a resilience of identity through a series of short videos: the sea and the fish that it provides; the land and the crops that are grown; the trees and the fruit they produce. It examines the condition of loss and disappearance, where the past built environments become 'sites of memory'. By accessing found texts and researching local archives, pastiche re-creations of places and scenes are re-created and explored. The scenes have a visual 'Kuleshov effect' that makes a distinct contrast between such things as historical events, geography, ideology and collective cultural identity, which can all attempt to overwrite or suppress identity.

Figure 3: Alan Rutherford, *My Job Is for my People, 2019*

Tension with the past is also explored by using materials such as concrete blocks, suggesting a process of territorialisation. These are interspersed with video screens

presenting footage from site visits. A hybrid form is created where cultural identity sits on top of a built layer suggesting a 'utopia' of pure concrete. This then becomes a de-territorialized and re-territorialized place.

Art can give us the means to address the need for a dialogue between the past and the present. Addressing this type of dialectic can be found in the work of Lithuanian film maker Sarunas Bartas. Dr Renata Šukaitytė (2012, p126) observes that his:

Close-up and long shots accurately document the vanishing remains of yesterday's 'powerful' empire, and question the loss and disappearance of the former common territory (gr. nostos) and common belonging (gr. algia)

Identity, Memory & Narrative

If we explore the theme of memory and identity further, we find that in 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge', Jean-François Lyotard (1979) analyses the notion of knowledge in postmodern society and proclaims the *death of the grand narrative*, stating that metanarratives such as The Enlightenment and Marxism have become untenable due to the progress of technology. He proclaimed that "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" (1979). Alongside the metanarrative, he also talks about 'narrative knowledge', explaining that:

> Scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity.

Narrative knowledge is knowledge in the form of story-telling. In primitive times, myths and legends created knowledge of this type. The narrative not only explained, but legitimized knowledge, and when applied to the social relations of their own society, the myths functioned as a legitimation of existing power relations, customs and mores. Furthermore, these stories are legitimized through the role of the narrator who creates a sense of belief and understanding. Narrative knowledge thus has a powerful value within a society and identity is rooted within it. In the Baltic states during Communism, there appeared to be a kind of dual existence between the Communist metanarrative and local narrative knowledge. The wearing of traditional folk costumes and dancing was allowed and large parades would take place. To a certain extent, the Baltic states were thus allowed to act as narrators of their own narrative knowledge - political and cultural identities being played out on different levels.

Figure 4: Alan Rutherford, *My Job Is for my People, 2019,* still of Latvian folk dancers

'My Job is for my People', explores Assemblage theory and additionally the role that these narratives have played within the historical power relations of a society. In site visits made in Latvia, I came across objects where identity had clearly manifested itself. But whose identity was it?

In an essay by Lukas Brasiskis (2016), he notes that:

> According to Russian film philosopher Mikhail Lampolski, an archetypical plot of Soviet films features an ordinary person who lives outside of Grand History, but, in the course of the film, is pulled into a historical timeline and given an identity.

The individual is thus subsumed into the communal and becomes an actor within the state narrative.

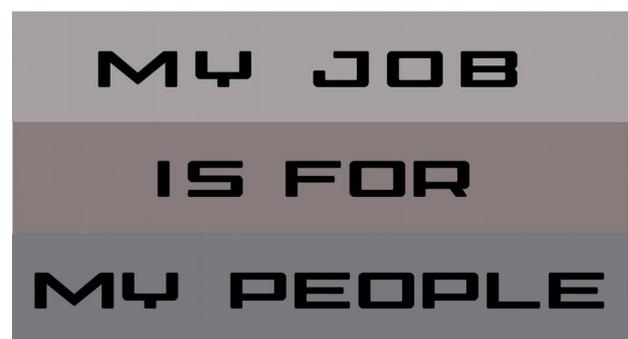**Figure 5:** Found text, Cold War site, Latvia

Figure 6: Translated text

Figure 5 was discovered during fieldwork and it clearly indicates a sense of the communal, rather than the individual. At the same site, a folio of workers' contract documents that were typed up in 1991 was found. The documents outline the new post-socialist ideals of

worker's rights, holidays and wages. Thus in existence at the same site, was evidence of both the communal and individual – Two different identities that resembled a perfectly preserved Assemblage. It reveals a transformation of national identity within a geo-political corridor that was once the frontline between two very different ideologies, which now functions as a bridge between the East and the West. In 'My Job is for my People', footage is shown of the remains of coastal defences that were once part of this ideological corridor.

Dr Sukaityte (2012, p125) describes the coming together of different identities such as narrative and metanarrative, and their existence as a type of Assemblage. She argues that "Cultural identities are built in histories: they are not fixed, but rather dynamic entities, which undergo constant changes and transformations under the influence of multiple power structures".

The study of identity, memory and narrative can be positioned within the discourse of post colonialism. In Sarunas Bartas' films, he approaches the recent history of the Baltic region, portraying a mix of emotions associated with the objects and places of the past. Dr Sukaityte (2012, p126) explains that:

> memories of the Soviet past can be seen as traumatic and nostalgic at the same time, still existing in a society which participated in both building and destroying communism and   its community…..They subtly remind us (through oral and visual objects and places attached to collective memory) of the collapse of a utopian Soviet state and testify to the dystopian consequences for the post-1989 Eastern European societies, including the coloniser and the colonised.

Thus at this point, the importance of objects and their association with identity and memory must be considered. Artist Christian Boltanski has explored relations between objects and memory over his long career. His installations (such as *Dead Swiss*, figure 7) often use materials such as found photographs, used clothing and rusted biscuit tins to trigger associations between viewers' own personal memories and imaginary memories of the anonymous lives suggested by these objects.

Figure 7: Christian Boltanski, *Dead Swiss*, 1990

Boltanski uses their power to focus on the *micro*, rather than the *macro*. He breaks down a volume or object into small meaningful components, where the notion of democracy itself can be considered. Whereas the meta-narrative and socialist ideology reduces individuals

to a large single entity, Boltanski (Maerkle, 2010) stresses that we must always think of people as one plus one plus one:

> I can imagine a scenario where someone says, "We're going to war but it won't be so bad, only 1,000 people will die and that's not so many." But it's not 1,000 people, it's one who loved spaghetti, one who had a girlfriend, one who loved football, it's always one plus one plus one. Democracy itself must be one plus one plus one, and if you quantify a group of people into a lump sum it becomes very dangerous.

So what did the end of the Cold War actually represent? For Jean Baudrillard, it did not represent an ideological victory; rather, it signalled the disappearance of utopian visions that were shared between both the political Right and Left. Just as the Situationist International had argued before him, that both Communism and Capitalism were equally totalitarian, Baudrillard (1994) contended that the ends they hoped for had always been illusions; indeed, as he argues in 'The Illusion of the End', he thought the idea of 'an end itself' was nothing more than a misguided dream:

> The end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values. Where are we going to throw Marxism, which actually invented the dustbins of history? (Yet there is some justice here since the very people who invented them have fallen in.) Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, this is because History itself has become a dustbin. It has become its own dustbin, just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin.

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Through the process of Globalisation from the 1990s we now have access to this 'dustbin of histories', but how do we investigate and explore this history? As artists do we offer an interpretation for the viewer or an explanation?

The Ethnographical Approach

Research can reveal the history of a place and also its current reality and its people. This can be described as an ethnographical approach, through which the artist can perhaps have a glimpse of Assemblages and better understand them. When an artist acts as an ethnographer, there are ethical issues associated with true objectivity and authorship. As Foster (1995, p174) points out, there are interesting ethical questions of power and presentation and representation, when he says that there is a danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of "ideological patronage". The artist must therefore attempt to ensure neutrality. The ethnographical approach is based on being an observer, as defined along the lines of self/other, and influences how the art that is produced is understood as a reflection of that observation process.

For artists, agency gives mandate for engaging with subjects and themes using an ethnographical approach. It can provide a commonality across all areas of investigation. An artist who uses ethnography and agency in her work is Sophie Calle. The ethnographic model in action is described in 'Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn' (Kuchler, 2001, p95):

Calle's use of the ethnographic present tense and also her staging and manipulation of self/ other relations draws heavily on the ethnographic model, in which fieldwork is used in order to reconcile theory and practice and to reinforce the basic principles of the participant/observer tradition

Figure 8:   Sophie Calle, *Gotham Handbook, Keep Smiling*, 1998

A mandate such as agency should be exercised with caution and used accordingly, with regard to ethical questions of power and presentation and representation. As in Foster's caution against 'idealogical patronage', the artist must similarly be aware of 'ethnographic ventriloquism' ("the claim to speak not just about another form of life but to speak from within it")' (Ruten et al, 2012)

However, agency also gives artists the power to transform. In 'My Job if for my People', the meaning of the found text is transposed, as it has left the site where it was originally found and has been abstracted. What does the text mean to the public audience? Where it came

from is less important than how it is used, its original source can be a caveat. It is situated

within the legacy of Duchamp's introduction of the found object and his 'Fountain'. The text

can change and transform. Artists Martin Boyce and Nathan Coley have used this

technique. In Boyce's 'Souvenir Placards', we see not the original protest placards, but a

conceptual representation of them. Tim Adams (2018) describes how it leaves viewers to

decide their own reading and meaning of the work:

> A mix and match of marchers' slogans: "Ban the Bomb", "Coal Not Dole", "Can't Pay, Won't
>
> Pay". The signs are either discarded for good, or feasibly ready for action, depending on
>
> your point of view.

Figure 9: Martin Boyce, *Souvenir Signs*, 1993

Similarly, in Coley's work 'There will be No Miracles Here' there is an absence of any

background knowledge (such as its 17th century origins), so that viewers are interrogated

about the status of the actual statement. They must decide for themselves what the

meaning and legitimacy of such a declaration might be.

Figure 10: Nathan Coley, *There will be no miracles here*, 2007-09

These examples suggests that it is a valid process to use abstraction and conceptual

methods to explore fieldwork findings, without the risk of being accused of

misrepresentation. For any artist working within the role of ethnographer, while there are

many things to consider, it remains a powerful tool for exploring identity and its many forms

of resilience.

Conclusion

Identity has a resilience that can survive political trauma, while also absorbing fragments

of other new identities. Lines of Flight means that traditional boundaries are crossed and

new ones are created, within an expansive field that is both synchronic (the social) and diachronic (the historical).

How we question and interrogate the historical past and its relation with the present must be considered carefully. How the findings of these investigations are represented can either create new critical readings of the subjects or merely act as a pseudo-ethnographic report, a disguised travelogue from the world art market (Foster, 1995). It is an interesting challenge for the artist to maintain a balance between *the self* and *the other* in his/her with the audience. To achieve this, the artist must be neutral and not be drawn into subjective ethnography. The artist Pierre Huyghe for example, empties himself of subjectivity which allows him to concentrate and focus more on the audience (Bouirrad, 2015).

The philosophical open framework proposed by Delueze and Guattari can be used to investigate the mechanisms that create change and transformation - where time, process and speed can be found at the heart of Assemblage theory. However theoretically complex, the work should be able to speak some kind of common language that is understandable to the audience. Otherwise, rather than engaging meaningfully with the work, the audience is relegated to admiring voyeur. And, as voiced in Postmodernist critique, it is the viewer, rather than the producer, who becomes the ultimate author of meaning (Derrida, 1976; Lyotard, 1979).

Word count: 3499

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