

ENGAGING CONSCIOUSNESS. TIME AND DURATION IN HOLLY BYNOE'S *COMPOUNDS*¹

GABRIELLE A. HEZEKIAH

Holly Bynoe's digital collage series *Compounds* offers an experience of space, time and image that exceeds photographic representation. Based largely on archival family photographs and found materials, the series is a project that explores questions of displacement, loss, rupture and knowing.² The series seeks to extend ideas of the photographic object through an exploration of surface tension. Bynoe describes the work as a kind of "poetic engagement with the past"—a recognition that memories are false and family stories complicated—an attempt to reconfigure images and render them more complex (Ibid). Her process of digital manipulation involves high-resolution scanning and Photoshop to produce a layered image of subtraction and abstraction. The result is a peculiar experience of time that I suggest stems from duration and spatial organization in the creation of the work. The collage *Brian* is particularly striking in this regard.

The central figure in *Brian* is a young man in what appears to be a photograph from the 1970s. The young man is in swim trunks. There is a house in what would otherwise be a background—but it floats and does not appear to be part of the same scene. The writing in the top left of the image seems to come from an official text. There are palm trees. All except a disembodied brown leg are in shades of black and white—but two sepia "age spots" indicate the presence of the past. The brown leg is bent but standing and is set against a pinkish hue. Behind the leg is a horizontal line of what appears to be a paisley marker—a threshold tile of the type found in a domestic space. It partially separates the dense, tree-lined portion of the collage from the legs in stasis and stilled motion. In this way, the collage is divided not into quadrants but distinct yet overlapping spheres. The spaces between the trees rise up like tall buildings. One has a sense of fullness though not of immersion. There is a play on surface. The scratches seem hand worked. Below the feet—of young man and brown leg—is a scratched border. This border extends perpendicularly halfway up the young man's body. His feet face forward, slightly turned out. The elements of the collage are perhaps drawn from different locations and different times but they all seem to be happening now. The young man faces us in a present moment. It is a peculiar sense of time. This is an image *of* time.

I am interested in exploring the particular mode of consciousness that allows this image to appear to me as an image of time. I wish to examine that which appears beyond the level of representation and of which there may be no physical trace. Holly Bynoe's

1 Many thanks to Andrea Kunard, Cyndie Campbell, Ann Thomas and staff at the Canadian Photography Institute and the Library of the National Gallery of Canada for access to research materials.

2 Holly Bynoe, interview with the author, 15 November 2016.

Compounds offer a unique opportunity to consider consciousness as—and at—the heart of the image. While there are clear connections to the social and political in this work, such an approach does not address the encounter with the work's internal character. This character is both more and less than an experience of historical time—and it suggests an attitude of openness and engagement that allows for the dissolution of a purely historical time and recognition of one more fundamental. This fundamental time of experience is what I have set out to investigate.

THE SOCIAL FACT OF REPRESENTATION

Imperial is a collage that addresses what I would call the construction and inscription of the colonial subject. There is the photograph of a woman. The dress and hair suggest a photograph of the early to mid-20th century. The woman's face is half light and half dark. The



FIG. 1
BRIAN (2010) BY HOLLY BYNOE
DIGITAL COLLAGE, 25 × 35 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

passport conveying British citizenship—or subjecthood—is inscribed upon it. The light side of the face is covered by signs of empire such as the British coat of arms. The dark side is covered with the physical description of the passport holder and the island of origin—Bequia. This locates the holder within a Caribbean space. But this is perhaps an image of two women. The hair is precariously positioned—like a wig or the hairpiece on a paper doll. The eyes are not quite the same and the neck appears to move beyond the established contours of the body. This is an exercise in layering and contrast. The background is also divided by shade. The white dress and grey sky anchor the image. In the background are the sharp angles of metal towers, bridges or scaffolding and buildings that seem metropolitan. The original images are spliced and arranged to produce a representation of the colonial British Caribbean subject and her relation to empire.

While *Imperial* calls to mind questions of inscription and construction, *The Fordes* points to the constitution of colonial subjectivity. The main figure appears to be a sartorial representation of colonial respectability and the outline that of a colonial gentleman. But he is built up and constituted by male and female figures of varying shades, all dressed quite formally and facing forward as if for official photographs.

Bynoe seems to have subtracted the original colour of the gentleman's face, adding disembodied faces and figures in its place, and the visage of colonial respectability is filled in with an undeniable blackness that almost exceeds its bounds. The pink hair frames a face that is stoic but jagged. There is the sense of an emerging timeline—of generations being built into a colonial figure—and the exposure of this edifice

as the underlying black skin beneath Fanon's white mask. *The Fordes* presents a corrective to history, illuminating a series of relationships that might otherwise go unacknowledged.

Where *The Fordes* presents a dense stack of constitutive subjectivity, *Pedigree* offers the deconstruction and unpacking of a portrait. Different in proportion from the others—40 × 40 inches square—this collage is clearly intended as a frame. We are drawn to read

this image as portraiture and also to see the posed subject as changing and receding over time. There are at least five photographs here. We see layers and expansiveness. Bynoe strips the constituent images and begins a process of separation that appears as a constellation—portraits floating in a galaxy of partially subtracted colour and sand-like granules, moving along an axis of personal memory. The frame within the frame also suggests the possibility of a mirror. The reflection is reminiscent of a series of nesting dolls. They pull away from the viewer. How deep and how far back is one prepared to go? In this collage, Bynoe seems to treat space as an unfixed backdrop for the unfolding of personal identity.

In describing his exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, curator Okwui Enwezor writes that it “delves into critical transactions predicated on opening up new pictorial and historiographical experiences against the exactitude of the photographic trace” (Enwezor 2007: 11). Similarly, we might read Bynoe’s experiments as an interrogation of received historical narratives through a reworking of the photographic trace. Official and unofficial narratives, history and memory and the repositioning of the face and figure within a complex political and social context all point to thoughtful juxtaposition as key to the understanding of the historiographical and the self. Images from the archive not only bring the personal into the collective and the political—they actively embody them. In these images we witness the compounded, multi-layered and jagged edges of specific historical processes. These are representations of social facts, extending outwards from



FIG. 3
THE FORDES (2010)
BY HOLLY BYNOE
DIGITAL COLLAGE, 40 × 60 INCHES.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

the photographic trace into the material and emotional web of imperial relations.

But Bynoe’s work also offers a more subtle space for interpretation. Beyond specific historical processes in these images lies a deeper relationship to the experience of time. In *Imperial*, I feel myself confronted with contemporaneous time. The time of empire is reflected in the time of the subject, the time of imperial writing and the time of the physical edifice.

These are simultaneous happenings in interconnected locations. In *The Fordes*, I experience a time built up over generations, ascending and accumulating in the figure of the gentleman. It is a time that lies behind. The events are embedded. Finally, in *Pedigree*, I am faced with a lengthening of time as individual images are separated and made to occupy an ever-widening space that seems to

extend to infinity. These descriptions approximate the temporal data that I experience as being presented immediately to consciousness. They are not specific to the historical processes addressed in the collages. They suggest a movement within the viewer that engages with movements internal to the images themselves. Such are the psychic facts that emerge beyond questions of the social and of representation.³



FIG. 2
IMPERIAL (2010) BY HOLLY BYNOE
DIGITAL COLLAGE, 40 × 60 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



FIG. 4
PEDIGREE (2009)
BY HOLLY BYNOE
DIGITAL COLLAGE, 40 × 40 INCHES.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

³ See Poivert (2016) for a discussion of images as social facts (representations) and the image as psychic fact of consciousness. I am indebted to his analysis. <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3594>

THE PSYCHIC FACT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Either you keep to what consciousness presents to you or you have recourse to a conventional mode of representation. (Bergson 1950: 66)

The spatial organization within the image in Bynoe's work corresponds in some way to the presentation of time to my consciousness. It teases out an underlying tension that is articulated through gaps and absences (Archer 2011). These gaps and absences are rendered visible – and communicable—through an experience of chronological time. This is a time that can be found in *Imperial*, *The Fordes* and *Pedigree* but is virtually absent in *Brian*. In *Pedigree*, the figure moves away from the viewer, detaching from the surface of the image along an axis that draws the viewer in. It is a timeline. In *Brian*, the main figure approaches. And the space is chaotic. There is no discernible arrangement that points to “before and after”. Space in *Brian* is always filled—with reflections, patterns or scratches—leaving no room for an interpretation of time in a conventional sense. What I experience in this image is not “time passing” (Massey 2016: 53) or a spatialized representation of time but time present and indivisible.

The spatialized representation of time is Bergson's manner of accounting for the quantifiable aspect of time understood as the chronological in our everyday. He enjoins us to attend to the immediate data of consciousness as presented through intuition and insight (Pogson 1950: vi) reasserting the primacy of experience and our inner life in the face of externalizing abstractions. He makes a distinction between real or concrete duration and mathematical or chronological time. Concrete duration is a lived experience of time as multiple and heterogeneous. It cannot be measured. Chronological time is a homogeneous time of discrete past and present. It is time “so to speak materialized” (Bergson 1950: 127). It is made up of boundaries. It is visualized and extends through space. I am suggesting that *Imperial*, *The Fordes* and *Pedigree* present us with space that delineates, shapes and quantifies our experience of time as contemporaneous, accumulated and extended. These collages are legible chronologically. But the figures in *Brian* are *de-spatialized*, inviting an experience of time as duration happening now, presented as psychic fact or mental image. It is time immediately presented to consciousness. In *Brian*, we no longer “project time into space” (Bergson 1950: 101). Instead, we encounter time as a form of fullness within the image.

By de-spatializing the original photographs and returning to surface, Bynoe has produced an arrangement that now has the freedom to express a fundamental time. The removal of conventional space returns us to duration. In this duration we experience time as indivisible. Bynoe has brought us to an experience of time in the archive that is not simply a representation or reconfiguration of the past. We come to experience what I call an *archival present*—a sense of fullness that is anchored in the intuition of a multiplicity of times happening now. This is facilitated by the time inscribed in the making of the image that then inheres in the final product. Bynoe describes the experience of time in the production of this series—hours of scanning and Photoshop—as reminiscent of an era when subjects sat for photographs.⁴ In this way, we see digital technology facilitating an experience that we associate with earlier forms of production. I am reminded of Benjamin and the aura—but also of Susan Edelstein who writes of “the accretions of time layered into the multiple moments of the image” (Edelstein 2007: 11) in the long exposure of pinhole photography.

These are all elements of psychic fact—an intuition of time and experience of duration within consciousness. They move beyond representation to engage with the inner workings of the collage. They suggest an organization of consciousness that touches an organization inherent within the image. But if “duration [durée] denotes not a thing, such as time, but the always individual act by which time is retained and prolonged in consciousness” (Worms 1999: 96) how does my individual act of consciousness produce an image of time?

⁴ Interview with the author.

MENTAL SYNTHESIS AND THE IMAGING CONSCIOUSNESS

| *But the image is a certain type of consciousness. The image is an act and not a thing. The image is consciousness of something.* (Sartre 2012: 144)

Pure duration is “a process of organization or interpretation of conscious states” (Massey 2016: 53) and Bynoe’s de-spatialization is a form of ordering and organization that brings this consciousness to bear. My sense of history—the sepia tones that suggest age and materiality—is dispersed in the image that *Brian* presents to my consciousness. It does not attach to a figure but floats on the surface of the scene. The text in the upper left suggests a memory of institutions—perhaps of education—but it is linked to concrete history only by an indirect line that moves across the human figures towards the tone near the bottom right. The disembodied leg is behind and beside the figure of Brian. It is not embedded and does not emerge. Brian is presented not as concretion but transparency. Through him I see palm trees and can barely discern a male figure facing left. Brian coming forward is a present stillness. My consciousness of past and present and the transparent link exists in the now.

Time retained and prolonged is not time extended. It is time synthesized and felt. The act by which this synthesis takes place sits just below the level of conscious awareness. There is an attitude of consciousness that is built up over the course of *Compounds*. It arises in the gaps between layers. It arises through a disjuncture between times—between surface and time. Elements of *Pedigree* drop out of the surface. These subtractions provide an opening through which consciousness connects. I am encouraged to meet—and to make—the image there. In *Brian* I synthesize prior experiences of divisible time with the time happening now. It is incorporated into past and present experience. I do not dismiss the existing photographs. They do not disappear. They serve as the ground that reflects this consciousness to me. The digital breakdown and reconstitution of the photographs allows time to emerge as the key subject and object of these collages. In Bynoe’s reworking of surface and space, the photograph *as* photograph—along with the notion of historical time—is dissolved. In its place is a mental image—grounded in physical representation but experienced as a reflection on this movement into time. To rework a phrase from Cadava (2001: 38): “For a photograph to be read as a mental image, it must encounter a constellation of dangers, not the least of which is its own dissolution.”⁵ The space-time link—now loosened—opens itself up to a relation of consciousness.

For Sartre (2004: 85), the image is a “relation of the object to a consciousness”. He conceived the idea of an imaging consciousness to account for the relationship between an external image, such as a photograph or a person present before us, and a mental image such as that experienced internally when we grasp a photograph intentionally or imagine an absent person in the mind’s eye. Through an imaging consciousness the viewer of a photograph *animates* that photograph, producing a mental image. The mental image, therefore, is not conjured purely in the mind of the viewer but in contact with and reflection upon the photographic image as presented. It is synthesis. We see the photograph but it becomes both more and less than that which it represents. As Sartre writes, imaging consciousness is “consciousness of an *object as imaged* and not consciousness of an *image*”. (Sartre 2004: 86) I am suggesting that in this work time itself becomes the object of an imaging consciousness. Bergson’s duration considers the ways in which space and time as we habitually understand them differ from the *experience* of time—and Sartre shows how this experience of time might be *imaged* in consciousness. In *Brian*, in my act of duration, past and present are synthesized to become consciousness of a time that is without spatial artifice. This is fundamental time, as imaged. And the imaging attitude provides the mode of consciousness through which I produce it.

REFERENCES

- Archer, Melanie (2011), “Turn of the Tide”, *Caribbean Review of Books*, paragraph 4. <http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/26-march-2011/turn-of-the-tide/> (04.02.2022)
- Bergson, Henri (1950), *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson, London, George Allen & Unwin.
- Cadava, Eduardo (2001), “Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins”, *October* 96 (Spring 2001): p. 35–60.
- Edelstein, Susan (2007), “Apparatus of Perception/Apparatus of Desire”, in: *Image and Apparatus: Dianne Bos, Arnold Koroshegyi, Donald Lawrence, Andrew Wright*, London, Ontario, Museum London.
- Enwezor, Okwui (2007), *Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument*, New York, International Center of Photography.
- Massey, Heath (2016), *The Origin of Time: Heidegger and Bergson*, New York, SUNY Press.
- Pogson, F.L. (1950), “Translator’s Preface”, in: Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, London, George Allen & Unwin.
- Poivert, Michel (2016), “La photographie est-elle une ‘image’?” *Études photographiques* No. 34. <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3594>
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (2004): *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, with introductions by Arlette Elkāim-Sartre and Jonathan Webber, London, Routledge.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (2012), *The Imagination*, trans. Kenneth Williford and David Rudrauf, London, Routledge.
- Worms, Frédéric (1999), “Matter and Memory on Mind and Body: Final Statements and New Perspectives”, trans. Pelagia Goulimari, in *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

5 Originally “For an image to be read (for it to ‘enter into legibility’ in the ‘Now of its recognizability’), it must encounter a constellation of dangers, not the least of which is its own dissolution.”