Figurations of memory in the virtual field of art (history)

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Abstract

The article discusses the location of memory and its relations with perception in contemporary art, as well as how memory takes part and resurfaces in artistic practice. I point to the impossibility of introducing a division between individual and collective memory and I refer to the notion of virtuality, which defines the immaterial visuality of memory coming into interaction with the perceived image that constitutes the expanded field of the process of construction and reception of an art work. In the second part of the text I provide a detailed analysis of means of visualising memory – the manifestations of its work that diversify the initial image – in the work of four artists: Zbigniew Libera, Gerhard Richter, Ken Aptekar and Izabella Gustowska. In conclusion, following Rosalind Krauss, I point to the necessity of redefining and "remembering" about the medium in contemporary art, with memory, in the context of the analysed works, as its founding element.

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Virtual memory and the perception of image

[1]   In contemporary art practices and theoretical reflection about them memory and temporality occupy an extremely important position. This phenomenon reflects a wider cultural situation described by Andreas Huyssen, who noted that in the final decades of the

20th century there has been a shift of focus from the modernist discourse of designing the future to the postmodern "memory fever", the interest in the past and memory, "from present futures to present pasts"[1]. He discusses memory as a subjective form of history, collective, cultural and individual memory rooted in the subject's experience and psyche. Memory, together with its determining obverse – amnesia – can work as a content as well as medium, the space for the emergence of an art work and its reception. Hence, it is possible to speak about the expanded field of visuality of images, which thanks to the medium of the artist's / viewer's memory initiated by perception engage in a dialogue with other images basing not only on the chronology of creation, but also on the anachronism of

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[1] Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia", *Public Culture* 12, 1 (2000), 21. As Huyssen remarks in the note, the notion of "present pasts" was taken from Rainhardt Koselleck's *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Cambridge 1985.

their experience by the ones who introduce them into the structural (creative and interpretive), temporally heterogenous game. Thus, memory, as a constitutive element of reception of all images and – in a more or less programmed way in an art work – their interpretation, is positioned in relation of the traditionally construed history at certain angle, allowing for a more dynamic and complex tracing of the past and experiencing the present.

[2]   In the present text I will be interested only in one aspect of the multidimensional relation between memory and art: the rarely addressed question of the figuration of memory, that is the means of its manifestation in art works made in the last fifty years, or the traces of memory as visual symptoms of its activity in the artist's / viewer's mind[2]. I treat memory, as I will show below, as a complex, individual-collective (non)presence revealing itself in the form of an image in memory or an impression stimulated by perception. I will concentrate on the relation between memory and perception / vision, and especially on the field within which there takes place the sense-producing merging of the perceived and remembered image. I define this field as a virtual surface of differentiation. This virtual interaction implies the expanded field of image rooted in the visual experience, its temporal extension and the loss of autonomy and immanence in favour of a constructive difference, which, nevertheless, can be founded on the specific nature of the initially perceived word. As a result of it there takes place a transformation, deformation, blurring or transition – towards figuration of memory.

[3]   Henri Bergson conducted a detailed analysis of the relation between memory and perception, emphasising the role of memory as a space of co-existence of the past and the present in the form of images-memories activated in perception: "the memory-image itself, if it remained pure memory, would be ineffectual. Virtual, this memory can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized"[3]. Actually – he states further on – "there is not perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details of our past experience"[4]. Hence, Bergson confirms that memory modifies perception, intervenes with it – it can complement it, but also weaken the clarity of the perceived image. It allows for the fluidity of time – its permanence and the transition from one perception to the next without any clear dividing

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[2] Joan Gibbons notices in an introduction to her book that the relation between seeing and remembering has always been very close: "the art of memory was essentially a visual art". Although since the 17th century the accuracy of images of rememberance has been questioned and linked with phantasmatic images, this relation remains very strong. Cf. Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory. Images of Rememberance*, London – New York 2007, 2. Unfortunately, Gibbons' book on memory in contemporary art is neither a convincing study for its lack of consistent methodology, as well as arbitrary, often very inaccurate choices of artists and works, as well as due to its reference to some of the most obvious works with repeated already established opinions about them.

[3] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, transl. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, London 1911, 163.

[4] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 24.

lines. The virtual layer of recollections merges with the perceived and "clutching" reality and time – claims Bergson – "constitutes the principal share of individual consciousness in perception, the subjective side of the knowledge of things"[5]. Although due to Bergson's conviction about the unchangeable nature of what has been remembered it is impossible to fully accept his ideas expressed in *Matter and Memory*, nevertheless he defines the key relation between vision and memory, between what is real and the virtual archive of memory. Let me add that for him memory is a virtual state somehow made immobile, potential, yet inactive, and to be activated it needs to be made actual in perception. Meanwhile, without dismissing Bergson's remarks on the relation between memory and perception, I suggest a broader application of the notion of virtuality – to memory (and other forms of imagined, phantasmic images) in action. The main sense is already hinted by etymology: the word "virtual" comes from the Latin noun *virtus* and at one point meant "a power of acting without the agency of matter" "[6], while "virtual" were things "inherently powerful or effective owing to particular natural qualities" and "capable of producing a particular result"[7]. In view of the above, although memory consisting of memory-images is immaterial, it is nevertheless able to influence the meaning of a particular image that is being crystallised in perception, that is its interpretation, to construct its field of influence expanded to include traces of other images, memories, or narratives. This virtual work of memory in the process of perception find its visual concretisation in the works of artists who take it into account as an element of seeing, and at times it becomes their main object of interest. As a result, the work of memory on the one hand materialises in the text of interpretation, on the other, in the visual substance of the artwork that lets this virtual dynamics of time and image be at least partly manifested.

[4]　　As Mikhail Iampolski wrote, "Sight without memory is blind [...]. A spectacle that is not immersed in memory, that has not benn granted access to the sources of Mnemosyne, remains a meaningles collection of disjoint fragments"[8]. Memory is, then, a kind of darkroom where images are being developed so that they can be seen, while vision rooted in memory is a necessary requirement for understanding, or at least for an interpretive movement in the network of references. Memory is a dynamic archive set in motion in the moment of confrontation with the image / object, which allows for its inscription in the structures of relations and meanings. What constitutes here a theoretical framework is intertextuality transferred into the field of perception and visuality[9]. In this perspective, understanding is based on recognition, that is on

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[5] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 25.

[6] In: *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1993; cited in: Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window. From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006, 254 (note 23).

[7] In: *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), 2nd ed., 1989, http://www.oed.com/ (accessed 23 May 2014).

[8] Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias. Intertextuality and Film*, Berkeley 1998, 2.

[9] Cf. the most insightful study of the theory of intertextuality in the context of images: Stanisław Czekalski, *Intertekstualność i malarstwo. Problemy badań nad związkami międzyobrazowymi*,

repetition, an iterative move not so much leading towards the final meaning, but postponing this meaning infinitely. Repetition – seeing as the recognition of what has already been seen – means, on the other hand, the inevitable invasion into the object of perception of a trace of a different image, which is being recalled in the memory-image (but also: constructed in imagination). Consequently, the situation where this other image virtually marks seeing and interpretation of its object finds its result, in case of an art historian / critic, in a produced text; in case of artistic practice there is either a more or less successful attempt to thwart this trace of the other, or – especially in contemporary art – a visualisation of this interaction – the figuration of the process of perception and memory. The resulting image marks the difference between perception and memory concretised in the form of memory-images, often leading to deformation, dislocation, and lack of clarity. As Kaja Silverman suggests, "the productively remembering look is one in which the imperative to displace has come to supersede the imperative to return"[10], and this displacement stems from various psychological process that transform memory and erase, repress, or thicken the images that are remembered or experienced in a different way. It is also linked with a changeable, unexpected hierarchy of value and strength of impact: "The unconscious »time« of any given perception – writes Silverman – can last as long as a life span, and bring about a much more radical transmutation of values than can its conscious revision. To look is to embed an image within a constantly shifting matrix of unconscious memories, which can render a culturally insignificant object libidinally resonant, or a culturally significant object worthless"[11]. Memory, then, is not locked in the value-making signposts shared by a larger community – namely monuments – but its virtual texture and the means of its visualisation depend on the unpredictable pulse of the economy of desire[12].

Individual and collective memory

[5]   Additionally complicating factor is introduced by the often posed question on the relation between individual memory shaped by the experience and psychological apparatus of an individual and collective memory, rooted in collective experience, shared traumas, phantasms, and visual archives[13]. Although the issue of memory as – so to speak – cultural and collective entity had not been addressed by Bergson, for example, it is fundamental for the understanding of forms of visualising memory and experiencing

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Poznań 2006. Intertextuality, discussed among others in reference to memory, constitutes also the basic methodological nspiration in my book: *Hopper wirtualny. Obrazy w pamiętającym spojrzeniu*, Toruń 2013, especially 36-54.

[10] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York – London 1996, 91.

[11] Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 2.

[12] On libidinal economy inscribed in looking see: Rosalind Krauss, *The Im/pulse to See*, in: *Vision and Visuality,* Hal Foster, ed., Seattle 1988, 51-75.

[13] This problem was a key issue addressed at the conference *Contemporary art versus individual memory* organised by the International Cultural Centre in Krakow (2 April 2014). The present article is an extended and edited version of the paper I presented under the title: "Pamięć, percepcja, wirtualność".

the world by what, following Silverman, I define as "remembering look"[14]. For, what we are dealing with here is an increasingly expansive spectrum of prosthetic memories, which broaden the accessibility and dynamics of individual visual experience: seeing marked by memory is enhanced by the mass media and technology, both by means of removable memory devices, accessible (visual) databases, as well as the Internet hypertext, which can be treated as an expanded field of the mind[15]. Materials from the past, made available through archiving and digitalisation – mediating yet also constructing direct individual experiences – are simultaneously available to wide, global communities. Briony Fer noted that on the one hand "technologies give access to different, multiple and unknown levels of reality, and by its mere presence, this access alters the encoding of our world[…]" – and on the other – "we have fewer and fewer individual memories, and most of the ones we now have are shared with an ever-increasing numer of men and women"[16]. In other words – the problem consists in the issue to what extent we share our memory, to what extent it is always already not-ours, but rather appropriated, what part of it constitutes a long layered existence, e.g. in the form of visual expressive forms, as defined by Warburg[17], and what part of it is an outcome of contemporary technological apparatuses of mass memory. In fact, the attempts to mark the borderline between individual memory linked to individual experience and memory formed by various technologies of collective experience and its mediations, seem entirely futile, while the problem posed in this manner seems inaccurately diagnosed. This kind of choice between individual and collective memory, that is the question about the subject of the work of memory, is described by Ricoeur as a "paralysing dilemma"[18]. On the other hand, Hans Belting approaches this problem a bit differently, proposing an anthropological perspective, nevertheless still pointing to an impossibility of introducing such a differentiation:

> Our internal images are not always of individual nature, yet even when they have their source in a collective experience, they become internalised, so that we regard them as our own […]. Thus happens an act of metamorphosis, when

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[14] On socially determined collective memory see: Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, transl. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago 1992. Definitions of collective memory that takes into account cultural conditions use the term "cultural memory" popularised by Jan and Aleida Assman. See for example Jan Assman, "Memory Culture", in: Jan Assman, *Cultural memory and Early Civilization*, Cambridge 2012, 15-70; as well as: Aleida Assmann's discussion of *Memory Spaces.*

[15] The notion of "prosthetic memory" in the era of mass culture features in: Alison Lansberg, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York 2004.

[16] Briony Fer, "The Infinite Line", in: Ian Farr, ed., *Memory*, London – Cambridge, Mass., 2012, 76-77.

[17] Literature on various aspects of Aby Warburg's theory is very extensive. One of the most interesting studies is: Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris 2002. On formulas of pathos (*Pathosformeln*), that is the visual expressive forms functioning in culture across centuries see: Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante,* 51-60.

[18] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer, Chicago 2004, 93.

perceived images are transformed into remembered images […]. Once we take images inside our body we disembody them, only to make them embodied yet again[19].

[6]   As a result of the constant movement of images mediated and re-mediated by the human body – mind, perception, and memory – there takes place appropriation and transformation that neutralises the provenance of particular memory in favour of a complex, partly new memory quality. The heterogenous structure of memory is also modified by the extent to which given event is traumatic. Dominick LaCapra notes that

> […] no memory is fully primeval. It is always influenced by elements that have their source outside the experience itself. An event produces a gap or rupture in the experience to the extent to which it is traumatic. Otherwise, it is being processed and hence changed, for it is being experienced through forms, archetypes, and stereotypes assimilated or developed in the course of life[20].

[7]   Even this brief selection of theoretical reflections on the topic indicates that considerations of forms of individual and collective memory as separate categories will always result in an unclean cut, a rhetorical or notional distillation, which finally may prove fruitful not holistically, but heuristically, within the frameworks of the locally framed problem. Therefore, if in the context of art that intentionally or unintentionally is always already a work on the existing image existing in memory or materially we take as a starting point the isolated archive of already constructed and accessible images, photographs, films, and museum objects (whose creation involves after all some part of individual experience), the way they are transformed in the expanded field of virtual differentiation becomes an individuating mark, embedded in a specific experience, even if it is shaped within the framework of a collective, and to a large extent it is determined by the psychological apparatus of both the artist and the viewer.

Figurations of memory

[8]   The discussion of various means of figuration of memory in the work of Polish and international artists (Zbigniew Libera, Gerhard Richter, Ken Aptekar, Izabella Gustowska) proposed below is not meant as a systematic analysis, nor does it exhaust the problem of the function of individual and collective memory in contemporary art since the 1960s. Nevertheless, it is meant to outline a particular kind of perspective of analysis of the work of memory in art that can be applied also to other works. Although I will write here about the relatively well known works and artists, the common theoretical framework proposed above will allow to read their work from a particular kind of perspective. I do

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[19] Hans Belting, *Antropologia obrazu. Szkice do nauki o obrazie*, trans. Mariusz Bryl, Kraków 2007, 28.

[20] "The memory of trauma" – continues LaCapra referring to the problem that is perhaps the most discussed in contemporary art – "is always a secondary memory, for the event is in this case not identical with the experience or directly remembered, but it requires reconstruction on the basis of results and traces. In this sense, even the original, and especially the secondary, witness and historian do not have a completely direct access to the experience itself". Dominick LaCapra, *Historia w okresie przejściowym. Doświadczenie, tożsamość, teoria krytyczna*, trans. Katarzyna Bojarska, Kraków 2009, 139 [translated after the Polish version].

not intend to discuss "monumental artworks", historic pieces in the traditional meaning of this word, but the kind of works that reveal difficulty – and illusion – of constructing a clear image of the past, that visualise this mechanism demonstrating the already discussed element of forgetting, deformation, lack of clarity. If the first of the discussed works – Libera's *Positives* – emphasise the issue of collective remembrance and shared history, other examples represent a clear merging of the elements of collective memory with micro-stories about the biographical or autobiographical entanglement in history, the medium, or language. In all the discussed cases memory becomes somehow visualised, yet it also is an active factor problematising the used medium, transforming and shaping the visibility of images; significantly, the merging of memory and perception, the expanded, virtual (memory-imaginative) field of these works constitutes an inherent aspect of their reception and interpretation.

[9]   I shall begin with Zbigniew Libera's *Positives* (2003), which have been discussed widely and accurately in the context of memory, so I will only briefly refer to one of the work's aspects (fig. 1). The series of staged pictures taken on the basis of well-known photographs giving testimony to important episodes from the past, seems like a signifiant repetition: they constitute a history already formed into history, a Barthesian "that-has been" transformed by the screen of the contemporary into "what – and how – is": the past lasting in the present[21]. The initial, "original" is virtually transformed, "re-photographed" with the remembering look, which remembers through and from a temporal distance. These are contemporary positives, "developed" from the negatives of the past. Libera shows memory, for example of concentration camps, adapted to the nature of contemporaneity, that is the present lack of transparency of the past photographic message. Their banality, inadequacy or grotesqueness marks the differentiating power of the process of remembering, additionally generationally diversified. Libera, as Ewa Domańska argued in the context of the "camp-related" *Residents*, calls for a break with martyrological ideology and visualises the desire for such a break inscribed in the look[22]. These photographs show also the ambiguity inherent in the medium of photography as *pharmakon*: on the one hand, they help to remember, yet, on the other, in their reproductive repetition they seem like the sandpaper of memory, anaesthetising the painful wound of history. This anaesthetic, or an introduction of an alternative form of sensation, is, nevertheless, inevitable due to its irreducible difference of experience and – if a complete erasure proves impossible and some forms or traces of memory remain – should not, as it seems, be treated as a value-making element. Libera executes a performative staging based on well-known photographs, that is, he makes literal the visual remembrance in action that can be termed a *tableau vivant* – a

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[21] Cf. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard, New York 2010.

[22] Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006, 231-245.

living picture that becomes alive after the live of the "original". In other words, Libera does not create new images, but he visualises the layers of time and the meaning-related, reception-based virtual changeability of these photographs dependent on the mechanisms of memory[23]. *Positives* is a result of a contemporary and past looking, an image of displacements and repetitions petrified in one form. This work requires recognition, that is the merging of the perceived and remembered image, for the viewer is presented with a preparation of the process of complex memory constructed by the artist. Although most of all it concerns collective memory, the effectiveness of it, based on recognition indeed, depends on individual erudition and may be different depending on the viewer.

1 Zbigniew Libera, *Residents*, from the series *Positives*, 2002,
photograph (courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw)

[10]   Since the 1960s we have witnessed an unprecedentedly clear – although not necessarily making the image clearer – encounter between the mediums of photography and painting in pop art and photorealism. In short, one might say that photography, with its often questioned yet still valid documentary ethos, somehow soaks into the canvas and becomes filled with the artist's subjective vision identified with the medium of painting. This practice has at the same time been a form of reflection on the inadequacy of photography to the reality of events and time towards which it was supposed to be transparent. A remarkable example of this can be found in selected *Fotobilder* by Gerhard Richter, painted since the sixties. Blurring, erasures or unclear contours in many of his works of this type I would like to interpret as a form of figuration of memory, that is the impact of virtual space between images and points in time – a trace of the difference

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[23] "Culture becomes a man's natural habitat. Nature is governed by evolution. I am interested in how certain constant elements of culture evolve, for example these famous pictures. Geneticists intervene into living organisms. I played a person who intervenes with the living structures of memory. I have become a »memetist«" – pisze Libera. Cited in: Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne*, 240; originally in: Marcel Andino Velez, "Pamięć genetycznie zmanipulowana", *Przekrój* 7, 3060 (2004) 73.

between the initial photographic image an the artist's contemporary reception, the image of the past coming back as a spectre; as a faded or not always readable after-image. Painting is then a dialectical practice of remembering and forgetting, of seeing and short-sightedness: the come back of photography on canvas shows traces of a difficult road it had covered. The smile of uncle Rudi (*Onkel Rudi*, 1965, fig. 2) – seen on the portrait of the artist's family member in Wehrmacht uniform – seems as inadequate as the smiles of Libera's staged prisoners of history – and memory. This family smile seems out-of-place due to the series of displacements and conflicts of several contradictory memories – especially the individual memory of the artist and his family relation with the portrayed man and the collective coding of the Nazi uniform as a *signifiant* of maleficent history. The lack of sharpness of the image stems from this very conflict, from the traumatic clash of memory and history inscribed in it.

2 Gerhard Richter, *Onkel Rudi*, 1965, oil on canvas (© Gerhard Richter 2014)

3 Gerhard Richter, *Tante Marianne*, 1965, oil
on canvas (© Gerhard Richter 2014)

[11]   The differentiating merging of the individual remembered experience and the fate of people determined by the mechanisms of history is also apparent in *Tante Marianne* (1965, fig. 3), which shows Richter – then still an infant – with his aunt who, despite her German nationality, was murdered by the Nazis during the second world war because of her mental illness. Here, the lack of clarity of the original photographs seems to be a form of mourning and visualises Richter's micro-history as a metonymy of individual memory, entangled in the mechanisms of collective memory[24].

[12]   On the other hand, in *September* (2005, fig. 4), referring to quite recent events, Richter repeats in his painting the well-known photographic image of the attack on New York and at the same time, with clear brushstrokes, he over-paints it, rubs it, marking this way the process of emotionally detaching media diffusion of images, which makes us forget not so much the image itself, but its transparency towards the real event, its reference. However, the painterly lack of the photographic clarity can also offer a chance for refreshing memory: the gesture of painting, the texture of painting itself, is experienced as a site of impact, aggression, an act of destruction of the clarity of image analogous to the destruction of the stable, architectonic structure of the towers of World Trade Center. Here, yet again, seeing is related to remembering, a differentiating merging of actual and remembered image, for most of us mediated, and hence broken with photography and video recording, as well as the conditions of seeing and remembering imposed by the passing of time and contemporary visual culture.

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[24] See an interesting analysis of the role of lack of focus and blurring in this painting in: Louise Curtis, "Nieprzezroczystość malarstwa: *Tante Marianne* 1965", transl. Filip Lipiński, *Arteon* 12 (2011), 24-26.

4 Gerhard Richter, *September*, 2005, oil on
canvas (© Gerhard Richter 2014)

[13]   Memory as an element of reception of an artwork and an attempt to visualise this reception constitute the conceptual framework of Ken Aptekar's painting. The common denominator of his work is the linking of image and text, whose source is found in the autobiographical memory of past experience or reactions of other viewers activated by an image he quotes. Aptekar examines art and – as Mieke Bal has persuasively shown – preposterously visualises the merging of the past and the present and the relevance of past masterpieces made subjective through reception, their long lasting and changing meanings[25]. What is crucial here is the procedure of action: the artist copies an element of the picture that interests him or juxtaposes fragments of several works and closes them under a glass plate attached to the surface of the painting and then by means of sandblasting inscribes a text on it. The detail, for example a feather from a hat worn by a figure in Caravaggio's painting (*Where'd you get the red hair?*, 1996, fig. 5), activates fetishistic memory and a narrative of an artist-as-a-boy; at different occasions the textual substance of Aptekar's painting is offered by a narrative of a different viewer, reacting to an artwork in a gallery. The structure of signification of the emerging work is shaped not only by the verbal language, but also by the choice of frame, the change of colour and size, and in some works yet another pictorial quote. The text is not just an "exterior" element, imposed on the initial masterpiece that the artist analyses, but as a

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[25] Mieke Bal reaches for the notion of *preposterous history* to define a situation where reading of a past masterpiece (in this case: Caravaggio) becomes – to use my terminology – virtually reshaped or actualised by an art work that quotes it at present (in this case: Aptekar). At the same time this relation is mutual. There is an absurd (*preposterous*) reversal of chronology, neutralisation of diachronic difference between "pre" and "post" in favour of a fruitful synchrony of the reception of two works brought together. Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago 1996, 4-8; analysis of Aptekar's work especially on pages: 77-98.

parergon it constitutes its virtual, expanded field, verbalised memory activated in seeing. As a result, his works are preparations of the subjective experience of the work by the artist / the viewer, based on perception and visual-discursive reversal projection on this work, captured like an insect behind the glass. This ambivalence of meaning in the pictorial hybrid is confirmed with the verbal text and appears as a thickening, that is, as a figuration into an image of virtual dynamics of traces, between perception and memory that it activates.
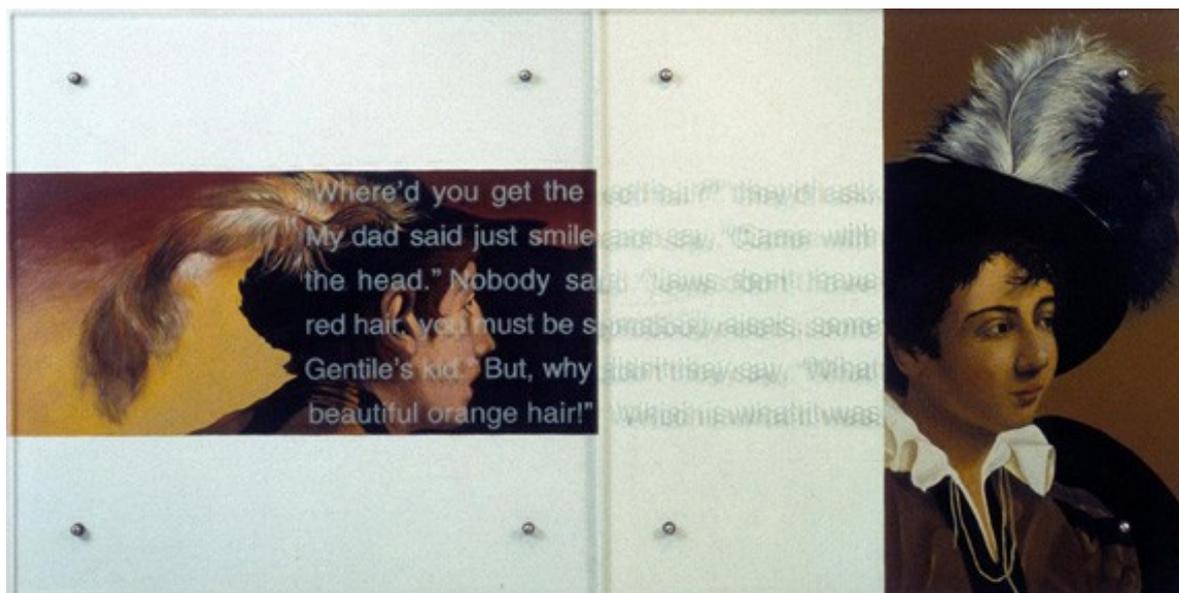
5 Ken Aptekar, *Where did you get that red hair?*, 1996,
oil on board, glass plate with sandblasted inscription,
screws (courtesy of the artist)

[14]   In his most recent project, *Nachbarn* from St. Annen Museum in Lübeck, planned for 2016, consisting not only of a series of paintings and drawings made in the above described technique, but also of video projections, Aptekar attempts to address the present through visual archeology of the past[26]. This way art is supposed to become a sensor of shared places deeply rooted in cultural memory of the eponymous neighbours: especially Catholic Germans (the museum is partly a former monastery), Russian Jews (with a synagogue located right next to the gallery) and Turkish Muslims, whose mosques are also located in the vicinity (due to the limited length I shall omit this motif). Aptekar's works are not meant to provide a comprehensive history of the troubled co-existence of the first two groups, from the 13th century, through the traumatic period of the second world war, up to the still conflicted present, but to point to images as a potential level of encounter that the artist prepares especially for local viewers. The work will become a kind of history-embracing mirror, with the Other emerging right next to one, and, it would seem, the clearly marked differences of identity stop being so obvious.

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[26] I would like to thank Ken Aptekar for giving me information about this project. Due to the limited length of this text my description of the project focuses on selected aspects and omits some of its parts.

The partly quoted altarpiece from the church of St. Annen will be laced with parts of texts – narratives of the wartime micro-history of certain Jewish family. On the other hand, the loaned painting of Max Libermann, *The Twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple* (1879), will be presented in the gallery that is a remnant of the church next to the quote in Aptekar's painting with a German inscription "Jews in the church of St. Annen" and a complex video-installation that will allow for a layered concentration of the past and the present, time and space (fig. 6). The camera directed at a fragment of Libermann's painting will transmit the image to the screen in the museum hall, while the second camera installed there will record on its background the entering public. This two-layered image will appear simultaneously in the gallery next to the original, seen through a glass plate with an inscription "The Twelve-year-old Jesus in the neighbouring synagogue". Aptekar interprets Liebermann's painting, which stops being a mere presentation of a Biblical subject, and becomes a field of inscription literally displacing the visually and verbally mentioned "Jews" and the Christ – from the synagogue to the church of St. Annen, from painting to architecture, from the past to the present, with clear trace in the form of figures of viewers appearing in real time between the surface of the image and the surface of inscription. The character of Aptekar's arrangement makes them take a position not only on the safe side of the detached viewers anchored in their own positions, but they become somewhat captured inside the image, they see their reflections in it and they are their elements, forced to ask about their place and identity in this spatio-temporal exchange, travelling with their moving sight from one place to the next, in time. The work of perception and memory is of social nature here, for the image becomes a field for the breaking of the borders imposed by language and history, archeology of the contemporary existence of the neighbouring citizens of this part of a German city.

6 Ken Aptekar, *Die Juden in der St. Annen Kirche*, 2014,
computer study for a work prepared for an exhibition
Nachbarn, to include: oil on board, glass plate with
sandblasted inscription, śruby (courtesy of the artist)

[15]   This kind of differentiating layering of memory in its collective-individual entanglement constitutes the main theme of intermedia projects of Izabella Gustowska – a case different from the previous ones and the last one I will be discussing here. Her piece *The Art of Difficult Choice* (2007) included a wall of light-boxes with circular, monochromatic, green fragments of film stills, as if they were moments of the focus of the eye of memory, fragments of a remembered film fabricated behind the glass. Gustowska conducts here a memory internalisation, an appropriation and hence transformation of images from mass culture. In the context of this work Paweł Leszkowicz wrote about the visualisation of "postmodern unconscious", linked with the filling of the layers of the subconscious memory with the mass of images perceived daily, especially the suggestive moving cinema images. These works can be seen as a result of their working through, their repeated organisation on the internal screen of the mind, in the dialectical movement between projection and introjection, conscious and the unconscious[27].

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[27] Leszkowicz describes this process in the following way: "The dynamics of the postmodern unconscious depends on two psychic and visual processes, projection and introjection. First, images need to be produced and sent to our consciousness, this is why contemporary visual culture surrounds us with their enormous amount. Next, our consciousness makes a selection and accepts these projected beams of light, and we are the screen for this projection. The images that manage to get inside and become a part of the unconscious and fantasy, get there through processes of introjection, that is internalisation, where the physiology of perception is linked with its psychology. It can be compared to the processes of image particles getting through the sieve of conscious perception, and then to the new level of unconscious organisation, which will become a matter for phantasmatic composition. *The Art of Hard Choices* introduces the viewer to this kind of psycho-visual sphere of exchange, the intertwining of the exterior and the interior, projection and introjection, unconscious and fantasy, conscious and the unconscious". Paweł Leszkowicz,

[16]   For several years, the Poznań-based artist had been working on a several-part project titled *The Strings of Time* (2008–2012), constituting – generally speaking – a testimony of an analysis of the process of her own reception of the painting of the American artist Edward Hopper, which becomes increasingly immersive and existential, and finally even partly political[28]. The first two parts (*The Case of Edward H.*, *The Case of Iza G.*) have the form of hybrid video works. In the former (fig. 7) the camera, much like an eye, travels not so much on the surface of the canvas, but on its reproduction, it reacts to it, it approximates or moves back, through which the artist points to the mediated, yet not entirely reduced, visual experience of images. At the same time sounds can be heard from off-screen – words and music, while the image is gradually becoming monochromatic, after which, for a moment, it is being radically misshapen: it is a moment of transition and a morphing shift into a film image subconsciously signalled through sound and modulation of colours and associated by the artist with a painted image. Deformation, or the distortion of a "clean" image are symptoms of the visual image struggling against the remembered image, the actual with the virtual, their diversifying symbiosis resulting in their changing visibility. This way Gustowska conducts an apt diagnosis of the contemporary function of Hopper's painting in visual culture through figuration of mechanisms of individual-collective, cultural memory and mediation. In the next part, *The Case of Iza G.*, she literally – by crossing the surface of the screen – goes one step forward, for Hopper's painting in dialogue with cinema creates a hybrid space of phantasmic projection, where the artist immerses herself: she becomes both the subject and the object of the gaze, linked by a umbilical cord of fantasy marked by traces of memory[29].

"Medialne introspekcje", in: *Life Is a Story*, cat. ex., ed. Ewa Hornowska, Poznań 2007, 85.

[28] I write more about the first two parts of *The Strings of Time* in my book *Hopper wirtualny*, 415-427, drawing, among others, on Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the figure. A version of this sub-chapter was published as: Filip Lipiński, "Struny czasu: figuracje »Hoppera wirtualnego«", in: Anna Borowiec i Magdalena Piłakowska, ed., *Izabella Gustowska, 66 Persons Search for Iza G.*, (in Polish and English), Poznań 2013, 211-245.

[29] This mechanism was aptly described by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen: "The fantasy […] is there in front of me, in the mode of *Vorstellung*: I (re)present it to myself. Better still, I (re)present myself in it through some »other«, some identificatory figure […]. But the point from which I contemplate the scene – the fantasy's »umbilical cord« one might say […], is not offstage. I am in the fantasy". Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, Stanford 1988, 44–45.

7 Izabella Gustowska, *The Strings of Time. The Case of Edward H.*,
2008-2012, film still (courtesy of the artist)

8 Izabella Gustowska, *The Case of Josephine H*., 2014, film still
(courtesy of the artist)

9 Izabella Gustowska, *The Case of Josephine H*., 2014, film still
(courtesy of the artist)

[17]   In April 2014 Gustowska finished a project titled *The Case of Josephine H.*, with references to *The Strings of Time*, yet autonomous from it, a forty-seven-minute-long film, which concentrates on Hopper's wife (fig. 8, fig. 9). If previous works were a form of the contemporary reception of the painting of the American artist, this one constitutes –

a feminist and hence political – attempt at not so much recalling the art of Josephine who had been overshadowed by her husband, but her voice in the form of the text written in her diaries and concerning her work, private life, and dilemmas. This form of memory in a heterogenous moving image, with contemporary New York as the common ground and plot location, always already marked by the memory of Hopper's painting, is based on the quoted text by Josephine, dispersed in the multiple subjectivity of numerous female protagonists of the film, broken with this text of subtle virtual traces of her husband's painting requiring from the viewer the work of memory, and finally a self-inscription into the film image made by Gustowska, who marks this way the inevitability of her part in this remembering, her presence on both sides of the screen. Through her manipulation of the image, its dynamics, the multiplicity of perspectives, the narrating subjects, and the chromatic shifts Gustowska activates the memory of Jospehine – no longer about the historic subject dissected in the utopian belief in the possibility of a real re-construction of the past, yet she constructs anew the visual-discursive space for Josephine's "text", translating it into a contemporary image, whose tissue is the unbreakable merging of the blurred, fantasy-filled memory, perception and the corporal being in the world, even if this world increasingly often takes the form of yet another screen.

Medium and memory

[18]   As a conclusion I would like to ask about the medium used by the above discussed artists in their practice or in the particular analysed works. The virtual field of their work I drafted here suggests an immanent impurity of the traditionally construed medium and the necessity of dismissing the question about its specificity. Each of them is characterised by a complexity in terms of the ontology and the medium generated by the look of the artist / viewer: Libera questions the transparency of photographic images, staging them and virtually planting it in other pictures: he treats them as a symptom of condition of memory and history; Richter as if "repaints" photographs, incorporating the work of memory; Aptekar treats the artworks he quotes as screens for projection that diversifies the initial work with image and text, but also – in case of his project in Lübeck – the field of potential encounter of diverse memories and identities; Gustowska, reaching for the medium of video, visualises via medium the complex merging of perception, memory and fantasy, projection and narcissistic self-projection. The question about the medium of figuration of memory in these works does not have to be discounted with a statement that it is the art of the era of "post-medium condition". In her most recent book, *Under Blue Cup*, Rosalind Krauss writes that the increasingly more recurrent dismissal of the question about the medium is a symptom of its being forgotten in contemporary art and the necessity of its redefinition. It is no longer a "material support" of the work, but a "technical support", a set of operating rules, a conceptual and procedural "scaffolding", whose inclusion is a condition for the signifying substance of

artworks so neglected by the critics of close reading[30]. Reinventing the medium by some contemporary artists whom Krauss discusses and their reflection on its nature, even if this nature has a paradoxical, differential status, is in her opinion a form of memory allowing for an answer to the question: "who are you?", that is about the definition of your own position (if not identity) in relation to artistic tradition. In the works discussed above there takes place a doubling of stakes: what we are dealing with is memory which revealing itself visually as a symptom of the remembering perception constitutes at the same time an element of the medially complex nature of the works. In other words, medium is here not just a form of remembering, but also memory itself is a part of the complex medium. In view of the above, if the question about the medium – as Krauss puts it – is related to the memory of "who one is", then one might say that in the analysed works memory and the various means of its figuration in the virtual field of art (history) is a reflective form of self-awareness, a reflection on the place and way of being in world of the artist, the viewer, and the image that affects them.

Translated by Karolina Kolenda

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[30] Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012. Krauss' reflection is related to her personal experience of loss as a result of illness and regaining her own medium of memory and language. I discuss her controversial yet inspiring book in a more detailed manner and in the context of her entire oeuvre in a sketch "Rosalind Krauss: przekraczanie modernizmu?", in: *Didaskalia* 111 (2012), 41-50, especially 46-48. The notion of "postmedia condition" I referred to above has been used and critisised by Krauss in various texts since around 2000.