

ERIN M. RILEY

Look Back At It

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*Three thousand six hundred times an hour,
The second hand whispers "Remember!"*
Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, (L'Horloge)

***Semper eadem*ⁱ – the shock absorber of projective reminiscences**

Speaking as neither a quantum physicist, nor ontological philosopher, what is a temporal paradox? I have a sense we've smacked hard into one. Since encountering Erin M. Riley's practice, as a writer on visual culture – a creature of altogether less *guileful* brain – I have been thinking a lot about artworks that have a capacity to impact the linearity of time. To stop it *dead* in its tracks and/or cause it to repeat and loop. In its simplest terms, in science fiction for example, a 'temporal paradox' is a hypothetical contradiction of cause-and-effect within a timeline that results from travelling backwards. Can conscious or unconscious action/s, in the *present*, of looking *backwards* (memory – willing or unwilling, in other words) potentially have the same impact? In ontological logic I believe they might, at least it muddies the temporal waters sufficiently to raise probable doubt, which itself causes effect, or affects causeⁱⁱ.

Erin M. Riley's title for her first solo exhibition with mother's tankstation, *Look Back At It*, is as apparently (correspondingly) simple as it is confounding. Look back at *what, when, how, why?* Here these are crucial, life-changing, questions. The most apparent thing is, that otherwise there is little option if we want some form of viable present or indeed a free(r), less past-impacted-future... The tense of the imperative command is *emphatic*, urgent, yet the clarion voice that breaches the here-and-now, summons an imperfect past. *Back we go*, just like being bungee-roped to a heavy rock, causing a temporal effect that clearly apprehends that we might get eternally locked in a purgatorial rift of perpetual presenthood; damned to repeat a quotidian shock, from which we might never recover, never move on. If that's not a sort of a *Predestination Paradox*, then I'm Mickey Mouse, or Einstein. Relatively.

The spatial firmament is here in the loomed microcosm of Erin M. Riley's work (it's hard to avoid either/or weaving and temporal metaphors with Riley's dialectically ancient and modern practice of weft-faced tapestry): "*Metaphor [itself] takes on the doublenessⁱⁱⁱ of the woven grid, the horizontal 'carry across' of the bar and the vertical 'digging in' of the posts: a substitution of one word for another in a kind of vertical temporality . . . In the related images of skin and clothing, loom and language, we have the idea of the limit/boundary, the relational differential interface between inner and outer, at which meaning is made.*"^{iv}

At *whence* meaning was made... Weaving as a practice and textiles as a productive outcome, are as ancient, primal, as things get and all the way to their foundations inextricably bind time and women, women as keepers of the past and tellers of the future. The mythologies that buoy these metaphors, warp and weft, rise and fall, vertical, horizontal, immanence and potential all reflect and reify the inescapable embodiment of women as weavers and weavers as women^v: Aside from mythology, textile production has traditionally been the domain of women, an apparently DNA-encoded 'gendered' space. In *hunter gatherer* societal pre-history, hunters (male) who came home empty handed

were thought as *noble unlucky* – innocently bested by angry beasts perhaps (?). Gathers (female) however, if failing in their role were conversely tarred with the brush of sloth or seditious indolence. But what, throughout the ages – from then to now - has our DNA-encoded gender prejudices to do with fairness? In trying to be 'objective' the 1960s, historian Jack Zipes noted: "*From the early formation of grazing societies up to the nineteenth century, women participated in almost all the work that concerned spinning. They took care of the animals and helped plant the flax; they cleaned and prepared the wool and roasted, broke and hatched the flax. They did practically all the spinning. That is spinning became the 'privilege' of women, and it was considered [and sanctioned] as their domain, [precisely] because it allowed for their domestication.*"^{vi} Through such *domestication* weaving perniciously gained associations of 'virtue' in the sense of *chastity*. The anachronistic wording of the account compounds the temporal problematisation of gender embodiment in weaving: women do the work, and if they don't they get the all the blame. They probably get the blame anyway. Riley emphatically roots through this ancient scrapheap, the lyric poetry of embodied allegory and simultaneously bins it and builds upon it. Demonstrating how time, attitude and action can endlessly repeat. Riley's subconscious appears to act like temporal shock absorbers buffering lost days by reliving them in the present.^{vii} Her hard-hitting and arresting imagery is searingly honest – sourced and meticulously collaged from personal photographs, hard-copy documentation, newspaper clippings and accumulated ephemera – it interrogates past-to-present observation. Fantasies, traumas of inner and outer violence, generational acts of domestic abuse and addiction, that provoke intimate questions of the 'self'; the sense of autonomy, of worth and purpose. *Semper eadem*.

The paradox of simultaneously embracing and rejecting a personal history indissoluble from the powerful allegorical culture of woven tapestry is a core to the understating of Erin M. Riley's complex work. There are dialectics aplenty, hard forks in "*the most perilous but straightest road,*"^{viii} presence/absence, love/hate, desire/loss, acceptance/rejection, anger/tenderness. But a pivotal consideration around which all orbits is that Riley's work circles back to the practice, purpose and unpolluted interpretation of art before the era of 'Art', as articulated by Hans Belting; "*Art may even [then] be understood as another sort of language. With this I do not mean the conventional metaphor of a poetical "language of art" but rather a system of symbolic communication locked into the forms themselves.*"^{ix} Yet Riley's work intuitively counters this with the pervasive, intrusion, the noise, of contemporary digital culture, which Belting argues follows and replaces the *aura* as a sort of 'natural' evolution: He continues "[conversely] *Contemporary art extends this inquiry with its analysis of advertising and other public media which today all too often replace nature as the dominant experience of our world.*"^x Riley's use of traditional paper cartoon construction marries both arguments of Belting's dialectic; webcam footage, selfies (Riley's Guardian Angel, *anima*^{xi}), against pure, 'nature' passages of dyed wool that refract eternal space and natural light, contrastingly exemplified in works such as *Protection Glow* and *Webcam Control* (all works wool and cotton, 2024). Hans Belting's primary argument in *Likeness and Presence*, is that the "image" before the era of 'Art' was involuntarily positioned upon the visualisation of a thing (an 'Icon') that was indivisible from the *thing* itself. An Icon of the Madonna, for example was inseparable for the theosophy of the Madonna as entity.^{xii} 'Art' was not about *making things up*, but the direct and immediate conveyance of involuntary concept, akin to an unshakable conviction of being present with the *thing* (or event) itself. Conversely, art in the era of *Art*, mimetic representation for its own sake, is essentially a willing and collective 'cynical' fiction; a simulated play/representation, based upon societally agreed 'ideas' – wherein, and as beautifully put by Arthur C. Danto, ushering in and concretising the post Baudelaire/Benjamin notion of 'modernity' in the age of mechanical reproduction, where if art can be anything then "anything can be Art."^{xiii}

Riley's work sits Janus-like on this boundary line between 'this' and 'that', primordial aura and contemporary scepticism, timeless and timely: not only does it lock and load to Beltian

auratic 'embodiment': arguably an art historical equivalent to 'subconsciousness' in Freud or involuntary memory in Proust,^{xiv} but treats lens-based veritas and mechanical (empirical) quotidian inevitability in exactly the same manner. Riley's spontaneous rejection of evolutionary paradox in this instance, is entirely contrary to Benjamin's association of the "decline of the aura" to what he calls a "crisis of perception". Relying on the notion that perception involves more than the mere capacity to see: it depends upon and supports a temporal organisation of the world. He argues the rise of technologies of mechanical reproduction – and photography in particular – extends the range and purview of voluntary memory at *the expense* of unconscious memory.^{xv} In Erin M. Riley's case, her use of collaged photography, digital images, selfies and photo booth imagery (*anima*), rendered by hand on the arcane machinery of a loom, in coloration and manner that consciously replicates low resolution digital pixelation, she has found a way to circumvent the theoretical division in both Belting and Benjamin's arguments, to force voluntary memory to confront involuntary memory on completely equal terms; to look back at it.

Is Erin M. Riley's awareness of the involuntary reflex of memory an attempt to consciously recapture or reject lost time? The oppositions present in each of the exhibition's major works (exemplified in the large eponymous tapestry *Look Back At It*) clearly evidence the artist's genuine trepidation that recollection can trigger re-living, yet her purposed determination in re-confronting difficult days, faces-off generational shock events^{xvi}. Is the purpose of looking back, to remember or to remember to forget. So loaded and searingly honest are the markers that Riley sets into her works that it can be difficult to discern a signpost from a roadblock. Riley writes, "I am a memory keeper" but the inherent cause-to-effect paradox of *Looking Back At It*, can be that it stops you from moving forward: Riley continues: "And so I look back at the moments wondering why things turned out how they did? how these experiences have changed how I have interacted going forward and how incredibly frustrating it is to realise that while fighting, avoiding and healing from the demons of a generation before mine, that I, at very least, expect to accrue my own."

"So many survivors of trauma avoid speaking about their experiences because it feels as though the emotional or physical pain can never be understood, also acknowledging that it feels like you are giving the perpetrators even more power. So I walk around the world seeing mantras that repeat in my mind, trying to summon the moment in which you did not speak. *Wrong way, Do not enter. Go back. Go back* and this pain and these trespasses travel with us."

Riley's beautiful work, her diaristic scorching honesty and uncompromising clarity in confronting unconscionable hurt, conjures a delicate resilience, recognition and validation for her own struggle, and speaks eloquently to the shared experience of many others. *Always the same*.

ⁱ *Semper eadem*, is a (female) expression from Latin: *always the same*, that denotes the stability, integrity and equanimity in the face of vicissitude. i.e. *whatever... I am always the same*.

ⁱⁱ c.f. Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Chapter X. *The Problem of General Laws*. Cambridge University Press, London/New York, 1965. Pg.201-233.

ⁱⁱⁱ "*Dedoublement*" in Baudelaire "...a joy of descending" – (channelling Swedenberg...), in the sense of an eternal, highly personal struggle – a fight to the death even - between *animas* (the external, inferior) and *anima* (inner, unalterable) Good and Evil, in simplistic terms]: "According to Swedenberg, *animas*, the external, inferior man [sic], and *anima*, the inner man [sic], unalterable, struggle with each other in the mind of every human being, by the intermediary, the one of the malicious spirits, the sensual passions, the other celestial *amores*, the ideal conceptions. Baudelaire takes up for his own use this personification of evil intelligences, which constitute the sinister vermin and monstrous fauna of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Like

Swedenberg and many others, he [Baudelaire] *anima* – [and in my argument also common to Erin M. Riley's work] depicts the Gaudian Angel under the traits of a real woman". Pierre Emmanuel, *The Paradox of Redemptive Satanism*, The University of Alabama Press, 1967, pg.106. N.B. My argument, is then in Erin M. Riley's, Guardian Angel, *anima*, is herself, the faceless selfie.

^{iv} Margaret Grafton, *Magic to metaphor: From empire to philosophy, the travesty of the woven textile*. 2000, p. 100. http://Crossart.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/MG_NewLit2000.pdf

^v In Greek mythology, The 'Fates' (the Moirai): *Lachesis* – the past, *Clotho* – the present and *Atropos* – the future, the three granddaughters of *Kronos*, the God of Time, and the daughters of *Zeus*, God of the Sky, and *Themis*, Goddess of Divine Law and Custom, spin and sing in the firmament, their song making the music of the spheres and spinning controlling the 'whorls' of heavenly bodies.

^{vi} Jack Zipes, *Spinning with Fate*, Harper and Collins, New York, 1968. Pg 43. [my insertions].

^{vii} "For Freud, although the fetish [exemplified in Riley's *faceless anima* selfies, wherein her hair and pictographic tattoos alone, prescribe identity] comes into being as a defensive response to shock, its *psychic* function is to parry the shock by 'forgetting' it. Perception of the fetish object becomes a way of compensation for the memory loss and absorbing the shock experience. By filling the (present) visual field, the fetish object appears to close the temporal void opened up by the shock. The sight of the fetish object then becomes invested with a magical aura of *presence* that is seemingly endowed with the power to redeem all losses. Paradoxically, the aura of "presence' that saturates the fetish object is psychically manufactured out of a lost experience of loss." Elissa Marder, *Dead Time – Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 2001, pg.46

^{viii} Baudelaire's questionable description of drunkenness and addiction as a productively creative path, in a passage somewhat admiringly devoted to Edgar Allan Poe's drinking "...*prenait le chemin le plus dangereux, mais le plus direct.*" (OC2:315)

^{ix} Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence, A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, and *The End of Art History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, pg.31

^x *Ibid.* *The End of Art History*, pg.32

^{xi} cf. no.iii

^{xii} Conversely a picture of a pipe was a pipe.

^{xiii} "C'est ne pas un pipe" Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box – Visual Art in Post-Historical Perspective*. University of California Press, 1992, amongst others. e.g. "Where we differ [from before the era of 'Art'] lies in the fact that we 'make' pictures, construed as *rational action*, reasons enter into the explanation, and this must be recovered as part of the[ir] interpretation..." pg.11

^{xiv} The mere taste of a Madeleine cake involuntarily unlocks a whole Sunday afternoon of childhood memory, complete in all sensory detail, light, sound: "No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent only on the extraordinary thing that was happening to me..." Marcel Proust, *Remembrances of Things Past* [I cling on to the former translation of the title]

^{xv} Benjamin, *Central Park*, pg.125

^{xvi} Erin M. Riley's remarkable and moving notes about this work should speak for themselves:

"I've spent years understanding the coping skills that have kept me in cycles of repetition, the compulsion to repeat actions and words, to focus deeply on an image or a moment... When I see a DO NOT ENTER sign, I read it and repeat it over again in my head as written in CAPS.

I internalise these messages:

WRONG WAY

GO BACK

I am reciting the words I needed in moments where I wish I had had a sign.

Instead I drove right into oncoming traffic.

I wish somebody had taught how to protect myself,

how to say stop, how to protect myself.

I wish somebody taught me that I deserved protection".