The Object of Affect(ion)

The Affect of Memory.
Those odds and ends of memory
are the only wealth that the rush of time
leaves us.
We are this chimerical museum of shifting
this heap of broken mirrors.¹

Where does one even start to begin an analysis of the effect of affect in art? Deleuze writes that ‘I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed.’² Affect is experiential. In this regard, it is often considered that affect is a byproduct of visual representation. However, Michele Elliot’s *Drawing on Memory* (1992) places affects at its core. The series of 12 drawings about memory, a deliberately fragmented collection of images of objects derived from childhood. These fragments elicit an experiential reaction from the viewer. As fragments they deny total representation. The only way to truly view the works is to experience them. Deleuze further explains that ‘what is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation.’³ In sustaining this sensation, Elliot’s drawings enable a subversive location amongst the patriarchal discourses of art history. As such, reading (or rather experiencing) Elliot’s affects enables a challenge to the marginalization of women within art historical discourses and frees women from the oppression of representation.

According to de Beauvoir, ‘representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men!’⁴ The canons of Western art history are a canon of representation. As a mimetic practice, representation is part of domination.⁵ Men occupy the position of ‘acting’, an active position compared to women ‘appearing’ passively to the enjoyment of the male act.⁶ Men are liberated from the body by their mastery of the gaze whereas women are contained within their body by the gaze. If representation belongs to men, then for feminist art practice it is necessary to create new displacements in order to ‘bare witness to the unpresentable’.⁷ Here, Elliot’s *Drawing on Memory* utilizes affects in order to avoid making a ‘programmed effect’.⁸ Affects

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² Gilles Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation " in Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 2002). p 31.
³ Ibid. p 32.
⁸ Ibid. p 16.
become a subsersive move as they do not play into the patriarchal discourses of representation, and instead draw on an experiential form of representation.

Massumi writes that ‘approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level.’\(^9\) It can be more satisfactory to often speak of the ‘affects’ of an artwork, that is the ‘moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter.’\(^10\) Affects are supposed to be a reaction to the work, unable to be represented, but instead felt in/on the body. For, as Massumi suggests there is no vocabulary of affect. As there is no vocabulary, then perhaps Elliot’s drawings are themselves a vocabulary in order to subvert dominant patriarchal discourses.\(^11\) Here Elliot draws, as Deleuze suggests, ‘the scream more than the horror.’\(^12\) Elliot refuses to represent the entire story, but rather only reveals her vocabulary: fragments. A vocabulary of affect cannot be an entirety in itself because to impose a totality of order and understanding would reduce affect to a mere effect. *Drawing on Memory* through its fragments documents sensations – aural, tactile, olfactory, etc.

To represent an affect is said to be a futile process, for ‘all we ever have is a kind of echo, a representation of affect.’\(^13\) Following Derrida’s deconstructionist tradition (which supposedly has removed the affect from art), all we ever have is a trace of affect. However, *Drawing on Memory* occupies more than just a documentary status as a trace of affect; it is itself an affect. For Deleuze and Guattari art is a bloc of sensations waiting to be reactivated by the viewer.\(^14\) However, memories and recollections are widely used by the marginalized to gain a political voice and visibility: their ‘political unconscious’.\(^15\) If we accept the thesis that memories constitute an affect, as memories are nothing but “sensations” and “instincts”, then

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\(^11\) See Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect."

\(^12\) Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation ". p 34.

\(^13\) O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect." p 126.


this act of reproduction is itself a reactivation of ‘a bloc of sensations’. As such, it is not a trace of affect that remains in the work, but instead the very essence of the affect.

Just as in Deleuze’s exploration of Francis Bacon’s oeuvre, here too ‘there are no feelings … there are nothing but affects, that is, “sensations” and “instincts”, according to the formula of Naturalism.’ One experiences memory through the nervous system, to borrow Deleuze’s conceptualization of the phenomenon. Sensation is to be transmitted directly, avoiding the brain. Elliot presents only fragments, fragments of words, images and memories in creating Drawing on Memory. Memories are, by their very nature, not feelings. One does not feel a memory. In decentralizing aesthetic representation, the brain no longer has primacy, allowing Elliot to become ‘the authoritative subject of another knowledge.’ The nervous system resists domination by the patriarchal gaze. Grosz states that:

I am not able to stand back from the body and its experiences to reflect on them; this withdrawal is unable to grasp my body-as-it-is-lived-by me. I have access to knowledge of my body only by living it. (emphasis added)

Given that the affect on the nervous system is entirely experiential, how is it possible to reduce to the patriarchal hegemony of representation? As such, in this regard, the utilization of the nervous system serves as a way of escaping the reductive nature of patriarchal modes of representation.

While Deleuze supposes that there is a dichotomy between acting on the brain and the nervous system, Elliot’s works breaks down such a distinction. In acting upon the brain, art is said to ‘not attain the sensation, they do not liberate the Figure’. However, it is difficult to reconcile this distinction with Drawing on Memory. Sensation is supposed to avoid the boredom of conveying a story. Here though, there is a story. In the activity of drawing on memory, one delves into the brain, not the nervous system. There are multiple narratives woven together to create the series.

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16 Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation ". p 35; Deleuze and Guattari, What Is Philosophy. p 164.
17 Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation ". p 35.
18 Ibid. p 70.
19 Minh-ha, When the Moon Waxes Red. p 186.
20 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994). p 86.
21 Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation ". p 32.
22 Ibid.
Elliot’s drawings are, in this regard, deeply autobiographical. This autobiography is not a modernist grand narrative of History (his-story), but rather a postmodernist one of local (her)story. Elliot’s history does not suppose a factual basis, but rather an experiential one. Here, the interaction between the brain and nervous system become inseparable. Memories should not be dismissed as merely an individual’s relationship with their past as this may trivialize the importance of memory. Here there is no beginning, middle and end for the brain to interpret and impose a singular reading or patriarchal understanding of narrative to. In writing her story, Elliot ‘breaks the silence imposed by male speech.’

Massumi posits that ‘affect has been deterritorialized, uprooted from the spatiotemporal coordinates in which it ‘naturally’ occurs and allowed to circulate.’

Every aspect of ‘molar human existence’ are images that may be purchased by a body and self-applied as desired. Elliot’s work has a distinct feminist tone to it. By refusing to portray the whole, and instead representing fragments of the body and the story, Elliot challenges the hegemonic discourses of patriarchy. However, in doing so it is possible to conceive that Elliot’s work could be reduced back to the realms of definition and patriarchal domination. While affects may have been outside of representation, now it may have ‘been grasped from another dimension by the social machine.’

While hegemonic patriarchal discourse may attempt to subsume Elliot’s work, Elliot does not offer the whole body to be consumed. As Minh-ha tells us

Difference is not otherness. And while otherness has its laws and interdictions difference always implies the interdependency of these two-sided feminist gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.

So while the deterritorialization of affect may result in consumption, Drawing on Memory constantly reminds the consumer of its own difference.

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Minh-ha, When the Moon Waxes Red. p 152.
What ultimately emerges from close analysis of Elliot’s *Drawing on Memory* is that the figure, the body, becomes constructed out of sensation. For Massumi, ‘the body corresponded to a “site” on the grid … the body came to be defined by its pinning on the grid.’\(^{28}\) However, Elliot’s constructed body cannot be defined by pinning it down on the grid. Elliot’s body is ephemeral, experiential and unique. While it speaks to a wide audience, it also speaks individually, creating unique affects to each viewer. As Deleuze puts it ‘at one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation.’\(^ {29}\) Sensation enables Elliot to avoid being pinned within the patriarchal grid that defines western art history. In order to challenge any system of values in a society, a politically conceived representation must first begin by challenging the system of representational values which its politics depend on.

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\(^{29}\) Deleuze, "Painting and Sensation ". p 31.
A responsible work today seems to me above all to be one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, that is, on the other hand, interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. In other words, a work that involves her story in history; a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation; a work that is careful not to turn a struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility be assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges, for no solution exists as given.  

Bibliography


It was quite a ritual each three o'clock on the veranda when we played mah jong to be cucumber the beautiful tea service Nani Mama made especially for the children to sight when she had a set of them you used to sit on the small one at the end of her bed they were from the old house one of the few pieces she did ever bring out.