



## Pixelated Memories: Performance, Media, and Digital Technology

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# Pixelated Memories: Performance, Media, and Digital Technology

Sarah Bay-Cheng

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 507–30 (p. 527).
2. Michael Arrington, 'Life Recorders May Be This Century's Wrist Watch', *TechCrunch*, 6 September 2009 <<http://social.techcrunch.com/2009/09/06/life-recorders-may-be-this-centurys-wrist-watch/>> [accessed 15 December 2015].
3. Ibid.
4. Since Arrington's post, several such devices have come to market, including not only the very similar 'Narrative Clip', which markets itself as 'the world's most wearable camera' (<<http://getnarrative.com/>>), but also the myriad devices in watches, mobile phones, and apps that are designed to track, record, and analyze any number of its users' behaviors as well as serve as a form of memory.

Isn't it the task of the photographer – descendant of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? (Walter Benjamin)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Imagine a small device that you wear on a necklace that takes photos every few seconds of whatever is around you, and records sound all day long. It has GPS and the ability to wirelessly upload the data to the cloud, where everything is date/time and geo stamped and the sound files are automatically transcribed and indexed. Photos of people, of course, would be automatically identified and tagged as well.<sup>2</sup>

This description comes from the September 2009 blog post 'Life Recorders May Be This Century's Wrist Watch', a reflection as much about the ways in which we capture and process memory as it is about the possibilities for new devices. In fact, Michael Arrington's post for *TechCrunch* was not about an actual device that could do these things; rather, it was an anxious look to the future possibilities of forthcoming devices. 'Imagine', Arrington posits, 'an entire lifetime recorded and searchable. Imagine if you could scroll and search through the lives of your ancestors.'<sup>3</sup> Part wonder, part horror, Arrington's essay focused attention on what would become a frequent feature of contemporary life: the compulsive, even obsessive desire to capture and translate every experience – however momentary, however *un*experienced, however trivial – into digital images for recording, searching, and re-searching in the future.<sup>4</sup> Arrington suggests that the emergence of a life recorder functions as a form of digital memory, but we might also consider how digital records have become not only encoders of personal memory, but also new

mechanisms for documentation and communication. The object that Arrington described never caught hold as a popular device, but the process he outlines can be witnessed in any number of digital recording tools such as portable digital cameras, mobile phone cameras, and social media. Arrington's description of what has been identified as 'ubiquitous photography' highlights a tension that Martin Hand describes as '[t]he notion that digital photography is primarily a form of communication rather than memory-making'.<sup>5</sup> In his overview, *Ubiquitous Photography*, Hand highlights the ways in which recording, memory, communication, documentation, and performance become conflated in digital contexts: '[w]here many once imagined a future of digital simulation and virtual reality, we now arguably have the opposite: the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape.'<sup>6</sup>

Take another example. In early 2012, the USA's National Public Radio's daily news show 'All Things Considered' replayed an interview with George Clooney in advance of the Academy Award show. During the interview, Clooney was asked about his experience with fame and his reaction to life as a highly visible movie star. His response is telling. 'I'll ride my motorcycle into the Swiss Alps', he responds to host Robert Siegel, 'to the top of a mountain to a tiny little bistro that we accidentally find. And by the time I've had coffee and a croissant, there's 40 people outside because of cell cameras.' He continues,

I've walked with very famous people down red carpets over to the crowd of thousands of people and you'll reach out to shake their hand and they've got a camera in their hand. And they don't even get their hand out, because they're recording the whole time. And you can tell people that you *recorded* Brad Pitt, but it would be very hard for you to say you actually *met* him, because you were watching it all through your phone. I think that's too bad, because I think people are experiencing less and recording more.<sup>7</sup>

'The trick', Clooney concludes (in that inimitably pithy, NPR-cum-Clooney way), 'is to get them not to do it when you go to the bathroom'.

In Arrington's post, we see anxiety about the function of digital photography as memory. In the second story from George Clooney, we see digital imaging as the mechanism for interaction (though ironically mediating what would otherwise be an interpersonal exchange). But digital photography fulfills a third key function, providing not only memory and documentation, but standing in as augmented vision. In April 2011, I attended the Boston Marathon in Massachusetts. On this particular day, an American woman threatened to win for the first time in decades (she missed first place by only a few seconds) and the men's winner clocked the fastest marathon time ever recorded to date. From my perspective, this is what the finish line looked like (see [Image 1](#)). So far as I could tell at this event, the purpose in taking a photograph of a performance was not to document the performance as seen, but rather as the means to *see* an otherwise unobservable event and to stand in as the performance of seeing, even when direct sight was not possible. The photograph serves multiple functions here. In addition to allowing us to 'see' the event, the digital image circulating through digital networks (and possibly never

5. Martin Hand, *Ubiquitous Photography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 13.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

7. George Clooney, 'George Clooney on Acting, Fame, and Putting Down your Cellphone Camera', *NPR Interview*, 9 February 2012 <<http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysec/2012/02/09/146643092/george-clooney-on-acting-fame-and-putting-down-your-cell-phone-camera>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

8. See Hugo Münsterberg, *Hugo Münsterberg on Film: The Photoplay – A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. by Allan Langdale (New York: Routledge, 2002); André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2001). Deleuze, for example, offers a critique of Henri Bergson's contextualization of the cinematic illusion in his *The Movement-Image*. There, he queries, 'is not the reproduction of the illusion in a certain sense also its correction? Can we conclude that the result is artificial because the means are artificial?' His analysis challenges the notion of cinema as illusion, noting that what Bergson identifies as illusion in his 1907 *Creative Evolution* may not be illusion at all. A fuller exploration of the philosophical questions of the cinematic illusion and movement exceeds the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say for now that the question of representation in moving images and its relation to reality – that is, as a form of documentation – saturates media history.
9. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, p. 15.
10. Mikko Villi, *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet*, ed. by Alexandra Moschovi, Carol McKay, and Arabella Plouviez (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2014), pp. 87–106 (p. 89).



Image 1 Digital snapshot from the finish line at the Boston marathon, 2011. Photograph by author.

even printed as a material object) also becomes proof of presence. Contrary to Clooney's distinction between the record and the experience, the recording *is* the experience. Thus, such documentation – the photograph of a performance (either aesthetic or athletic) whether directly observed or not – becomes the instantiation of memory. What we think we know of the event is not the event itself, but our document of it. The image is the memory and the encounter.

Although not overtly concerned with performance, these examples point to a kind of aesthetic confusion of reality and representation similar to that which Bertolt Brecht criticized in his audience's identification with theatrical characters. They may also remind us of the illusion of cinematic movement that activated the philosophies of cinema in writings by Hugo Münsterberg, André Bazin, and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>8</sup> In his 'Ontology of the Photographic Image', for instance, Bazin argued that, '[t]he aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities', while Deleuze questioned the appearance of cinema time and movement.<sup>9</sup> The photographic confusion that Clooney points to conflates the representation of experience with the thing itself, a condition that emerges with recording media of the mid- and late-nineteenth century in first photography then cinema, but becomes more pronounced with the cultural saturation of mobile phone cameras and other digital recording devices. As Mikko Villi notes, 'the almost universal access to cameras in the form of camera phones means that snapshots of different situations have become a common form of interaction'.<sup>10</sup> Although self-documentation did not originate with digital technologies, mobile devices have enabled their users to document and transmit images much faster

11. See Corey Keller and others, *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008); and Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
12. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, 'A Life More Photographic', *Photographies*, 1.1 (2008), 9–28 (p. 16) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17540760701785842>>.
13. Indeed, even as I was revising this essay in April 2016, *The New Yorker* magazine published an essay covering precisely this point. See Om Malik, 'In the Future, We Will Photograph Everything and Look at Nothing', *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2016 <<http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/in-the-future-we-will-photograph-everything-and-look-at-nothing>> [accessed 11 April 2016].
14. Images from this performance are archived on the Gallery's website. See 'Guillaume Désanges', *Gallery TPW* <<http://gallerytpw.ca/parallel-programming/performances/historyofperformance/>> [accessed 11 April 2016].

and much farther than previously possible. Images posted online and in the context of personal social media profiles such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *Instagram* also extend the potential for interaction between image and viewer and as such facilitate a new form of encounter. Thus, as digital images circulate, they become more than records of past events, and increasingly function *as performances* themselves.

Of course, photographic documentation is neither new nor unique to digital media. The use of photography as a tool of memory runs throughout its history, as does the function of photography as a method for seeing the unseen, as evidenced in nineteenth-century spirit photography.<sup>11</sup> However, the digital introduces features unavailable within previous photographic documentation. These are, specifically, capacities of reproducibility, search, and interactivity. Circulating through digital networks, the digital image is thus not only a marker of memory. As in the example of Clooney and the marathon, such images may now serve *primarily* as a kind of social connection. As Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis note in their essay 'A Life More Photographic', 'the four main uses of camera phone photography are creating and maintaining social relationships, constructing personal and group memory, self-presentation, and self-expression'.<sup>12</sup> The still photograph exists as an object, but the digital image exists not only as a discrete object on its own (and perhaps not always that), but also as a means to infinite exchange. In this context, performance (both in and out of daily life) becomes a function of its documentation such that living is now a condition of the digital, rather than the other way around.<sup>13</sup>

It has now been almost two decades since academia and, perhaps more influentially, the art world became invested in the eroding distinctions between performance and its documentation, developments accelerated by the rise of digital interactive technologies. Exhibits such as Tate Liverpool's 'Art, Lies, and Videotape: Exposing Performance' (2003); the Vienna Museum of Modern Art's 'After the Act: The (Re) Presentation of Performance Art' (2005); and Marina Abramović's major retrospective for MOMA, 'The Artist Is Present' (2010), all drew attention to the impact of recording, although few at the time made any distinction among photography, video, film, and the emerging digital revolution. The effect of all this attention on documentation and photography, concurrent with the rise of what is broadly called the 'digital humanities', is that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to talk about performance, documentation, and media as discrete and separable entities. Since it began in the context of performance art, it may be worth beginning with an example that brought these questions to the surface in performance itself.

## Désanges: A History of Performance in 20 Minutes

In Toronto's Gallery TPW in 2010, I was struck by Guillaume Désanges's performance lecture 'A History of Performance in 20 Minutes'.<sup>14</sup> In this performance Désanges, a curator and art critic – that is, a figure not usually a performer – recalls major performance art pieces within his

own categorization according to the performances' distinct bodily gestures: appearing, receiving, holding back, escaping, aiming, falling, crying, biting, emptying oneself, and disappearing. As he says of the performance,

Let's attempt a history of the body in art as a history of silence as opposed to discourse about art. Let's simply show how the history – of art – has, at a certain moment – and for some people – engendered gestures and not objects. And certainly not discourse [...]. Looked at this way, in a purely formal fashion, the history of performance, or of body art, is not then a history of the representation of the body but exclusively a history of gesture. Barely sketched, already expired.<sup>15</sup>

15. Guillaume Désanges, 'A History of Performance in 20 Minutes', *Guillaume Désanges*, 2005 <<http://www.guillaumedesanges.com/spip.php?article4>> [accessed 15 December 2015]. Images and video of the performance are also available on this site.

While Désanges reads his lecture, a performer (in this case Hélène Meisel, but the lecture was originated with Frédéric Cherboeuf in 2005) performs or, rather, re-performs moments from significant performance art pieces, mostly from the 1960s and 1970s. Watching closely, however, we see that the performer is not actually re-performing the original actions or gestures of these works, but rather she is slowly moving into poses of their most iconic gestural moments as documented in the archival photographs. Désanges does indeed construct a lecture, but although semantically he claims to locate the performance as disappearing gesture – 'barely sketched, already expired' – Désanges actually constructs a living slideshow of photographs. Indeed, the performer – despite recreating *performances* – assumes a static position for each one, as if the original performances were as fixed and static as the photographs that survived them. We can also observe that the white background of the gallery space of the performance, the black and white clothing of the performer, and the flat lighting contribute to a visual aesthetic that reminds us of the black and white photographs that have circulated in the wake of the performances themselves. It is an effect of photographic nostalgia in digital contexts that is not unlike the use of *Instagram* filters on iPhones.

Since I rely on photographs to make my point, one might justifiably say, 'Well, of course, the photographs you cite look like the archival photographs'. We might further speculate that (since I did not take the photos) the Gallery TPW photographer has deliberately chosen or framed these images precisely for their correspondence to the original documentation. We can see that the very form of documentation and dissemination – digital photographs taken by the gallery and posted on a website – distorts the argument. One might be skeptical of my reading, but the case for another reading of the event has to be negotiated through the images themselves. More specifically, can an alternative reading emerge as an original interpretation connected to the performance event, or must an argument articulate a different response to the photographs themselves? The images, digitally captured and distributed, thus shift the emphasis from our consideration of the work itself to a debate conducted in and through documentation and digital remnants. This, it seems to me, becomes a key question in terms of contemporary performance scholarship, and specifically historiography, with respect to images, documentation, and memory. What are we looking at when we look at performance documentation? What is the weight of ubiquitous digital images on our

memory of a performance (both one we have seen, but perhaps also standing in for one we have not witnessed directly)? How does the online circulation of those images – the capture, collecting, and disseminating of images – impact our ideas about the performance historically? No longer relegated to archives, special collections, and art catalogues, what happens to performance documentation when it can come from anyone and go anywhere? How can we construct histories and memories if we cannot get outside of the digital economy of the image?

Michel de Certeau points to this idea in *The Writing of History*. There he positions the writing of history as within the already-closed system of semantically, historically, and ideologically influenced thought and proposes to consider the process of writing such ideas within the established semiotics of historical narratives. Interestingly, he poses this in ways both compelling and familiar to those invested in performance. ‘The activity’, he writes,

that produces meaning and establishes an intelligibility of the past is also the symptom of an activity *endured*, the result of events and structurings that it changes into objects capable of being thought, the representation of an evanescent order of genesis.<sup>16</sup>

16. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1975]), p. 44, emphasis in original.

If we substitute ‘digital media’ for ‘activity’, we have a pretty good sense of both the opportunities and challenges that such technologies afford theatre and performance studies today. With apologies to de Certeau we might revise his statement as: ‘[t]he digital media that produce meaning and establish an intelligibility of the past are also a symptom of digital media endured [and here we might also substitute experienced], the result of events and structurings (i.e. the work of media themselves) that it changes into objects capable of being thought, the representation of an evanescent order of genesis’. Digital images here perform several simultaneous functions. They provide a record of the event, perhaps augmenting or replacing direct observation. These images also function as a kind of augmented memory system. Less objective than the term ‘documentation’ suggests, one’s digital images are both objective records and reflections of a subjective view of an event. Thus, the impact of digital technology functions as both documentation and memory. As such, it exerts significant pressure on the creation of new work and shapes not only the work itself, but also its reception and documentation. Just as the writing of history is embedded within a history of writing, so too is the digital record of performance inscribed within the act of digital recording. As, in my next example, we see the ways in which the life of performance is best captured in images rather than bodies, though perhaps in a more nuanced manner than seen in Désanges’s performance lecture.

## Image Confusion

Désanges’s work points to an increasingly complex set of relations among performances and digital duplication. In her essay ‘Image as Icon’, art historian Tracey Warr defines distinct types of audiences for performance:

17. Tracey Warr, 'Image as Icon: Recognizing the Mystery', in *Art, Lies, and Videotape: Exposing Performance*, ed. by Adrian George (London: Tate, 2003), pp. 30–37.

the immediate audience; the audience that experiences the work through documentation; and the audience of posterity.<sup>17</sup> We might take it for granted that we understand these categories and where we fit within them. You know, after all, whether or not you attended a particular performance, whether you were there, and whether or not you have seen the performances articulated in the documentation. But as photographs circulate through digital and social media, their images take hold as indexical in our minds such that the categories of audience begin to break down. If we have seen the performance and the documentation, can we readily distinguish between the two? What if we have not seen the original performance, but we have seen detailed recordings? In the case of the Boston marathon, I was there, but I did not see much of the event. I have attended various art shows, such as Abramović's 'The Artist Is Present', but for however much I saw in the museum, I have inevitably seen much more online. How do I delineate the performance I attended from the digital records I have collected, especially those that are personal to me in my mobile phone? In the images from Désanges, for instance, there is a danger in thinking we remember too much outside and within the photograph. This false knowledge, again a kind of misrecognition of image and action, has impact beyond the aesthetic and artistic fields. While it may seem rather frivolous or merely academic to puzzle over the circulation of digital images, these critical confusions of pixel and memory, or image and being, have real-world consequences. Indeed, as Raphael Samuel writes in his *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, we should note that memory,

so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic – what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers – and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than being some kind of negative other to it.<sup>18</sup>

18. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso Books, 2012 [1995]), p. xxiii.

It is precisely this link between the digital image and its potential real-world consequences that Rabih Mroué explores in his lecture-performances *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2012) and *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012). Through the specific qualities of the digital image – its mobility, proximity to individual bodies (e.g. personal mobile phones), and low resolution – become powerful metaphors for geo-political conflicts.

## Rabih Mroué

Mroué's *Looking for a Missing Employee* functions as a kind of joke. The lecture-performance tells the story of an employee Rafaat Suleiman, a civil servant in the Lebanese Ministry of Finance in Beirut, who may or may not be missing; who may or may not have embezzled millions of Lebanese pounds (a joke in the narrative plot continues to adjust the exact amount stolen from the thousands to the millions and back again); and who may or may not be dead. Mroué tells this story by recounting



the events reported in the newspapers. As he tells us at the beginning, he has followed the major newspapers and edited all relevant stories into three notebooks, one for each newspaper. These notebooks figure prominently as characters in the story through their projection on one of two onstage screens.

Mroué performs in the audience, behind all of the spectators, with two cameras trained on him. One frames his face and projects him in real-time onto a television monitor positioned behind a table and chair onstage, giving the (somewhat) convincing illusion that he is sitting at the table there. The other camera is pointed down at the table in front of him (that is, him the person, not him the television screen) so that we may follow along in his notebooks. On screen, we see the newspaper clippings, notes, and translations of the newspaper articles (mostly written in Arabic) while Mroué points to the relevant details. Throughout the performance, we face away from Mroué even as he sits among us and we watch his projected television image and the close-ups on pages of the notebooks. This physical position, somewhat awkward initially, gradually informs the entire performance. While I began the performance by looking back and forth to the actual Mroué, his steadfast gaze at the camera and the illusion of connection made the twisting and turning to ‘see’ him irrelevant. Mroué jokes to this effect early in the lecture. He adjusts the camera, and when he is framed properly and clearly in view, he announces, ‘Good. Now we can see each other.’ The audience chuckles, but we continue to stare out ahead, convinced against reason that we can ‘see’ each other through the video as Mroué convincingly looks into the camera and *at* us. It is a mode of connection and communication with which we are all familiar and comfortable, and Mroué uses this familiarity – what I again consider a fundamental confusion of representation and presence, or image and body – to highlight the ways in which documentation as performance is always inherently false, even, perhaps especially, when it appears to be most transparent.

Elsewhere in the audience (and at the 2012 PS122 Coil Festival performance I attended, directly in front of me) is another performer, who tracks the details of the reports of the missing employee, Suleiman, on a white board in different colored felt-tip pens. This board includes a timeline of events, the different people involved, the amount of money Suleiman is alleged to have stolen, and the different identities attributed to him – all marked in differently colored lines, icons, and other symbols. At the conclusion of the performance this board is ‘erased’ with a solvent that bleeds the marker ink, such that the ‘record’ of the events remains as a blurred, bloodied mess of the account (see [Image 2](#)). Indeed, as it becomes clear in the performance itself, the events in the various papers diverge wildly, no final account or version is ever verified, and one ultimately has to question whether or not the events as recounted have any basis in reality. After all, the evidence presented was indecipherable, to me at least. This is a point also made into a joke when Mroué, concerned that he is running out of time, skims through the notebooks’ pages. ‘We’ll go through these more quickly’, he says, and commences simply to turn the pages of the notebooks without translation or commentary. Suddenly the absurdity of our viewing is made readily apparent. Dutifully, we have

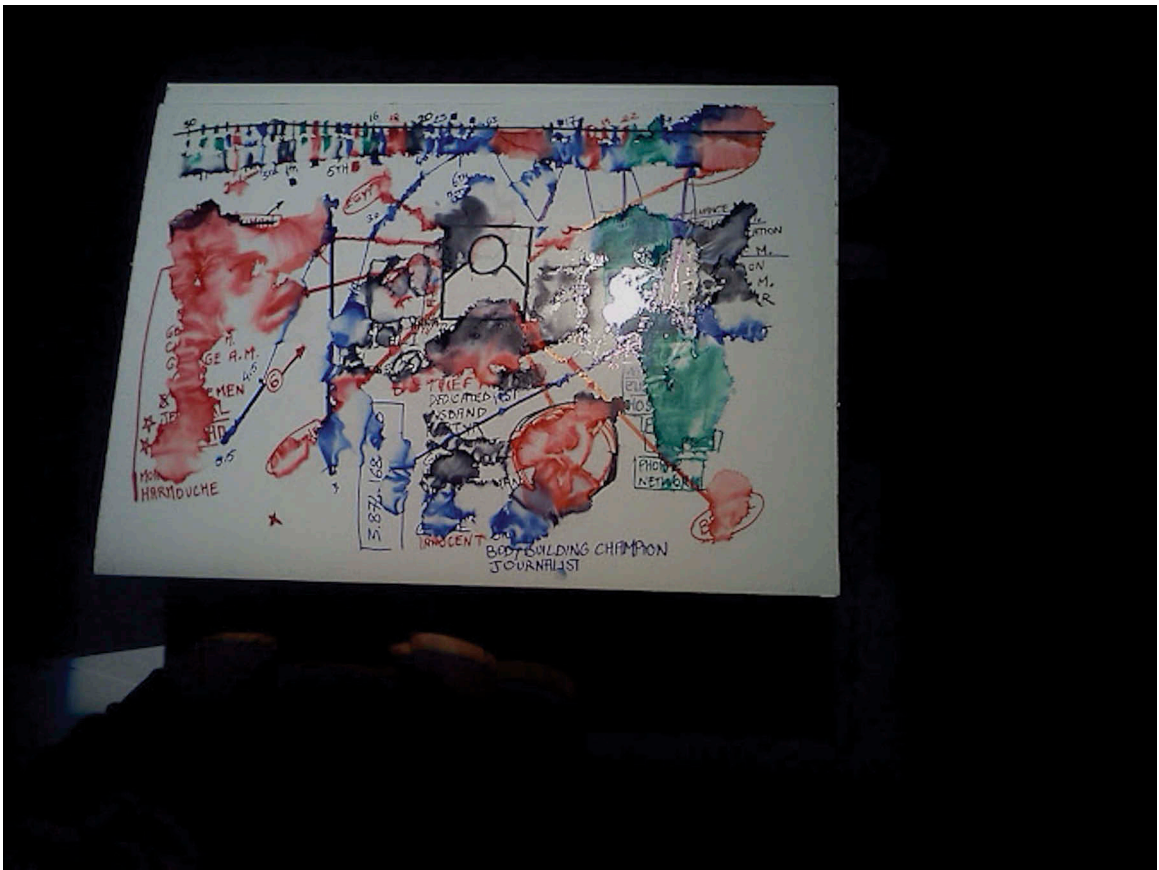


Image 2 Digital image of 'crased' white board from *Looking for a Missing Employee*, 2012 at PS122 Coil Festival, New York. Photograph by author with mobile phone.

watched the notebooks, 'reading' the Arabic unknown to me and likely most others, but fixated nevertheless on the images of the notebooks, made deceptively legible by his commentary. We pretend to know what we see, that it makes some kind of sense. Of course, most of us do not and it does not, but that does not stop us from watching or even questioning the screens. And this questioning of screens gets to his real point. Mroué, of course, gestures to the absurdity of his narrative elsewhere, as when he describes a person called Joseph K. 'No, no, not Kafka's K., of course', he insists, but we have no reason not to think of it as anyone other than Kafka's bureaucratically trapped protagonist. And although Raafat Suleiman was in fact an actual case from 1996 (recorded by the Associated Press, among others), the name may refer to Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, whose film *The Time That Remains* (a film about the creation of the State of Israel from 1948 to 2009) Mroué references in his performance *The Pixelated Revolution*. Thus, actual events become undermined through fictive framing, while the fiction takes on all the hallmarks of 'truth' through its digital conveyance. This



Image 3 Digital image of final stage image of *The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012 at PS122 Coil Festival, New York. Photograph by author with mobile phone.

is, Mroué implies, a potentially dangerous reversal and misrecognition. And the final absence is yet to come.

After Mroué has completed his account, worked through all of his notebooks, he turns on a video of a news story detailing the final version of the disappearance and death of Suleiman, the Ministry of Finance employee. Producing a VHS copy of the television account, Mroué leaves to play the tape. While the video plays, the other performer ‘erases’ the white board with the solvent. One account emerges as another literally dissolves. At the conclusion of the video, Mroué appears back on the television screen, silently staring (see [Image 3](#)). The audience sits expectantly. We can tell that the performance is nearing its conclusion – the employee is dead now, after all – but Mroué says nothing. I turn around and note that Mroué is now himself missing; the image of him on screen tacked onto the end of the video clip. It is a moment of cognitive dissonance, in which what I know jars with what I see and it takes the audience a long time as a group collectively to acknowledge that the performance is over and that Mroué is not there and, like the missing employee Suleiman, is

not coming back. Rabih Mroué is not physically present, but he is clearly ‘there’, while Suleiman may never have been ‘there’ at all. In considering the entire lecture evening, it is clear that there is documentation, but what was the performance and what exactly has been documented? A real event? A critique? A fiction? In the wake of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, in which social media and digital images provided millions worldwide with the illusion of presence, of knowledge, of ‘seeing what was happening’, Mroué presciently exposes the dangers of mediated confusion and the problems of trusting documentation. Even when looking (as for a missing employee) at digital images, we may not ‘see’ what is happening.

Mroué’s *Looking for a Missing Employee* dates to 2003, but continues to feel urgent among the political events throughout the Middle East. His 2012 work *The Pixelated Revolution* engages with these events more directly, even more potently pointing to the dangers of believing that recording is seeing, that documentation affirms performance, and calling into question the role of social media, mobile technology, and digital legibility in the context of violence.

### *The Pixelated Revolution*

It is important to note that Mroué’s work began in response to the earliest uprisings of Syrian protestors against the Syrian government and President Bashar al-Assad in the wake of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ protests in late 2010 and 2011.<sup>19</sup> Created in 2011 and premiered in early 2012, the work now functions as a kind of alternative history; a counter-factual to the events that have since played out very differently with the creation of Daesh and a highly volatile and complicated political environment. And yet Mroué’s work remains compelling, at least in part because of his attention to precisely the questions of media, confusion, and misrepresentation that have come to characterize the brutal conflict in Syria and the anguish among the people there.

Mroué developed the piece in response to protests by Syrian citizens against the Assad government, and the violent responses by the state, often directed against civilians.<sup>20</sup> Mroué examines the images created by the protesters on mobile phones within the context of other films and manifestos, most notably the Dogme95 filmmakers. For example, he draws parallels between the famous ‘Vow of Chastity’ taken by the Dogme95 group with the directives on recording political demonstrations in Syria. Working through the Dogme95 dictates, Mroué juxtaposes these aesthetic ideals (some of which attempt to eschew aesthetics) with the real-world practicalities of filming demonstrations within oppressive regimes. Whereas the filmmakers worked on location out of principle, Syrian protestors worked on location out of political necessity. Whereas the lack of identification of the filmmakers was a device to emphasize cinematic truth for its own sake, the identities of the protestors and those documenting the ‘manifestations’ required anonymity for reasons of personal safety and security. Mroué then

19. A full-text version of the performance was published by *TDR* with commentary by Carol Martin in 2002. See Rabih Mroué, Ziad Nawfal, and Carol Martin, ‘The Pixelated Revolution’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56.3 (2012), 18–35.

20. The purpose of this essay is not to debate the Syrian civil war, either its origins, the actions of the government or protestors, or current progress in its divisions among various warring factions. I am not qualified to comment on any area of the present conflict nor its history, and I have only limited access to information via news media with all its inherent biases. Reading the 2014 United Nations report by Ban Ki-moon, however, is a depressing exercise when considered in relation to the declining state over the past 18 months. My reading is in response to Mroué’s work in the context of the Syrian conflict in 2012 but without (I hope) losing sight of its later state.

juxtaposes these images with the state-sponsored political footage, which aligns with techniques and conventions of commercial cinema, including careful attention to frame composition (particularly the figures within it), the use of the tripod (rejected by the Dogme95 movement; unavailable and impractical for protestors), and other familiar devices of emotionally manipulative and effective methods of commercial and political cinema. His analysis, indebted to formalist frame analysis, works through the ethical and aesthetic questions of image-making and performance in the context of political violence. ‘To take what’s happening in Syria and place it alongside a cinematic manifesto was for some people unethical’, he says

because people are still dying and suffering and I’m doing this cold reflection. But when I’m making art, I’m not an activist, and I refuse to be an activist in art. I try not to take a political position in my work, but if I do – and in this case, it’s very clear that I’m with the protesters – then I try to deconstruct and reflect on my position and provoke myself. Of course, all of these questions came to my mind. Am I allowed to talk about the protesters when they are still being killed? Am I allowed to take them out of these events? Is it okay? Is it possible for an artist to make a work about something that is still going on? When I ask myself such questions, I tend to think I’ve pinpointed something I should pursue.<sup>21</sup>

21. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, ‘Rabih Mroué on Tour: *The Pixelated Revolution*’, *Al Akhbar English*, 5 January 2012 <<http://english.al-akbar.com/content/rabih-mrou%C3%A9-tour-pixelated-revolution>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

The most harrowing footage in *The Pixelated Revolution* comes not from the political demonstrations, but from the mobile phone footage of those targeted – literally – by the government forces. Mroué is particularly interested in the protesters’ repeated recordings of their own deaths, that is, their continued filming via mobile phone, even after the military sniper or tank has pointed the barrel at the protester with camera and until the hit has caused the phone camera eye to spin wildly into the dirt or crash to a black screen. In one short clip – perhaps 90 seconds or so – we watch as the phone camera tracks the image of a sniper on a distant balcony. Mroué tracks the video, zooming into the image of the gunman as he raises his weapon (see [Image 4](#)), aims it at the camera, and we continue to watch as the sound of the rifle resounds, the person holding the camera is audibly hit, and the camera clatters to the ground and goes dark. It is a jarring image, immediate in its intensity and authenticity, frightening in both its clarity and ambiguity.

In his commentary on these images, Mroué questions the repeated filming of these moments. Why not run away? It cannot be to record evidence to be used against the sniper. The gunman cannot be identified because of the low (that is, pixelated) resolution. These recordings will never bring the perpetrator to justice. As Mroué zooms in on the image of the sniper, he becomes less and less defined, disintegrating into a blur of abstract art. In perhaps a fitting analogy for the entire project, the closer we look at the digital image, the less we see. And, indeed, when it comes to death, Mroué invokes precisely this impossibility of vision that nevertheless compels us to a unique spectatorship. He situates this desire to see past death historically, including



Image 4 Rabih Mroué in *The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012. Photograph by Ernesto Donegana.

references both to the nineteenth-century German physiologist Wilhelm Friedrich Kühne and his experiments with ‘optograms’ – the attempt to extract the final image from the retina of a dead body – and Sophie Calle’s recent attempt to record the exact moment of her mother’s death. It is worth returning to de Certeau here, who saw history and certainly the writing of history as the product of a western obsession with death. ‘Death obsesses the West’, de Certeau writes. ‘In this respect, the discourse of the human sciences is pathological: a discourse of *pathos* – misfortune and passionate action – in a confrontation with this death that our society can no longer conceive of as a way of living one’s life.’<sup>22</sup> Refusing to acknowledge that the dead still

22. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 5.

haunt the living, historiography for de Certeau works at this impossible double negation:

Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is an odd procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death against death.<sup>23</sup>

23. Ibid.

This ‘labor of death against death’ is perhaps the best way of coming to terms with the Syrian protestors who unwaveringly return the gaze of the rifle target with the low-resolution zoom of a mobile phone camera. These digital moments become, as their filmmakers might have imagined they would, almost instantly historical and historically significant. Why continue to film, as Mroué frames it, this ‘double shooting’? Perhaps because these instances of death become, though not instrumental in specific judicial procedures, part of a larger discourse to document and historicize the events as they occur, a writing of history in moving images to ensure that the deaths are not lost, even if ironically this results in specific instances of death. ‘What is *perishable*’, de Certeau observes, ‘is its data; *progress* is its motto. The one is the experience which the other must both compensate for and struggle against.’<sup>24</sup> This has been an enduring project of Mroué’s, as in his earlier performance *The Inhabitants of Images* (2009), which focused on the images of those in political posters in Beirut, and *Who’s Afraid of Representation* (2004), which juxtaposed radical performance art with the story of a Lebanese civil servant shot by his colleagues. In all of these works, Mroué positions the project of performance and documentation as an almost Sisyphean resistance to instances of violence, oppression, and death. As Mroué points out in *The Pixelated Revolution*, no single image, act, or moment of resistance can resist the power of guns, tanks, and state-sponsored violence.

24. Ibid., emphasis in original.

But any single act of resistance is perhaps not the point. Mroué proposes, both in the lecture performance itself and in the title, that the meaning of these images is not contained within a single specific instance, but has meaning only in the accumulation of moments. It is this accumulation of instances – however unclear, fragmented, and ineffective each one is individually – that gives the digital representations meaning. Much like the individual pixels that combine and compose the larger image (more pixels per square inch creates higher resolution and a clearer image), so too do these repeated, and repeatedly infuriatingly futile, recordings at the moment of death combine to create a larger, clearer significance. More recordings create a clearer, larger picture for the eventual viewer. Thus it is the act of recording – the performance as such – in these moments of aggression that *write* the history of the Syrian protestors against the regime. In digital culture, then, the textual discourse is deceptively clear (as seen in the ambiguous newspaper accounts of ‘Missing Employee’), while the pixelated, seemingly distorted video documentation may become the most comprehensive and accurate record of the events as they move

from experience into history. Michael Arrington's vision seems to have come true, although these are devices that function not as life recorders, but death recorders.

## Conclusions

In these examples and many others we can see the ways in which media and digital technology fundamentally transform the ways in which we perform, discuss, demonstrate, and remember. Like their analogue predecessors, digital images affirm who we are, where we were, and our relation to the world. In digital domains, however, the boundary between image and performance erodes under the pressure of videos that circulate endlessly, and performances that turn repeatedly to images for source material. Social media – the circulation of these digital images and video through *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Tumblr*, and *Twitter* among other sites – have opened the negotiations of vision, presence, and documentation to all.<sup>25</sup> No longer is it only the artist or avant-garde performer who is looking to test the limits of perception, of knowing, of seeing, nor only the historian who creates and participates in the discourses of history, but now the project of death against death has become a project for everyone whether we acknowledge this or not. Every picture snapped to guard against memory loss, every camera held above one's head to compensate for what is experienced but not seen, contribute to these new ways of seeing. We are all part of a collective 'I' and 'eye', digitally inherited from the kino-eye. Indeed, elsewhere Mroué describes the camera as an 'optical prosthetic' that conflates our vision with the camera operator. The constant recording of information and experience – in the form of tweets, now archived extensively, status updates, and the millions of digital images captured and circulated daily – has turned nearly every moment of waking life in the wired world into simultaneous performances and their documentation. According to *Facebook*, over six billion photos are uploaded each month.<sup>26</sup> When the images of the event become indistinguishable from the event, we seem ever closer to the avant-garde fantasy of the early twentieth century that life and art could become inseparable.

As Mroué makes painfully clear, these images have real-world implications and we ignore the confusion of the representation and the real at our peril. In considering the decision of the protestors to continue to film, even to the point of death, Mroué speculates that perhaps the protestor does not realize that he and the figure in the pixelated, digital image share the same reality; that the protestor experiences a fatal misrecognition of the screen. But I would suggest that this is Mroué the character, the provocateur, performing his own act of misdirection. It is not the Syrian protestor who misrecognizes the real, but the audience, comfortably ensconced away from the danger and willfully in thrall to glowing screens while elsewhere in the world cities burn. It is the misrecognition of a *Facebook* 'like' for political

25. I should note that 'vision' here is not necessarily limited to visual perception, but refers more broadly to issues of awareness, understanding, and perceptions that may also be aural, tactile, or conveyed through various other representative strategies. Since the topic here is photography, I have privileged the visual aspects of digital media and photography, but there are no doubt many other related aspects of this discussion beyond the visual, narrowly defined.

26. Figures according to a *Facebook* engineer who responded to a question posed on the site, Quora, in 2011. Since this figure was recorded it is very likely that the number has significantly increased. See 'How Many Photos Are Uploaded to Facebook Each Day?', *Quora* <<http://www.quora.com/permalink/TmkFN4yMB>> [accessed 22 February 2014].



27. Bill O'Driscoll, 'Program Notes: Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* at The Warhol', *Pittsburgh City Paper*, 6 February 2012 <<http://www.pghcitypaper.com/ProgramNotes/archives/2012/02/06/rabih-mroue-the-pixelated-revolution-at-the-warhol>> [accessed 22 January 2014].

action; a misrecognition of images for action; a mistaking of documentation for performance. What we need, Mroué argues, are not more images, but more discourse. As he responded in the question and answer period of *The Pixelated Revolution* at the Warhol Museum in 2012, '[f]or me, it's more important and more useful to make images that are already imposing themselves on our daily lives and are keeping us from thinking, and use them as material to [make us] think'.<sup>27</sup> Mroué thus turns the distractions of digital image culture into more profound engagements with the traces of our many mediated interactions. Perhaps it is only in its digital reflections that we may begin to see the mediated world more clearly.