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# A Picture You Already Know

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Streets of Paris. Germans of the early-twentieth-century. Blast furnaces. Museums. Libraries. One-child families. Teenagers. Wax figures. Each of these subjects has been photographed by individual photographers with prolonged and disciplined regularity, through a sustained accumulation of images. The images are related by consistent subjects, composition, angle of view, lighting, and tonal range. They are similar, but not the same. Together, such images have resulted in bodies of work that, without necessarily focusing on single images, derive their meaning from the accumulation of similarities and the repetition of themes, icons, or forms.

Repetition in photography comprises a wide range of manifestations that have formed a significant part of photographic practice from the early development of the medium. Repetition figured in the use of photographs in racial and criminal studies (in which the repetitive use of portraits was used to identify what were thought to be the physiological foundations of traits and behaviors); in the cumulative documentation of the photographer's urban or social context, such as in the work of Eugène Atget and August Sander; and in the mimicry of the pictorial conventions of painting genres such as still lifes, portraiture, and landscapes. In the context of contemporary photography, repetition appears in a profusion of varieties. These include the repetition of forms, spaces, or people (such as Bernd and Hilla Becher's typologies, Candida Höfer's institutional spaces, Wang Jinsong's one-child "standard families" in China, and Hans Eijkelboom's people in public settings); repetition over time (Nicholas Nixon's periodic portraits of a group of sisters over the decades); repetition of motifs and compositions from art history (Jeff Wall's rejiggerings of iconic paintings, Rineke Dijkstra's classically posed portraits); collections of repetitions in imagery from the popular media (Peter Piller's reordering of existing imagery into distinct categories); repetitions of the self (such as those by Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, Tomoko Sawada, and Tseng Kwong-Chi); overlapping of repeated images (Idris Khan's layerings of multiples); the reuse of existing imagery as seen in Sherrie Levine's and Thomas Ruff's appropriations; and representations of representations (Hiroshi

Sugimoto's wax figures, and Thomas Struth's museum photographs).

The layers that form the practice of photography are themselves permeated by layers of repetition and multiplication. A chain of duplications begins with the process of taking a photograph, which is, in most cases, the duplication of something existing in "reality." From this "copy," which takes the form of a single negative, slide, or digital file, multiple prints can be made. The image represented in these prints, when considered within the scope of a photographer's body of work, often functions as one of a series, or as one within multiple iterations of an artist's themes and concerns. The image also contains within it the past history of images that have influenced its conception, and the future lines of influence yet to be formed. These threads of influence—the dialogue between artists and artistic concerns both within and outside of a particular era—weave through historical contexts and future possibilities, and imprint their influence, through variations, similarities, and resonances, on visual culture.

These historical contexts reach back before photography to a history of visual practices that saw repetition as a necessary tool for the development of artists, and for the acceptance of their work in the contexts that commissioned and consumed imagemaking. For the majority of the history of painting, emulation and imitation formed core practices through the copying of paintings, the mimicry of masters, and the repetition of accepted subject matters and styles within accepted genres such as religious, court, and landscape painting. Although the range of genres and subjects in photography are more or less parallel with those that have traditionally defined painting (portraits, landscapes, city views, even abstractions), because of the relative absence of the artist's hand on the surface of the print, photographs have an even greater sense of similarity and repetition than do paintings. Chuck Close observed that "photography is the easiest medium in which to be competent and the hardest medium in which to have a personal vision because there's no touch, there's no hand, there's no physicality, there's no interface."<sup>1</sup> Without the unique particularities of drawing or rendering to shape the forms and contours of the image, and without the characteristic marks of a paintbrush, palette knife, or hand to create and shape the actual surface of the picture, the photographer depends on available technical options to convey his or her intentions. Which camera format and lens focal length should receive the intended view? Which photographic surface should receive the resulting

image (matte or glossy paper, Kodak Endura or Fuji Crystal Archive, etc.)? These technical parameters focus the range of expression and make repetition in photography even more pronounced than in other visual arts. It makes the photographs of two different photographers look more similar than the paintings of two different painters. It can also seem to imply that photographers are revisiting the same themes, iconographies, and styles when, in fact, the range of subjects in the history of visual representation has gradually expanded over time.

Perhaps this is why working in series is so important to photography, for to shape a personal vision requires revisiting a subject over many images to create a more focused and particular view, rather than relying on the unique aspects of a single image. In other words, photography is particularly suited to the accumulation of and relationships between many images, rather than to the specific imprint on the individual image, to create a unique vision or outlook. It seems that in photography, increasing the limitations and rules by which an image is constructed within an already limited technical field—and therefore cultivating the conditions for repetition—is one of the most important factors in making a body of work specific and different.

These, then, are some of the challenges that, as a photographer, I see as central to the making of photographs: how to shape meaning and uniqueness out of a limited range of expression; how to expand meanings through similarities and repetition, rather than restricting them through repetitiveness (the distinction between repetition and repetitiveness, after all, can be dangerously close sometimes); how to achieve the widest range of contrast within a narrow range of parameters, and the widest range of difference within a unifying envelope; how to form a dialogue with the histories and influences that define the field; and how to find unique relationships within ways of seeing and within environments already permeated by repetition.

## INSIDE / OUTSIDE

The process of repetition is, on the level of perception, intrinsic to how we see, and also to how we know and behave. Our vision is composed of duplications and translations of outside reality: two almost-identical images, seen through two eyes, are projected onto the light-sensitive cells of the retina at the back of each eye, which are then translated into neural signals for the brain to understand. This repetition of images

also becomes the basis for comprehending depth. When the two images from each eye are overlapped, our surroundings are removed from flatness and are rendered in three dimensions.

Repetition is thus intrinsic to turning seeing into knowing, and it is one of the most important tools in helping the brain retain information. Repetition is the basis for the recognition of things and the creation of familiar grounds from which the new and unfamiliar can be identified and understood. It reflects the need to place and relate new concepts to known personal, intellectual, educational, or artistic contexts. Repetition shapes the range of familiarity outlined by our cultural, social, and historical environments, making what we see intelligible. Repetition gives structure to thought, and forms a barrier against the flood of indecipherability and entropy.

Repetition also underlies our behaviors—the formation of habit, of familiar practices, of the regularity of daily life. As Sigmund Freud hypothesized, the repetition of past experiences, especially traumatic ones, forms the basis of unconscious drives, which manifest in how a person confronts reality: “What appears to be reality is in fact only a reflection of a forgotten past.”<sup>2</sup>

At the level of what is perceived, the myriad environments that surround us and form our physical, temporal, and cultural contexts are often structured through repetition. Wavelengths, periodicities, and orbits underlie the behavior of phenomena in space. The repetitive layers of geological stratification sediment the cycles of time in the earth. The circular motion of clocks, daily and seasonal cycles, and Buddhist and Hindu concepts of reincarnation and the Wheel of Life structure understandings of time. A regular heartbeat, biological reproduction, and the recurrence of genetic traits give continuity to life. Standardization, mass production, and gridded structural systems create and organize our built environment. The eternal recurrence, “the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things,”<sup>3</sup> was for Friedrich Nietzsche the basis of existence. By affirming its repetition, one would affirm life in the past, present, and future. Nietzsche’s concept was influenced by Heinrich Heine, who observed that “time is infinite, but the things in time are finite,”<sup>4</sup> and are therefore bound to repeat. Today, we say that “history repeats itself.”

Photography occupies the meeting point between the mechanics of visual perception and the structures that shape our environments. In the process of giving

visual form to the ways of seeing and behaving that define us, and to the contexts that encompass us, it engages layers of repetition inherent within ourselves and our environments. The process of repetition therefore extends in both directions, for to photograph is to multiply the already multiplied: photography mirrors the doubling process of seeing, and duplicates environments already structured by repetition.

## UNIQUE / SAME

It might seem that the opposite of the repetitive is the unique or the original—that which differs enough from its surroundings to be considered distinct and separate. Uniqueness and originality have been favored qualities in Western thought, in contrast to Eastern thought, in which reiteration is an accepted practice. Uniqueness, however, can only be understood within a context of similarities and repetitions. In other words, something is unique only in relation to a larger field of comparisons. Depending on context, uniqueness becomes a relative rather than an absolute term.

The categories that establish similarity, or the range of repetition, are not necessarily stable or fixed: they are largely determined by the specific circumstances of history, culture, and society. The organizing principles that determine what falls within categories of the similar are seldom absolute, as examined by Michel Foucault in his book *The Order of Things*. In this book, he quoted Jorge Luis Borges' fictional description of a "Chinese encyclopedia" entitled *The Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, that describes a division of animals into those "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies."<sup>5</sup> What one society might consider as different and unrelated could be thought of as similar and related by another. Take, for example, the Hindu list of beings that are considered pure and thus don't require cremation: sadhus (holy men), pregnant women, children, animals, and those who have died from snake bites. In languages, sounds that are distinct and unique to one ear can sound similar or indistinguishable to another: *b* and *p* in English, *l* and *ll* in Spanish, and *xi* and *qi* in Mandarin.

The determination of what can fall within categories of sameness, whether made by a society, a figure

or body of power, or an epoch, defines how the environment can be ordered and therefore how it can be seen and understood. In other words, the categories of the same are the product of history and society, giving no stable, eternal basis for the unique. The identification and examination of uniqueness is similar to looking at a hologram—the subject appears, changes appearance, or disappears altogether depending on the angle of view.

## FIGURE / GROUND

The context of similarities against which something can be identified as different is akin to the distinction between ground and figure. The visibility of the figure depends on the composition of the ground or context against which it appears, whether this be defined on the visual level by tone, color, or texture; on the physical level by shape, material, or structure; or on the ideological level by discipline, culture, or history. These properties, when expanded or repeated and then arranged through sets of relationships, form a field of intelligibility, or a background for vision, against which things can appear and make sense.

In photography, the use of repetition involves a choice of what will constitute the ground through the establishment of what counts as consistent and similar. By establishing a context, the photographer can then foreground difference. But figure and ground can also shift positions. By shifting the lines that separate sameness and difference, repetition allows for the manipulation of the relationship between figure and ground. Hans Eijkelboom's photographs of individual pedestrians in Paris, New York, and Shanghai come to mind. His grids of images of people are grouped according to similarities: those wearing blue jeans, those wearing striped shirts, those holding coffee cups. Is the ground the uniform-like similarities in clothing and accessories that foreground the differences between individuals? Or do the subtle differences in the individual objects—the different colors of the striped shirts, the various shapes and sizes of handbags, the miscellany of t-shirt iconography—become the figures against a ground of uniform tastes, habits, and aspirations? The answer is both and neither, for figure and ground in repetition can switch places, as in the familiar figure/ground reversal between an image of two profiles facing each other, and the shape of a vase.

The dividing line between figure and ground, foreground and background, uniqueness and sameness, and difference and repetition is a

dynamic one, changing depending on the view. Each is necessary to understand the other, and both are distinguished by gradations rather than solid boundaries. “Difference lies between two repetitions” according to Gilles Deleuze,<sup>6</sup> who in his book *Difference and Repetition* explained the interrelationship of these two concepts beginning with a quote from David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*: “Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it.”<sup>7</sup>

## TIME / SPACE

In the way that light and contrast give shape to form, repetition can give shape to time and to the spaces that objects inhabit. In Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies, the repetition of images as strips of film-like stills of people and animals in motion endows the stationary image with a layer of temporal movement. Repetition can also open up the possibility of not only rendering the forward movement of time, but of treating it as a plastic material, just like clay or paint. Through repetition, time can be rendered malleable, by compressing or expanding change or stasis. Portraits by Rineke Dijkstra, Keizo Kitajima, and Nicholas Nixon, in which the same person or group of people is photographed over a span of years, both stretch and compress time—and our viewing experience. These portraits extend the relatively short time spent with the images into the long periods of time depicted in the photographs, and compress the long passage of time into a few images that can be viewed simultaneously. Repetition can also break up a moment in history into a seemingly endless number of components, as in Barbara Probst’s multiple images of a single moment in time.

In rendering space, repetition enables our movement beyond the static two dimensions of the picture surface. Consider repetition within a picture—a regular grid of columns receding into the distance, for instance—and the impression of the third dimension, rendered in perspective and extending behind the two-dimensional surface, will emerge. Space can also be depicted beyond the simple representation of three-dimensional perspectival space, as in images that render the spaces created by social practices, economics, history, and beliefs. Once a trait is repeated enough times, it becomes a social practice; once a form is repeated enough times, it becomes part of an iconography. Social practices and shared spaces create an expanded definition of a “ground”—not only as a pictorial device, but as a basis of familiarity and

intelligibility from which “figures” (people, objects, ourselves) can be discerned and looked at.

Through repetition, space can, for example, be distilled and collapsed by showing the uniform spaces created by the economy, as suggested by Keizo Kitajima’s views of financial centers in different cities. Repetition can also expand specific places into the wider space of history by showing change, as in Joachim Koester’s recent photographs of buildings and places photographed in the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Ed Ruscha and Robert Adams. Or repetition can show how space is formed by society, as in Thomas Struth’s photographs of streets in Europe, Japan, and the United States. These works, however, are not pure reflections of reality, for they create their own relationships, forming visual environments that overlap, mirror, or stand independent from reality and the environments we inhabit.

Photography, then, becomes a simultaneous closing-in and distancing-from what is depicted. It closes in to examine and make visible, but distances in the multiplication of meanings and interpretations. With repetition, the focus is less on the relationship between the images and the “reality” they represent, and more on the relationship between the images themselves. Through the relationships that are established, the images constitute their own environments.

## SINGLE / MULTIPLE

While repetition can represent the larger structures that surround us, it also reveals the impossibility of single truths in photography. The fact that a single view can be repeated but is modified each time through the filters that affect its appearance—weather, light, culture, society, events, politics, economics—makes each photograph a fragment of a whole that is impossible to fully describe or reach. It might seem that multiplying a view would get us closer to the truth; instead, repetition reminds us that meanings are always multiple and changing.

As photography already points to larger fields and contexts, rendering an expanded view in time and space through repetition opens the possibility, through the accumulation of individual parts, of depicting a picture larger than what we may be able to see as individuals. “A picture” in this case is not only a discrete image, but an image created from multiple views whose relationships build up a unique view of

the world. Each photograph contributes to this larger view, in the same way that individual brushstrokes contribute to the composition of a larger painting. Unlike the brushstrokes within a single painting, however, multiple photographic images do not add up to a single image that can be understood in a single glance; they can only be comprehended through multiple views and multiple viewpoints. Mark Ruwedel's images of the remains of train lines across the United States, for example, not only portray a single geographic space traversed by transport lines; they also portray the transformation of multiple spaces by the single ambition of economic expansion. Together, the images form a portrait of the spaces created when the forces of standardization, colonization, and the spread of markets meet the specific terrains of particular landscapes.

While the single image is synonymous with the individual view, multiple images offer the possibility of breaking up vision into multiple viewpoints, suggesting that vision exists beyond the individual. In other words, repetition demonstrates that vision is made up not only of *individuals* viewing, but of *societies* and *cultures* looking and forming how and what we see. It suggests that repetition is rarely the duplication of the same, but is composed of similarities and variations modified through the filters of our manifold environments—historical, cultural, intellectual, psychological. It suggests that uniqueness is not only how different something is from its surrounding context, but how it rearranges the relationships of its surrounding ground and how it changes the ways in which we see our own contexts. Repetition allows us to scrutinize how the structures we encounter and inhabit are composed, by exposing them to multiplied views. Repetition suggests that views are never singular, but that each time we look, we see something different.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES  
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## Notes

1. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/06/art/chuck-close-with-phong-bui>
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), p. 19.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 273–4.
4. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 318.
5. Quoted in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. xv.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 76.
7. Quoted in Deleuze, p. 70.