Rehearsal of Memory

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'Rehearsal of Memory', in Claire Doherty, ed., *Factor 1995*, FACT, Liverpool 2002, n.p.

> There are no statistics of the soul. There is no way to measure the depth of the cultural wound… we cannot know to what point we have been mutilated in our consciousness, our identity and our memory.[1]

Imagine having pressed up against the pane of your computer screen the naked, scarred and tattooed body of some dangerously unstable male. His body is of doubtful cleanliness. Imagine further that marks on and various extremities of his body literally tell stories, the click of a mouse over them summoning up images, voices, snatches of video or text, fragmentary narratives that are briefly painful, amusing or disturbing. Also that the voices thus roused compete against many others that fade in and out of a fabric of harsh sounds. This is the beginning of the viewer's experience of the CD-ROM *Rehearsal of Memory*, and its first impression is of a palpable presence that stands opposed to the cool sign-system of computing, pushed up against and threatening (in a moment) to burst through the glass.

The body displayed here is a composite portrait of patients confined at Ashworth Maximum Security Mental Hospital, recorded by their pressing parts of themselves against the screen of a scanner (cameras were banned from the asylum). Just as the surface of their flesh was recorded piece by piece, so they are seen in *Rehearsal of Memory*, the monitor become a confining frame from which the user can never take enough distance to achieve a view of the whole, or to gauge properly the threat presented. Rather, when the navigation arrows at the sides of the screen are clicked, there is a claustrophobic shunting from fragment to fragment in a false and forced intimacy, accompanied by the metallic sound of a door slamming shut or a bolt being shot. The patients' own lack of a coherent sense of self (some would claim that what they lack is itself an illusion) is suggested by the competing voices and the viewing of bodily segments.

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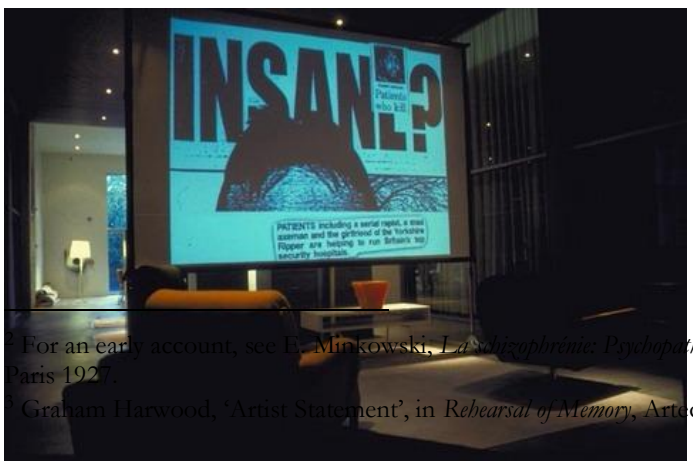
[1] Eduardo Galeano, *We Say No: Chronicles, 1963-1991*, trans. Mark Fried, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1992, p. 191.

Despite the extensive work in digitising, manipulating and suturing the scans, the indexical character of these quasi-photographic fragments is significant, for there is a strong affinity between photography, tattooing and scarring, each being precise traces of a presence marked on a surface. Just as photographs bear an eerie resemblance to those memories (known as 'flashbulb memories') engraved with great clarity and detail on our minds by shock, so scars bear an intimate relation to memories etched deep by pain. (In my own case, to trace the scars on my knee, head, hands, leg and chest is to raise vivid recollections of a fall in the playground, two knife attacks and an operation.) Pain, remembrance, marks made by wounding the body and photography gather together on the screen in *Rehearsal of Memory*.

Insistently and intrusively, the sounds of the hospital accompany the user's visual tour. The closer the cursor is moved to the centre of the screen, the more individual voices stand out from the general cacophony. As one inmate says, the dominant persona within a self contains the 'central database' of knowledge. To move cursor from centre to margin is to register the loss of coherence. That the soundscape was made by the well-known artist of surveillance, Scanner, was appropriate since, in his own work, Scanner snatches conversations from the airwaves (public and private), looping them into complex compositions. Since the early days of radio, schizophrenics have imagined manipulators of the ether transmitting voices directly into their heads, and threatening to control their thoughts.[2]

Ashworth confines the most dangerous of the criminally insane, including murderers, rapists, child molesters and arsonists. Some of its inmates are notorious for their cruelty, like the Moors murderer Ian Brady; others for the injustice of their imprisonment, like Michael Hickey of the Bridgewater Four who became mentally unbalanced during his lengthy and wrongful incarceration. Typical views of these patients fall into two opposing camps: a conservative opinion that they are intrinsically evil, and a liberal opinion that they have been damaged by trauma. As Graham Harwood, the director of *Rehearsal of Memory* makes clear, neither is quite adequate: rather, there is a socially drawn distinction between those who do violence for the state and those who do so freelance, and an equally conventional line demarcating sanity and insanity, for a strictly delimited madness assures those who fall outside it of their normality.[3]

In making the work at Ashworth, Harwood was exploiting a narrow window of opportunity. In the early 1990s, few people understood what a multi-media project could encompass, and he was given generous access to staff, patients and information, and for a short time even managed to set up online computers for the use of inmates. Equally, the result, *Rehearsal of Memory*, first in 1995 as a projected large-screen installation shown in galleries, and a year later produced as a CD-ROM, was a startling use of the new technology, loudly praised and widely toured. Harwood has



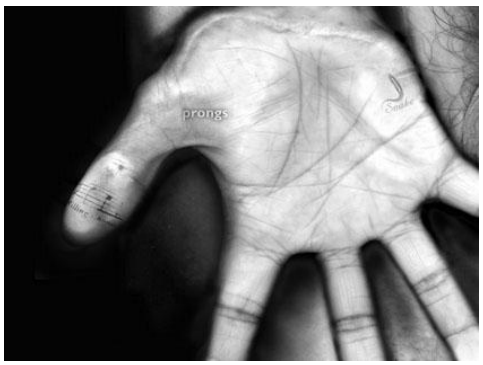
[2] For an early account, see E. Minkowski, *La Schizophrénie: Psychopathologie des schizoïudes et des schizophrènes*, Paris 1927.
[3] Graham Harwood, 'Artist Statement', in *Rehearsal of Memory*, Artec/ Bookworks, London 1996.

expressed some discomfort at the work's very success, suspicious that its radical character was being used by the computer industry to illustrate the apparently humanising effects of their products.[4]

Furthermore, it is easy to see that *Rehearsal of Memory* could be attacked, perhaps along the lines that liberal documentary has been assaulted; it could be said that the work makes a spectacle of misery for the entertainment of a privileged public; or that its investigation into the details of inmates' lives opens them up to more effective surveillance and control; that its reforming zeal (if *Rehearsal of Memory* is read as a plea for more humane treatment of Ashworth's patients) fails to assign specific blame for their plight, and finally serves only to support the system that it purports to condemn.[5] One prominent new media critic, Peter Lunenfeld, even writes that *Rehearsal of Memory* 'suffers from a romanticism about the violent and the mad more appropriate to the beginning of the twentieth century than its exhausted end…'[6]

Various prominent features of *Rehearsal of Memory* would, however, have to be played down by this line of criticism. The first is the work's authorship. Harwood is described merely as the 'director' of this highly collaborative project. Patients and staff at Ashworth are credited with the 'artwork', while students at London community computing space Artec (many of whom had experienced long-term unemployment) spent long, unpaid hours building the piece. (With Harwood, those students went on to become the members of the radical art group, Mongrel.) The inclusion of two distinct socially excluded groups in the making of the work muddies the usual 'self and other' schema on which critiques of documentary depend.

The charge of romanticism is similarly blunted by the bringing into face-to-face contention the harshness, indeed the pollution, of the subject matter and the regulated, office-oriented space of the computer. As Lev Manovich points out, like many works of computer art, *Rehearsal of Memory* is a database. While in older media, such as painting, interface and database are one and the same, in computer-based work they stand apart.[7]



In *Rehearsal of Memory*, where a too-present yet equally spectral flesh is navigated to pull up the data files, interface and database seem deliberately opposed. (It would, after all, be easy to imagine a work that used the same material to comment upon the bureaucracy of incarceration, using an interface of case-notes and files that self-evidently looked like a database.) Instead, as Harwood puts it, *Rehearsal of Memory* 'confronts us with a clean comfortable machine filled with filth, the forbidden and the demented, its hygienic procedures contaminated with the effluent of excluded human relations.'

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[4] Harwood in conversation with the author, March 2002.

[5] For such a critique of documentary photography, see Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989.

[6] Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Medi,a and Cultures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 128.

[7] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, pp. 226-7.

Yet such a filling of the screen with filth was (and is) hardly unusual, and was the very purpose of two powerful computing industries, gaming and pornography. In the same year that *Rehearsal of Memory* was published, ID software launched *Quake*, an extremely popular and influential game that, in a similar colour scheme of browns, blacks and greys, pushed a visceral experience of killing as far as the technology of the day would allow, regaling players with fountains of blood and bouncing chunks of blown-apart flesh set against a dark, complex, Piranesi-inspired dungeon. Beneath the spectacle of slaughter lay the strict administration of the computer, enforcing on the efficient player as much conformity and economy as an office program.[8] The porn industry, a vast database, likewise pushed up against the screen intimate parts of bodies, in a mapping of the multitudinous configurations of couplings and recording of excretions every bit as complete and systematic as the writings of de Sade.[9]

Both have an affinity with *Rehearsal of Memory*, gaming especially with the conventionalised movement forced on the user (a choice of navigational tools, allowing movement in sharp jumps or a slow drift), the revelation of fresh, fleshy territory, the choice of clicking or not clicking. With both digital gaming and pornography, their database forms stifle the emergence of narrative with which each would like to further engage their users.[10] As in *Rehearsal of Memory*, with its snatches of conversation, taped confessions, text extracts and glimpses of some remembered scene, these narratives remain sharply defined fragments, which refuse to add up and make sense. There is a connection between this failure of narrative to cohere and trauma, in which memory repeats itself involuntarily, looped and unchanging, just as the data fragments of *Rehearsal of Memory* can never change (and the initials of the work's title, ROM, also stand for Read Only Memory).[11] As it is summoned up, the database of text fragments forms a regular grid obscuring the body, suggesting the physical caging of bars and the mental confinement of trauma.

This structure could, of course, stand only for the dissociation that madness brings, but perhaps the view of this collaborative work is broader. Harwood writes, after all, about using the work as a mirror for 'normal society', and this suggests a relation of

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[8] For an elaboration of this argument, see the chapter 'Just Gaming' in my book *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*, Verso, London 1996.

[9] The Sadean database finds its most complete expression in *Les 120 Journées de Sodome, ou l'Ecole du libertinage, par le marquis de Sade*, ed. Maurice Heine, Paris 1931-35.

[10] On the conflict between database and narrative, see Manovich, *Language*, ch. 5; for an account of the possibilities and limits of computer narrative, see Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*, revised edition, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass. 2000.

[11] This is pointed out by Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid*, p. 127.

resemblance, not difference.[12] All memory involves a digital form of recording, a mapping of the pattern of neural firings (zero and one) which composed an experience, and all persistent memory involves repetition, or rehearsal, over hours or days if it is to survive the passage from short to long term.[13] The life of Ashworth's patients, their confinement, their control by drugs, the regulation of their activities, their treatment of others with brute instrumentality, and their self abuse is merely at the extreme end of a spectrum that characterises technological, administered, capitalist society as a whole. Few are not compelled to live out large portions of their lives in places and doing tasks that they would rather not; few consistently treat others as ends rather than means, or can afford to do so; many retreat from their troubles with prescribed or proscribed drugs; many, in pain, harm themselves by cutting into or starving their bodies; none escape implication in a system in which, say, buying a diamond for a loved one, or a bar of chocolate, fuels barbaric civil war or slavery. The claustrophobia of *Rehearsal of Memory* with its spherical space that eventually brings viewers back upon themselves, and with the fragmentation, repetition and ordering of its database, is certainly an attempt to evoke the atmosphere of the asylum, but is also meant to make the viewer reflect on the uncanny familiarity of that place, as if a visit there was also a visit home.

[12] Harwood, 'Artist Statement'.

[13] See John McCrone, *Going Inside: A Tour Round a Single Moment of Consciousness*, Faber and Faber, London 1999, pp. 204-5.