

Earrings, Noodles, and Recurrence

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The riddle of recurrence intercepts the theory of becoming. Could a fundamental recurrence be concealed within Heraclitean time flowing through the cosmos, history, social and individual life, exhaustless temporality glimpsed only by some of the greatest philosophers? ... Could everyday life be the occasion for such a confrontation and does it possess the key to the mystery or a clue to some higher truth? Images, imagination and the imaginary would seem to be involved in this temporal flow and to extend it; and yet is not the fabric of the imaginary woven from threads of remembrance and therefore of recurrence?¹

“Apologies, time is a wet noodle,” has been my phrase of choice when replying to emails a little too late this year. It seems appropriate for the medium of art-viewing to become similarly unmoored to match the experience of time in everyday life during this pandemic. *the commute*, a project commissioned by Arts Assembly’s Whitney Brennan long before the events of this year, is a series of three audio works. Originally meant to be listened to on each piece’s corresponding transit line in Vancouver, the works become more expansive than their original premise as the experience of commutes become distant. Listening to the works by S F Ho, jaye simpson, and Helena Krobath create a double experience of space and time. The listener is in their own body and location, but also elsewhere, moving along distinct routes and timetables of another body.

The commute as a concept is travel structured around labour and falls into a category of peripheral unpaid time. This is what Henri Lefebvre called “‘constrained time,’ the time of repeated formalities and obligations that, like the departmental cocktail party, are neither precisely work nor, in any real sense of the term, pleasure.”² This time also produces memories that live in us. The repeated travel folds in on itself repetitively and makes specific memories less distinct. The other parlance of the commute is the passing of payment from one form into another. Literally, in the form of purchasing a pass to a transit system. Passing from one form to another is one way I would like to think through these audio pieces. There is a shift from the labour body to the contemplative self that occurs along familiar routes. The body is lulled by this familiarity, and the mind takes us elsewhere. The passage is

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1971), 19.

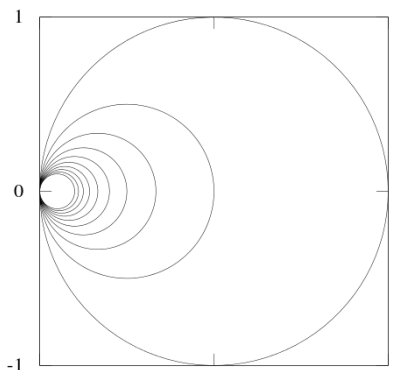
² Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998), 20-21.

not a smooth transition, but a trading-in, a compromise made to facilitate movement. This time, like the time of these audio works, is both ours and not ours.

The infinite earring is a 1-dimensional, compact, locally path-connected metrizable topological space in \mathbb{R}^2 . Please, hold with me, not all of those qualifiers are necessary to understand at this moment. Gloss over them, think of them as poetic. This is what is important: it is defined by the union of circles. I'm introducing the space of the infinite earring because I find that some of the odd not-quite paradoxes that topology allows you to work with have a way of illustrating concepts that you probably understand through your own experience of thought, or might be described obliquely through art.

Topology is a compelling way of formulating space, in that it imagines spaces outside of the linear rationalized Euclidean plane. These are weird spaces in dimensions where things happen in opposition to the mundane encounters we have in the space that culture inscribes. If you approach topological spaces through the rote logic that you learn about mathematics in school, they seem impossible to understand, create friction in your thought, because they are often described with equations that have taken mathematicians far beyond the polynomials taught to most people, and it seems like endless work to repetitively learn what you would need to make those logical steps. And they are, necessarily for their usefulness in mathematics, described using these, and other stranger notations.

However, I like to approach them as if they are, not fantasy exactly, but internal spaces, or spaces of possibility. I prefer to feel them intuitively, to notice how movement changes, and also how some aspects of life that we are told to feel or experience a certain way, that contradict how we actually feel, might be resolved, if left to exist in these topologically alien worlds. They are isomorphic to mundane life, in that they can be connected to everyday experience, but they veer off of it in new directions. I like to think of them as an illustration of how different kinds of thought, or feeling, can work. And



they often easily slip past the typical binaristic conflicts that philosophy and politics find themselves unable to resolve. If they are thought about in this way, then mathematics can do the work of relating them back to our current situation, with new axioms.

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It is not a coincidence that this strange topological space is named after a piece of jewellery that is inserted into the body. The 1-dimensionality of the space allows it to pass through the smallest hole. The infinite earring is a space where there is one point through

³Wikipedia contributors, "Hawaiian earring," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hawaiian_earring&oldid=978618726

which passes an infinite amount of circles. They are contained within a maximum size, but they can become infinitely smaller. Pictured here are the first ten of these circles. Each circle is reduced in radius by half.

The important topological condition of this space is that these circles, which get infinitely smaller, all pass through the same point at 0 on the graph. They reinscribe themselves without materiality. It was once described to me as “not like a handful of spaghetti,” because there are only so many noodles that you can hold in one hand, no matter how thin they come, angel hair or linguine. These circles do not have mass or thickness. But they do describe something. They describe the passage through this space. While your hand can only squish together so many noodles before they are no longer noodles, the one-dimensional 0 point space can withstand an infinite amount of circles running through it. The circles approach having a radius of 0 without ever reaching it, as the smallest cut in half can be cut again, using the vacancy of materialism that is granted to such mathematical concepts.

Human thought has made some big leaps into abstraction, and one such jarring concept is the line with no thickness. Giuseppe Longo attributes this concept to a distinctly human brain. Animals don't see contours, he argues, they see beings. “This line is the first and most fundamental ‘mathematical structure’, a border, a very difficult notion.”⁴ This space of the earring relies on this idea of the line with no thickness, or to be more precise, the point with no thickness. “the line as the trace of a continuous gesture is a fundamental notion: the point...is apprehended, according to Euclid ...as an intersection of two lines. The point is not the fundamental entity: from a spatial-geometrical point of view, it is not the line that is composed of points, but it is the point that is the sign-trace of relations and movements of which the line is the support.”⁵ As much as we are inherently finite beings, and one day our circles of thought will cease, due to material conditions of existence, there still exists an infinity in a closed circle of thought. The infinite earring is a topological space wherein, unlike a handful of noodles, the circles pass infinitely through the same point, because the point is one dimensional. Time as it is experienced in the body is not a handful of wet noodles but has the dimensionality to contain infinite retracings. It is the body that can only withstand so much rethreading.

The topological space of the infinite earring is a framework through which I've been thinking about these audio works. In each, there is a shape of time that is reinscribed, and comes back to itself. S F Ho's piece, *Guts*, contains various cycles, or circles, each looping at different rates. In the body, there is

⁴ Giuseppe Longo, “Space and Time in the Foundations of Mathematics, or some challenges in the interactions with other sciences” (Springer, *Handbook of the Mathematics of the Arts and Sciences*, 2020), 3.

⁵ Giuseppe Longo, “The Consequences of Philosophy” (Glass Bead Journal, 2016)
<https://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-consequences-of-philosophy/?lang=enview>

the breath that varies slightly with each exhalation, as well as the digestive cycle, one that we understand as being interrupted, or reversed. There is also a walking circle, one that is inscribed around an apartment, and around a block, a relatively small circle of commute. Each of these cyclical rhythms becomes distended throughout the piece. However, they exist all at once, in the present moment of the listener, and seek to describe this simultaneity in the subject of the piece. They double themselves out of the present moment, that time with no thickness distorts along these circles. We are led through these distentions by the suspicious voice of the guru, which encourages a change, but one that seems incompatible to the path that you are currently on. In *Guts*, it seems integral that this one-dimensional point wherein time formally reinscribes itself is located inside the body, in a form of pharmakon⁶, both part of the body and foreign to it, wounding and healing doubly in each reinscription.

Lefebvre often speaks about reinscription as constructing forms of power. In *The Production of Space*, and also in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. The latter speaks more directly about the reinscription of time, but relies on the framework that is built in the former. It's in this book that Lefebvre speaks about "constrained time" mentioned above, which the time of the commute falls under. "Everyday life is made of recurrences: gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions, natural and rational time, etc."⁷ Lefebvre sets up this recurrent time in opposition to a cumulative recurrence, wherein the former is exploited by the latter. The violence of the superstructures which create inequality rely on the slice of the everyday, the way it opens up and then falls back down in its repetition. In Helena Krobath's audio piece, *Ghost Story Commute*, we see the disjuncture between the experience of the constrained time, and the material effects of cumulative abstraction. The ghost that wanders the halls of the train is the dimensionless point that can cut through historical and material circumstances to reveal the ways in which these different forms of recurrence are interrelated. Lefebvre separates these levels of recurrence with memory as an intermediary.

"Memory is a typical process of accumulation and therefore an essential component of mechanisms that materialize and technicalize such a process. But everyday life is not cumulative... Everyday life, when it changes, evolves according to a rhythm that does not

⁶ In Derrida's essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," he introduces the concept of the pharmakon, which is described in Plato as a metaphor for writing which was given by the gods. The pharmakon in greek has a double meaning, cure and poison, and Derrida's reformulation of the concept applies initially to writing, as a boon that both makes concrete the ephemeral, but also undoes the ability to remember and experience the world unmediated. It is a dual concept of a thing that wounds as it heals.

⁷ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 18.

coincide with the time of accumulation and in a space that cannot be identified with that of cumulative processes.”⁸

Krobath sets up the ghost as a memory, crossing the boundaries of the lack of accumulation in everyday life, to the profusion of accumulation in processes of capital and colonization. This dimensionless point, insofar as each cycle flows through it, allows a transfer from interior to exterior cycles, and the reverse. The voice of the ghost intonates different spheres of materiality and symbolic abstraction in a litany towards the end of the work, speeding up these points of transfer, as if to accelerate their collision. “What is your spine made of? What do you think when you wake? When the light inside comes on? What owns you? What does a boot taste like? Or a knife? Have you tasted safety? Who built you?”

Jaye Simpson’s work *Migrational Memories* continues in this form of elliptical loops, and their piece is built around a spatial and temporal idea of displacement. They are primarily interested in excavating their own memories for recurrences, points of intersection. The absence that becomes the focus of their work is delineated by various abstractions: the case file number on their social work file, the precise location of their memories along Commercial Drive. However repetitive these structures in themselves are, the story that is told escapes the rote bureaucratic assignments of cross-streets and numbers, and speaks to what is necessarily missing from these structures, namely the desires and dreams of a person, their loves and experiences of joy, which cannot be adhered arbitrarily the same way these other machinations can. The narrative of memory is insistent on its gaps, what it avoids, with “open windows and doors,” and creates form from what is necessarily hidden. Their writing knows the violence of replacing one thing with another. The absences create a spectral time running behind the many branches that they wreathe. As the stories weave through movements between memories, the concepts of migration and displacement become netted together, necessary for either to be thought.

Memory may have been formed by the world and its materiality, but once the abstract event of it is underway, it becomes dimensionless, and may pass through the same terrain without taking up more space. Without even a trenchant inscription. This recurrence through these forms, colonial and exploitative and dismissing, are not material inscription, but formal inscription. This is not to say that formality does not have material inscription, but that it also has a potentiality. All of these works are interested in the potentiality of escaping the prescribed efficiency of narrative. As these circles pass through the same absent point in the space of memory, the loops can be crossed, creating an entry to a non-linear narrative. This place of transaction, the trading in, or absentia of temporal elements of the

⁸ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 61.

body, but also the place of transaction as an absolute abstraction, the line with no thickness, the one dimensional point that contains infinities of traversal, which is a fiction in materiality, is also a place of possibility, which these works make powerful use of. This clashes with the material world in violent ways, but it also contains possibilities for that lived world, and as it is constructed through the event of thought, it becomes part of the world itself. It is another temporal form of the poison that cures.

Ultimately the one-dimensional point of the earring is a place of exchange, which has variances of levels of neutrality of passage from one form to another. This can be through the repetition that allows for the multiplication of circular inscription, but also a part of an exchange of labour, an instance of exploitation, and a reality of our bodily mortality and its rhythms. This year, many of our lives have gone from 3-spheres to a dimensionless point that contains infinite circles. Lefebvre's statement that "life is trapped in an intermediary zone between cyclic and rationalized linear time"⁹ seems more wounding now than ever. The loss of that dimensionality is assuaged by these works, that assure us that it has always been the case, and that we have strategies to continue, despite temporal recurrence. The passage between the abstract and material which has historically been oppressive is also traversable in the opposite direction, and its point of transfer is both abstract and material, it is blurred and more precise, mush and infinite. "With everyday life as mediator [it] passes from the relative to the absolute."¹⁰ Outside of this proposition, although we may feel alone, a handful of spaghetti is approximately the right portion for a single person.

⁹ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 84.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 6.