

Same Same

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Same Same invites artists to make something again; to revisit an idea or action.

Experience assumes a second attempt will apply knowledge acquired from the earlier effort, but does the instruction to make again excel or stagnate creativity?

Art schools instruct students to “make it bigger, make it outside, make it on a piece of toast and eat it.” The message is to interrogate through the research of repetition if one hopes to produce something of quality and vision.

The artist needs to make a lot of stuff before they know what to keep, and it’s knowing what to keep that reveals the talent of the artist.

Agnes Martin confirms that *an artist is a person who can recognise failure*.¹ But how the artist recognises failure, is unlikely to be described in words. The personal logic or criteria applied by the artist, which declares the work a success, remains beyond comprehension. Yet this state of not knowing, often secures achievement. Philip Guston describes how being completely baffled by one of his paintings is a highly desired state.² Art is a method of acquiring knowledge without being exactly sure what knowledge one is attempting to acquire.

Klaas Hoek, a tutor at the Slade, once explained how he was creatively paralysed after making a ‘successful’ artwork. He described how the work of art embodied all that he wanted to say, and the achievement rendered him void. How did he reverse out of the cul-de-sac of success? He did it again. The same work was not the same work. It was a route back out into the not knowing, a happily obscure place from which artists can begin.

The action of again is not only a method to escape creative stagnation, or a rigorous research tool. To reference Bridget Riley, it is an action that amplifies visible events which singly would go unnoticed.³

The amplification of again, is brilliantly demonstrated in *The Cholmondeley Ladies*, a work which inspired the concept of *Same Same*. Painted in England in 1600, it shows two women dressed the same, sat side by side in bed, holding identical babes in arms. It is an immediately arresting image that illustrates how repetition can warrant a work iconic. The women’s visibility is magnified by the presence of the other. We are forced into an elaborate game of spot the difference as our eye is propelled back and forth across the reflection, recording with relish the many subtle differences in dress, decoration, eye colour, and masked emotion.

The strategy of again is not always considered a positive move. Making something multiple times can be viewed as capitalising on one’s success. John Berger explains how the artist simultaneously desires and fears success.⁴ An artist labelled as ‘successful’ can often be accused of cultivating a production line to meet demand. Yet if one sells little and is not deemed to be a ‘successful’ artist, but repeats the same idea or action, their integrity remains intact. An obscure hero of lone creative ritual.

Can something be made too many times? The answer is surely down to the individual. If an artist’s understanding of what they make becomes too comprehensive and the lesson complete, then surely it is time to seek a more obscure process that works to a creative curiosity and avoids art as product. But perhaps this is too rigid a statement – to dictate or question any artists process is to misunderstand the nature of art. To quote Gary Woodley, *Art is what the artist chooses to take responsibility for, it is not for anyone else to decide*.

¹ Agnes Martin, “Beauty is the Mystery of Life”, 1989 in *Agnes Martin*, ed. Francis Morris and Tiffany Bell (Tate Publishing, London, 2015) p.159

² Philip Guston, talk at “Art/Not Art” conference, University of Minnesota, 1978, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2011) p.280

³ *Bridget Riley – Painting the Line*, BBC Studios – Documentary Unit, 2021

⁴ John Berger, 1965 “The Success and Failure of Picasso” in *Failure, Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Lisa Le Feuvre (Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2010) p.28