Q: How do Idris Khan and Hiroshi Sugimoto use their distinct media and techniques to explore the continuity of time and the layering of memory, and what impact do their representations have on the viewer's perception and emotional experience?

Introduction

Time and memory have been important themes in artistic creation since ancient times. In contemporary visual art, these concepts have been interpreted more deeply through innovative forms of expression. This essay will focus on the works of the British artist Idris Khan and the Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto, focusing on their approaches to time and memory in their artistic practices. Both artists attempt to reproduce the continuity of time and the hierarchy of memory in static images by demonstrating the deep human feelings about the passage of time and the construction of memory. However, the media and techniques they use are very different. This essay provides an in-depth exploration of the works of Idris Khan and Hiroshi Sugimoto in order to examine the different ways in which each artist deals with time and memory in his or her work.

Idris Khan's work and process has been described by The Guardian as 'experiments in compressed memories' (The Guardian, 2010) and 'all-encompassing composites' (Photo Slaves, 2009). Khan attempts to capture the complexity of human memory and the passage of time. In an interview, he said, 'It is a challenge to not define my work as a photograph but using the medium of photography to create something that exists on the surface of the paper and not to be transported back to the paper. paper and not to be transported back to an isolated moment in time.' (Photo Slaves, 2009). Similarly, the art publication Artforum describes Khan's work as recreating Nietzsche's writings in which Apollonian ideals of order and rationality are plagued by the Dionysian intoxication of ecstasy, magic, and chaos-the unease of the boundaries between order and chaos (Artforum, 2014). Khan himself states, 'I try to capture the essence of the building-something that's been permanently imprinted in someone's mind, like a

memory.' (Khan, 2016).

As a contemporary artist, Idris Khan's contribution is to capture the passage of time and the layering of memories through the superimposition of images and text, transforming transience into a timeless visual experience. Khan deliberately avoids clearly identifiable images and words in his work, using the ambiguity created by layering and repetition to express the uncertainty and fragmentation of memory and time. For example, in Every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders', he superimposes multiple layers of the Becher's photographs to create a visual effect that is both familiar and unfamiliar, an imperfection that reflects the subjective and fleeting nature of memory. Khan argues that his work has an indicative quality according to the definitions of Roland Barthes, noting that photographs are a tool with a certain melancholic connotation that allows the viewer to go back to a moment in life and remember a face or a place where they once stood. (Khan, 2016)

Hiroshi Sugimoto's work reveals his deep reflection on philosophical ideas, especially the study of time, space and the nature of existence. His creative approach and representation of movement and time creates a unique dialogue between the work and the viewer. The central theme of this essay is how Hiroshi Sugimoto uses both figurative and abstract visual representations to express the continuity or timelessness of time, without being constrained by the ephemeral nature of the photographic medium. In Theatres, Sugimoto captures figurative representations of theatre and screen through long exposures, making each photograph an abstract record of eternity beyond the moment. This sense of movement in stillness demonstrates the continuity of time and reflects phenomenological reflections on the passage of time. His philosophical perspective emphasizes that time is not only a linear passage, but also a cyclical existence inseparable from space. He said: 'Naming things has something to do with human consciousness, with the separation of the whole world from oneself'. (Khan, 2008).

This essay will focus on the works of Idris Khan and Hiroshi Sugimoto, with an emphasis on their approaches to time and memory. By comparing and exploring how the two artists explore the continuity of time and the layering of memory in visual art through their different mediums and techniques, as well as comparing the similarities and differences in their techniques from a critical and theoretical perspective.

Theoretical perspectives

The exploration of the continuity of time and the hierarchy of memory can be analyzed with the help of the perspectives of different theorists. This exploration not only traces history, individual and collective memory, but also constructs a re-examination of the nature of being and time.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 1985, Gilles Deleuze proposed the concept of the 'time-image', emphasizing that time can exist independently of events and be displayed as a non-linear narrative. He believes that artworks can show the extension of time in images, so that the audience can feel the interweaving of the past, present and future (Deleuze, 1985). For example, Bill Viola's video work *The Reflecting Pool, 1977* creates a non-linear time experience through the contrast between the freezing frame and the flow of time. In this work, the action of a person jumping into the pond is frozen in the air, while the surrounding landscape changes in normal time. This contrast creates an experience of 'time suspended', where the viewer feels both movement and stillness at the same time. Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche proposed the theory of 'eternal recurrence' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). He believed that time is not linear, but exists in the form of cycles and repetitions. This repetition is not just a simple repetition, but a symbolic ritual that shows that life and events will return in different forms endlessly (Nietzsche, 1883). Christian Marclay's artistic practice, The Clock (2010), is a perfect example of the 'eternal theory'. It is a 24-hour video installation made up of thousands of film scenes edited together, with clocks and time displays constantly appearing in the scenes. Although the work follows a linear flow of time, its infinite loop format makes the audience contemplate the endless and inevitable cycle of time. In the time dimension of non-linear narrative, the experience of time presents a special continuity. This continuity is different from the traditional linear time structure, which emphasizes a 'duration' type of flow, as if blending the past, present and future in the same space and time, allowing the viewer to transcend the fragmentary experience of the moment and enter a contemplation of the totality of time. As Henri Bergson pointed

out in his theory of ‘la durée’, time is not made up of discrete moments, but rather an ongoing flow of consciousness (Bergson, 1911). This ‘la durée’ allows the viewer to experience continuity, overlap and endless flow of time during the viewing of the work. In artistic practice, this particular continuity of time is usually achieved by breaking the causal sequence and spatial-temporal logic of events. For example, Bill Viola’s video work The Passing (1991) interweaves life and death, memory and reality through slow motion and static images to create a poetic cycle of time.

Similarly, in the universal dimension of time, there is a certain ‘awakening’ of historical, personal and collective memory. This ‘awakening’ is both dispersed and fluid and continuous. Maurice Halbwachs, in his theory of ‘collective memory’, pointed out that memory does not belong to individuals alone, but depends on social and cultural contexts and is constantly constructed and reproduced through shared symbols, rituals and historical events (Halbwachs, 1992). In these temporal structures, the experience of individual and collective memory is often expressed as the interweaving and overlapping of different temporal nodes, so that historical narratives are no longer linear but multidimensional and ‘synchronic’. Similarly, Pierre Nora’s theory of ‘sites of memory’ emphasizes that as direct historical memory gradually fades, symbolic sites of memory become the carriers of historical narratives (Nora, 1989). Such sites are not constrained by the unidirectionality of time, but are full of ruptures and reconstructions. This concept of memory is vividly embodied in Christian Boltanski’s installation Monument: The Children of Dijon (1986). His work links individual memory with collective history through a series of anonymous photographs, lighting and archival records. The countless unfamiliar faces of children in the photographs become symbols of lost lives. As the audience confronts these images, collective memories are evoked, transcending a single thread of time and forming a meeting between the past and the present. As Marcel Duchamp mentioned in ‘Creative Acts’, a work of art requires the participation of the audience to be truly complete. The interpretation and emotional participation of the audience allows the meaning of the work to be generated (Duchamp, 1957).

Idris Khan

Time and memory are like an invisible river that flows silently through the depths of human consciousness. As the philosopher Henri Bergson described in his theory of ‘la durée’, time is a continuous flow rather than a collection of separate moments (Bergson, 1911). Artists often attempt to visualize the infinite changes and layers of this river, trying to capture the sense of temporality in something static. Idris Khan’s work is a bold attempt to do just that - through the layering of images, the recombination of symbols and cultural metaphors, he creates a visual world that is both ambiguous and rich in detail. In this world, time is compressed into layers of overlapping images, and memories are fragmented and reconstructed. Khan's works are like dreams remembered, interweaving past and present, momentary and eternal, between consciousness and subconscious, evoking the audience's contemplation of the passage of time and fragments of memory.

Sigmund Freud entitled A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad 1925, he describes an experiment that is a highly symbolic metaphor for exploring the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. He uses a children's toy called the Mystic Writing Pad as a metaphor. This wax pad is covered with a transparent film, and writing can be written on directly without the use of ink or pencil. To erase the contents, the sheet is simply lifted from the wax board. However, although the surface imprints of the words are erased, they leave faint traces on the underlying wax board, becoming a ‘vague but not completely erased impression’ (Freud, 1925). This metaphor vividly illustrates the dual mechanism of memory: while conscious-level memories can be ‘erased’ on the surface, there are always indelible traces in the subconscious. According to Freud, although an individual's emotional experiences and memories may be forgotten or repressed in the conscious mind, they persist as ‘afterimages’ in the subconscious, ready to resurface at any time. This metaphor resonates interestingly with the creative approach of the artist Idris Khan. Khan's work focuses on superimposition and recombination, creating a visual effect that is both blurry and distinct through the

overlaying of multiple layers of images and text. In this way, he creates richly layered images that are both abstract and concrete, telling the story of history, accumulated experience and the metaphysical collapse of time into a single moment. This technique seems to visualize for the viewer the fragmented and multi-dimensional nature of memory. By layering hundreds of images, manuscripts, sheet music and texts, he creates a visual effect that is both blurry and clear, calm and full of tension. Just as a painter shapes an image with brushstrokes, Khan constructs a sense of time and memory through superposition. Each of his works seems to narrate a complex story that cannot be described by linear time. He has successively scanned, printed and digitally composed historical paintings, music manuscripts, religious texts and even photographs, repeatedly rearranging and superimposing them to create a visual texture with a strong sense of depth. These textures are woven into a complex image that is as inscrutable as time itself.

In the work ‘Every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders’, Khan superimposes the industrial building photographs taken by the Becher couple to create a seemingly constantly trembling image. The huge gas tanks gradually lose their clear outlines in the overlapping layers, leaving only a mottled, heavy outline and intertwined lines, as if they have gradually weathered and faded over time. Like the faint traces on the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’, Khan's works show the residual impressions and distortions of memory in the process of being re-examined and reconstructed. As Khan describes: ‘It is a challenge to not define my work as a photograph but using the medium of photography to create something that exists on the surface of the paper and not to be transported back to an isolated moment in time.’

Figure 1. Idris Khan. Every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders, 2004.

Khan's work not only concerns the narrative of time, but also explores the essence of time in a deeper way. The art critic Rosalind Krauss also mentioned the characteristic of memory as 'always bearing a trace of' when analyzing the relationship between modernist art and memory. This trace is not a complete reproduction, but a fragmentary echo (Krauss, 1986). In Idris Khan's artistic world, time is not a straight line moving forward, but a melody of intertwining, circling, and recurring patterns. He rejects the logic of 'freezing a moment' in traditional art, and instead attempts to capture the 'traces of time' through the overlapping of multiple images. These traces are not centered on a single point in time, but rather blend the past, present, and future together to create a visual experience that is like a 'afterimage of time'.

For example, in the work 'Struggling to Hear... After Ludwig van Beethoven', Beethoven's sheet music is repeatedly printed and superimposed, eventually forming

a dense black-and-white canvas. The overlapping of the lines of the sheet music is like the reverberation of the notes in time, and the visual layering seems to simulate the pressure and struggle of people with hearing impairments as they try to hear the sound. This complex composition emphasizes the cyclical nature of time in memory, as if each trigger of a memory brings back the same situation, but with new details and emotions. This non-linear expression of time makes the viewer feel as if they are in an endless symphony, repeatedly travelling between the notes of the past and the echoes of the present. At the same time, the overlapping musical scores seem to imitate the way human memory works: instead of a clear recollection, it is a gradual accumulation of fragments, each layer containing different emotions and time imprints.

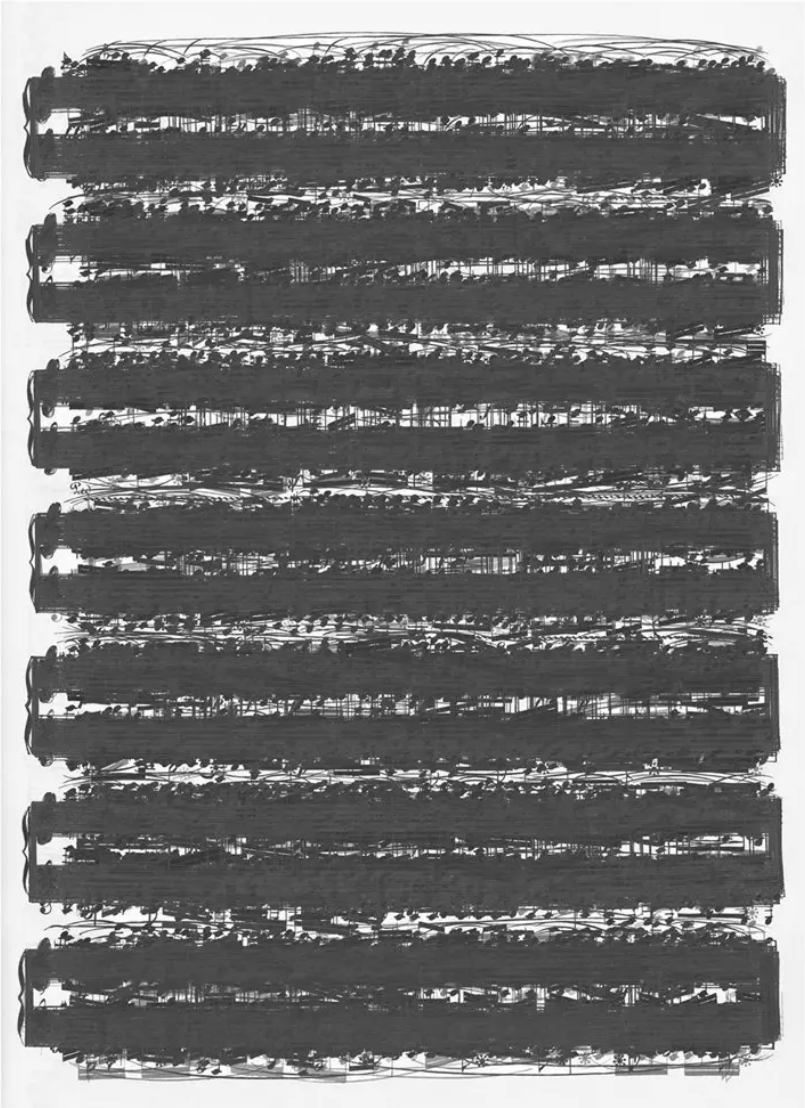

Figure 2. Idris Khan. Struggling to Hear.... After Ludwig van Beethoven Sonatas, 2005

The media chosen by Khan for his works are also symbolic. He often uses cultural symbols that carry historical memories, such as classical paintings, religious texts or music manuscripts, and gives them new life through superimposition and recombination. For example, in his work ‘Every... page of the Holy Qur’an, 2004’, he superimposes hundreds of pages of Quran manuscripts to create an image that is both sacred and universal. This technique frees the original fixed text from its traditional religious context and transforms it into a visual expression that transcends culture and time.

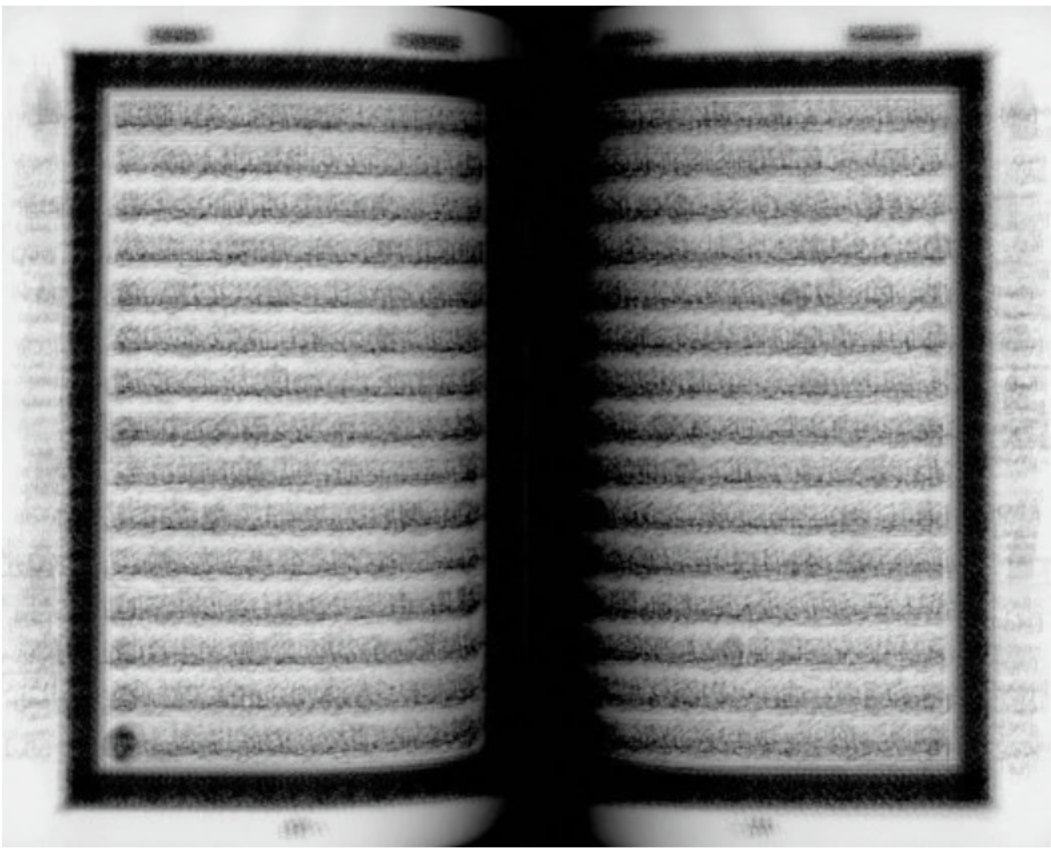

Figure 3. Idris Khan. Every... page of the Holy Qur'an, 2004

Through these media, Khan blurs the boundaries between the individual and the collective, the past and the present. His artistic language reveals the fluidity and uncertainty of memory, reminding the audience that memory is not a static store of information, but a dynamic process of reconstruction. At this point, Khan’s work is not

only a visual object for people to appreciate, but also an ‘immersive journey of memory and emotion’. Khan invites the audience to enter the ‘labyrinth of memory’ and recognize familiar symbols and fragments in the hazy images. When the audience stands in front of Khan’s work, they are not just passively watching, but are drawn into a process of exploration and discovery. This process is like trying to recall a vague dream – the details appear and disappear, but they continue to provoke emotional resonance and memory associations. Khan’s works therefore stimulate a strong emotional experience. He creates ambiguity through blurring and layering, so that the viewer cannot fully interpret the meaning of the work at a single viewing, but must engage with it through personal memories and emotions. This uncertainty gives the work an openness, so that each viewer can find their own emotional entry point in the work. When the audience faces Khan’s work, they are led on a journey of examining their memories. People stop and gaze at his work, as if trying to piece together the complete picture in their memories, but eventually realize that memories can never be completely recovered. This emotional ambiguity and complexity are precisely the charm of Khan’s work. The fragments of memory, the overlapping of history and the passage of time together construct a reflection on ‘forgetting and remembering’. Just as Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of ‘collective memory’ emphasizes the socially constructed nature of memory, he said memory is not an entirely individual internal experience, but is constructed collectively through social relationships and cultural symbols. This emotional journey intertwines individual experience with collective history, making every viewer a part of the work as they watch. In addition, there are similarities between Khan’s method of superimposition and Sigmund Freud’s concept of ‘trace memory’ – memory is not static, but is overwritten layer by layer, and each time it is recalled, it is a superimposition of new and old memories (Freud, 2015).

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Hiroshi Sugimoto's works are like a contemplation of vision and time. Among them, 'Seascapes' and 'Theatres' are two of his most representative series of works. Using photography as a medium, he captures eternal impressions that transcend the moment through the technique of long exposure, revealing the continuity of time and the layering of memory, while also reflecting on the philosophical thinking of humans about time and memory.

The Seascapes series began in the 1980s, when Sugimoto travelled the world to photograph various maritime scenes, from the Arctic Ocean to the Pacific coast. Using long exposures, he smoothed out the dynamic surface of the ocean, leaving only the horizontal line between sea and sky. In these images, the ocean seems to stand still at the end of time, and Sugimoto's choice of seascapes is extremely simple - no boats or people, just pure water and sky, presenting a kind of minimalist calm. 'A sharp horizon line and a cloudless sky - this is where my consciousness began,' Sugimoto writes on his official website. From there, my thoughts race to the origins of human consciousness itself. The sea reminds me that within my blood remain traces of human evolution over hundreds of thousands of years. The sea reminds me that in my blood remain traces of human evolution over hundreds of thousands of years. In Time Exposed, Sugimoto describes himself: 'What is the first sight of humanity? It must be the line between the sea and the sky.' (Sugimoto, 1991) This statement reveals his original intention, which is to explore the original visual impression in the collective memory of humanity.

Figure 4. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Caribbean Sea, Jamaica, 1980

Figure 5. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Ligurian Sea, Savior, 1993

The ‘boundlessness’ of the ocean symbolizes the infinity of life and the insignificance of man in a philosophical sense. The composition of each work in the Seascapes series is similar, but the difference in light and shadow at the boundary between sea and sky provides the viewer with a different emotional experience, a change that allows the viewer to contemplate the relationship between self and eternity in a visual meditation.

Another of Sugimoto's masterpieces, the Theatres series, began in the late 1970s, when he documented the projection of an entire film with long exposures, resulting in a screen that became a source of pure white light, symbolizing the accumulation of each frame in the film. This method compresses time through photography, condensing the entire duration of the film into a single image, showing the passage of time and the interweaving of moments. Most of the theatre venues chosen by Sugimoto are historical buildings, such as U.A. Play House in New York and the Carpenter Center in Richmond. These buildings are carriers of cultural memory, and through his lens they are given new life, as if the viewer were travelling back in time to experience the rituals of the early days of cinema. Talking about the series, Sugimoto discovered that 'Different movies give different brightnesses. If it's an optimistic story, I usually end up with a bright screen; if it's a sad story, I usually end up with a bright screen. If it's an optimistic story, I usually end up with a bright screen; if it's a sad story, it's a dark screen. Occult movie? Very dark.' In his work, he relates the brightness of the film to its mood, with the details of the theatre's architecture contrasting sharply with the pure white of the screen. The intricate decorative details of the theatre itself are highlighted by the black and white images, while the screen becomes a blank 'window on time'. This form emphasizes the power of light and shadow as symbols of time in a work of art.

Figure 6. Hiroshi Sugimoto. U. A. Play House, New York,1978

Figure 7. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Carpenter Center, Richmond,1993

As Roland Barthes proposed in Camera Lucida, the concept of the ‘punctum’ refers to the details in a photographic image that touch the viewer's emotions (Barthes, 1981). In Hiroshi Sugimoto's Theatre series, the visual conflict between the blank screen and the grandeur of the theatre becomes a ‘punctum’. This contrast does not directly reproduce reality, but through long exposure, condenses all the images of the film into a ‘pure white light source’, making the screen a ‘blank moment’ that transcends narrative. As a result, when the audience stares at the pure white screen, they will associate it with the content of the film, the passage of time, and even their own existence.

Sugimoto’s Seascapes and Theatres series are very different in nature, but they both explore the multiple dimensions of time. Seascapes presents the tranquility and continuity of time through the boundless beauty of nature, while Theatres compresses time through ‘visual gaps’ to make the audience reflect on the relationship between time and memory while gazing at the screen. Through these works, Sugimoto has elevated photography to the height of philosophical speculation. His works not only record the moment of light and shadow, but also incorporate the exploration of human experience of time into the visual language. As Walter Benjamin said, ‘The aura of a work of art is its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.’ ‘The unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.’ (Benjamin, 2018).

Conclusion

Khan uses scanning, printing and digital compositing techniques to layer texts, images and sounds from different periods of history in the form of superimpositions and overlays, creating a complex ‘layer of memory’ that gives the viewer a sense of the intertwining and fragmentation of time in their visual perception, and this layering effect creates emotional resonance and alienation. Sugimoto, on the other hand, uses a large-format camera to capture seascapes and theatres with long exposures, condensing time into a single image and making still images ‘containers of time’. The minimalist compositions and long exposures of his works create a surreal and serene atmosphere that leads the viewer to contemplate the origin of life, eternity and nothingness.

All in all, their artworks emphasize the continuity of time and the hierarchy of memory. In their artistic practice, they find that time is not only a linear passage, but also a cyclical and inseparable existence in space, and on this basis they awaken the viewer to reconstruct history, individual and collective memory. The two artists’ creations are not only innovations in visual art forms, but also investigations into the meaning of time, memory and existence. Their works remind us that contemporary art is not only a carrier of sensual experience, but also an important expression of identity, cultural heritage and common human memory, and it is time and memory that bring these two otherwise unconnected artists and their work together.

Bibliography and Reference List

Catherine Borra. (2016), 'Idris Khan', Flash Art, 21 Sep. Available at: https://flash---art.com/article/idris-khan/

Barthes, R. (1981), *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography,* New York: Hill and Wang.

Benjamin, W. (2018), 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *A museum studies approach to heritage*, London: Routledge, pp. 226–243. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315668505 (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

Bergson, H. (2014), *Time and free will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness,* London: Routledge.

Bergson, H. (1911), *Creative evolution,* London: Macmillan.

Deleuze, G. (2019), Cinema II: The time-image, *Philosophers on Film from Bergson to Badiou: A Critical Reader,* Columbia: Columbia University Press, pp. 177–199. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7312/kul-17602-011 (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

Freud, S. (1951), A note upon the" mystic writing-pad", *Organization and pathology of thought: Selected sources,* Columbia: Columbia University Press, pp. 329–337. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7312/rapa92214-019 (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

Freud, S. (2015), Beyond the pleasure principle, *Psychoanalysis and History,* 17(2), pp. 151–204. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2015.0169 (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

Halbwachs, M. (2020), *On collective memory,* Chicago: University of Chicago press.

Krauss, R.E. (1986), *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths,* MA: MIT press.

Magnus Andersen. (2009), 'Idris Khan's multi-layered photos', Photo Slaves, 28 Sep. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20130704025916/http://photoslaves.com/idris-khan%E2%80%99s-multi-layered-photos/

Marcus Bunyan. (2016), 'Exhibition: 'The Memory of the Future. Photographic Dialogues between Past, Present and Future' at the Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne', Art Blart, 24 Aug. Available at: https://artblart.com/2016/08/24/exhibition-the-memory-of-the-future-at-the-musee-de-lelysee-lausanne/

Nietzschde, F. and Hollingdale, R.J. (2020), Thus spoke zarathustra, *The Routledge*

Circus Studies Reader, London: Routledge, pp. 461–466. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003074670 (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

Nora, P. (1989), Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory/Spring.

Skye Sherwin. (2010), 'Artist of the week 80: Idris Khan', The Guardian, 25 Mar. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/mar/25/artist-idris-khan

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Idris Khan. Every... Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholders, 2004. Available at: https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/9.2005.a-c/

Figure 2. Idris Khan. Struggling to Hear.... After Ludwig van Beethoven Sonatas, 2005. Available at: https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/14-idris-khan/works/artworks6264/

Figure 3. Idris Khan. Every... page of the Holy Qur'an, 2004. Available at: https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/14-idris-khan/works/artworks5491/

Figure 4. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Caribbean Sea, Jamaica, 1980. Available at: https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/seascapes-1

Figure 5. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Ligurian Sea, Savior, 1993. Available at: https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/seascapes-1

Figure 6. Hiroshi Sugimoto. U. A. Play House, New York,1978. Available at: https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-7

Figure 7. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Carpenter Center, Richmond,1993. Available at: https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-7