

**On Time:
The Loop and the Line**



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On Time: The Loop and the Line

by Christoph Cox

In his final years of sanity, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche became obsessed with an idea. What if time formed an infinite loop? What if life not only ran forward, relentlessly propelling us toward the future, but also doubled back on itself to produce the “eternal recurrence of the same”? Nietzsche made a few failed attempts to prove that the cosmos actually has this circular structure. Ultimately, he proposed the idea as an existential test aimed at challenging his readers to affirm the value of life as a fluid process without any pre-given aim, goal, or meaning.

The truth is, we live both the line and the loop at once. We are carried forward on the stream of time and, each moment, are different from who we were. We grow, learn, age, and move ever closer to our deaths. Yet our lives are equally marked by repetition. Days, weeks, and years endlessly repeat their interlocking loops. Our very identities and characters are formed by our habits, those actions and passions we continually repeat. And memory constantly throws us back to past moments that we live again.

Historians and anthropologists note that these twin conceptions of time are themselves recurrent features of human history and culture. Yet surely each age lives them differently. Our modernity is marked by a peculiar conjunction of repetition and difference propelled in large part by developments in technology. From photography and phonography to video and mp3, recording technology is essentially a form of externalized memory. It allows the unique and fleeting moment to be captured and repeated *ad infinitum*. Circumventing life’s entropy and the linearity of time, recording allows the dead to speak again . . . and again and again. In the profusion of recorded media, we live the eternal recurrence of the same.

Nonetheless, it wasn’t until the 1960s that American and European artists began to explore these powers of repetition. It’s no coincidence that that decade also marks the advent of postmodernism, which rejects modernism’s grand, linear narratives of heroic development, emancipation, and historical progress in favor of temporal recycling and non-linear form. Aesthetic minimalism is emblematic here. From Philip Glass and Donald Judd to Thomas Brinkmann and Carsten Nicolai, minimalism exchanges the line for the circle, the arc for the loop. And the loop is the stuff of which vast swaths of contemporary video and audio art—minimalist or otherwise—are made.

But, Nietzsche’s phrase notwithstanding, repetition is never the repetition of *the same* or *the identical*. It is always allied with difference. Repetition provides a stable

backdrop against which alteration—auditory and visual, temporal and spatial—is made manifest. Steve Reich’s *Come Out* (1966), for instance, runs a 5-word tape loop through two playback machines. At first, the loops run in unison. Yet, due to slight differences in tape speed, the two machines gradually move out of synch, creating a whirlpool echoing phrases. Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) equally generates difference through repetition. A text describing the very process of the piece is read into one tape recorder and then played back repeatedly into another. Each loop amplifies the room resonance such that, after a dozen repetitions, articulate speech has become submerged in a wash of abstract, metallic sound.

Against this historical backdrop, “Group Loop” explores the role of loops in contemporary audio and visual art, focusing on the ways that loops help us to perceive and to conceive relationships between repetition and difference. The exhibition aims to reveal the capacity of loops to generate and degenerate material and to intensify our perception of time, memory, and lived experience.

The conjunction of time, memory, difference, and repetition is poignantly manifested in William Basinski’s *Disintegration Loop 1.1* (2002)—at once a formal experiment recalling the tape work of Reich and Lucier and a moving elegy to the victims of September 11. A static shot filmed from Basinski’s Brooklyn rooftop records the last hour of sunlight on that fateful day. Waves of smoke billow by as lower Manhattan is slowly engulfed in mournful darkness. The audio track documents a parallel movement of repetition and temporal decay. A somber melodic loop recorded by Basinski in the early 1980s is gradually reduced to near silence as the playback machine slowly scrapes away chunks of magnetic material from the deteriorating tape.

Nicholas Nixon and Steve Roden mark recurrence and change via slices of time presented in series. In a set of annual portraits that span a quarter century, Nixon’s celebrated *Brown Sisters* photographs chart the course of history and the entropic force of time manifested in the faces and bodies of four siblings. The series presents infinite opportunities for spatial and temporal comparison and contrast. As the eye traces the contours of family resemblance, each individual photograph reveals the play of difference and repetition at the genetic level. At once methodical and fluid, the whole set forms a kind of calendar, in which days and months recur while the years press on.

Roden’s *Feldman Drawings* (2005) series is equally a kind of calendar marking repetition and difference. Every evening for a single month, the artist listened in the dark to a recording of Morton Feldman’s *Piano and String Quartet*. In response to the music, Roden drew with colored pencils on sheets of paper—one color and one page per day. These drawings are at once recordings and improvisations, that is,

repetition and alterations. Stylus to page, Roden's body and hand became a sort of primitive phonograph, translating Feldman's music into two-dimensional space. At the same time, Roden treated drawing itself as a sonic art, allowing the sounds of his pencil markings to improvise with the music. Roden sees his practice as a form of sampling, through which a recording is repeated with a difference.

Nixon marks time in years, Roden in days, and David Grubbs in seconds, minutes, and hours. Ingeniously simple, Grubbs' *Between a Raven and a Writing Desk* (2000) exploits two basic features of the CD format: its capacity to hold 60 minutes of continuous sound, and the ability of a standard CD player to repeat ad infinitum. With these two elements as the installation's hardware, *Between a Raven . . .* is a musical clock: a 59-minute and 56-second composition (allowing four seconds for the repeat function) in which musical events emerge every quarter hour, separated by stretches of ticking percussion. Aptly balancing objective and subjective time, Grubbs's rendering is both mechanical and loose, with minor events and differences temporarily diverting time's pulsing repetition.

Filmmaker and textile artist Sabrina Gschwandtner's *Crochet Film* (2004) offers another meditation on time. The installation features a pair of conceptually interlocking loops: a loop of film and its crocheted replica, the one depicting the creation of the other. Though identical in size, the two loops represent very different durations. The film passes through its cycle in a minute and a half, while the crocheted film represents four and a half hours of work. The installation also draws attention to the very process of crocheting, which generates new objects through the repetitive interlocking of tiny loops.

It is not measured time but the infinite present that is explored in video pieces by Euan MacDonald and Heike Baranowsky. The most minimalist works in the exhibition, these video loops focus on difference and repetition in their most basic forms and highlight the mesmerizing, hallucinatory power of their conjunction. The seamless loops in MacDonald's *Poor Blumfeld* (2002) produce impossible movements that captivate eye and ear alike with their off-kilter rhythms and asynchronous pairing. Baranowsky's *Schwimmerin* (2000) employs a two-second loop to produce an infinite line that, depending on your temporal orientation, is either Sisyphian hell or fluid bliss.

Loop and line, process without progress—all this brings us back to Nietzsche and the doctrine of eternal recurrence. To live the line and the loop is both our fate and our fortune. To affirm both is, Nietzsche thought, to really live, to desire the now *and* its again. Beyond progress and the narrative arc, to live this way is to realize that the circle is virtuous, not vicious, and that, as Prince sings, "there's joy in repetition."