

Remembrance of Things Present:

Steven Foster's *Repetition* Series Photographs, Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories*

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“We do not hear what we hear..., only what we remember.”

-Morton Feldman (1926-1987)

Two different events,¹ two different times; Steven Foster's new *Repetition* series photographs and Morton Feldman's solo piano composition *Triadic Memories*, neither of which is actually here, *live*, before us right now—or not quite here anyway: Foster's photographs are not far, true, but hanging downstairs in the gallery (and, at this moment, cannot be seen); nor is Feldman's music currently to be heard. And even when performed, it will be heard but fleetingly (if you can call a nearly two hour, uninterrupted piano solo “fleeting”). Therefore, to speak of them both—the photographs, the music—as *not* here, but instead as adjacent, absent, elsewhere.

¹ The following essay was delivered as a lecture on April 7, 2004, at the Michael Lord Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in conjunction with Steven Foster's new exhibition of photographs from his series *Repetition*, and Louis Goldstein's performance of Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories* (1981), which was to take place the following evening on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. All three events—the exhibition, the concert, the lecture—were finally intended to function as a triad of events, a triadic memory of their own.


In many ways, the fact of these two absences points to something of what I'm wanting to examine now anyway: the challenges, frustrations, perhaps even chronic impossibilities, of being personally present at what one is thinking about, talking about, hoping to see or hear—the difficulty of maintaining, for any length of time, one's undivided attention. For there is, built into one's very hard-driven desire *to be* present—and to pay attention—so often what feels like staticky interference, a kind of delayed or dispersed reaction to one's experiences in which it seems that one is somehow always slightly out of sync with oneself—not fully focused upon what one is hoping to see, nor completely attuned to what one is trying to hear—never quite where one wants to be, when one want to be there. And, compounding the problem, *to be* present, one must somehow paradoxically remember being present, or anticipate being present, both of which, however, are not quite the same as being present.

I recall, a couple of years back, standing on the shores of Lake Michigan in South Milwaukee, staring out at the water, the light, the horizon, and trying to see more fixedly what was before me, to hold firmly that luminously expansive sight, as if somehow to imprint it onto the delicate cornea of my eyes (my own head acting as a kind of camera). And, briefly, doing it, seeing it, or something *of* it, but also failing to fix the image, to contain its singular certainty for any length of time. And whether I liked it or not, finally, seeing myself impatiently see it—(I, as repeated and plural, before the lake's singularity)—seeing myself seeing myself see it. In other words, unable to stay still, *I* kept getting in the way of my own seeing, as my divided eyes, nudged along by time, were intersected by the obligation to think, to think about itself, to think about itself thinking and seeing, and in that very thought-filled, word-filled moment, to be blind-sided by my very desire to see; thus disrupting, dispersing what might be imagined as time's

more immediately desired destination, a simpler sight—here, now (or, what was, on *that* shore, there, then).

Perhaps—now, here—by looking at one of Foster’s new photographs, and then thinking about it in relation to aspects of Morton Feldman’s music, some of these issues involving how we see and hear—or don’t—might find some partial accompaniment. And significantly, it’s not simply me that is suggesting this pairing with Feldman’s music, but Foster himself who has even subtitled sections of his exhibition, borrowing some of the composer’s own most evocative titles of musical compositions—*Chromatic Fields*, *Vertical Thoughts*, and finally, of course, *Triadic Memories*. Through Foster’s and Feldman’s shared stillnesses, their careful patternings and essential spacings, and especially their delicate and deliberate repetitions, might there be a kind synesthetic bond to be seen and heard between them, such that we might, if careful, see the one through the other, hear the other, through the one? And, even more, to learn something from them both about staying still, about paying attention.

For example, finally, there is in Foster’s new series of photographs a small, square

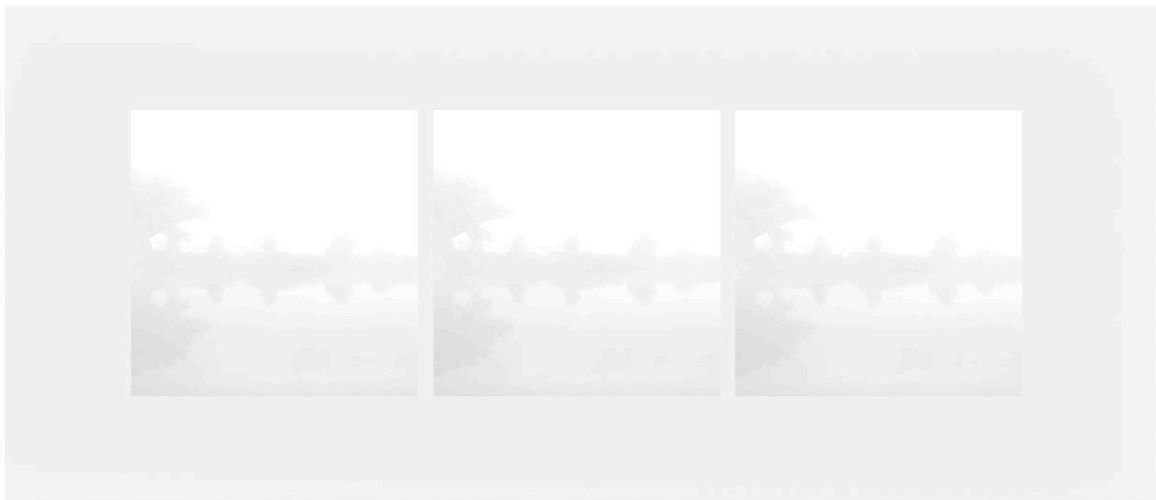


black-and-white image of a foggy landscape: a body of reflecting water, perhaps a small lake or a cove, and a rather large tree extending out from the left side of the picture over the water; in the distance, across the lake, we can make out what vaguely appear as several other, smaller trees (or clumps of trees; it’s not clear) that are quite evenly spaced on the horizon line. This image is divided almost evenly between

water and sky, with the trees softly reflected upon the surface of the lake, doubling the image. And in fact, it is the reflected trees below that are a bit more sharply defined than the trees above—the real trees—such that the reflection itself is slightly more vivid than that which is being reflected.

As described, and as titled, this photograph shows a foggy landscape, all details bleached white by the light that is exposing, *over-exposing*, the scene, as if the fog itself were rolling into the image, onto the paper. Indeed, it almost seems that if the photograph were to bleach any further it might simply merge invisibly into the surrounding whiteness of the print, absorbed entirely by the light—no longer to be seen. But even as it is, the image is quite hard to see, as if one needs to squint, or strain one's eyes, in order to make out what is visible in the photograph, as if such straining were needed to see anything at all.

But, of course, the photograph doesn't simply end there, because, like nearly all of the other photographs in Foster's new *Repetition* series, Foster then repeats the image as a grouping



of three apparently identical images placed alongside each other, separated by a narrow border—as he horizontally repeats what, as I described it, is already a vertically reflected repetition of itself. So, in a sense, what we have here are repetitions of a repetition, the doubling

of the already doubled, as the image splits off, digitally splitting—like cells dividing—into identical copies of itself (and the digital technology involved in making this image is a crucial aspect of it). The repetition of water and sky, the repetition of the trees above and below (trees that were already seeming nearly to repeat themselves in their patterned formation on the horizon), and then, compositionally, the repetition of these repetitions, that creates a kind of afterimage, of an afterimage, of an afterimage; all finally seen through the cataracting fog of the photograph, at the very vanishing point of its own visibility.

But, as I've just presented them, if all of the images are *after*-images, where *is* the image? And, with this foggy landscape, what kind of a vanishing image, what kind of visible images, is this, are these? (As my grammar here hesitates in trying to describe what is seen as being either singular or plural, as one image or many. And that is, in a sense, part of the power, beauty, *and* uncertainty, of Foster's repetitive photographs: we may not be quite sure how to look at them, how to see, to name the repeated scenes repeated, and repeated again. Change without change, movement without movement, how does one look at repetition, see what has already been seen?)

To assist us in such looking, we might now examine what it is to hear repetition. And so, as promised, to reflect further upon Foster's repetitive photographs, I want now to shift gears and speak directly, and at some length, of Morton Feldman and his *Triadic Memories*, a composition that seems in many ways built upon and sustained by repetition. But as I'm speaking of the music, try and keep the described image of Foster's foggy landscape in mind, remembering its patterned trees, its divided horizon, its repeated repetitions—and finally, its own triadic arrangement; the photograph, whether here or there (remembered or not), to be somehow squintingly seen, as if through a kind of fog.

Or to recall, another lake, Lake Michigan, and me on its shores, staring out, intersected by time, vainly trying to see, *only* to see something of myself seeing (as if I, as an image—an *after*-image of myself—were the one now repeating, my own eyes dividing). Memories failing, the seeing eyes suddenly see themselves blind.

Ever since a friend, many years ago, unexpectedly gave me a copied cassette of *Triadic Memories*, I've been a fervent admirer of Morton Feldman's music. What I was almost instantly drawn to in this late piano piece, composed in 1981 (Feldman died in 1987), was the manner in which the music combined a formal, audible intricacy with an undeniable emotional charm, even, at times, an unabashed beauty. By joining a gently crafted dissonance with an enduring degree of melodic enticement, *Triadic Memories* seemed to be a rare piece of contemporary classical music that was both smart and sensual, conceptually complex yet utterly alluring. And this composition possessed as well many of the familiar features of Feldman's late work with its extended duration, its repetitions gradually evolving into new patterns of other repetitions, and a sustained stillness held throughout the piece, with silence (perhaps like white borders surrounding a printed image) used as a kind of counterpoint to the performed sounds

I had also been led to Feldman by my earlier interest in his older friend and mentor, John Cage. Their names were frequently linked as part of what would become known as the New York School of composers that was to emerge, alongside parallel movement in the visual arts, in the late 1940's and 1950's, and on into the 1960's. Early on, Feldman was motivated, in large part by his encounters with Cage, to write music in which one would hear the performed sounds in all their immediate, tactile qualities, to disrupt the deafening habits of our hearing so that we might finally listen in ways unencumbered by historical memory, inherited convention and fixed

formula. Feldman, echoing Cage, wrote of his earliest compositional orientation that, “Only by ‘unfixing’ the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves—not as symbols, or memories which were memories of other music to begin with” (35). The stated desire of the composer was to penetrate beneath, beyond, the perceived historical obstructions to hearing, arriving unencumbered at the origins of unmediated sound, into the very heart of its sonorous matter.

Cage, of course, famously pursued throughout his life just such an endeavor to open the ears to a more profound, direct kind of listening. His infectious intensity and his endless means of invention would seem to have impacted an entire generation (or two, or three) to strive to finally hear “Just sounds, sounds free of judgments about whether they are ‘musical’ or not, sounds free of memory and taste ... , sounds free of fixed relations” (116). And Cage, already by the early 1950’s, believed that many of Feldman’s first compositions effectively manifested such a liberated listening, the live performances of the younger composer’s music seeming to offer access to the sounds in all their resonant power and purity. In his seminal book *Silence* (1961), he wrote extensively on Feldman’s music and its capacity to so movingly deliver the “tender” and sometimes “violent” sounds to us, to make themselves present and accounted for, available for our immediate sensual enjoyment.

For Cage, there was the belief, the *desire* to believe, that sounds—any and all sounds—could be construed musically, and that in the final account “Everything is music.” For Feldman, however, his “only argument with Cage” (29), as he described it in his own writings, lay here, believing as he did that *everything* was decidedly *not* music, and that there remained intractably, regrettably perhaps, an indeterminate realm apart, a distance, a detachment, by which his music was then to define itself, find itself defined. In a sense, many of the important questions that

Cage had initiated about music, and of our own reception of sound and silence, were then taken by Feldman and ontologically pushed further. Indeed, pursuing ever more complexly many of the difficulties of writing and listening to music, Feldman was to come to conclusions that would often seem quite contrary to Cage's, risking that nothing—as opposed to everything—is music, while continuing nonetheless to try to make it, to listen for it.

For Feldman, alongside and perhaps in conflict with his desire to, as he said, “hear the sounds themselves,” seemed simultaneously aware of a kind of sound *barrier* existing between himself and the music, between the performance of the written notes and the seemingly inevitable delayed reaction to their reception. As a consequence of our own deflected awareness of the sounds, the performed music, existing *in* time, must always remain somehow off-limits, or out of sync with our hearing of it, just beyond the range of our own acoustic reception. Reflecting something of this estrangement, Marcel Proust—a favorite author of Feldman's—was to write of his fictional composer Vinteuil, and of the “little phrase” of his sonata that was so elusively sought:

Doubtless the notes which we hear ... tend, according to their pitch and volume, to spread out before our eyes over surfaces of varying dimensions, to trace arabesques, to give us the sensation of breadth or tenuity, stability or caprice. But the notes themselves have vanished before these sensations have developed sufficiently to escape submersion under those which the succeeding or even simultaneous notes have already begun to awaken in us. (I 228)

In place of the felt immediacy of the music, the performed, passing sounds were more likely to be heard in a kind of decayed, disintegrating retreat from their otherwise unlocatable source. For Feldman, affirming, or perhaps, circumscribing, an even more radically ephemeral event than what Cage was proposing, what we hear is perhaps only what remains of the sound's very

vanishing— what we hear is, in a sense, *not there*, never *quite* there, always having just passed us by. Listening, one is unable to fix where the sounds exist in relation to one's hearing, with each subsequent sound, as Feldman described it, “eras[ing] in one's memory what happened before” (qtd. in Zimmerman 230). Any aspirations to a Cage-like, musicated immediacy, must consequently be side-stepped or bracketed, replaced by some other kind of hope or expectation, some other means of musical formation that takes into account what Proust elsewhere described as “that ineluctable law which ordains that we can only imagine what is absent” (III 905), we can only hear what is no longer there to be heard.

By working, as Feldman wrote “with the decay of each sound,” a piece of music performed by a musician, and listened to by us, would thus present itself as a kind of material manifestation of entropic dispersal and decline, a sounded site of time forever slipping away from our own awareness of it, our own resounding failure to apprehend anything at all. “Decay ... this departing landscape, *this* expresses where the sound exists in our hearing—leaving us rather than coming toward us” (25). And instead of Feldman's music reflecting Cage's more sensual silence, or his famous “celebration that we own nothing,” one is more likely to hear instead something that, while perhaps less liberating and celebratory, resonates nonetheless, but more complexly, reflecting in part Feldman's own enduring attraction to the work of Samuel Beckett, what he described of the author as “a kind of shared longing this saturated, unending longing” (qtd. in Frost 51).

Into the 1970's and 1980's, Feldman was thus to further distinguish himself, apart from Cage and the others, as a writer of his increasingly long compositions, pursuing through his music a delicate arrangement of disintegrating sound, a kind of hermetic, Proustian investigation of the workings of memory, the subtle intricacies and evasions of how we hear. So often in these

later compositions, Feldman repeats familiar patterns of notation, quiet chords, gentle dissonances soothingly played again and again. For long stretches of time (and contributing to the composition's necessary length), we may find ourselves listening almost distractedly to the sounds, remembering the familiar arrangements as they fleetingly pass by, recalling what Nietzsche was to describe as "the kind of beauty that infiltrates slowly" (105). And then, abruptly, just when we think we know what we're going to hear, just when memory has taken over and seems to be listening for us (relieving us of the burden of trying to hear at all), Feldman might change a single note, minutely adjust a chordal configuration—an unfamiliar key—played upon the piano, or a string of the violin unexpectedly struck. Involuntarily, and as if it were somehow permeating our memory, this sudden sound seems to echo from out of previously patterned arrangements. And contained within this newest sound, it is as if there is a weight of duration that extends it through two moments at once—like a memory materially heard, the past sound instantly recollected in the present. The sound, itself decaying, has thus proven itself dependent upon a field of remembrance, skating upon it, as if marking the movement of its own disappearance.

With enough time taken so that memory itself is stretched and strained towards its own tethered limit, and by applying in his lengthiest compositions what Feldman described as "a synthesis between variation and repetition," the composer created patterned gradations of contiguous sound that were to be both "concrete and ephemeral," "frozen, at the same time they are vibrating." Feldman would thus give passing shape to that which he described as a kind of acoustic "object," an ec-static form, with the piece existing not "*in* time or *about* time, but ... *as* Time Time as an image" (86). Also, by marking and measuring the dimensions of its own vanishing, insistently demarcating a disappearance, the music might finally, ephemerally, be

heard as the sedimented sound of time, time itself sounding. Feldman once wrote that “I know that when I write a piece [of music], ... I’m telling people ‘We’re not gonna be here very long’” (qtd. in Gizzi 253). The irony, of course, is that it might take a long time—nearly two uninterrupted hours perhaps—to get that message across, to make it finally felt.

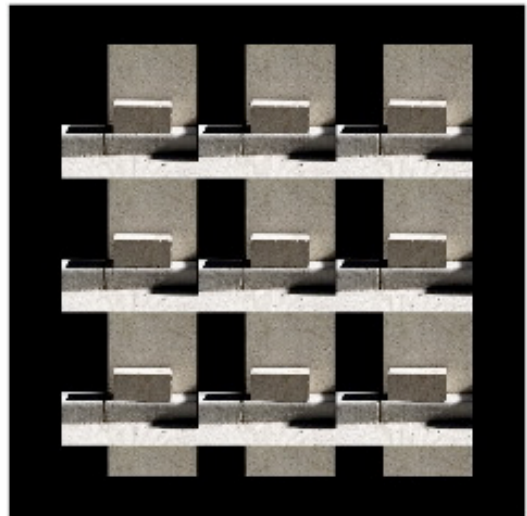
With concerns such as these in mind, Feldman was to realize that other compositional methods would have to be used in order to accommodate a more complex form of musical writing and awareness. For the earlier listening innocence had given way to a more hardened kind of hearing, one in which the difficult task was now to write music with this acoustic division and delay in mind, anticipating the sounds themselves as always elsewhere, never quite punctuating the piece at the precise moment intended, but echoing instead after the fact. And as Feldman himself succinctly, provocatively described it, “We do not hear what we hear ... , only what we remember” (*Give My Regards* 209).

The question however remains as to how we might hear *that*—remembrance—as if, once-removed, the sounds, decayed, might somehow be made to return (in some ghostly manner), to sound, perhaps inaudibly, in their own resounding absence. How are we to hear ourselves presently remembering, to approach and achieve a remembrance of things present?

To hear such a sound, to see such a sight, might Feldman’s music, heard, remembered having *been* heard, now offer a way of seeing something more in Foster’s new photographs, and a way of thinking more concretely about his repetitions? Let’s return, briefly, to Foster’s foggy landscape, remembering its repetitions, alongside Feldman’s own, and his description of his music as occurring upon a “departing landscape.” As you’ll recall, in that photograph, seeing itself was not easily seen, for the image was bleached, nearly lost in its own occluding light, the

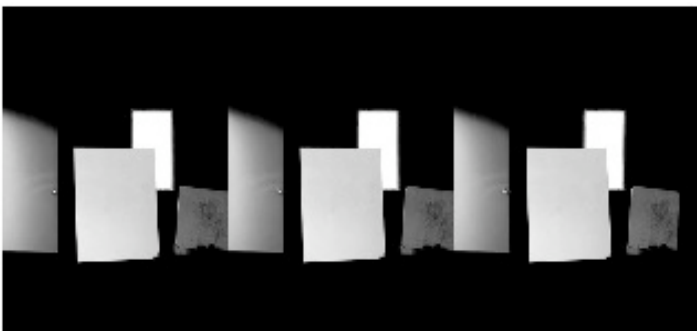
photograph imagined even as a kind of emblematic reflection of the difficulty of seeing; Foster's own photograph as a Feldmanesque "departing landscape," barely there, threatening to vanish entirely.

Feldman's repetitions were built upon a patterning of repeated notes, a sound sustained across time, remembered along a continuum, with the repetitions used as a means of reinforcing a forgotten sound, reinforcing one's hearing of one's forgetting. But also, such repetitions might be imagined as offering a crafted resistance to time, while also requiring time as a condition to hear it, to hear anything at all—time as singular object, time as a pluralized event. For in hearing such a sound, forgetting it, and then hearing it again ... and again, one is perhaps made to hear something of time itself.



And while Feldman's music is necessarily temporal, heard *in* time, with one note following the next, always promising another, Foster's photographs, because they are still photographs, partake of time quite differently.

This returns us to the question of how to look at these photographs, how to look at repetition. For by repeating an image, Foster is, in a sense, applying time to his photographs,



obliging us to see *in* time, as our eyes move from identical image to identical image, and back again, remembering as they go—never instantly or completely there... or there... or there,

but made to move, to see the same thing again and again, and to remember seeing it. Like film stills that are truly still (because they are the same), the images move, without moving anywhere at all. Looking at the repetitions—seen singularly or plural, from here or there, this way or that way—has the effect of mobilizing our own seeing, seeing through a consciousness of temporality; and linguistically, the photographs are apprehended now *not* as steadied nouns, but as active verbs—events, taking

place—through our own peripatetic perceptions of them.

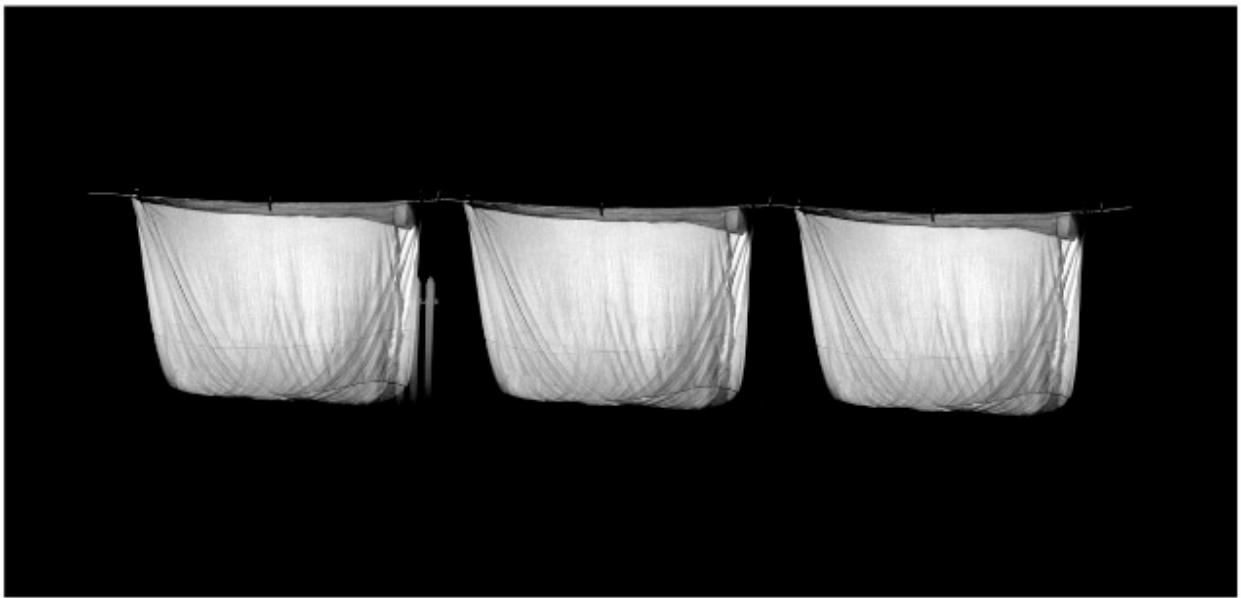
To stand before Foster's repetitions, to try and see what is



contained there is to, in a sense, find oneself divided by time, split in three, dispersed into a triadic form of memoried perceptions. “We do not hear what we hear ...” Feldman memorably stated, “only what we remember.” Nor, perhaps, do we see what we see. And so, to repeat what we’ve seen, *not* seen, to reinforce and reiterate it, so that it might be remembered presently, seeing... memorably... now.

The still image, our moving eyes—Foster’s photograph, as both a singular, static object and a mobilized, pluralized event, might even be understood to have attained something of what Feldman described as a kind of “synthesis between variation and repetition”; seeing what cannot be seen, alongside that which can, and the movement of disappearance between them that will not reveal itself; an ec-static form, an ec-static photograph, with the image existing (like the sustained, remembered sounds of the piano), not “*in* time or *about* time,” as Feldman insisted, “but ... *as* Time Time as an image.”

In another of Foster's new photographs, we can see, simply, three white bed sheets hanging on a laundry line. The rectangular fabric is luminous at its center, vividly reflecting the light. The three sheets, slightly separated from each other on the extended clothesline, are surrounded by a pitch black background, a background so bold that it makes the three sheets seem all the more radiant. Also, there is, it seems, another, more darkly shadowed sheet that hangs just behind the first ones; a single clothes pin is visible holding it on the laundry line.



Here, as in the foggy landscape, is another repetition of a single image, the same sheet repeated three times. But this time, Foster has altered the photograph subtly, but even more radically than before, such that the clothesline upon which the sheets are hanging has been neatly lined up and linked, digitally stitched together so as to appear as a single, long clothesline extending uninterrupted across the image. And, unlike the repetitions of the foggy landscape, where each image was in its own carefully delineated square surrounded by white border, in this photograph the repetitions have been joined compositionally together into a single horizontal image. Indeed, it appears that we are seeing three sheets, the same sheet, three times, hanging

identically, impossibly together. And what divided the earlier foggy landscape (while also dividing our seeing of the image) has here been even more stealthily conjoined, while making it less difficult to see and *think* this image as one image, seen singularly, like a chordal configuration, a triadic pattern of repetition, sounded out upon a piano.

Three identical bed sheets hanging on a single clothes line. But wait; are we really seeing a repetition here? For not only have the borders between the three images been eliminated, digitally linking the lines, stitching the sheets into a single scene, but, looking, one suddenly sees, just behind the one bed sheet on the left (and only behind that sheet), there is discretely visible in the shallow background a couple of shadowed, vertical slats from a white picket fence. The slats of the fence are not easy to see, nor perhaps are they immediately seen (or possibly even seen at all if one doesn't take the time to look closely), but once seen, the repetition within the photograph is deftly, instantaneously altered. For, in what seems a particularly Feldmanesque moment, with a Feldmanesque kind of repetition, while the visible repetition of the bed sheets is clearly, luminously registered —immediately seen—there is discretely noted as well, but, in time, a kind of delicately delayed reaction, like a gently heard undertone, the two shadowed slats of the fence, quietly adjusting the repetitive patterns within this chromatic field. And so what is finally seen is both instantly singular, but, with the fence behind, instantly plural; a repetition that is a repetition that is *not quite* a repetition—both the one *and* the other, repetition *and* difference, simultaneously seen.

Of such repetitions, and with the kind of discrete detail as the shadowed fence (what Foster, when I asked him about it, described to me in an e-mail, quite wonderfully, as the “fence

event”), let’s now return again directly to Feldman, and even more specifically to Feldman's *Triadic Memories*.

Triadic Memories is a quiet composition made up primarily of intricately arranged piano patterns, a series of attenuated repetitions that only very gradually adjust and reconfigure themselves upon a kind of delicately woven field of sound. Like the beloved Turkish rugs that Feldman late in life collected and drew inspiration from, it is as if chromatic fields of aural tone have been carefully crafted and cast into thin air, threads of timbre and nuance interlaced and entangling. Familiarly melodic chords are placed alongside gently dissonant ones in a kind of seductive tension, the two apposite textures finally merging in such a manner that we are almost made to forget which is which, both simply present in contiguous arrangement. With our habits of listening deftly loosened, the asymmetrical patterns seem to circle ever more expansively about themselves, tracing Vinteuil-like arabesques upon what Feldman called his “time canvases,” reiterating their own sonorous structure before dissipating into faint echo. The piano’s atmospheric resonances decay into deliberately placed silences, absences of sound that act as contrasting but parallel elements to what is heard, a kind of counterpoint to the notes themselves. Indeed, elsewhere Feldman described his use of notated silence as “my substitute for counterpoint. It’s nothing against something. The degrees of nothing against something. It’s a real thing, it’s a breathing thing” (181).

The “breathing” of silence encountered in *Triadic Memories* seems at times, if listened for carefully, to be something (of nothing) that one might actually hear, registered at least as vividly as any of the silences that John Cage was more famously to present or propose. Through a kind of negative space within the composition, we are positioned to hear more acutely what isn’t there, alongside that which is—the sounded notations surrounded by sections of empty

score. And accompanying these intervals of silence, Feldman instructed the pianist to perform much of the composition “*ppp*”—at the lowest possible volume—with the piano at times only faintly heard, seeming to submerge itself entirely beneath its own audibility (perhaps like a photograph filling with fog, over-exposing into an afterimage of absence). Also, within this sustained stillness, or collaborating with it, the pianist is instructed to hold the foot pedal down through the duration of the piece, causing a kind of constant echo to ring through the room, the sedimented sounds entropically lost at the edges of their own acoustic resonance. Or, as the pianist Louis Goldstein describes from his own playing of this piece, “The pedal, in effect, erases the silences and creates a wash of sound” (72).

Where Cage, seeking silence, was famously to enter a sound-proof anechoic chamber (only to encounter there the sounds of his own functioning body—the internal coursings and rumblings of his own blood, the incessant whirrings and ringings of his nervous system), Feldman presents instead an acoustic space in which listeners may become themselves something like an anechoic chamber, situated and sound-proofed to hear aspects of their own hearing in the physical act of listening, their own directed ears as instruments of sensuous reception. The echoing nuances of sound, felt materially, move through the narrowing chambers of the ear, tapering off toward their own particled dispersal, lost at the nerve ends, in the spiraling channels of the cochlea. At these taut moments of suspended sound, Feldman did not intend his audience—as Cage likely would have—to listen for ambient noises within and beyond the concert hall, where “everything is music.” But instead, within this sounded vacancy, one may hear a more indeterminate kind of call involving a more ambivalent pleasure, “nothing against something,” the one abrading the other, chafing at the imperceptible edges of absence.

Two thirds of the way through *Triadic Memories*, a particularly arresting passage is suddenly heard. In a section lasting around eight minutes, similarly spaced chords are slowly repeated one after the other. The pianist strikes a patterning of notes, pacing the varied arrangements by raising and lowering the tones, gently accelerating or slowing down the reverberating effect. Feldman himself described this particular section this way:

One chord might be repeated three times, another, seven or eight—depending on how long I felt it should go on. Quite soon I would forget the reiterated chord before it. I then reconstructed the entire section: rearranging its earlier progression and changing the number of times a particular chord was repeated. This way of working was a conscious attempt at “formalizing” a disorientation of memory. Chords are heard repeated without any discernible pattern. In this regularity (though there are slight gradations of tempo) there is a *suggestion* that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin—where all the buildings look alike, *even if they’re not*. (137-138)

Sounding something like a room full of clocks consecutively striking, in this extraordinary section of the composition one has a sense of time both being told, and of time winding down. Indeed, by simultaneously marking and erasing the moment’s duration, the varied chords would seem to be thermodynamically dissolving toward their own directionless standstill. And of the “stasis” that Feldman so frequently spoke—his desire to shape structurally through his music a form “both concrete and ephemeral,” “frozen, at the same time it’s vibrating”—this section comes closest to manifesting just that, *making stasis happen*.

As its title signals, *Triadic Memories* was written as a kind of acoustic investigation of memory and, as Feldman described it, “a conscious attempt at ‘formalizing’ a disorientation of memory.” For if, axiomatically, we do not hear what we hear, but what we remember, then

perhaps it is only by *disorienting* memory that we might be made to hear anything at all, to hear something of our own remembrance. And as the music unfolds, finally arriving at the distinctive section of repeated chords, memory and thought are indeed both enlisted and disrupted towards a heightened awareness of hearing and of having heard, a re-membering of evanescent sound.

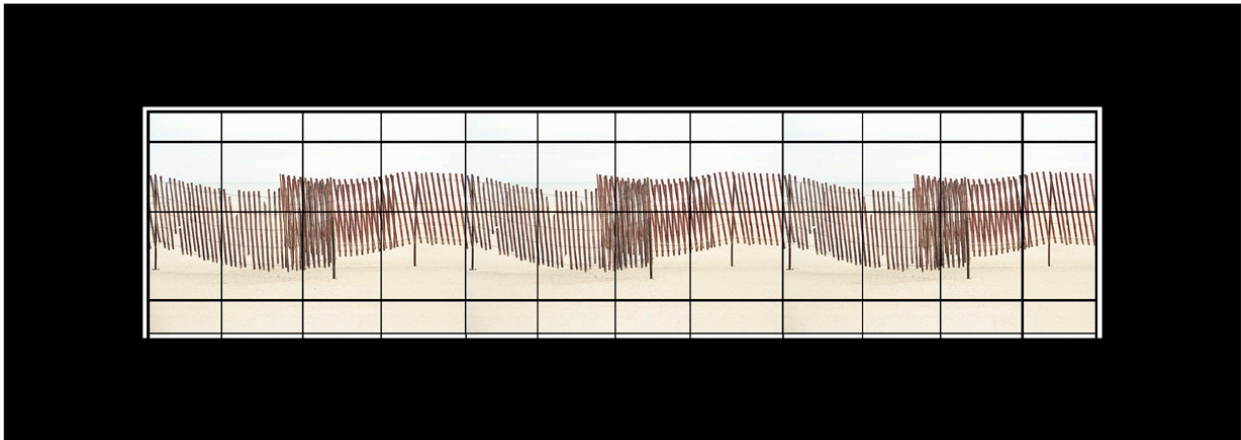
Two different chords durationally separated may be recollected as a kind of inaudible overtone, or afterimage (recalling the faintly seen “fence event” in Foster’s hanging bed sheets), a sounded absence that creates “its own type of ... equilibrium” (156). In a virtually silent synthesis of the two chords—one past, one present—a memoried triad may be finally felt, an ephemeral affect bringing to mind those described through Proustian metaphor in which impressions, as Proust wrote, “are experienced ... at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other” (III 904). Sound, and the memory of sound, can be heard collaborating on this flat field of sound, Feldman’s “time canvas,” conjuring in its mysterious form, a sounded absence, an affective presence. Like the buildings of Berlin, a crafted illusion is somehow conjured in which sound, and the memory of sound, can be heard collaborating—time as an image is thus briefly apprehended, *even if it is not*.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky wrote that the “repetition of the same appeal thickens the spiritual atmosphere which is necessary for the maturing of the finest feelings, in the same way as the warm air of a greenhouse is necessary for the ripening of certain fruit” (42). And indeed, at this most explicitly repetitive point of Feldman’s piece where the pattern of chords is heard, and its “spiritual atmosphere” thereby thickened (like fruit ripened by its warmth), it seems we have been somehow made to hear something of the sound of ourselves sensuously thinking in time, remembering out of time, as thought’s own disparate, time-*filled* sensations have been

momentarily contained and arranged, held in moving formation. Thought, not as a linear, systematized arrangement of words—that which had finally so troubled me on the shores of Lake Michigan—(for that *kind* of thought has been mercifully, if momentarily, suspended), but thought as an affective condition of visceral consciousness, even, dare I say it, as a fleeting state of grace, a passing sensation of memoried sound, an instantaneous recognition, a mere moment—and then it is gone.

Evoking Kandinsky’s “spiritual atmospheres,” or “states of grace,” however fleeting—in our return now to Foster’s photographs—the bar of expectation has clearly been risen by such lofty language, perhaps unreasonably. Nonetheless, let’s see what further associations can be found.

In one of Foster’s new color photographs, indeed, one that offers yet another “fence event,” we see this time a brown wooden fence gracefully arcing across the entire rectangular photograph, those familiar fences seen on Lake Michigan’s beaches in winter to, I believe, control the blowing sand. If looked at closely, there are again in this photograph, of course, repetitions, but here, instead of presenting the repetitions separately, or surrounded by their own boundaries, the photograph has been even more carefully treated, digitally eliminating virtually any divisions within the image so that the fence appears entirely as one interconnected thing, the repeated scene sutured into a single, horizontally extended sight (with the wooden fence itself shaping like a wave of water). Then, across the entire image, Foster has imposed a deliberate, digitally-printed grid, such that it appears that we are looking through this formally, artificially imposed pattern of lines, as if seeing through one fence, onto another.



While just over the wooden, wavy fence (or fences), discretely, we can make out just a thin band of Lake Michigan in the background where the fence briefly curves down, or rather, three identical narrow bands of a bleached blue (glimpses of the same lake that I, a couple of years back, had tried so hard to see as I stood on its shores). Through the digital grid, over the wooden fence, a glimpse of the lake is revealed—the singular lake now, un-nouned, as a kind of “lake event,” a pluralized verb—but only *as* seen, with our eyes mobilized, through the two layered divisions that must first be gotten through, seen over, in order for one to see at all, and then only partially: the white light reflecting on the distant lake, and then reflecting again—in its repetitions—something of our own reflections upon it.

In fact, such obstructions to seeing seem to be a recurring motif in many of Foster’s



new photographs, as we are repeatedly made—as with the fences and grid—to look over and through barriers, or onto obstacles and flat surfaces. Or

even more explicitly, Foster has made the photographs *of* the obstructions themselves, as we find ourselves frequently looking *at* the richly patterned surfaces of wooden walls, concrete walls, brick walls, closed garage doors, piles of concrete blocks, darkened windows, windows with their blinds pulled.

Or even in the handful of photographs of people, the figures are often turned from us, or walking away, as we see them only from behind; or, if they are facing us, hands cover the face, eyes tightly shut (the closed eyes as windows onto ... closed eyes), our attention thus drawn to other details playing rhythmically upon that flat surface—the



musicated patterning of fingernails, the shimmering beads on a bracelet, the arrangement of wrinkles, folds of the flesh.

Seen as surfaces (while recalling Feldman's own, what he called, "obsession" with "surface," "the subject of my music," desiring as he did to make his music "flat"), such images of Foster's are repetitively presented, as if the repeated obstacles to vision, the rhythmic redundancy of the barriers, have become something of the subject itself—what *can't* be seen, as

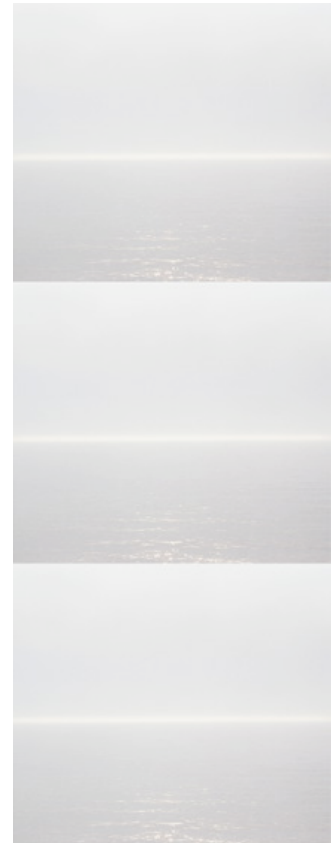


what *is* seen, but lyrically, lastingly so, as the silent scenes repeat themselves again and again and again; surfaces sensuously revealed in all their obstructive substance.

Finally, as my last example, there is yet another image involving Lake Michigan in Foster's new series of photographs. With an almost perfectly divided composition, we see a muted, gray sky above, and the darker lake below (with some patches of shimmering waves in the extreme foreground). The horizon line itself, splitting the image in half, shines as a perfect band of brilliant light that crosses the entire photograph from left to right.

But, of course, that's not the end of the story. For Foster has stacked three of these identical images on top of each other, literally joining them together at the seam. Digitally linked, the sky of the middle image touches the water of the image above, while the sky of the bottom image, joins with the water above it. Stacked and bound in this manner, the three repeated images form a single vertical image of lake and sky, three lakes and three skies seen as one. But then there's more. For Foster then repeats this vertical repetition horizontally, again and again, compositionally separated, to form triadic stacks of the same triadic image.

This photograph reminds me now of the earlier foggy landscape discussed, offering—minus the reflected trees—a similarly divided scene of water and sky. However, in this photograph, it is as if the fog has finally lifted onto this much larger, greater lake, revealing a clearer, crisper image. And in the photograph's gridded precision, it suggests as well a pictorial parallel to a stack of machine-crafted, stainless steel boxes by Donald Judd, or also Hiroshi Sugimoto's own photographed seascapes, but with Foster upping the ante here, repeating what in Sugimoto's work only often *seems* repeated, by actually repeating it—the same scene nine times,



or nine scenes once; where Sugimoto collapses geographic space, Foster collapses geometric time. Yet unlike Foster's photograph of the lake with the wavy wooden fence, no shoreline is seen in this last lake image, nor are there any fences to be seen through, no digital grid imposed onto it, for the photograph itself has, as a kind of sculpted, specific object, compositionally *become* the grid, the flattened barrier through, or upon which, we must look. With no shoreline from which to stand and see—to ground our perceptions—we look, unmoored, directly at the repeated patterns of light, onto the reflecting water, and into the blinding radiance of the nine horizon lines.



But what are we looking at here? What are we seeing? What *can* we see? For here, the repetitions, in their repetitive excess—nine identical images neatly bound into their patterned

formation—appear individually to almost cancel each other out; producing a kind of incantatory dissolution of image, in their uncanny stacking and piling up of repeated imagery: an aporia of surplus sight. Looking here and there, up and down, moving about *in time*, always seeing the same image repeated (dispensing sight by mobilizing it); everything we see, we remember *having* seen, as memories mutate seamlessly, inciting a kind of chain reaction—a perceptual/conceptual collision—into memories of themselves remembering; until, looking longer, something finally clicks (like a camera) into momentary position, the eye and mind briefly stall, the language locks, staying still, before an echoing image that is “concrete and ephemeral,” “frozen, at the same time it’s vibrating”—*making stasis happen*. And in ceasing to see either singly, *or* multiply, but simultaneously both, a kind of *unfenced* event shines, briefly—like that almost burningly radiant horizon line—before my blinded eyes: there, for a mere moment, a passing sensation of memoried sight, an instantaneous recognition—and then it is gone.

And, with this final photograph, I find myself at the shores of the same Lake Michigan from which, a few years back, I had stood so impatiently gazing out, but from which I was unable then to stay still, to pay attention, to see lastingly, wordlessly, what was before me—my divided eyes, doubled and doubling, reflected repetitions of myself (as an afterimage) trying to see myself see. While Foster’s photograph here offers a kind of response, or perhaps even something of a remedy to my restlessness—if *I* can’t stay still and pay attention, then perhaps the image can, staying still for me, and thus offering—multiply, memorably—a kind of impossible sight, a coalescing correspondence of my own dividedness and repetition, by the image’s own. As if seeing itself were somehow ordered—stacked and neatly seamed—around its own blind-spot, seeing negatively now, a radiant record of my failure to see—*seen*—again and again and again.

And so, now, finally, we should all go downstairs to the gallery and look at Steven Foster's photographs, to see first-hand—perhaps—something of what I've been saying; seeing what cannot be seen, alongside that which can. And tomorrow evening, don't forget, *do not miss*, what is certain to be Louis Goldstein's memorable performance of Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories*—I'm already remembering it fondly and it hasn't even happened yet. For the sights and sounds of both of these elegantly, appropriately conjoined events are certain to resonate—luminously, gracefully—as remembrances of things present.

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