

“Remembrance is Reconstruction”

A Senior Thesis Exploration of the Intangibility and Unreliability of Memory

By

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Remembering is recreation, not recalling. There is no way to bring back something that one has seen, known, or experienced in the past. There is only the new invention that is brought into existence by remembering. Memory is not accurate, this much is widely accepted. Every individual experience is ingested differently and is therefore remembered differently.

Remembering is described as to “have in or be able to bring to one's mind an awareness of (someone or something that one has seen, known, or experienced in the past)” by Oxford Dictionary. I would like to redefine remembering, or rather fine tune the existing definition using digital media, video, and image.

Despite events and experiences being up for interpretation, the places in which they occur are typically remembered the best. These rooms, structures, places serve as skeletons for memories to grow on, and from which to evolve. The foundation of memory exists in thresholds. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes the house as “the first universe for the young children that inhabit it,” and begs the question of the role architecture plays in shaping one's future relationships. I aim to advance that question further; how does space become fertile ground for memory? Is it possible to return to memory without permanently altering it?

When we imagine our childhood home, we often remember the overall shape, the color of the outside, and what the front door looked like. We remember specific rooms, the smell of the kitchen, the way the light from the window would come through the blinds, but we can't remember every room perfectly. Georgian artist Andro Wekua describes these lapses as “memory gaps.” In his 2014 exhibition “Pink Wave Hunter,” Wekua reconstructs buildings from his childhood town, and leaves blank spaces for rooms that he cannot recall. These “memory gaps”

are integral to the piece, and the larger concept of recreation from memory. Of his work, Wekua says “For me, this city is constantly unreachable, a mirage of sorts... maybe this city does not and has never existed.” Memory is widely accepted as intangible; this work does an excellent job at physically depicting that notion. Here, Wekua is not re-interpreting these preexisting structures, but is rather leaving out what he cannot accurately represent. Is this a more truthful recounting of a memory? It is, if anything, a lie by omission. He shows us what he remembers to be true of these buildings, and is honest in his omission of the rooms he can’t recall properly, or “truthfully,” or “accurately.”

The buildings in “Pink Wave Hunter” are constructed out of solid, durable materials; concrete, bronze, aluminum, and plaster. These materials are obviously heavy and unmoving. These are qualities that juxtapose the subject matter they are conveying. Memory is ephemeral, and concrete is permanent. But even concrete can erode and give way to the indisputable gravity of time.

Renowned artist and critic Hito Steyerl has a theory called “the state of zero probability”. In this state, a person can “disappear.” What Steyerl means by this is that through an inundation of images, digital or material, and through an inundation of coverage, a person can be lost, or forgotten. This can happen anywhere, at any time. A person can be swallowed up in the flood of circulating images, or even in over-saturation of their own image. In this sense, the representation of the self can erase the self. The only way to hold on is to assert your presence in the world, to write yourself into existence.

Can we narrate our own lives, and write ourselves into history? History, after all, is the collective remembering of the past, a widely agreed upon and largely accepted version of the events that went down that are no longer happening. In her collection of writing, Sahar Khraibani references Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish:

It's as if we were here as caretakers of fragile substances and were now preparing to absorb the operation of moving our reality, in its entirety, into the domain of memories forming within sight of us. And as we move away, we can see ourselves turning into memories.

She likens "the act of seeing oneself turn into a memory as akin to the act of writing one's story, one's narrative- writing the things we are most afraid of"(Khraibani, *The Making and Unmaking of Memories, or the Fragmenting Force of Memory*). The generally accepted distinction between history and memory is that we view the former as objective, and the latter as subjective.

However, this distinction discredits the real value of affect in remembering. Oral histories are a form of storytelling, but also truth telling. The lineage of stories passed down through generations perhaps holds greater truth than the sterile recounting found in textbooks or in school curriculums. This is an effective example of "writing one's story," in that the personal impact an event has on someone can reframe the way the event existed in the world. Events and history do not exist in a vacuum; the truth of the event lies in the aftermath.

In an interview with Frieze, filmmaker and academic Trinh T. Minh-ha says "Remembering is not opposed to forgetting." Minh-ha's work consists largely of films, but she has also extended to critical writings. She likens remembering and forgetting to opposite ends of a binary system. It is not so much that they are in opposition to each other, but rather that both must be accepted as true and integral to one another. To remember something, or someone, is to

risk forgetting. The risk and fear of forgetting fortifies the desire to remember. The two are in constant dialogue.

Minh-ha has also said that “there is no such thing as documentary,” by which she means that any visual representation of a series of events is instantly fictionalized through the process of visualization. When Minh-ha says “to use an image is to enter fiction,” she’s speaking to this idea. The use of visual media to represent reality is fickle in the sense that it is inherently inaccurate. The presence of the camera, or rather the capturing of an image results in a dishonest version of what the image is capturing in that it is now a separate object existing in the world. If a person were to hold up a photograph of a house next to the house that was photographed, you would not consider them to be the same thing. There is the house and there is a photograph of the house. The photograph has transformed the house into another house, one that is unchanging and ephemeral at the same time. The use of the image suffuses whatever is captured with emotion and depth.

Minh-ha also criticizes the idea of “authenticity,” saying that “authenticity is always defined by the one who consumes the so-called authentic.” This speaks to the similarities between history and memory. For a memory to cross the threshold into history requires it to be fact-checked, or proven to be authentic, which refers back to the idea of collective remembering as history. History is written accounts of multiple people’s memories of the past, a collection of points where the many stories line up. Authenticity is predicated on the collective agreement of a specific group of people who are deemed experts on the subject, but oftentimes this agreement dilutes the minor yet important details.

I referenced Gaston Bachelard at the beginning of this paper as he is at the forefront of the school of thought regarding memory and space. In his book “The Poetics of Space,” Bachelard discusses the utmost importance of physical spaces in relation to the construction and conservation of memory. He says:

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original values as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home, and by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.

Physical space operates as a container for memories. Memories are formless without the spaces in which they take place, and the loss of space alters the memory formed there. Bachelard astutely distinguishes memories that exist outside of contained space are more prone to changing than those that exist within a defined space. If the home is the first universe, then of course interior space would be the foundation upon which memory can flourish. A room becomes fertile ground for memories to take root, to remain firm in one’s mind. Like a lattice in a garden, structures and forms act as a physical armature for memory. How often does a place stir up memories we thought were lost? We mourn the loss of a childhood home moved out of or torn down, a favorite restaurant turned into a clothing store. We feel robbed, as if the existence of the place we remember was integral to the memory attached to it. Loss colors memory, but not in a way that alters its face; when you return to your childhood home, even if it looks different, the front lawn still stirs memories from the depths of your mind. The event of someone dying is when one’s mind becomes ripe with memories of them. That threat of loss brings to mind things you didn’t even realize you had forgotten.

Bachelard notes that we can never be real “historians,” which refers back to the question of history versus memory. Can we ever truly be objective in our recounting of the past? I think no, but that isn’t a bad thing. It is unavoidable to be subjective, to let emotion and nostalgia color our recollection. The gaps in memory should not be overlooked or ignored, but rather considered a part of the larger image. “Thus, by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination, we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.”

The issue with trying to tackle such a sprawling concept in one project is that there is no one face to memory. There have been many attempts to visualize what memory looks like; it’s usually an image or video with hazy, blurred edges, echoey laughter and bokeh circles floating across the viewer’s field of vision. In Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives,” the film’s recollections of the past are shaded and blue, hazy in their own right. These depictions are closest to the truth, which is that since memory is so evasive in form and visual representation, we are able to depict it however we see fit. This is what I strive to do in my own work.

My senior project was a seven minute long single channel video that dealt with how memory is reconfigured through digital images. I also composed the score entirely from samples I recorded. The piece deals with the idea that to remember something is to rebuild something in a different way that exists in the material world.

I wanted to explore this concept because I consider myself a very introspective, sentimental, and sensitive person. I often reflect back on my life, not necessarily on my personal history, but on the way that I felt the way and the way things make me feel. I actually went through a breakup around August of last year. My partner and I have since gotten back together, but during that period, I would think often about this abandoned house that lived in the woods behind my partner's house. We would spend a lot of time there together in the early stages of our relationship, and it became this symbol for our relationship as a place that no one else inhabited but us. And then sometime in early 2022, it got torn down. During the period where we weren't together, I often thought about how this place where we spent so much time no longer existed and there's very little record of it on the internet. There were only a couple photos taken that I had access to at least so, parts of the house have kind of faded out of memory, which means they've faded out of existence. I wanted to expand upon that idea and think about the way that I could recreate that house and therefore other memories by preserving them in this format.

I initially knew I wanted to start with this house. I knew that I wanted to include it, images of it, and images of its absence in that space. I have worked with digital media before in the sense that I like to mine the internet for content or material. I knew that I couldn't make a piece solely on this house, even though in one of my earlier iterations I had planned on making a 3D model of this house from my memory using Blender or unity. But that sort of stuff was really not my strong suit or my skill set, so I decided not to do that. I instead asked both my parents, my father and my mother, for addresses to their childhood homes, and then used the google maps Google Earth feature to navigate my way through their old neighborhoods. I used those places to build upon this idea of the way that places of personal significance are not immune to changing

throughout time. The way that my father's childhood house looks now looks nothing like the way it did when he lived there. I ended up not including my mother's neighborhood because I thought the cultural context of living in a lower income neighborhood in Thailand would end up muddying the point I was trying to make. But my father has lived in many places from the Netherlands to France, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. That variety of places, in addition to my own childhood neighborhood and the place of the abandoned house, offered enough visual diversity to make up the bulk of the video. For me, these digital landscapes were very fertile ground.

The internet was very fertile ground for me, in that there is the underlying context that anything and everything can be found on the internet. The entire world is mapped out for anyone to view, which means that with the right amount of curiosity and information, anyone in any place can be seen by any person. That means that it is especially perplexing when there is little record of a location to be found. There were no photographs of this abandoned house to be found on line, none of it while it was lived in. All that existed was an obscured view through the trees on google maps, with the roof just barely visible from behind the treetops.

After that, I requested some archived images of my father in his youth and of the houses that he had lived in, to juxtapose the more sterile and voyeuristic images Google had to offer of these places with these more weathered, affective photos taken by my grandparents of these places. I then layered these images on top of my virtual navigation of these neighborhoods to bridge the gap between this ephemeral memory of a place and the almost clerical recollection of these places through a digital database.

Once getting the foundations of the video laid out, I began to work on the score. I knew I wanted to create my own score simply because I felt like video alone wasn't enough and I wanted to push myself to create something from scratch, which I've never done before.

So I started with recording my partner recalling the path to this abandoned house in the back of the woods from their house in as much detail as they could. The recording was not meant to be accurate in any sense. It was supposed to kind of be this kind of meandering, unsure and uncertain retelling of this path. I allowed them to pause and redirect, and often would interject with my own feedback. It was all recorded in one take and I decided against rerecording it because I wanted to capture their first remembrance, without looking back or studying whatever material is left to study of that place. Whatever they forgot to mention would be considered nonexistent to me.

I then took that sample into Logic and did all my editing and composing there. I took my partner saying one word, and then stretched it and pulled a tone of their voice out of that word. I used that single tone as my instrument for the entire composition. I must've had about 20 layers of that tone, looped and repeated, pitch shifted in 20 different ways to come together and harmonize with each other. I also pulled in a sample of my father speaking to me as a kid when I was really young from an archived home video. I took some of these samples and edited them in Emission Control, which is a free online synthesizer. I was able to scramble and distort the samples in a way that was able to give off the sense that someone was talking, but the words themselves were indiscernible. I ended up playing with panning as well to add more sonic

interest. I wanted it to be a really immersive experience, so the sound is kind of coming at you from all directions, especially when you're wearing headphones.

I think the sound infuses the video with warmth and humanity. It's heavily digital; the video itself can look a little sterile because a lot of it takes place on Google Maps and that kind of two dimensional world. And even when it enters the global view, it's still lacking a sort of embodiment. I wanted to add some sort of personal aspect and I thought that there's a richness to these ambient drones that I'm drawn to. I was heavily inspired by the work of Brian Eno or Kali Malone's work. They make these really beautiful drones that slowly evolve over time, and I think that having that sort of score and composition accompany my work was integral to how I wanted it to be perceived.

The research I did played a large role in how I figured out what I did and didn't want to include or pursue in making this project. When I think back, I actually didn't end up feeling as if the book I initially was focusing on, *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, was so directly influential with my work, but I definitely still kept in mind a few key concepts from the book. But I thought mostly about documentary filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha. Minh-ha has said time and time again that there's no such thing as documentary. It's not an honest retelling, which I think kind of speaks to the intangibility of memory. But I think that a retelling is exactly that; it's never the original history. A retelling of history is never accurate. And perhaps a more accurate version of history is told orally. When history, or memory, is passed down through oral storytelling, there is an aspect there that you can't get from a more sterile, textbook history that is more personal, more intimate.

It is no secret that general history is written by those who have the power to distribute their narrative far and wide. From large scale issues to interpersonal relationships, there are power structures in place to protect those who have done wrong from suffering the consequences of their actions through silencing those with a different perspective. Of course, this is not only evident in situations of conflict; a small house in upstate New York is more likely to be forgotten than a commercial building in Brooklyn. Houses are torn down everyday, rich with a history no one will know but the people who once lived there. In making art about these dilapidated places that are left to be forgotten and replaced, I strive to memorialize and canonize them and publicly recognize the importance of a former home. Even though it was a home that was not even mine, it is symbolic in it's late stages, as every house is just a shell that we grow in and eventually discard.

The project went through a myriad of different iterations. It morphed as time progressed, as memory often does as well. Through figuring out what medium would best suit my interests for my project, I began to reimagine the places I planned on depicted in different forms, different states. In my mind's eye I began to remember where windows were in this skeleton of the Victorian house when envisioning it as a floating 3D model, but would then remember the types of trees in the front yard when picturing it through the lens of video art and digital navigation. I had initially planned on attempting to build a 3D model of the Victorian house and have my project centered around that. I was going to try to rebuild from memory, the 3D model of this Victorian house in the woods and I was going to try to have the model reconstructed and deconstructed based on sensors that I had laid out on the floor. So as you would move towards a monitor where the model would be displayed, the house would deconstruct, but then as you'd

retreat from the monitor, the house would reconstruct. The deconstruction of the house as you approached would've served as an allegory for a memory being reconfigured and scrambled the more you recall it. Of course, the retreat from the house coinciding with the reconstruction would be a reference to leaving a memory in order to preserve it. But that was so ambitious and to be honest, not really what I was interested in. I was really stressing myself out thinking about how it would be received and I wanted to do the most objectively impressive thing.

That's something I still think about, how it's so hard for me to just accept my work as my worthy and not try to make my work the most palatable- or maybe not palatable, but just the best and most universally appreciated, so to speak. I thought to pull off a technical feat like building not only a 3D model, which is something I am not particularly skilled in, but also sensors, would have been so technically impressive that it would assuage the sort of ever present apprehension that my work is valuable and important and whatnot.

After much deliberation, I decided that maybe this approach was not right for me. I started playing around with the idea of just doing a video piece or what I thought I was telling myself would be too inadequate. I, of course, overcame this obstacle, but I think that the line of thought that led me to pursue the project the way I did was incredibly important for my process. I had to be realistic with myself about my capabilities, my time constraints, and what I actually wanted to create versus what I thought would be the most liked. It's something I implored my professors, my senior advisor, and even my friends to help me understand, but ultimately I had to figure out on my own that the best work I could make was work that was influenced by my opinion and my opinion alone.

I knew I wanted to compose the score, but I was kind of hitting a wall and I didn't know how to start. But then eventually I just kind of threw caution to the wind and I started but knew that the trade off was going to be a more intricate installation process. I had played around with the idea of using my welding knowledge to make a sort of cradle-like structure that would either hold the monitor or create a sort of vestibule that the viewer could step into and immerse themselves in my work, but I eventually decided against it. It was just all so much that I didn't have time to do and honestly, it's probably for the best that I didn't do it.

For my install, I knew that I wanted to include another medium aside from just one single channel monitor. So I had the single channel monitor and because my piece of course was amongst 10 other amazing pieces, I knew that I had to use headphones. I didn't want to compromise the integrity of the score, because it's so integral to the piece. So I ended up finding a four channel headphone jack and I had three headphones plugged in. My professor, Michael Bell-Smith, suggested that in order to create more visual interest I lay one of the podiums that I initially just had upright and laid it sideways so it was closer to the ground. I positioned my monitor on that, and it ended up really benefiting my work because it encouraged the audience and patrons of the gallery to get on its level and come closer together to listen. Because there were three headphones attached to one jack, it forced the audience to sit next to each other and share space to view my work. That sort of congregation I think ended up having a really great effect that I hadn't actually initially expected.

I also had three cyanotype prints that I'd made hanging on the wall adjacent to my monitor. I love cyanotype and think it has this affective quality that is hard to describe. The

image can be so clear, yet the edges can bleed and blur, giving the illusion that the image is coming forth from some primordial soup. Even the central image can sometimes become distorted, burnt by too much light exposure or from a stray drop of water. The rich blue dye gives the impression that the image is irrevocably true in its depiction, that it cannot be edited. That steadfastness is alluring, especially when it juxtaposes the very quality it emanates. I think it has this ephemeral quality to it that other traditional photography methods, in my opinion, don't really have. The stain of the blue on the fabric feels natural in a way that is in contrast with the very digital video I had made. I like the idea that over time, the prints could slowly fade from the sun, and the muslin could fall apart, and then these images would cease to exist. The images burned into the cloth from the sun would too fade out of existence in time.

I had made these cyanotypes for a previous show that I had last semester, a solo show I had the Forum Artspace in the student center, called "The only way out is through// when I say infinity I mean now" and I took thin sheets of muslin cloth, cut them into rectangles, and I had images of this abandoned house and also images from the process of moving out of various places I've lived over the past couple of years. A couple of them are from inside my room and in one of the apartments my dad has lived in over the past five years. I printed out negatives of these photos that I had taken on acetate, and then I just treated the fabric with the cyanotype liquid and put them in a light box with the negatives on acetate pressed on top. And once I rinsed out the solution, the prints had this really nice, raw sort of quality where the edges are so distorted yet the image's quality is quite pristine and except for a couple blotches where the fabric was still pretty wet. I think it's so effective. It really captures the essence of each place even if it's not the most perfect representation.

It's hard to feel like I'm not talking in circles when trying to talk about my project, but perhaps that is the curse that befalls someone trying to talk about something they don't quite understand themselves. I feel so desperate to hold onto the memories I have, partially because I feel like I lose them without realizing I had them in the first place. I often wonder what I've forgotten and haven't realized, and then will try to remember even the most mundane, irrelevant things from my life from five, seven, ten years ago.

Memory is something that evades not only me, but the people around me. My grandmother, who died not even a week ago, had Alzheimer's, and hasn't known who I was since 2018. I often think about how just as I reached the age to wonder about her life, she started forgetting it. There was no time for her to pass down whatever knowledge she had as it was swept away into some unknown place. There are few photos of her, even fewer videos. The gap between me and her yawned wider and wider as each month passed, as she forgot English and I never learned Thai. What parts of my life would make more sense with that lost knowledge? It's like the Library of Alexandria to me; what if there was just one sentence she could've said to me that would've altered the course of my life for the better?

Some may say there is no point in wondering about such things, but I disagree. To wonder brings me as close as I can to the answer. It's as if I'm looking out my window, and there's something outside just out of focus, obscured by fog. I can press my face as close as I can to the glass, or I can try to open the window. I feel thankful to have learned all the skills I have that makes this pursuit feel like it's not in vain. Every circle I talk in brings me one step closer to

understanding what I'm really trying to say. Through making this work, I feel as though I am getting closer to opening that window.

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Kali Malone, "The Sacrificial Code" 2019

Brian Eno, "Another Green World," 1975

Thank you to my Yai, Prarom Minkovich, who passed on Sunday, May 7th, 2023.