

Materializing Memory

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Introduction

Memory is crucial to everyday life. Even the ability to find meaning while reading this very sentence relies on remembering what you've already read. Memory also reaches far deeper into the recesses of our minds, shaping ourselves through experience and knowledge. Our memory creates associations between things and ideas, giving meaning to objects, events, places, people, and more. Utilizing specific materials then not only can embody memory for one individual, but spark connections in others' minds as well.

Interpreting Memory

Long-term memory is able to sink in better when we interpret it. Interpreting an event (or any visual, audio, or other information for that matter) is more than anything else putting it in our own perspective. "A person perceives events in terms of his personal frame of reference, and this considerably influences what he later recalls."¹ Without digesting the information that we experience, it holds no place in our minds, and slips away as quickly as it came. What is important, and ultimately what is engrained in our memory, is entirely dependent on ourselves and our view of the world. It's not just about what happens, but about how we see it.

¹ Michael Howe, *Introduction to Human Memory*, (New York: Harper & Row).

Independent of the overwhelming stimulus of the digital age, there is now and has always been more information bombarding our minds at a single time than we can pay attention to. We sacrifice attention to some information in order to pay attention to something else. For example, we constantly see our nose, but our mind knows it is insignificant to our view of the world. We can change this by merely choosing to see our nose. This widely accepted idea is called selective disregard or selective attention, and it plays a part in our memory. The choice of what to observe is not just a human thing, but is especially important to artists. The power to guide our vision and others is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. If we remember what we interpret, then we can only interpret what we notice.

Interpretive transformations fascinate me, and as such I use them frequently. For example, the sculptures I created for the performance *Cleansed* transform a childhood memory of mine. One summer while growing up, my mom (in an effort to keep five



Victoria Jensen, Sculptures for Cleansed, 2020

children entertained) gave us coffee filters and Crayola markers to “tie-dye” with. This

kept my siblings and I busy for weeks, and transforming without distortion was an exciting endeavor. So even though this interpretation is not a direct and “faithful” record of this particular memory, it still serves its purpose. Just as memories warp and fade over time, these coffee filters appear to have faded as well because of the decreased saturation of ink.

Recording Memory

Even once the noticed and interpreted information has been stored, it doesn’t always stay. Memory is frequently altered because of our perception (interpretation) of an experience and because of the neuroplasticity of our brains. Interestingly enough, recording in any form a memory only solidifies our interpretation instead of the truth of the event.² So why do we as artists try so hard to record and preserve memory?

Artist Rachel Whiteread might just be the one exception, depending on how you look at it. With her work physically taking an impression of a place, there is only so much misinterpreting of memory that can occur. While it is true that her work often focusses on a collective memory,³ the physicality of the spaces she captures feels incredibly

² Michael Howe, *Introduction to Human Memory*.

³ James Lawrence, *Solid Recollections: Rachel Whiteread*, (Gagosian).

personal. The spaces documented preserve magically what once was, leaving behind the physical manifestation of someone's infinite memories of the space.

This choice to preserve personal memories has become a vitally important part of my art. Recently, I took old clothes of mine and encrusted them in salt. These clothes were ones that I loved so much I wore them everyday, or wanted so badly that I made them myself. Each item of clothing used has some degree of significance, and memories tied to each. They physically carry the stains and rips associated with these memories, and as such record with exactness not only image the event, but breathe it to us word for word.

Material Associations

In order for us to recognize anything and know what it is, we must first have a memory associated with that thing. As artists, we can choose to either capture that everyday aspect of the object, or transform it through something else. In the words of Lygia Clark, "The process of transfiguration of an object is limited by the fact that it is grounded not so much in the formal qualities of the object but in its connection with

the object's quotidian use."⁴ This suggests that try as they might, artists can only bring a transformation so far. The material (of the art) will shine through inherently because of the associations we have with it. Art can only hide so much of the material's quotidian purpose and our association with that.

This might not be such a bad thing. For some artists, the material needs to be highlighted by a particular relationship, not hidden by it. Brazilian artist Henrique Oliveira brings our attention to the material because of the way its displayed. He utilizes building materials within or on the surface of a building, using the proximity to bring attention to the materials used. We, as viewers, wouldn't think twice about what a building is made out of (unless we happen to be architects) until it was brought to our attention. Within the building it interacts with, the wood provides structure and support, but in flimsy plywood form, also holds a certain fragility. "They have something of the quality of a dreamlike, imaginary universe without losing sight of reality."⁵ We would likely be completely oblivious to this if Oliveira hadn't brought it

⁴ Ferreira Gullar, Mario Pedrosa, and Lygia Clark, *Lygia Clark*, (Rio de Janeiro: Edição Funarte).

⁵ Martina Weinhardt, *Brasiliana*, (Frankfurt: Frankfurt Schirn Kunsthalle).

to our attention. Sometimes it is then more important to highlight an association than to hide it.

In my own work, I strive to highlight these types of associations. Towards the end of 2020, I started coating a kitchen table and its four place settings in salt. *Table Salt* is set to look as if four people have just had a meal there, the chairs pulled out from the table a little, the silverware strewn over each setting. While the salt both physically and visually preserves this scene, upon viewing it, we start to have recollections of our own experiences at the dinner



Victoria Jensen, Table Salt, 2020

table. The silly conversations we had with our families growing up, or the lonely meals alone might come to mind. Whatever it is, the ability to associate with various people's memories is crucial to the work's success. We have learned that, at least in contemporary western culture, this kind of table, bowls, plates, cups, and silverware are for eating. This association is invisibly concrete in our understanding, and generally the same from person to person. Without it, we could not understand it as a dinner table, and would miss out on the further associations with our experiences eating at such a table.

Conclusion

A material's associations hold within them an incredible power. This power comes from deep within our minds, captured by our memories. It is the honor of artists to bring back to light those precious memories. Only by shining this light on something so seemingly simple can we remember beautiful glimmers of our own lives as the viewer. The ordinary can then become extraordinary when we dedicate our work to materializing memory.

Bibliography

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