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Object Data Memory

An exhibition

The Material Forms of Memory: a creative arts praxis examining family archive materiality and the performance of memory through installation art

An exegesis

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Masters of Arts by Research

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**Conclusion**

This creative arts praxis investigated family archives and their influence on the performance of memory. Through a multi-method arts-based research approach, the outcomes of this research culminated through a series of installations across three exhibitions—*Becomings* (2014), *The Substance of Memory* (2015) and *Object Data Memory* (2015). This creative arts praxis situates itself within a reflexive framework to generate a constant dialogue between theoretical discourses, studio inquiry, my role as practitioner researcher and the subjective experiences that inform my art making. Family archives to me, were emotionally charged with notions surrounding memory after the death of my father at a young age. In recent years, I watched my grandmother suffer from Alzheimer’s, which highlighted to me the fragility of memory and our reliance on technologies to reaffirm, enhance and substitute our memories. These subjective experiences alongside theoretical discourses discussed in this exegesis, reveal that the performance of telling family stories and narratives through the material remains of family artefacts is key in providing a sense of belonging that enriches our personal identity and memories.

In this exegesis and my creative works I have sought to demonstrate through a reflexive and critical examination of studio practices and theoretical frameworks, how family archive materiality affects what we remember and how we remember. In doing so, it also adds to the burgeoning body of scholarly research regarding arts-based practitioners approaches, which could act as a bridge between research and their own arts praxis. In addition, the analyses of these discourses through the lens of my own family archives within my arts praxis expands and adds to the body of knowledge surrounding family archives and memory within contemporary visual arts. Contemporary artists Kutluğ Ataman’s *Testimony* (2007), *fff (for found footage)* (2010) and Tacita Dean’s *Film* (2011) illustrate how discourses surrounding family archives and memory are intersected into the context of multi-media and installation art. Informed by theoretical discourses, the installations that emerged from my creative arts praxis engaged the audience into the sensory experience of my family’s archive of memories dictated by external technologies.

The aim of this research was fulfilled through a creative arts praxis employing a multi-method research approach using my own family archives as source material. The intention was to illuminate the participatory engagement with family archive materiality and how this might affect the performance of memory. This open investigative approach
to studio practices extended the media used in my artistic practices and as a result, 
illustrates that this hybrid and dynamic research approach has the potential to generate 
new knowledge and cultural and social experiences (Barrett & Bolt, 2010; Stewart, 2006; 
Crouch, 2007). The integration of new media, video, audio and installation art occurred 
through reflexively engaging with these materials and was informed by theoretical 
discourses that underpin my research questions. Using Barrett and Bolt’s (2010) and 
Kember and Zylinksa’s (2013) theories, materiality is aligned to the experience and 
mediation between humans and machines—a relationship that fundamentally influences 
our understanding of the world and our being in the world. This understanding of 
materiality can also be applied to my creative arts praxis that relied on a material 
dialogue between my family artefacts, my creative practices and the intersection of 
theoretical discourses.

Architecture was used as a metaphorical reference reflected through classical mnemonic 
perspectives and Yates (1984) and Hornstein’s (2011) theories surrounding mnemonic 
mapping exercises using an analogues link (physically and metaphorically). These ideas 
emphasise that memory is situated by these mental anchors and physical objects to 
recall our past experiences and narratives. This architectural reference is firstly, 
embodied through installation art and most prominent in Slide Nights (2015) and the 
final exhibition Object Data Memory (2015)—the physical infrastructure of a three-
dimensional space that the audience navigate their bodies through to view the work. 
Secondly, it reflects the role of family archives as physical and static evidence archived 
within the domestic space or through the virtual architecture of the Internet—as 
Lastly, by using this architectural analogy it resonates with the processes of memory—the 
brain as a storehouse of recollections that are pieced together through visual clues that 
are re-appropriated over time as they are viewed within new contexts and accumulated 
knowledge. These ideas are reflected in It’s 10 o’clock in the morning and daddy’s just 
gotten up to have breakfast (2015) and the video works in Object Data Memory (2015).

Sontag (2008) and Barthes (2010) acknowledge that the role of photography is directly 
associated with processes of memory by the indexical reference to tangible objects of 
memory from the past. Within the family home, these tangible artefacts of memory 
produce inter-generational memory by provoking story-telling and conversation through 
their physically handling, their inscriptions read aloud or by discussing the content or 
physical materiality of the photograph (Edwards and Hand, 2004; Kuhn, 2007). These 
ideas were explored in I Forget Now (2015) and Behind the Photograph (2015), which
illuminated the artefacts that invite conversation and narrative by their inherent materiality. The performance of memory is embedded within external technologies—both can be said to act in parallel ways. Research suggests the human brain has altered in considerable ways from the emergence of digital technologies and the Internet (McLuhan, 1964; Carr, 2015). Hand (2012) and van Dijck (2010) emphasise that the emergence of new media has altered the landscape of visual culture—recording, sharing, editing and archiving have all become unconscious acts from individuals living in connected and networked Western cultures. How will we pass down our archives to future generations? Will it be through hard drives and passwords or online databases and accounts? New media technologies provide infinite ways to construct, edit and share individual narrative and story across public and private networks, which ultimately effects our mnemonic processes in relation to the family archive.

This creative research approach emerged as a direct result of my physical handling and collating of my archives in the first stage of this research journey. The process of digitising these archives made me aware of the multitude of devices and technologies that our archives sit within—all requiring their own unique set of viewing conditions and bodily engagements to experience the visual content. The creative outcomes that culminate this research aimed to explore how our mnemonic processes are influenced by family archive materiality. The outcomes of this research resulted in a multi-panel projection installation, a photo media installation, video works using tablets, audio components, objects and photography. As Schrader (2015b) states in her review of The Substance of Memory (2015):

The large entry room of the gallery is divided into two parts and peppered with collected objects, intricate sculptures, photographs and digital projections with analogue sources. After discovering an interactive installation, I came upon a darkened projection room and later a narrow corridor with a row of headphones. The Substance of Memory is broad in execution, yet the work consistently makes connections with human memory prone to deteriorate and forget. There are a few poignant photographs that caused me to stop and consider how, and if at all, family records are able to bring an unknown past into contact with the present. (para. 2–3)

Through this array of family archival materials, the audience was confronted with tangible objects, ephemeral screens, QR codes, audio stories and archival photographs. Another exhibition review of The Substance of Memory (2015) from Perth Fringe World Festival 2015 describes:

This interactive venture has you exploring a multitude of senses as part of the experience. This is definitely the right way to get you started to feeling the world around you. This piece is so immersive it will transport you into a new plane of thought allowing you to really feel what the artist is trying to convey. With so many different mediums in displaying our connection with memory you are bound to at least find something that’ll ‘wow’ you. (Day 5: lets get sensual!, 2015, para 1)
The boundaries between new and old media are blurred throughout these installations—explicitly highlighting to the audience how the inherent materiality of family archives dictates their viewing experience and participatory engagement.

As the audience moved within the gallery spaces of *The Substance of Memory* (2015) and *Object Data Memory* (2015) what became evident was the participatory engagement by the audience to access and view these archives. The use of installation art coalesces these ideas by involving the audience within the gallery space, whereby similar to archives, it can be said, that these works are incomplete until they are viewed by an audience. The outcomes of my creative arts praxis are ephemeral multi-media installations, and therefore, there is an on-going performance between present and past. They are never finalised, they are viewed within new contexts by different audiences as they are integrated into my art practices and viewed within new contexts by different audiences in future research.

My family archives are far removed from their original location within the family domestic space—they have been manipulated, edited, digitised, cross-embedded and re-contextualised through my art practices and guided by theoretical frameworks. This arts-based research is limited by the fact that it specifically uses my family’s archives dating from the 1900s to 2013, of which, I, as the practitioner researcher have an emotional connection with. That being said, the potential for future research lies in the ability to expand the archives used in my creative practices. In addition, this research has expanded my art practices and has highlighted the potential for further exploration with new media within interactive installations to investigate notions surrounding archives and the performance of memory.
REFERENCES


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