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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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Methodology

“I WANT TO SHOW THAT LIFE ITSELF IS ART, THAT IT IS A KIND OF CONSTRUCTION”

- KUTLUNĞ ATAMAN (AS CITED IN BORTOLOTTI, 2011)

This arts-based research investigates how family archives have altered as a result of new media and how this might have affected our memory processes. My creative arts praxis uses multi-method approaches in studio inquiry and exhibition outcomes to illuminate the participatory engagement with family archive materiality. Creative arts praxis is the key methodology that underpins this arts-based research, in combination with reflexivity and a multi-method creative arts inquiry through disciplines of photography, new media and installation art. This part of the exegesis will explore, the application of reflexivity as an investigative research method, which is vital to my arts praxis and the outcomes of the creative visual work. ^1

After the death of my father when I was 10 years old, family archives became emotionally charged with visual and tangible representations of the past that reinforced and preserved my memory. In recent years, my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and I have witnessed the fragility of memory as it deteriorates out of her control. For me, family archives have become deeply rooted with notions of remembrance and nostalgia—home movies and photographs have strengthened and substituted my childhood memories. The material importance is based on more than just images and sounds that conjure memories, but also on artefacts of memory; tangible objects that invite archiving. In my creative arts praxis, these subjective experiences are not intended to be explicit—what is important, is to define how they have directed and informed my arts practices. In addition, by establishing these subjective experiences, the intention is not to explore notions of loss, grief or trauma. These subjective experiences are the foundation to my arts based research. By using my own family’s archives, the intention is to explore the varying roles of the family archive in relation to memory and

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^1 This section draws on my paper presented at ACUADS 2015 Conference, Art and Design Education in the Global 24/7, Adelaide and my paper written for Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network issue Make, Mistake, Journey (expected publication early 2016).
highlight the ways in which technologies alter our engagement and experience with these archives.

The multi-faceted dimensions of my arts-based research are driven by subjective experiences, theoretical understandings and the production of artistic outcomes through reflexive practices (Gray, 2006; Barrett and Bolt, 2007). By using my own personal family archives in this creative praxis the intention is not to employ an ethnographic research approach, but rather to situate it as an autobiographical inquiry within the framework of reflexivity. In Stewart’s (2009) view, this research approach is described as “a way to explore the practitioner and their concepts involving the self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience and knowledge” (p. 129). The narratives derived from my work do not focus on myself as the centre of the archives, or any central narrative. The intention is to capture the varying roles of the family archive in relation to memory and highlight the ways in which technologies alter our engagement and experience with these archives. Carole Gray (2006) argues, methodology is a result of ontology and epistemology—“the practitioner is involved as the researcher from an informed perspective, where they are identifying researchable problems raised in practice and responding through practice” (p. 2). The research methods chosen support and encourage a hybrid and reflective relationship between subjectivity, conceptual frameworks and artistic production and outcomes.

In this part to the exegesis, the terms creative arts praxis and reflexivity are defined within the broader concepts of arts-based research and the investigative research approaches that operate within the context of my arts-based research. With this framework established, this chapter then explores the role of family archives as source materials in my research and art practices and processes. The holistic nature of creative arts praxis and reflexivity integrates a continuous dialogue between the inclusion of myself as the researcher, in the research, whilst fostering a critical inquiry into studio practices and exhibited work in progress informed by theoretical frameworks (Sullivan, 2005; Stewart, 2001, 2006; Crouch, 2007; Gray 2006).

**The Reflexive Practitioner in Creative Arts Praxis**

*Praxis*, as described by Williams, is “a whole mode of activity in which, by analysis but only by analysis, theoretical and practical elements can be distinguished, but is always a whole activity, to be judged as such” (as cited in Johnson et al., 2004, p. 90). The emphasis of my exegesis aligns itself within a creative arts praxis methodology—both the
exegetical writing and creative processes and practices are interwoven within the research process and as such, should be viewed as a collective whole. Christopher Crouch (2007) extends these ideas by emphasising, “when the creative practitioner adopts praxis, it encourages the act of reflecting upon, and reconstructing the constructed world. Adopting praxis assumes a process of meaning making, and that meaning and its processes are contingent upon cultural and social environment” (p. 112). This exegesis demonstrates the transitional dialogues between making my work and making meaning, contextualised within theoretical frameworks and the critical analysis of works by Kutluğ Ataman and Tacita Dean. In Robyn Stewart’s (2001) view, “praxis involves the critical and inextricable meld of theory and practice” (p. 4). Creative arts praxis and reflexivity form the nexus of my methodological approach. Crouch (2007) contends “reflexivity as a research method takes into account the various ways in which the researcher influences research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge” (p. 109). By doing so, reflexivity “takes self-knowledge into the social realm and initiates the de-narcissification of self evaluation” (Crouch, 2007, p. 109). Griffiths (2011) asserts that exercising reflexivity demands an “attempt by the researcher to be self-conscious about his or her own...social, political and value position and positionality, in relation to how these might have influenced the design, execution and interpretation of the theory, data and conclusions” (p. 184). In this approach to arts-based research, Brad Haseman (2010) contends, “practitioner researchers do not merely ‘think’ their way through or out of a problem, but rather they ‘practice’ to a resolution” (p. 147). My creative arts praxis sits within this methodological paradigm—the reflexive dialogues between theoretical discourses, the role of myself as an artist and the narratives derived from my own source materials are transitional and constantly re-appropriated throughout the research journey.

An understanding of Anthony Giddens’ (1991) theories of the reflexive self are important in defining reflexivity in the context of creative arts praxis. Giddens’ (1991) analyses key relationships between influences of modernity and self-identity, largely within the field of sociology. According to Giddens “society is becoming increasingly self-aware and that growing reflexivity sees individuals continually constructing their identity” (as cited in O’Leary, 2007, p. 4). O’Leary (2007) expands this definition further by arguing that self-reflection is set within “ideological frameworks that allow us to explore ourselves as both products and creators of social order” (p. 3). As explored in the literature earlier, the social frameworks that surround us have an effect on shaping our collective and individual memory, including our sense of belonging and identity (Eril, 2011; Brockmeier, 2002; Kuhn, 2007; 2010; Bietti, 2010). Similarly, reflexivity plays a crucial role to the
understanding of our own identity and the location of who we are in the world according to social and cultural frameworks (Giddens, 2007; O'Leary, 2007; Brown, 2006). To situate this understanding of reflexivity within creative arts research, O'Leary (2007) argues, “the nature of who we are, as well as our interactions within research settings, can actually shape research processes and outcomes” (p. 3). My subjective experiences have shaped the reasons why I make art and the artistic practices and processes that coalesce from this dynamic research approach. The source materials used are from my family’s archives—they are highly subjective and emotive materials to me and require methodologies and research methods to view these objectively—a contradictory term within creative arts research. According to Elliot Eisner (as cited in Sullivan, 2010), when involved as the researcher and within the research it is impossible to achieve complete objectivity,

what we know about the world is always a result of inquiry, it is mediated by mind. Since it is mediated by mind, the world cannot be known in its ontologically objective state. An objective world is postulated both as a general and as a particular entity. Since what we know about the world is a product of the transaction of our subjective life and a postulated objective world, these worlds cannot be separated (p. 40).

The role of a reflexive praxis is to integrate the roles of both subjectivity and objectivity—producing a space that theory and art practices converge. Kim Etherington (2004) suggests that reflexivity

opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity to allow for an exploration and representation of the more blurred genres of our experiences...[whilst]...adding validity and rigor in research by providing information about the contexts in which data are located (p. 37)

Reflexivity, therefore, allows for the inclusion of myself in the creative arts praxis, and is an intentional and supplementary element, whilst establishing boundaries to avoid “solipsism, self-indulgence, navel gazing or narcissism” (Etherington, 2004, p. 31). These research methods are fundamental to my creative arts praxis. The source materials in this research stem from my family archives—I cannot remove myself as subject, nor detach my emotional connections from these materials. By assimilating creative praxis in conjunction with reflexivity, it acknowledges the integration of my family archives to support the subjective experiences that have informed my art practices. In addition, the decisions made when immersed within the practitioner researcher paradigm are constantly re-appropriated throughout the research journey as the dialogue between theory and studio practices develop, extend and inform each other.

It is important, however, not to fall into the pitfalls of academic research by proclaiming reflexivity, which itself is often under theorised (Maton, 2003) and without actually defining how this reflexive process occurs in my own arts practice. Reflexivity, described
by Morwenna Griffiths (2011), is “carried out by the self or selves who are found in the thick of it. It is a passionate inquiry which uses a range of means for symbolising personal and inexplicit understandings, attitudes and reactions” (p. 184). Griffiths (2011) argues that fundamentally, all research is affected “by the selves (relationships, circumstances, perspectives and reactions) of the researcher, making these as clear as possible to the audience is one way of exercising academic virtue and removing bias” (p. 184). My creative arts praxis relies on reflexivity as a research method to support, inform and negotiate the dialogues between researcher, creative practitioner and subject. As explored by Crouch (2007), “adopting a reflexive viewpoint allows an understanding of the creative process from a subjective viewpoint, revealing the dynamic relationship between the context, construction and articulation of the act” (p. 108). As further supported by Griffith (2011), in arts-based research “the self is inescapable, because the person creating, responding to, working on, developing or evaluating performances, artefacts and practices is central to those activities” (pg. 185). With this understanding, theoretical frameworks and the role of the artist/researcher to generate reflexive dialogues between artistic practices, processes and products are the cornerstones to my creative arts praxis.

**Research Methods and Studio Processes**

Arts-based research is described by Griffiths (2011) as a series of stages that move to the next—“they evolve, often mutually affecting each other, and, indeed, do not become finally stable until the research is completed” (p. 169). This mutually dependent relationship between the stages of arts-based research, as described by Griffiths (2011), can be applied to this arts-based research journey. The first stage was to gather source materials from my family archives. The following stages include studio experimentations and exhibiting work-in-progress—as demonstrated throughout the following chapters to this exegesis. These stages mould and affect each other and are vital to the final studio outcomes of this research. This creative arts praxis in conjunction with reflexivity imposes responsibilities of the practitioner researcher for the “practical effects and implications of our knowledge and research processes. It implies internal dialogues between our theories and other modes of acting in the world” (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 92). These dialogues can occur through two distinct processes. Firstly, there is the process “where questions, problems or challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners. And secondly, the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners” (Barrett, 2009, p. 145). The application of specific research methods cannot apply from
the outset of my creative arts praxis. Throughout my previous creative arts praxis inquiries, I have used a multi-method approach by experimenting with a range of media and processes, whilst constantly informed by relevant theoretical perspectives. This being said, it is not always possible to quantify outcomes of studio production due to the “complex experimental, material and social processes through which artistic production occurs” (Barrett, 2009, p. 3).

The advantages of creative arts praxis are that it does not restrict the production of creative work, but rather encourages and promotes emergent, subjective and interdisciplinary approaches to research. The methods of creative arts research cannot be pre-determined “and outcomes of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable” (Barrett, 2009, p. 3). This dynamic research approach to creative arts praxis has expanded the research methods familiar to me as a practitioner. The emotional, subjective and personal concerns that motivate creative arts research, “operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also that of tacit knowledge” (Barrett, 2007, p. 143). The term experiential knowledge occurs as “a continuum with normal processes of living, and is derived from an impulse to handle objects and to think and feel through their handling” (Barrett, 2013, p. 64).

The first stage of my creative arts praxis was to collate the source materials from my family archives dating from the early 1900s to 2013 (Figure 8 and Figure 9) and includes photographs, negatives, 35mm slides, VHS tapes, personal objects and audiotapes. The physical handling, sorting and digitising of these archives across an array of media platforms demonstrates the material dialogue with my family. The digitising of my family’s...
analogue archives required varying devices and software in order to edit some of the obsolete and out-dated media. Marshall McLuhan proposes, “the content of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8). McLuhan’s ideas are evident through the process of archiving and duplicating my family archives—family photographic negatives became digitised, VHS tapes transferred to DVD’s, 35mm slides scanned onto CD’s and photographs scanned via a flatbed scanner. As Norman Klein (2010) suggests, media embeds itself into other media and changes platforms. The photograph in Figure 8 exemplifies that this original photograph is a tangible artefact that has been imprinted with handwritten inscriptions. Although, when this photograph is digitised onto the computer, it loses its context and requires its own unique set of viewing conditions, devices, editing and printing technologies.

![Figure 9. Hornum Family Archives, 1982 and 1984, photographer unknown](image)

Technology and materiality are innately connected (Leonardi et al, 2012), and by collating, transferring and digitising my family archives, this relationship becomes explicitly evident. This practical collating of family archives as source materials has informed my praxis as I delved through family archival materials, which revealed media that extended my arts practices and processes—including the integration of video, audio and objects. In the early stages of studio inquiry, I envisioned my artistic outcomes in the
form of an installation that reproduced family archives through analogue photographic techniques. The holistic nature of arts praxis has nurtured experimentation within the studio and reflexive engagement with work-in-progress. Studio practices operate as an arena for the intersection of theoretical discourses and subjective experiences and reflection of the arts practitioner and researcher (Stewart, 2006). As a result, a multi-method research approach has emerged, including—photography, new media, sound and installation art. This aligns with Stewart’s (2006) theories that suggest as “creative practitioners we develop paradigms of methodological inventiveness using our studios as laboratories of praxis where critical analysis enables a deeper understanding of our work in progress” (p. 7). In my arts praxis, an open studio inquiry occurs within experimental studio practices and public exhibitions, which are vital to this methodological framework. As illustrated throughout the following chapters, the exhibition of my work throughout this research journey has included: a group exhibition Becomings (2014), a solo residency and exhibition The Substance of Memory (2015), and the final show Object Data Memory (2015), which was fundamentally influenced by the previous two exhibitions. Enabling these reflexive dialogues to occur throughout my research illuminated the ways in which audiences engaged and experienced my work. The following chapters of this exegesis examine how these research methods evolved through creative arts praxis and a reflexive dialogue with theoretical concerns, source materials from my family archives and an open studio inquiry with my art practices, processes and products.