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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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CHAPTER ONE

EMERGING FROM THE DARKROOM
THE MATERIALISTIC HANDLING OF FAMILY ARCHIVES IN EARLY EXPERIMENTATION AND BECOMINGS EXHIBITION

Within the parameters of arts-based research, the emphasis is on the exegesis to reflect the outcomes and processes of studio practices informed from theoretical frameworks. This chapter maps the significant elements that emerged from studio experimentations, which critically informed my creative arts praxis. Firstly, this chapter discusses early studio experimentations that frame the beginning of studio processes and highlights the integration of new research methods in my creative arts praxis. This chapter will then reflexively engage with Becomings (2014), a postgraduate group exhibition that was first opportunity to exhibit this work in a gallery environment. ²

Early Studio Experiments

After collating and digitising a large volume of my family archives, I was armed with myriad visual content. Initially, I was determined to produce a photographic installation using traditional and experimental darkroom processes, interweaving digital elements. Therefore, I began studio experimentations in the darkroom (Figure 10 and 11) using digital contact sheets and negatives to abstract the imagery. Other experiments include alternative image transfer processes using gel emulsions onto fabric (Figure 12 and 13) and re-appropriating analogue photographs using new media (Figure 14). The focus of these studio experimentations was to blur the boundaries of family archive materiality between new and old media. However, the creative outcomes that emerged were static and did not reflect the complexities of the literature that underpins this research and the theoretical discourses that became prevalent as this creative arts praxis developed.

² 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).
Figure 10. Emily Hornum, (2013), darkroom experiments

Figure 11. Emily Hornum, (2013), darkroom experiments
Figure 12. Emily Hornum, (2013), gel emulsion on fabric

Figure 13. Emily Hornum, (2013), gel emulsion on fabric

Figure 14. Emily Hornum, (2013), digital scan
As I began to cement the theoretical framework that underpins this creative arts praxis, research (Zimmerman, 2008) emerged that investigated home movies as artificial remnants of family life. This provoked me to re-discover the VHS tapes in my family’s archive through digitising them to use in my creative practices (Figure 15). The shift to use family home movies and to extend into video and digital media significantly changed the direction of studio practices. In the process of transferring these VHS tapes to digital media I re-watched these home tapes. As I watched the footage, what became hard to ascertain was whether I remembered these events from memories of actually being there or by watching these tapes over time.

Without carefully organising VHS tapes they are vulnerable to being recorded over or for them to run out of tape, and so they become a constantly changing and fragmentary collection of footage over the years. Similar to family photo albums, when my family watched our family tapes within collective spaces, they invited narration, story telling and communication with the viewers of the video. The moving footage from the past evokes a reflexive engagement from the viewers to decipher the visual codes in front of them and conjures recollection of the past due to its indexical representation of the past—ultimately, giving families the “power to keep the ancestors ‘alive’ in celluloid for generations to come” (Cuevas, 2013, p. 21). To apply these ideas within my research,
Cuevas (2013) describes that when a filmmaker recycles their own home movies in their work it “can be understood then as an extension of the very process of home moviemaking, which is not finished until the films are projected and documented on by the family members, creating an ephemeral soundtrack missing in the filmstrip” (p. 20). This reaffirmed for me, that home movie archives are not static but rather “a retrieval machine defined by its revisions, expansions, addition and change” (Zimmerman & Ishizuka, 2008, p. 19). My family movie tapes as source materials in my research become removed from their limited audience of family members and friends, and become recontextualised in my own arts praxis. Cuevas (2013) argues that by using family films in film making, they “need to provide enough reasons for that personal archive to be part of a public film, so that the spectator does not feel like an intruder, but rather part of that family, a welcome guest to the family screening” (p. 20). These theories can be applied to my research, and the studio practices that are emerging, whereby what is important is to allow the audience into the archive rather than merely watching my family archives, which could result in a voyeuristic response from the audience.

Some of the videos that emerged from studio experiments in the early stages of this arts-based research include:

• Digitally editing an old family analogue photograph. As this video progresses it gradually becomes distorted by an increase of artificial digital noise applied over the top, as a result, the photograph becomes more difficult to decipher (Video 3)

Video 3. Emily Hornum, (2013), Degrading Photo (video)

CLICK TO PLAY
• Finding family photographs that were taken split seconds apart to create stop motion video. These videos were then projected in my studio to experiment with installation (Video 4).

Video 4. Emily Hornum, (2013), Split Seconds (studio experiments)

CLICK TO PLAY

• Further exploration of editing family videos and the incorporation of multiple projections in a three dimensional space (Video 5)

Video 5. Emily Hornum, (2013), studio experiments

CLICK TO PLAY
Experimenting with videos using analogue photographs. The key difference in this video is that the materiality of the analogue medium is explicit through the referencing of the sprocket holes of 35mm film (Video 6).

VHS tapes are tangible objects, however the projected imagery is not. Screen-reliant installation artworks are spaces “made up of immaterial projected images but also the physical media apparatus; the screen, film, and projectors emerge as sculptural objects in their own right” (Cuevas, 2013, p.10). This creative arts praxis challenges this idea, whereby the projected image, although is immaterial, it conjures the essence of the VHS materiality. VHS tapes sit at the boundary between analogue and digital—their materiality is analogue by nature, however, in order to edit and view these videos they require the mediation of screens and digital media. Therefore, installation art emerged in my arts praxis as a suitable platform to coalesce both analogue and digital media. The term installation art can be defined as a hybrid art that embodies characteristics of site-specificity and ephemerality (Geczy, & Genocchio, 2001; McTighe, 2012). This definition however, does not encompass the complexity of installation art. Nicholas Zurbrugg (2001) argues, “the common factor of all installations is their use of three-dimensional space...[and]...comes into existence as the artist’s attempt to redefine a particular exhibition space” (p. 25). In Kate Mondloch’s (2010) view, the term installation can be evaluated on criteria such as “considerations of space, materials, embodiment, duration, site and participation” (p. 3). My creative arts praxis operates under these definitions and characteristics of installation art. At the core of installation art is the relationship between the spectators participation within the space. This is explored by Julie H. Reiss (2001),
who contends “there is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space and the viewer” (p. xiii). This participation from the viewer can be implicit by walking through the installation space, or explicitly by participating with the installation. The installations that have emerged through my studio practice integrate both of these elements of audience participation, and will be discussed throughout these chapters in relation to these works. Installation art is a platform that supports and intersects the theoretical framework to my research. Mediation, participation and tactile experience within an installation space mirror similar discourses surrounding photography, new media and family archives. The reflexive research approach employed in this creative arts praxis is demonstrated in this stage of my research journey, in which the studio becomes an environment to translate theoretical discourses through my art making practices and to engage with artistic processes and outcomes.
**Becomings (2014)**

The first opportunity to exhibit my studio outcomes of this creative arts praxis was in *Becomings* (2014), a postgraduate group exhibition and symposium at Edith Cowan University’s Spectrum Project Space, Perth. The two works exhibited (Figure 16) included a single panel projection *A Year in the Life of the Hornums* (2015) and an interactive photo media installation *Memory Viewing* (2015).

![Figure 16. Emily Hornum, (2014), A Year in the Life of the Hornums (from: Becomings exhibition), video, projector, headphones, audio. (installation view). Photographer: Emily Hornum](image)

*A Year in the Life of the Hornums* (2014) (Video 7) consisted of a 15-minute looped video, edited from my family VHS tapes and combined with an electronic music track created by my brother Holger Hornum. Using this track as a base, I edited it to gain tempo as the video progresses. Three of Holger’s audio tracks (produced around 2002) are used in this creative arts praxis—they were made electronically and when I further manipulated the tempo, it highlighted the digital sound qualities to this music. At the beginning of the video the track is reduced to 5% speed, which significantly distorts and alters the sound. The resulting effect was an echoing electronic noise that worked in harmony with the celluloid nature of the VHS tape that is flickering and scratching on screen. As the video progresses, the audio gains tempo—a speed that is only subtle for the majority of the video, but in the last few minutes, the tempo suddenly gains tempo...
dramatically. As Edwards and Hart (2004) describe “material forms create very different embodied experiences of images and very different affective tones or theatres of consumption. For instance, framing devices distinguish relations between photographic space and the viewer’s space, sometimes like the photographic frame accentuating the space” (p. 5 – 6). Using a circular mask over the videos references early photographic and optical inventions such as the camera obscure—technologies that had a significant impact on visual experience and mnemonic processes. At the same time, this circular frame breaks away from the constraints of the standard viewing experience of rectangular screens and position the viewer through a new lens—almost as if it is an extension of the “perceiving, recording eye” (Forgacs, 2008, p. 53). The evocative nature of sound is used to intensify the viewer’s sensory experience and further removes my family home movie footage from their original context from the private domestic space and has been transformed into an almost cinematic experience.

Video 7. Emily Hornum, (2014), A Year in the Life of the Hornums (video excerpt)
CLICK TO PLAY

The celluloid film of VHS tapes gradually decays over time, as witnessed in own family archives—they have become distorted and vulnerable to environmental factors, and a materiality that becomes visible on screen when the film is scratched or scrambles for footage. Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins (2013) assert, when old motion pictures are
screened in the present, “film stock decomposes...The footage now reveals a materiality, originally far less perceptible, concealed behind the ethereal, evanescent images that appeared on screen” (p. 77). The transcribed footage on celluloid film is fragile and subject to the technologies used for their transcription—these tapes have been re-watched, rewound and edited countless times, in combination with their gradual decay over time due to improper storage or external conditions. As further described by Laura Marks (as cited in Chare & Watkins, 2013), “every time we watch a film, we witness its gradual decay: another scratch, more fading as it is exposed to the light, and chemical deterioration” (p. 78). I have accentuated this materiality of VHS tapes by digitally manipulating the speed of the footage and overlaying the scratched and empty sections of the celluloid film over footage that is still intact.

Figure 17. Emily Hornum, (2014), A Year in the Life of the Hornums (from: Becomings exhibition), video, projector, headphones, audio (installation view). Photographer: Emily Hornum

A Year in the Life of the Hornums’ (2014) scatters circular footage onto a single panel screen, whereby these fragments of memories change shape and size, attempting to emphasise the ephemeral and transient nature of memory and of the materiality used to record and store those memories. As Chare and Watkins (2013) proclaim, “the memories which are held in the film stock function to activate other preconscious memories in the spectator” (p. 78). When audiences come into contact with degenerating film stock, Marks argues that it “brings the audience into contact with the material forms of
memory” (as cited in Chare & Watkins, 2013, p. 78). These ideas are extrapolated further in the following chapters when discussing It’s 10 o’clock in the morning and Daddy’s just gotten up to have breakfast (2015) and Object Data Memory (2015). Due to Becomings (2014) being a group exhibition it placed limitations on the scale of the work, lighting and audible sound due to other artists work in close proximity. The audience were required to use headphones to view the work and this created a level of intimacy. However, at the same time, this limited the audiences immersion into the work (Figure 17). In addition, the use of headphones alienated viewers that may not like to use headphones. After this exhibition, the intention was to create a multi-panel projection installation that immersed the audience within the space more effectively. This work also illustrated the evocative nature of sound and audio, which becomes a key element in a number of the installations in this creative arts praxis.

Alongside A Year in the Life of the Hornums (2014) I exhibited Memory Viewing (2014) (Figure 18), which was an interactive photo media installation. The intention for this work was to encourage the audience to use the slide viewer to view the slides displayed. The importance of exhibiting Memory Viewing (2014) was to illustrate the tactile and physical nature of analogue photographic media such as 35mm slides. This work resonates with media archaeological perspectives—the analyses of technology and devices from the past that have influenced our visual understanding of the world around us in the present.
Photographic slides and slide viewers are obsolete media, but they can be analysed in terms of their physical status as an artefacts and their functional relationship to capture memories and visually represent the past. As explored by McTighe (2007), when Kodak, ceased manufacturing slide film, this media has become charged with “a particular moment in history and has become a site charged with personal memory” (p. 443). The materiality of slides can be read in parallel to analogue photographs; however, they are dependent on other technologies to access and view them—similar to the computer, technologies and software required to capture, transfer and view digital data. Photographic slides rely on a slide viewer or a projector and screen, which our participation and engagement with the memoires stored within these frames is less tactile (Chambers, 2003). However, Monica McTighe (2007) suggests, viewing slides in domestic spaces - of which have been arranged in sequence and narrated as they are shown - “bridges the gap between photography and film” (pg. 442). Viewing these slides collectively and in darkened conditions also reflects the viewing experiences of film and cinema and highlights the various ways we engage with family archives dependent on their materiality.

The 35mm slides in Memory Viewing (2014) are reproduced from digitally printed family archival negatives and sandwiched together in multiple layers in the frames. This layering of multiple images and the poor quality of some of the digital prints onto acetate have distorted the visual content of these slides and this requires the viewer to study the slides for longer to ascertain what is in the image, that is, if they can decipher anything at all. The viewers that interacted with this work (Figure 19) were enticed by this tangible media through a physical and bodily engagement. The way in which the viewer is mediated by old and new media is central to my work from this point forward. The intention for my subsequent solo exhibition was to investigate the participatory engagement with family archive materiality across media through a series of installations. Memory Viewing (2014) fundamentally redirected my studio practices and had a significant influence on the development of Slide Nights (2015) and Object Data Memory (2015).
Figure 19. Emily Hornum, (2014), Memory Viewing (from: Becomings exhibition), slide viewer, 35mm digital slides (installation detail). Photographer: Emily Hornum