

Dr. Martina Cleary – Extract from PhD Dissertation

The Photograph As A Site of Mnemonic Return (2017) (pages 30-37)

Visualizing Memory

A close reading of a photograph is like a stone dropped in a pond, with its ever expanding inclusions, occlusions and allusions.

(Langford 2008, p.4)

The primary research material used as a starting point in Phase I, consisted of autobiographical photographic images, or what could broadly be described as family album materials, in that they were taken at the time as snapshots to record my daily domestic life, and never meant to be used as more than a private record of a time and a place. My decision to begin here was influenced to a large extent by the writings of Martha Langford on photography and memory. In *Suspended Conversations, The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (2008), Langford points to certain conventions in the choice of subject matter, self-representation, narrative visual sequencing, and the ritualistic function within this form of photography, particularly in the construction and perpetuation of social norms. She advocates looking for certain repetitive patterns, including absence as well as presence in what has been included or excluded from the album. In her essay for *Locating Memory, Photographic Acts*, edited by Kuhn and McAllister (2006, p. 242) Langford comments that, “The album can be understood in this way, as an additive articulation of memories that accrue to a sense of self in the continuum of belonging.” The album can also be considered a vernacular means to visually relate a sense of origin, identity and connection to community as well as place. The accumulation of snapshot memories, serving as visual prompts for the recollection of personal histories within albums, has evolved as a form of seamless alteration in how individual and collective stories are visually inscribed. Langford (2008, p. 26) also references Bourdieu’s ideas on the collective role of the album, which is regarded as a form of aid to memory through, its presentation “in chronological order, the logical order of social memory.” She has also described the family album, as a “remembrance environment” (ibid. p. 223), and a site of contemporary material cultural practice which unites anthropological, ethnographic, psychological, linguistic and vernacular folkloric strands of inquiry.

Applying her oral photographic framework, Langford presents an in-depth analysis of the interrelationship between conventions of visual photographic representation within the collections of family albums, held at the McCord Museum of Canadian History, and practices of interpretation, or reading of these albums in operation within the everyday response of test subjects. This idea informed and influenced the first year of my practice-based experiments, where I visually and conceptually applied her method of “speaking the album” within my studio work. In doing this I used and transcribed audio recordings, made during psychotherapy sessions, responding to personal album images, with the intention of going as deeply into the latent memories triggered by these images as possible.

The theories of Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* on the relationship between the photograph and memory, particularly as it relates to the autobiographical content of family albums became more

meaningful the further I progressed within the studio experiments. Barthes' belief that the photograph prohibits memory is relevant. He comments,

Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.

(Barthes 1981, p. 91)

What he describes here is the false composure of scene or action within the photographic moment; we compose or pose ourselves before the lens, momentarily arresting temporal continuum, which is inconsistent with the mechanisms of memory itself. Time within the photographic image is for Barthes engorged, literal, eidetic, it cannot be reinvented, reinterpreted nor transformed in the way that true memory operates. He notes that the only way to transform the photograph is to throw it into the refuse. It is perishable, sensitive to material decay in a way that the mnemonic traditions of earlier societies were not. Barthes' theory of the *punctum* was however particularly significant for my own process. In describing the affective impact of a photograph of his mother in the Winter Garden, Barthes describes that unexpected quality within certain photographs, that which jumps out, wounds, pricks, or is poignant, as the *punctum*. He maintains (ibid., p.57) that figures in photographs are usually "anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies." However, it is through the *punctum* that the entombment of time within the photograph is ruptured. This happens through an affective association and identification - a recognition, which causes the subject pictured to live again in a space beyond the frame. The viewer can somehow re-engage with this subject, beyond the image's "flat death", beyond its temporal immutability.

The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle beyond - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.

(Barthes 1981, p.59)

In discussing photographs and mourning Barthes draws upon Proust's observation, that when looking into such photographs, one is better off in fact relying on memory, as photography induces only a heightened sense of loss. The photograph can never sum up what he describes as the totality or essence of that person, what remains are only fragments of recognition, through certain physical features or gestures. It is memory, elicited by the photographic trace which lends a certain 'air' to the image. These theories provided insights into the psychological dynamic, and certain frustrations with the impenetrability of the photographic image, when trying to access powerful memories. I limited my initial selection of source materials to those which I felt had this quality of *punctum*, or the ability to wound, and began to use this idea to physically rupturing or wounding the surface of the image in response. Langford also introduced me to the writings of Marianne Hirsch on the family album as a site of memory. Hirsch claims that:

Recognizing an image as familial elicits a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative.

(Hirsch 2010, p. 93)

This idea of suturing is important, as it implies we place ourselves into certain images on a highly subjective level and not only that, but we take from them something which can be creatively

incorporated into our own autobiography or identity. As Langford also notes Hirsch relates this process to Barthes's idea of the *punctum*, which he terms as:

Idiosyncratic, un-theorisable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our own sense of particularity.

(Langford 2008, p.28)

Applying these theories to studio process, I realised that by staying with certain photographs, and returning to them in cycles of discursive and aesthetic repetition, I was able to gradually reconstitute lost memory. There was indeed a large part of my self still sutured or buried within the associated mnemonic content triggered by these photographs. By using them actively as an environment of mnemonic return, I was able to find order within fragmented autobiographical narrative and find closure, a process I will now discuss in more detail below.

Practice Based Research in Phase I

Based upon the theories and concepts discussed above, in beginning my first practiced based experiments, I set certain guidelines and parameters:

- I would limit my visual starting points to personal photographs, and stay with these until I had tested whether and how they functioned as environments of mnemonic return. I would therefore be my own initial test subject.
- The process would be supported through resource to a certain number of sessions with a psychotherapist, to aid deep memory work. These sessions would be recorded and transcribed.
- I would use materials that emerged from this process, to guide and inform visual content in resulting artwork. My intention wasn't to illustrate personal memory, nor to engage in art therapy. I was interested in consciously discovering and visually expressing any latent mnemonic content within the images. I would find conceptual and aesthetic approaches, to generate materials for public exhibition. From what emerged, the emphasis was therefore on creating resolved visual outcomes rather than finding therapeutic strategies. As I have some training in expressive Art Therapy, (gained at the Aalto University of Art, Design & Architecture while studying for my M.Ed. in Art Education), I was cognisant of differences between this and a Fine Art approach to image making.
- My aesthetic and material form would be exploratory, allowing for new directions within my visual art practice.

I initially selected photographs from my personal family album, based on the physical aesthetic form of the photograph as object, and how this communicated a sense of time, history and memory. Tonal range, staining, fading, handwritten messages, general wear, flaws in certain images, all suggested

time embedded in the substance and surface of the photograph as artefact. I organised, arranged and rearranged these images randomly, influenced more by their aesthetic rather than content. Some were of subjects within living memory, others stretched back a few generations. I also digitally scanned this material, layering and juxtaposing certain visual features with more contemporary personal photographs, with the intention of playing with temporal reading, and inserting my own experience into the continuum of family time and memory (Fig. 1). From the outset, my use of collage as a way to work with flow, mutability, and the reformation of narrative reading was very important. Along with these photographs, I began to also use selected 3D objects. This decision was influenced to a large extent by Geoffrey Batchen's analysis of the use of objects alongside images in early photography, to enhance their mnemonic impact (Batchen 2004). For example, Batchen discusses how in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, personal photographs were often housed in elaborate frames, into which artefacts such as hair, fabric, hand-written texts, dried flowers and keepsakes could be placed. The photograph became a reliquie, to house momento-mori, often even worn on the body or inside personal garments. As Batchen notes, the photograph while fulfilling its indexical function as proof of the former existence of an event or person, was not felt to be sufficient to do this alone. The multi-sensory, tactile attributes of for example a lock of hair, or pieces of a garment once worn, were used to enhance memory through what were essentially collage objects. Batchen also observes how these practices were often considered women's craft, and tied to traditions of mourning. He comments,

No doubt the time spent in crafting such things was part of the period of mourning, a time of contemplation and creative activity that helped to heal the bereft as well as memorialize the dead.

(Batchen 2004, p. 78)

This use of an object or material, to enhance the tactile multi-sensory mnemonic capacity of the photograph was influential on my studio process. As was the idea of using more 3D pictorial materials to simultaneously stay with, while working through difficult memories evoked by the content of the images. With this in mind I began to use more repetitive and labour intensive techniques in the studio. This included making photographic emulsion lift transfers onto a variety of surfaces (Fig. 2). I found the slow, laborious and repetitive physical actions needed to create these pieces effective in forcing me to stay with the memories that were surfacing. In his essay, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), Freud outlines the differences between different forms of remembering, and also the role of repetition in the process of coming to terms with, or avoiding, certain difficult memories. He describes the early psychoanalytic techniques of Breuer for example, who would have employed hypnosis to access repressed memories, as cathartic release. It was thought at that point in psychoanalysis, that by identifying and bringing the cause of problems 'into focus', the impact of events could be relieved through abreaction, or the acting out of the underlying cause of the malady. In contrast by 1914, Freud advocated concentrating on the workings of the mind of the subject in the present, and in particular any resistances or neurotic repetitive actions which were evident in the subjects behaviour. He maintained that compulsive urges to repeat, were in fact a way of remembering. This form of repetition for Freud, included the enactment, or 'acting-out' of repressed memory. Repetition was also central to his theory of transference. Here the subject is driven by a compulsion to repeat certain forms of relationship, particularly within the psychoanalytic treatment, which demonstrate an

avoidance of remembering, of an underlying originary cause. According to Freud the greater the resistance, the more repetition replaces true remembering. Freud notes (ibid, p 149),

The patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance...(and) We may now ask what it is that he in fact repeats or acts out. The answer is that he repeats everything that has already made its way from the source of the repressed into his manifest personality – his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character traits. He also repeats his symptoms in the course of the treatment.

In the more modern methods he described, the role of the analyst was to help the subject build associations, to bridge certain gaps in memory, to recognize the avoidances, repressions or the neurosis of repetitive cycles so as to overcome them.

In light of these theories, my decision to use sometimes repetitive actions or aesthetic gestures to continuously revisit certain photographs, such as threading, or emulsion lift transfer, could be read as an avoidance strategy. I would argue however that the difference lies in the creative process itself as a conscious act of agency and discovery, both psychologically and materially. While it does often involve a making real and putting outside of oneself, or giving expressive form to certain internal, often unresolved and sometimes subconscious obsessional cycles, there is also a transformative element central to this process. It is about a discovery of the new and unexpected, within the self and the material, which supercedes the safety of simple repetition of what is already known, consciously or subconsciously. Freud (ibid, p 146) also observed that,

In the many different forms of obsessional neurosis in particular, forgetting is mostly restricted to dissolving thought-connections, failing to draw the right conclusions and isolating memories.

Another difference here within the iterations of studio work, is the drive towards cohesion, connection, completion and resolution. In my own process driven experiments, I was using text in relationship to the image, along with the narrative format of the book, to rebuild connections between isolated fragments of recollection, to put things in order, to make sense of memory. And further to imagine alternative endings, or transformative psychological avenues out of traumatic autobiographical events. This is a very different experience and use of repetition, to the dissolution of neurosis described by Freud above. Another important distinguishing feature within studio work is the conscious agency that is involved. It demands a reflective and reflexive awareness of what is emerging, or surfacing from subconscious memory through the manifest form of the visual artwork, as it changes beneath the hand and before the eye. Within this process time can also be experienced differently; what I have describe as a slowing down, or staying with memories that return. In his article *The Flow Experience* (1979, p. 63), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes alterations in consciousness characteristic of a number of activities, creative practice being one of them. On the concept of flow he says,

It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experinece it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment: between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future.

Here action is governed by both the conscious and unconscious mind in harmony, with full awareness of the self in the moment. It is very different to the unconsciousness, or lack of control of neurotic compulsion. The dissolution of boundaries between the past, present and future, or the sense of stepping outside of time, is also something quite characteristic of the flow experience. I would argue that this state of consciousness, what Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p 65) also describes as, one in which the subject "becomes more intensely aware of internal processes", is very effective for memory work, as there is a conscious temporal interchangeability between the past and present, as memory comes to mind. Memory can be treated as a fluid and dynamic phenomenon, which is just as open to reinterpretation, reforming and remoulding, as any other medium brought into the studio process. It is often memory which does come to mind while in the studio, it directs action towards an overall goal of creating a cohesive, unified and transformed expression for communication through the work.

What initially emerged in the first stages of this project, were several disjointed fragments, which were pinned like pieces of skin to the studio wall. Things appeared to be literally in pieces, and in trying to access memories attached to the visual, I was stripping everything back to the essentials of the image. By digging up the past, excavating the memories, the studio was becoming an archaeological site. An assemblage of bone and personal artefacts, including my shoes, driving licence, keys, wallet, bank cards and jewellery were arranged in a manner resembling an archaeological dig on the studio floor, in a self-portrait of my psychological state at the outset of this journey (Fig. 3). Influenced by the visual form and function of cabinets of curiosity as miniature memory environments, I also began to consider possible containers to house these fragments. References to birds at this stage, were prompted by classical allegories of memory being like an aviary, full of brightly coloured creatures that are difficult to pin down. I was also treating the emerging visual fragments like specimens, or pinned butterflies, using collage to juxtapose 2D & 3D elements intuitively, allowing chance to determine how images, objects and materials would be finally visually synthesised within the artwork. Reflexive analysis through ongoing written analysis of studio outcomes, and discussion of these with research supervisors allowed me to begin to access, and verbalize certain subconscious associations and recollections, triggered by the visual field of the image (Fig. 4).

However, I soon realised that beyond certain aesthetic qualities, the older archival album materials were not really relevant to my intention, as their associated memories were beyond my own lifetime. I decided instead to concentrate on authentically autobiographical images, related to personally significant events. Knowing that traumatic memory leaves the greatest imprint, I also knew that choosing photographs related to disturbing life events might be a useful place to start. I narrowed my selection down to approximately one hundred photographs, related to a particular time and place. I also had several written diaries from this time, and began to re-read these in conjunction with my visual treatment of the images (Fig. 5). I digitally scanned, cropped and reframed photographs, to concentrate my attention on details within this material. This process allowed me to visually select and focus in on what was significant. I began to literally dig into the surface of the image. I created multiple copies of photographs which I felt were more significant than others, using repetitions, echoes, silences,

avoidances, dead ends, in a process which aesthetically mirrored a psychological working through of their mnemonic content. I realised that fragmentation within studio results mirrored my own difficulties in piecing together events. Gaps, erasures, ellipses, voids, disruptions in the visual inscription of how I technically composed and reassembled what I was working with, demonstrated real problems in reforming linear sequence in a narrative account of events. Text became an important means to address latent memories, and also to communicate what the image alone could not. As mentioned above, the material techniques I chose entailed physically repetitive and slow actions, requiring more prolonged embodied engagement, or a staying with the content of the memories evoked by the photographs. The hybrid collages which emerged, integrated elements of analogue, digital and alternative photographic processes, as well as text and a threading through of material.

The tactile quality of results were also important. The emulsion lifts were skin-like, both in tone and texture, which inspired me to concentrate further on the physical embodied presence and absence of the subject they depicted. As I found this process increasingly difficult to negotiate alone, and influenced by Martha Langford's theories on speaking the album, along with insights gained from trauma theory (Herman, Van der Kolk, Kuhn, Karuth), I decided at this point to work with a psychotherapist. My intention was to use a dialectical conversation to tap into the deeper memories elicited by the images. Practice based alterations to original photographs now became experiments in trying to communicate difficult affect driven recollection. During the spring and early summer of 2013, I worked through this same set of images in each session. Extracts from transcribed audio recordings of these sessions were then carried further into collage pieces in follow up studio experiments. The process became both a physical and a psychological remembrance of fragmented narrative, through a very different process to the usual speed of my previous photographic work. I realised that memory, trauma and mourning were central to what was happening, and began to address the lost subject in the images, directly through text as well as image. I was also trying to disrupt what Barthes described as the "flat death" of the photograph, to break or penetrate the cold surface of the image. By lifting the photographic surface physically like a veil, I was attempting to metaphorically, or ritualistically re-enter its mnemonic environment through the sense of touch. I decided to obscure identity in some photographs, through cropping, blurring, and hiding the face as much as possible. This allowed me to visually distance myself and I hoped also to somewhat transcend the autobiographical content. I set aesthetic controls regarding media, techniques, scale and presentation formats. After this, my intention was to work as intuitively as possible, letting memory dictate outcomes. First results included the series *Some Spectral Muse*, 16 mixed-media collages (Fig. 6) and the artist book *Helsinki Album* (Fig. 7), which contained 65 larger emulsion lifts in a hand bound artist book.

The presence and absence of the body is very apparent in all studio work from Phase I. Skin becomes the skin of the image and the body simultaneously, with suggestions of wounding, rupture or trauma happening at the surface of the image. In a second artist book, *Blood book* (Fig. 8) references to the body are more apparent as I used my own blood for writing the narrative extracts. Photographs are sewn into skin-like leaves that unfold in a maze-like configuration, which

much like memory can be entered and read from different starting points. In accordance with ethical practice, the blood for this work was drawn in a small amount by a medical professional. The completed piece was exhibited in a glass cabinet and not handled by the public. I used the blood to write a final letter to the subject in these images, as a reciprocal gesture, a form of ritual, farewell and mourning. In the work *Memory Skins* no. 2 - 6 (Fig. 9) the sense of the surface of the photograph becoming the skin of the body is more apparent, and is combined with direct references to loss. In a final piece in this series *Memory Skin no. 1* several individual fragments of image and text were finally brought together as a wearable dress or shroud (Fig. 10).