Construction Documents for the Better Part of 1992, as Remembered

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Abstract

Human brains are predisposed to remember spatial information more easily than other forms, such as names, dates, instructions, or timelines.\footnote{Joshua Foer, Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything (New York: Penguin, 2011), 97.} This phenomenon is the genesis of my sculptural process: if spaces are easier to remember than events, will memories be easier to recall if converted into spaces? Through my research, both written and visual, I am exploring the capabilities and limitations of human memory. Specifically, I am interested in the inclination to seek accuracy within memories, and anxiety surrounding shortcomings in their veracity. My practice seeks to synthesize mnemonic learning devices, which rely on inventing visuals and sorting information, with technical drawing, a tool for delineating form from ideas. Utilizing these processes and strategies, I build sculptures that attempt to give a physical, durable form to incomplete recollections.
Introduction

“I am forgetting things, which scares me.
I am losing words, although I am not losing concepts.
I hope that I am not losing concepts.
If I am losing concepts, I am not aware of it. If I am losing concepts,
how would I know?”

These are the opening lines to the short story, “The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury,”

Neil Gaiman’s tribute to Ray Bradbury in which he considers what might happen if the author
were forgotten. I included this quote because it concisely describes the anxious feeling I have
experienced when considering the vulnerability of my own memories to revision and forgetting.

Further on in his monologue, Gaiman postulates that God assigns us each things to remember.

He would say, “You! I want you to remember the dates of the Hundred Years' War. And you,
you remember okapi.” Gaiman continues to explain that if we fail to remember our
assignments, as he has forgotten Ray Bradbury, they are lost forever, leaving “an okapi-shaped
hole in the world.”

My current work responds to this anxiety by attempting to recover and make
permanent memories I have already mostly forgotten. Essentially, this work is a sculptural
translation of memories from 1992, when I was four years old. Many of them overlap and
coalesce, and all of them are incomplete recollections. These qualities are made evident in my
sculptures through the repetition of colors across materials, and by the combination of
seemingly unrelated forms and images among compositions. They are built at variable scale,
dimensionality, and resolution, in the interest of illustrating the differing degrees of clarity in

the memories. I employ the process and visual language of technical drawing as a strategy for imposing organization, a playful parallel to the encoding and sorting of information utilized by mnemonic devices to improve memory recall. Within this paper I will address a selection of journalists and artists who have influenced my work, scientific perspectives on remembering through mnemonic learning devices, and how I approach my questions through my studio practice. With my process, I am asking what it might look like to try to recall and make permanent a memory that has been forgotten. Further, can converting an experience into a space make it easier to remember, and how does this change the memory?

Journalistic Sources

There is a great deal of research related to memory in contemporary media, art, and science. One example of this is The Retro Report, an independent journalistic organization launched in 2013 to revisit stories from past news headlines, and re-report on the events. In their mission statement, the Retro Report explains how initial news reports, considered “the first draft of history,” can be wrong. “When news organizations fail to invest the time and money required to correct the record or provide context around what really happened, myth can replace truth. The results are policy decisions and cultural trends built on error, misunderstanding, or flat-out lies.” The goal of the Retro Report is to revisit these stories, collect new information, and correct misinformation, to build a permanent, accurate, news

archive “where viewers can gain new insight into the events that shaped their lives.”

Ostensibly, journalists have the capacity to do this by collecting physical evidence, and reporting on results of research that are no longer speculation into the future. In many ways, this is the root of my interest in memory. I would love the ability to fact-check stories I hear from my childhood, or sleuth out information about my absent father. Like many others, I can’t help but consider the lack of an impartial position, or a complete account of my own story. I wonder, did I actually insist on eating only tater-tots for years? What really happened to my pet rabbit? Who was my best friend in Kindergarten? These questions, large and small, might not have answers that can be found.

StoryCorps is an independent nonprofit organization that collects and archives interviews in an effort to preserve individuals’ stories. According to their website, since 2003 StoryCorps has facilitated over 50,000 interviews, each of which is archived at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. The StoryCorps mission is to provide people from all backgrounds the opportunity to share stories from their lives, and to build an archive of these personal narratives for future generations. Specific programs focus on the stories of military families, teachers, Latinos, and individuals with memory loss. One study on the impact of StoryCorps on patients experiencing memory loss found that the StoryCorps Memory Loss Initiative comforted family members by creating a permanent record of family histories, and increased feelings of personhood in individuals with degenerative disorders such as dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.

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Contemporary Art Sources

Two artists interested in memory and misinformation that have been conceptually influential to me are Mike Kelley and Agnieszka Kurant. In his work *Educational Complex* from 1995, Kelley created a hybridized architectural model of all the educational institutions he attended, as well as his childhood home. The model morphed all of these buildings into one structure, with holes where areas could not be remembered. Kelley created this piece after many works made with stuffed animals prompted responses suggesting childhood abuse. Although Kelley said he was never abused, he made this piece responding to these insistent suggestions. With this work, Kelley provides the potential locations where this repressed abuse may have taken place, calling to attention case studies where techniques to recover repressed memories have lead to false or misleading accounts of events that never actually happened.  

Agnieszka Kurant’s work explores the pervasive nature of misinformation in global political, economic, and cultural climates. Kurant talks about this hearsay or misinterpreted information as “phantom capital,” or “exformation.” Her work explores how editing, aesthetic and political, can compound phantom capital. Kurant’s sound piece, *103.1 (title variable)*, edits together clips of silence from political speeches. These silences represent gaps in logic, or information that is removed with the editing process. This concept of phantom capital extends to the realm of rumor and fiction interpreted as truth, evident in her works *Phantom Estate*, *The Archive of Phantom Islands*, and *Phantom Library*. These pieces each realize fictional or

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Agnieszka Kurant, “Phantom Estate,” 2013
inaccurate information. *Phantom Estate* sculpturally combines a series of never completed projects proposed by multiple artists. *The Archive of Phantom Islands* illustrates and provides context for islands that are referenced either in fictional or historical accounts, but do not actually exist. Similarly, *Phantom Library* is a collection of books that are referenced or cited in actual books, but have never been written.  

**Long-Term Memory**

Memory processes are often divided into short-term and long-term. Simply put, short-term memory allows us to recall information that is necessary or relevant only for a brief period of time, for example, remembering to carry the one in an addition problem. Long-term memory stores information in a seemingly more durable way. My research is primarily concerned with long-term memory, which can be further broken down into distinctions between semantic and episodic memory, and explicit and implicit memory. Semantic memory refers to our accumulated knowledge of the world, while episodic memory refers to stored information about our individual experience and personal narrative. Both semantic and episodic memories fall into the category of explicit memory, because they can be actively and intentionally recalled.

Implicit memories are characterized by their unconscious deployment; this is information that we don’t actively consider, but unknowingly consult when making decisions or

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reacting to present circumstances. This is evidenced in several studies on implicit memory conducted by Larry L. Jacoby. Jacoby neatly demonstrates the unconsciousness of implicit learning in one study on the impact of memory priming (a function of implicit learning). In this study, participants were first asked to listen to a series of sentences, they were then asked to join in what was said to be an unrelated study on the volume of ambient noise. In this “second” study, the subjects listened to a combination of old and new sentences with a constant level of background noise. They consistently rated the volume of background noise to be quieter when listening to the sentences they had hear before, and louder when hearing new sentences. This result indicates the implicit learning effect that allowed them to more easily hear the older information.

Interestingly, Implicit memory often remains present and functional in amnesic patients. There are accounts of individuals with damaged memory functions who are able to learn and perform new tasks, yet are unable to commit them to long-term memory. In one account, two children who suffered from memory loss after encephalitis were able to learn and retain the skills necessary for a pursuit-tracking task, but continued to deny having previously encountered the necessary equipment. Another study, *The Efficacy of Imagery Mnemonics Following Brain Damage*, suggests that imagery mnemonic learning strategies can be effective in remediation and rehabilitation in cases of acquired memory deficiency. In one example,
patients experiencing amnesia due to a traumatic brain injury were taught a peg-word mnemonic (explained in the following section), to aid in memory retention. In this particular case, all four patients reported an improved ability to rely on their own memory, making them less dependent upon others.

However, patients experiencing memory loss due to chronic alcoholism, or Korsakoff’s syndrome, reported less success with visual mnemonics. Evidence indicates that the strategies were unsuccessful in part because the patients were unaware of their memory deficiency. This suggests that the effectiveness of mnemonic strategies for memory rehabilitation requires both significant motivation, and awareness of memory difficulties.\textsuperscript{15} To summarize this rather technical section, our unconscious memories as well as our ability to acquire unconscious memories seem to persist even with damaged or absent long-term memory. Further, mnemonic learning strategies may help to rebuild memory functions in individuals with damaged memories.

**Mnemonic Learning Strategies**

The persistence of unconscious memory, and potential for mnemonic strategies to rebuild memory functionality, both fueled my goal of reconstructing largely non-existent memories from 1992. Therefore, part of my studio practice became practicing mnemonic learning strategies. Mnemonic devices are learning strategies used to aid in committing information to memory. In his book *In Search of Memory*, Eric R. Kandel discusses how our brains commit information to long-term memory through the strengthening of neural pathways

\textsuperscript{15} Richardson et al., “The Efficacy of Imagery Mnemonics,” 321.
and the building of additional proteins. Kandel’s studies show that we can become better at learning and remembering with practice. Most mnemonic strategies require encoding and organization of information to be remembered. The peg-word mnemonic, referenced previously, first requires memorizing easily visualized words in place of numbers: one is bun, two is shoe, three is tree, four is door, five is hive, six is sticks, seven is heaven, eight is gate, nine is line, and ten is hen. These objects can then be utilized to remember any other list of ten unrelated or related items by visualizing the new information interacting with the ten peg-words. For example, if the second thing on your grocery list is toothpaste, you can visualize a shoe overflowing with toothpaste. The more bizarre the image conjured, the more memorable it will be. Remembering abstract or non-visual ideas requires one to transform them into something visual, making this method of memorization a rather creative process. Francis Bellezza suggests the use of rhyming as one way to do this, for example, “fiscal” could become “fish tail,” which conjures a clearer image to visualize. This way, when you see your image of a fish tail, you simply translate it back into “fiscal”.

The method of loci mnemonic also utilizes a practice of encoding and organizing information, similar to the peg-word device described above. This system, also referred to as a memory palace, allows the user to store information within a familiar space. A chosen memory palace must be a space that the user is well acquainted with; often mnemonists choose to use their childhood home, or a frequently traveled route. The user then codes the information to

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be memorized into visual cues, and pictures them existing and/or interacting with the spaces in their memory palace. Each item should be placed in a specific location, to be encountered in the same place each time the memory palace is summoned. This way, as you walk through your palace, carefully taking the same route each time, the information is encountered, decoded, and remembered intact.  

Sculptural and Material Approaches

When giving a sculptural form to this process, I employ the visual language of technical drawing. In their book The Art of the Engineer, Ken Baynes and Francis Pugh describe technical drawing as an “attempt to delineate and control difficult and novel concepts.” Essentially, the process of attempting to draft a technical drawing of a place or experience requires me to think about it from all angles. I sculpt most often with clay, plywood, paper, polystyrene foam, and hardware. My sculptures are carefully crafted and exacting, exposing my admittedly futile desire to exercise control over, or imbue some sense of clarity in, my memory.

First approaching my exhibit, Construction Documents for the Better Part of 1992, as Remembered, the viewer encounters a full-scale doorframe built out of steel rod with what appears to be either the beginning of, or the dismantling of, a brick wall adjacent to it. The bricks are constructed out of acrylic glass and filled with carefully sorted packaging peanuts of a variety of colors and shapes, as well as a shredded spelling dictionary and Norton Anthology. The peanuts and shredded documents reference my family’s move across the country, and serve as an odd volumetric color composition. They are coded and arranged, much like visual

20. Foer, Moonwalking with Einstein, 104.
memory cues in imagery mnemonic techniques. This component leads into a row of stanchions beginning at a larger than normal scale and rapidly descending in size as they lead into a layered drawing on technical vellum.

This first piece just described, *Isometric Projection of Auditorium and Stanchions*, represents of the beginnings of a recollection, the amalgamation of memories the first time they come to mind. The looseness in the handling of the porcelain, and roughness of the foam texture, allude to the rawness of the recollections. The dramatic shifting of scale in the stanchions points to both the uncertain nature of the memory of being at my mother’s college graduation, while also playfully confusing the viewers experience of perspective, a recurrent motif in each of these works.

With each of these works I am encouraging contradiction in the representation of perspective and presence. In *Isometric Projection of Auditorium and Stanchions*, this manifests in the doorframe, which I constructed using both steel, packaging peanuts, and shredded paper. Steel, as a material is relatively durable, and yet compared to the vibrancy of the packing peanuts it disappears. The peanuts and shredded paper are opaque and visually more present, and yet are less permanent. Foam and paper eventually discolor, disintegrate, or shrivel with age. This conflict of presence mimics the experience of grasping for a memory that is both naggingly present, yet seemingly indefinable.

(Detail) *Isometric Projection of Auditorium and Stanchions*, 2015. Porcelain, polystyrene foam, polyethylene tarp, bungee chords, steel, acrylic, plywood, and graphite on vellum
Confusion of perspective, seen previously in the scale shift of foam and porcelain stanchions transforming into drawing, is also evident in the next work I will discuss. This piece, *Survey of Public Swimming Pools: Shapes*, transitions between the larger sculptural elements in the previous work, and the series of more refined wall pieces. The dialogue between the looser qualities of *Isometric Projection*... and the following wall works reflects the mnemonic process of organizing and encoding information to be memorized. This first work combines a variety of materials and techniques: drawings of shapes slip-trailed with terracotta, the form of what might be a home or shelter cut from plywood and carefully sanded foam, bits of handmade paper, a quilted cyanotype print, and smooth porcelain forms with transfers of electrical diagrams and architectural symbols. These porcelain forms are flat, with edges sanded to create the illusion of perspective drawings; the effect is a hybridization of drawing and depth.

These next two works, *Site Plan for 1042 Larson Lake Lane* and *Lateral Cross Section of House Bathrooms, Bedrooms, and Clothes Storage*, are sculptural collages of mnemonic memory palaces. These are the floor plans for each of the houses my family lived in, as I remember them, in 1992. In *Site Plan for 1042 Larson Lake Lane*, cut paper, plywood, polystyrene foam, and cyanotype prints reconstruct our first house in Belfair, Washington. The cyanotype prints call to mind the traditional blueprinting process used in architectural construction documents, while the hand-sewn symbols for doors and windows clarify the impression of a floor plan. I find that the physicality of the cut and paste collage process facilitates the guess and check, problem solving nature of long-term memory recall. Through this process, I remembered the location of a second bathroom in my childhood home that I had previously forgotten—one that I now feel confident was there, but may have invented. The
layers of thin, translucent handmade paper overlap one another, building complexity in the surface and alluding to my uncertainty of the placement of walls. The division of the frame into two sections suggests the presence of an empty lot next to our house, which I have heard stories about but do not remember myself.

In *Lateral Cross Section of House Bathrooms, Bedrooms, and Clothes Storage*, the top floor in my family’s home after our move from Belfair to New Jersey is built out from the frame. The added dimensionality invites the viewer to look beyond the layer of varying transparency, into a partially obscured basement floor. These layers mimic the experience of looking back in time while attempting to reconstruct a space.
Works to the right of these more traditionally framed compositions break away from the easily recognizable floor plan logic. In *Side Elevation of Garages, Trailers, and Motorcycles*, the form of a house is easily recognizable. The slip-cast porcelain and terracotta shapes fit together neatly, stacked with a foam block onto a plywood foundation. The overall shape is resolved and sound, despite the leaning stilts anchored with chord and electrical ring terminals.

This work, as well as the next piece, *General Arrangement Drawing of Bars, Seats, Booths, and Tables*, suggests an absence of something, despite the completeness of the formal composition. This absence is felt through the odd sterility of the works, experienced both in the color and quiet quality of these pieces. They seem to be stripped of narrative content, and yet the architectural construction suggests they are either modeling a place to be built, or re-modeling
a place that existed. I embrace the ambiguity of interpretation on this point. The absence and confusion is compounded by the titles of all of these works, which are borrowed in part from Charles George Ramsey and Harold Reeve Sleeper’s *Architectural Graphic Standards*. They allude to the acts of building and reconstruction, yet often reference a specificity that is not immediately recognizable in the work itself.


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Conclusion

“Although much of our retrieval from long-term memory is effortless and automatic, this is clearly not always the case. When we are trying to retrieve something that is on the fringe of accessibility, something much more like searching or even problem solving goes on.”

This description of the active and interactive components of long-term memory recall from Alan Baddeley’s book, *Essentials of Human Memory*, goes on to describe recollection as a creative process, colored by the means of retrieval cues, mood, and original context of the memory coding. The creative act of re-building that occurs in memory recall is a part of the process that I am illustrating with my sculptural constructions. “...Recollecting a half-

remembered event has elements in common with problem solving, involving both the following of promising clues to recall, and evaluating the results of such attempts.” With my process, I am physically working through this problem solving, while utilizing mnemonic learning strategies to transform and document memories. The sculptures resulting from this process have an oddly sterile quality to them. This is what I see is the result of my process:
documentation of the change in quality that occurs in a memory that is memorized. The latter works have the rehearsed characteristic of a story that has been told too many times. There is a strong contrast between the first work, *Isometric Projection of Auditorium and Stanchions*, and the last works, *Side Elevation of Garages, Trailers, and Motorcycles* and *General Arrangement Drawing of Bars, Seats, Booths, and Tables*. Something of the authenticity is lost with the pinning-down necessary for memory coding.

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Bibliography


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