Mind in Hand

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of art and psychology as it manifests in my art practice, particularly in the medium of weaving. The contemporary frameworks of memory and archive provide the basis of this discussion, as well as findings from the field of Art Therapy. Difficult emotions like loss and grief often show up in my work, and I will discuss how artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Sophie Calle also utilize these concepts. In weaving, I capture my internal mental states, memories, and perceptions of the future in a variety of found and gifted objects. Guided by the precedents set by textile artists Anni Albers and Sheila Hicks, I propose my weavings offer a new trajectory for the medium.
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Introduction

“The mind in hand” is how contemporary textile artist Sheila Hicks describes the structure and sense of weaving (Danto and Simon 74). In this thesis, I will expand upon both of these components: the mind as it relates to the psyche and Art Therapy, and the hand to the weaving process. In other words, this thesis explores the intersection of psychology and art as it manifests in my studio practice. The contemporary frameworks of archive and memory are pertinent to these areas, and I will use these concepts to contextualize my own practice. Art has long been a form of coping for me and many others, and I will examine the motives and events behind what make up these impulses. Related to this is the field of Art Therapy, which uses art as a healing mechanism. Finally, I will focus on the medium of weaving in my art practice, as well as its history and relation to the psychological concept of flow.
Memory and Archive

“Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.”

- Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire*

Memory and archive, as Nora’s quote emphasizes, are inextricably connected. These two concepts have appeared in art perpetually, and make up the foundation of my work as well the work of countless other artists. This chapter will begin to explore these interconnected frameworks and their relevance to contemporary art and my practice.

The concepts of memory and archive each have their own dedicated volumes in the Documents of Contemporary Art series, which contain collections of essays by artists, historians, critics, and more. In his essay, *An Archival Impulse*, Hal Foster delineates archival artists as those who “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text, and favour the installation format” (Merewether 143). Archivists gather, organize, and document for a variety of reasons: to reconstruct the past, summarize, provide evidence of existence, explore new meanings and connections, etc.. An archive is never complete and is continually evolving — “a living entity, it rumbles along indefinitely, growing in stops and starts, mutating” (Merewether 186). As time
goes on, perceptions of the past and its objects often change, making the concept of archive a continually fruitful exploration.

In my art, I draw on objects and experiences from my past in order to form new associations and conclusions. *Still Lifes/Dioramas I Arranged About Death, Religion, Love, and Life in Nine Cubbies My Grandpa Built* (see fig. 1) is a life-size photography installation that brings together personal and familial artifacts to construct a self-portrait. Though specific to me, these objects approach the universal when others are able to recognize familiar items and recall their own memories. The archive functions as a conduit for recollection.

Fig. 1. Anna Olson, *Still Lifes/Dioramas I Arranged About Death, Religion, Love, and Life in Nine Cubbies My Grandpa Built*, 2017, each photo 14 ½” x 12 ¾”, digital print
Nick Flessa’s exhibit, *Death Production: The Archive of Janna Flessa* (see fig. 2), displayed his late-mother’s possessions — her books, journals, makeup, recipes, paintings — in a sterile and stable method of organization, carefully framed and hung on the wall, placed on pedestals, laid out in vitrines. This exhibition significantly contrasts the dynamic and intentionally-chaotic logic of my installation, *Mind/Wandering Archive* (see fig. 3), which displays artwork and objects from my time in and out of college the last seven years in a more or less accessible way.

![Fig. 2. Nick Flessa, *Death Production: The Archive of Janna Flessa*, 2018, installation, late-mother’s possessions](image-url)
Fig. 3. Anna Olson, *Mind/Wandering Archive*, 2018, variable size, yarn, clothing, flower, nylon, jewelry, wood, plastic bag, dog tag, keychain, banana sticker, solar eclipse glasses, wrapping paper, beer case, tea jug, belt, hospital bracelet, quartz, brick, pill package, bismuth, tape, bead, honeycomb
In the beautiful words of Ollivier Dyens, “memories are our existence, and art is their system of replication” (Farr 78). Art has the capacity to explore past memories, emotions, and their intersection. Memory facilitates the examination of one’s identity. Sharing sentiments through creative expression allows for connection and empathy among all of us. Since memories are not tangible, we need archives and art to make them visible.

Art often deals with the difficult emotions of grief and loss. Felix Gonzalez-Torres created *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (see fig. 4) about his former partner who passed away from AIDS. The installation is ideally 175 pounds of candy, Ross’ optimal body weight. After viewers take candy, it is periodically replenished, thus metaphorically giving new life to Ross.

Fig. 4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, installation, 175 pounds of candy
Loss is also a significant concept in my life and artistic practice. For instance, I annually revisit the subject of my younger brother, Nick, passing away, allowing for reflection and processing over time. Nick 1 (see fig. 5) and Nick 2 (see fig. 6) epitomize my ongoing feelings of despair. Objects like sympathy cards, family photos, letters he wrote me, and his baseball hats are collected and memorialized through photocopy and photography installations. These artifacts are all I have left of him, everyday objects that act as intermediaries between me and anyone who has ever lost someone.

Pierre Nora wrote, “there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies and authenticate documents, because such things no longer happen as a matter of course” (Farr 61). Learning from and documenting the past allows people to consolidate troubling experiences and facilitate healing, as we will see in the next section.

Fig. 5. Anna Olson, Nick 1, 2016, each page 8½” x 11”, photocopies

Fig. 6. Anna Olson, Nick 2, 2017, photos clockwise from top left: 12” x 10 ¼”, 10 ¾” x 16”, 14 ¾” x 10 ¼”, 14” x 10 ¾”, 16” x 10”, digital prints
Numerous artists throughout history have dealt with personal struggles and difficulties, ranging from the physical to the mental. The hardships of seminal artists like Jackson Pollock, Frida Kahlo, Henri Matisse, Georgia O’Keeffe, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Yayoi Kusama are all known. People who have dealt with comparable experiences may be able to take solace in the work or biography of artists like these. Though such issues are not always readily apparent in the work, many artists do use their adverse experiences as fuel. Käthe Kollwitz and Sophie Calle both draw on personal pain to inform their art-making.

Kollwitz was a painter, printmaker, and sculptor who dealt with subjects like the working class, mourning, and social critique (Figura). After her son was killed in war, she grieved and stopped working for almost three years. When she began making art again, she focused on her own suffering, making a series of woodcuts, War (see fig. 7), and a memorial sculpture, The Grieving Parents (Harris) (see fig. 8). Surely anyone who has lost a child or loved one can identify with the haunting poses of the figures in her prints and sculpture: hunched over, arms crossed, agonizing/clasped hands, furrowed brows, closed eyes.
In *Exquisite Pain* (see fig. 9 and fig. 10), contemporary artist Sophie Calle chronicles and archives her memories, photographs, love letters, and other documents in the days leading up to a startling relationship break-up and the period of recovery that followed. She divides the book between the number of days “Before unhappiness” and the number of days “After unhappiness.” In the after section, she includes the sufferings of others as well. Calle explains, “I started asking both friends and chance encounters: ‘When did you suffer most?’ I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition. The method proved radically effective. In three months I had cured myself” (Calle 202-203). Indeed, writing about trauma is psychologically beneficial because it requires coherence and self-reflection, alters memories, and leads to insight (Bono). Calle’s process of writing about the same
event exhaustively is a model of how to heal from something, specifically a relationship, as that the event's hold on you will gradually diminish.

In an interview in 2004, Calle said that she began *Exquisite Pain* "more for therapeutic than for artistic reasons" (Gentleman). Art has tremendous power to facilitate healing. Carling Hale, a Washington University in St. Louis MFA alumna, confirms this as well in her thesis. With photographs and installations, she memorializes her experiences with anxiety, depression, traumatic stress, and crying, finding “that the most productive, and least self-destructive way of dealing with the recall of uncomfortable history is by translating (and documenting) these bodily sensations into images” (Hale 90). I too have experienced the therapeutic potential of art. I turn to art as something to focus on, channel my energy and emotions into, and become

Fig. 9. Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, 16-17.

Fig. 10. Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, 210-211.
rejuvenated by. I have also witnessed the healing effects of art-making, having worked or volunteered in some capacity in a variety of settings related to Art Therapy and art activities: a juvenile detention center, a non-profit art organization geared towards cancer patients, a contemporary art museum, and a residential program. Art undoubtedly has the ability to affect people, regardless of age, demographics, or abilities.

In *Using the Creative Therapies to Cope with Grief and Loss*, art therapist Stephanie Kellington writes, "the process of articulating an emotion or thought in image-form gives physical presence to experiences, which may not otherwise be able to be acknowledged" (Miraglia and Brooke 76). People are not always able to express themselves effectively in words, so communication through something tangible can be extraordinarily valuable. Sensory involvement with materials like markers, pastels, clay, and paint can tap into one's emotions and creativity and allow for the expression of negativity to be made real, which can be liberating.

Maxine Borowsky Junge, a pioneer in the field, made grief and loss the subjects of her book, *Mourning, Memory and Life Itself: Essays by an Art Therapist*. I identified with several of her essays about turning to creative expression in times of mourning. On this process, she writes, “The creativity evoked…is the remarkable attempt not only to remember the dead as a process of remembering and marking the meaning of their lives but to create something from that loss” (Junge 16). Traumatic events can be life-
altering, and remain as defining moments in one's life. Five months after my brother passed away in a car crash, I made Nick 1 (see fig. 5), discussed earlier. My and my family's life will forever be marked by the time before Nick died, and since. We will always keep an archive of his belongings, ordinary things that have more significance now that he is no longer here. I will continue this series annually, readdressing the same subject year after year and my evolving emotions of grief.

Making work despite or about the great difficulties in life is an enduring theme in art. This falls in line with what Alain de Botton and John Armstrong consider the seven functions of art: remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth, and appreciation. They argue that art is a "therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort, and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves" (Botton 5). Turning to creative expression is oftentimes invaluable for those dealing with challenges, and I will certainly continue to do so.
Weaving and Flow

When I was very young, I learned to weave from fiber artist Denise Mandel during a summer art camp. She opened my eyes to this medium, teaching the class the Navajo style of weaving on a frame loom, taking us to an alpaca farm to see where natural fleece comes from, ‘exhibiting’ our work, and letting us experiment on one of her floor looms. However, after the summer ended, I entirely abandoned the world of weaving... until I rediscovered my humble frame loom in my basement my very last semester of college.

In January 2018, I re-entered the world of weaving, starting off with traditional materials: warp threads, shed sticks, heddle rods, and yarn as the only weft (see fig. 11) before moving on to more experimental materials (see fig. 12). Weaving has been around for tens of thousands of years, though the basics have remained the same. Perhaps that is why I transitioned so seamlessly back into the medium; it is very intuitive and “any weaving, even the most elaborate, can be done, given time, with a minimum of equipment” (Albers 22). The joy of experimentation in weaving combines with the emotions surrounding my past experiences, as many of my weavings are autobiographical and include personal objects. The activities of finding, collecting, and using a variety of materials allows the weavings to embody where I am both physically and conceptually.
Fig. 11. Anna Olson, April 23, 2016, 2018, 16” x 13”, 15” x 15”, 16 ½” x 4 ½”, yarn and branches

Fig. 12. Anna Olson, Mind/Wandering/Weaving, 2018, 44” x 40”, yarn, clothing, flower, nylon, jewelry, wood, plastic bag, dog tag, keychain, banana sticker, solar eclipse glasses, wrapping paper, beer case, tea jug, belt, hospital bracelet, quartz, brick, pill package, bismuth, tape, bead, honeycomb
Making this medium the focal point of my last semester has been enjoyable and valuable. The act of weaving has become incredibly meditative and cathartic. This section of my thesis will address some of weaving’s rich history, my current practice, and the psychological concept of flow. More specifically, I will explore the impact of Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers, review the practice of Sheila Hicks, and consider how Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s ideas on flow intersect with art.

Historically, textiles have been overlooked and undervalued, relegated to the minor craft arts and viewed mostly as decorative. German artist Anni Albers began weaving at the Bauhaus and is largely responsible for changing such notions and introducing weaving to the fine art world. Her 1949 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art (see fig. 13) was the first time any textile artist had a solo show there. In her influential book *On Weaving*, she argues, “Along with cave paintings, threads were among the earliest transmitters of meaning.” (Albers 68). Albers was significantly influenced by Pre-Columbian textiles, believing their achievement was unsurpassed in terms of material, structure, and design. She translated these Ancient American textiles into a contemporary context, playing with colors, forms, surfaces, and materials in an abstract, innovative, and experimental way. Albers undoubtedly paved the way for weaving to enter the realm of fine art for myself and other contemporary artists.
After Albers stopped weaving, her yarns were eventually passed down to Sheila Hicks, an American fiber artist who has been working since the 1950’s. Hicks continues to push the medium forward and currently has a textile retrospective at Centre Pompidou titled *Lines of Life*. The excellent book, *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, catalogs nearly two-hundred of the artist’s small weavings, which she calls “personal expressions,” “private investigations,” and “ramblings” (Danto and Simon 43) (see fig. 14 and fig. 15). These miniatures are personal, experimental, intimate, and exploratory in the way she “uses her hands to give form to new ideas” (351). In several of her small
weavings, she uses unconventional materials and found objects, which I use in mine as well. I am inspired to continue using my frame loom in this prolific and investigative way.

The experience and process of weaving is quite contrary to the fast-paced technologically-advanced world we live in. Warping the loom, preparing the yarn and other materials, and building the weft are simple, time-consuming, and most of all relaxing. The repetition of passing the weft back and forth is quite meditative. Artist, designer, and entrepreneur Dee Clements echoes these sentiments: “Being at the loom is a slow and cathartic rhythm that I enjoy immensely when I can let myself get
into a flow state” (Jurgens). Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is known for his studies on flow, a mental state with several characteristics, including having a sense of control, balancing skills with challenges, deeply concentrating, and losing sense of time. I definitely experience flow when I am weaving; the hours pass by quickly as I integrate various materials and come up with solutions to the textile problems I encounter. My mind easily focuses on the task at hand, always forecasting the next step while also remaining in the moment. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky writes colloquially about the phenomenon of flow: “The experience of flow leads us to be involved in life (rather than be alienated from it), to enjoy activities (rather than to find them dreary), to have a sense of control (rather than helplessness), and to feel a strong sense of self (rather than unworthiness). All these factors imbue life with meaning and lend it a richness and intensity. And happiness” (Lyubomirsky 183). We should strive to engage in flow experiences as often as possible.

The materials and objects that appear in my weavings are byproducts of the resources I have available to me in a given location. Working on a loom at home prompts me to use familial and personal objects, while working in the studio results in using discarded materials from around the school and friends’ various belongings. It is tactiley stimulating and working with so many kinds of matter is satisfying; Albers writes, “our tactile experiences are elemental.” (Albers 62). The finished piece is an amalgamation and manifestation of its surroundings.
The completed weavings also represent my internal states and often function as a timeline or map. The process of building up the weft on a loom is very much like stratification, wherein rocks are layered with the oldest section at the bottom and newest at the top, compressing over time. In From Now Until The End Until Forever (see fig. 16), certain areas recall and project ideas about college, graduate school, working, marriage, living, dying, and death.
I will continue to explore the medium of weaving, both in small frame looms and large wall-sized pieces, and hope to gain experience with other types of looms and techniques. I am grateful to Denise Mandel, Anni Albers, and Sheila Hicks, as my weaving practice would most likely not exist without their guidance and innovations. I believe my weavings, in their use of found and collected materials and their basis on intuition and the passage of time, offer a new trajectory for the medium. Piecing together various fragments from all of my previous years in the form of weaving allows me to properly conclude this chapter of my life and provides a strong foundation for future work.
Conclusion

Learning about and working in the medium of weaving has brought together the conceptual ideas I have been focusing on for much of my college career and allowed them to meaningfully progress. Utilizing my archive of yarn and other traditional weaving materials as well as personal, familial, and gifted objects allows me to illustrate and capture memories and envision the future in textile form. Weaving has the capacity to greatly evolve in contemporary art, and I believe my weavings hint at its possibilities (see fig. 17, fig. 18, and fig. 19). I am eager to continue my textile practice, as well as learn more about the field of Art Therapy. Weaving certainly allows me to access an optimal mental space, and I encourage others going through challenging circumstances of any kind turn to creative expression to uncover its benefits.

Fig. 17. Anna Olson, Brown/UMSL, 2018, 18” x 13”, nylon, University clothing
Fig. 18. Anna Olson, For Grandma, 2018, 18” x 17”, clothing, yarn, ribbon, sheet music, branch
Fig. 19. Anna Olson, Future, 2018, 13” x 6”, yarn, clothing, ribbon, jewelry
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