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Recommended Citation

sun, merry, "Material Memory" (2019). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 59.
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Material Memory

3 May 2019

BFA in Studio Art, Sculpture Concentration

Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract

Memory may be implicitly embedded into an artwork through explicit material triggers.

Materials can evoke memory through material past life and through physical denotations of the past. The former carries with it the weight of existence; the latter demonstrates tangibly what cannot be captured by words. The material triggers act as semantic memories that can be used to construct an experiential, episodic memory in the mental faculties of the viewer. The memory that is contained within the work must be implicit in nature to carry experience, for explicit memory can only be read semantically. As the viewer strives to reach an understanding of the work, she also is reconstructing the embedded memory of the work in her own mind. In this sense, the artist weaves memory into her work: the viewer reclaims some threads of this offered memory and reconstructs them for herself.

Artifacts act as a substrate for memories to be interwoven into them. All artworks, upon creation, slowly begin to transition into the realm of artifact, in virtue of its designated significance.

Regular objects undergo transformation upon this designation, whether it be through physical means, such as in their creation, or some metaphysical means, such as through their selection. It was not merely the hand of Duchamp flipping the urinal that transformed it into *Fountain*, but also the object itself—the past life it once led, and the present life it was then given. A piece of driftwood, when taken from the shoreline and repositioned as an art object, carries with it its past existence as a waterlogged limb. The role of the artist, then, is to embody the weaver that may thread memory through her work that can then be transferred to viewers and passersby. Artwork can embed implicit memories within them through cues given explicitly through material triggers.

For this transference of memory to be possible, the nature of the memory itself must be episodic, as opposed to semantic. Semantic memory refers to the memory capacity for propositions (S remembers that *p*), while episodic memory refers to memories of events, particularly from one's experience (S remembers *X*). Both semantic and episodic memories may be temporally dated, spatially located, and contain some temporal-spatial relation; however, episodic memory can evoke the auto-noetic consciousness (Tulving). The coalescing of materials in an artwork can transition semantic information into episodic memory through its references to place and time, and through evoking the viewer's faculties of the mind. An artwork must implicitly contain this memory for it to be transferrable to the viewer—an explicit memory can only be read as semantic, for merely experiencing a film cannot transfer the experience of the film's heroine to the viewer but can only inform the viewer of the factual occurrences she experienced. Thus, only implicit memories can evoke the auto-noetic consciousness. The auto-noetic consciousness refers

to a conscious awareness that characterizes the recollection of personal happenings and allows for an individual to place herself mentally in the past, future, or counterfactual. This form of consciousness allows for a self-aware examination of one's own thoughts. It then becomes the role of the viewer to combine the cues and triggers explicitly given by materials through her mental faculties, thereby interpreting and reconstructing a form of the artwork's imbedded memory in her own mind.

Acts of remembering may be distinguished by a distinctive type of awareness: an awareness that links the experience of here, now to something there, then, before. My own work focuses on the capacity of an artwork to evoke the auto-noetic consciousness within a viewer so that she may reform the imbedded memory from the artwork into her own mind. A memory rooted within a physical place lends itself to an embodyable experience that is beyond mere recall. A space may or may not be associated with time itself when existing in memory form. I resist binding my work to a specific moment in time, which could damn it metaphysically. When bonded with a single instant, it is temporally frozen there. However, when allowed the freedom to time travel, the memory is allowed to wander from my experiential realm to yours, to theirs. Thus, when embodying memories of a concrete place, I evade time.

Every material has the potential to evoke or contain some memory. A material can contain a memory when the material itself had led a past life and can evoke memory when utilized to reconjure qualities of the past. *Particle Processed Cafeteria* is an example of the former. Artist Daniel Turner pulverizes the objects that once composed the makings of a cafeteria into a liquified powder (Turner). The cafeteria was ground down into uniform, indiscernible particles, then rebound as a singular unit through a liquidation process. The material memory of that place,

however, still exists within the watered dust. What is contained in it is not only the ghost of chairs, tables, and appliances, but also the space in which they defined and occupied. The work is permanently installed on the gallery floor of König Galerie in Berlin. Turner has dismantled a found space and reconstituted anew, and while the cafeteria was physically transformed into something unrecognizable, it still possesses the memory of what it once was through its material memory, and still commands a continuous space through its liquified reconstitution and application.

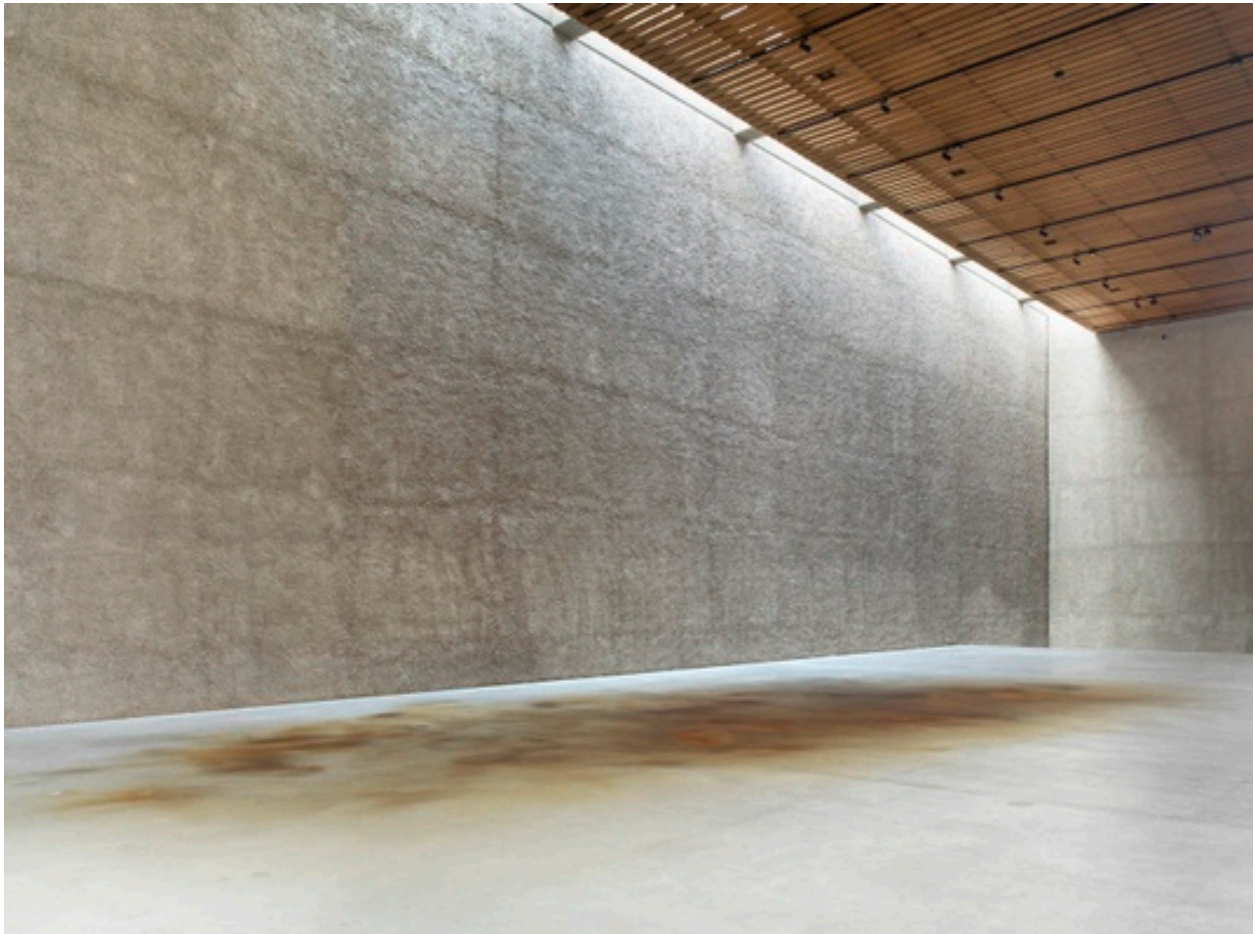


Figure 1: Daniel Turner, *Particle Processed Cafeteria*, 2016, Installation.

Books on a shelf uses both forms of material memory — material past life and material as historical referent. Taking the form of a sandbox, this ongoing piece transforms the book into sand, giving the sandbox a secondary purpose as a bookshelf.



Figure 2 Merry Sun, *Books on a shelf*, 2018, Installation.

Inspired by the novel *Wiley Women of the West*, the disintegration of the pages through abrasion frees the story from the pages, releasing the outlaw women from their written fates and placing them in the realm of imagination and play. The sandbox is created from pine, the material from which their coffins were made. This material metaphor acknowledges the unfortunate demise of that which is contained inside the box. *The Castle*, *The Trial*, and *Amerika* are three other books

that are pulverized in the box, as these novels were never intended to be published by Franz Kafka.

Awnings with the sound of their own destruction contains a similar material transformation. The sculpture presents itself as two closed aluminum boxes that sit nonchalantly in a space. However, when a viewer breaches the personal space of one of these objects, its partner begins to sing the sounds of the approached box's demise. Once freestanding aluminum awnings from the piece *Awnings do not say much unless provoked*, sound played an important role in their existence. In their former life, the sibling structures were adorned with contact microphones and acted as autonomous observers that both guarded and defined a fluid space. The microphones picked up sounds of passersby, precipitation, wind, and other agitation, playing them aloud for all to hear.



Figure 3 Merry Sun, *Awnings do not say much unless provoked*, 2018, Installation.

As awnings, the space beneath them was unsealed and welcome to outsiders as both a threshold and a point of shelter. However, once disassembled and reconstituted, the spaces contained within the reformed boxes became closed off and insular. No longer trusting the passersby, the two boxed structures have formed a symbiotic relationship, each to play one another's sounds of deconstruction when their threshold of space is approached. They no longer present shelter, but instead mistrust, as to reference their past material treatment of dismemberment.



Figure 4 Merry Sun, *Awnings with the sound of their own destruction*, 2019, Installation.

Sound, too, may be used as a material to define space. *St. Louis American, Vol. 90 No. 23* is a symphony that defines the front page of a newspaper. Each article on the front page of the paper was transposed into a musical composition. The embedded images in the paper are transposed into sound by converting visual wavelengths into auditory wavelengths. The compositions are arranged as a quadraphonic sound-mapping based on the layout of the front page, the article at

the top playing from the speaker that occupies the head of the room. The articles play in unison, allowing the viewers the liberty of wandering the room, moving toward sounds that are of interest to them, much like how the front page of a paper functions. While it is practically impossible to translate the sound back into the original text through mere listening, what the listeners are left with is an alternative experience of an inaccessible memory.



Figure 5 Merry Sun, *St. Louis American*, Vol. 90 No. 23, 2018, Installation.

Sound has been used by artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller as a decipherable memory device. Cardiff and Miller use a combination of field recordings and constructed narrative to create *Audio Walks* that take viewers through a particular place. The multilayered binaural tracks create an immersive environment for the viewer to enter while she is in the “site” of the work itself. Cardiff and Miller’s auditory intervention also acts to remove the participants from their surroundings and reinsert them into a surreal other world that is based in this reality. Rendering

control to Cardiff and Miller, the viewers perform a scripted walk from the artists' own memories. Often times, the walks include a second substrate to evoke memory, such as photographs and videos that suggest person or place. The viewers act out the memories constructed by Cardiff and Miller while experiencing the piece so that their fictional and psychological insertions mold the experience of the participants by playing with notions of reality and autonomy through suggestion (Bertens). While the guidance of the walks removes opportunities for choice from the participants, the audience reclaims autonomy by choosing to embark and perform the entire length of the walk, which functions as a prepackaged moment of episodic memory here. Cardiff's and Miller's walks demonstrate that the narrative memory can be both embodied and distributed.



Figure 6 Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Alter Mahnhof Video Walk*, 2012, Video walk.

Historical narratives and memories may be embodied internally and distributed externally into artifacts (Heersmink). These individual artifacts can function as the scaffolding for a larger experience that begins to embody a memory beyond what I am capable of giving to it as creator.

When the personal artifact coalesces with the found and suggested artifact, they become merged into an inseparable unit. Thus, my own memories woven into the piece act as presenter of the historic memories I am referencing. *Clemens* contains the memories of the demolished home, its ghost, and me. The Clemens house on Cass Avenue was built by James Clemens Jr. for his recently deceased wife in 1860. In 2018, it was demolished. This piece is comprised of 17 images that show the empty lot in which the house used to reside, the gravesite of the family, their tombstones, and my own journey through the graveyard in search of the Clemens.



Figure 7 Merry Sun, *Clemens*, 2018, Sculpture.



Figure 8 Merry Sun, Clemens, 2018, Detail.

These images are vacant of people and lack referents to a particular time period. The photographs rest in a pine clamshell box that shares dimension and shape with the Clemens' family tombstone. The pine itself is a reference to the material of the coffins used in that era. Next to the photograph box is a second pine box that contains a patch of land taken from the original site of the house. Side by side, then, rests the house and the family in this rearrangement. While neither is physically present, their presence looms over the piece, as does my own involvement and interaction with the family and their land. As the viewers flip through the images, they are interacting both with my experiences and the physical representation of the Clemens family and their history. In this way, the viewer is able to time travel through the episodic memories implanted into the piece, gathering a sense of loss and rediscovery.

The joining of photographic and sculptural elements lends itself to episodic memory, for the photograph may depict as the sculpture embodies. Sound, too, can evoke memory, through the

faculty of senses and through spatial description. *Bunkers 52, 50, and 49* and *.50 Caliber Coat Check* are two pieces that, when combined, show the history and present of Tyson Research Center. Formerly known as Tyson Valley Powder Farm, this span of land holds fifty-two bunkers that were used for munitions storage for the United States Government during World War II and the Korean War. Before then, it was a limestone mining quarry and housed a small village of miners (Gussman and Lima). Now utilized by Washington University as a research facility for environmental sciences, it's past memories as are present in the remnants of historical architecture. The bunkers now have intertwined with the current research endeavors and the grown landscape. Stoic and concrete, they face away from the main roads, but line them, not unlike soldiers. *Bunkers 52, 50, and 49* is equally a sculpture as it is photographs. It stands as three autonomous, individual units that embody the bunkers visually and materially. Three photographs of the bunkers are engulfed in cast concrete frames. The images show the bunkers in varying levels of obscurity: one in an active state, one in a dormant, camouflaged state, and one as background witness. The concrete frames are alike, but not identical, much like the bunkers. Each frame hangs from individual welded steel structures that stand around six feet tall, matching the height of the viewer. This furthers the individuality and autonomy of the bunkers, suggesting a uniqueness in uniformity. The concrete frames demonstrate the materiality and weight of the bunkers that would be lost to the photographs. The photographs show the structure and situation of the bunkers that could not be described through mere sculptural suggestion. The memory of the land, past and present, is conveyed in this display. The freestanding frames are as stoic in their environment as the bunkers are in theirs, but their presence looms over the space.

Seeing them in various conditions suggests the mutability of the place, as well as the various conditions that the bunkers have experienced.



Figure 9 Merry Sun, *Bunkers 50, 49, and 52*, 2019, Sculpture.

.50 Caliber Coat Check is a sculptural sound piece. It exists as a small concrete cube that hangs on the wall, with the shells of .50 caliber bullets embedded into the sides. A pair of headphones protrude from the center of its face. Both humorous and foreboding, it suggests the irony of the situation of the bunkers, once used to house dangerous ammunition, now dormant or used as storage for scientific research. The sound itself is not threatening, but rather melodic—yet, it falls empty. The auditory sensation itself becomes a material trigger, suggesting space through resonance. The echoes of the brass hitting the concrete floor describe the empty interior states of the bunkers, as well as the density of the bunker's walls. The viewer,

with the headphones on, becomes tethered to the concrete block on the wall, inexplicably connected and implicated through the act of observing. This nudges the viewer into an experience from both the artist's personal past as well as the cultural, collective past of Tyson.



Figure 10 Merry Sun, *.50 Caliber Coat Check*, 2019, Sculpture.

When shown with *Bunkers 52, 50, and 49*, a memory is curated between the two. Our past experiences inform us about ourselves and allow for us to engage in self-projection. That which

occurred in our past may inform us of future choices, alternative routes, and the paths of others (Buckner, Carroll). In creating an immersive and evocative installation, artwork can begin to prompt its viewers' mental faculties to engage in free play. The viewers use the powers of imagination to combine the physical memory triggers in the piece. Thus, the physical experience of the piece merges with the memory content of the piece to create a novel, multidimensional experience within the viewer. This active interpretation combines the viewer's experience of understanding with the historical referents within the piece.

Material is an effective substrate to package memory within, for it lends itself to the viewer without obscuring its own form. It is fully self-aware but does not overtake the content of the work. While the material can explicitly show, it may only implicitly suggest. It is essential that the experiential memory of a piece is to be formed by the viewer through her own understanding of the work—it cannot simply give itself over to the audience, for then the experience ends at the surface and cannot promote further self-contemplation. The embedded memory must be implied through cues readable by the viewer, moldable through experience into personal memory.

Responding to the artist that weaves memory into her work, the viewers untangle in their mental faculties the threads of material to refabricate into a novel fabric of memory, as to fully accept the embedded memory of the piece.

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