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DECONSTRUCTING THE PRESENT || (RE)CONSTRUCTING THE PAST

Hugh Hoagland

Bachelor of Fine Arts Thesis Statement

BFA in Studio Art; second major in Art History

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

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Abstract

Though we live only in the present, our every experience will eventually fade into the depths of memory. *Deconstructing the Present || (Re)constructing the Past* introduces my artist practice on a broad level, one that is preoccupied by the difference between present experience and its memory, as well as the ways we weave memory into the physical environments of architecture and material objects. This thesis establishes a specific signal memory for the body of work, the memory of a structure that, for a brief time, was a sanctuary for myself and many others. The paper then follows the arc of artistic response to that memory as I worked across discipline to reinvigorate the memory with new life. I situate my work among scholarship which draws connections between nostalgia and the image of the home, the relationship between the home and memory, and the subjectivity of memory itself. I contextualize my own creative practice with contemporary artists working within similar conceptual bounds. The work presented in this thesis visualizes the circularity of remembering and the subjectivity of memory, from a singular signal memory to works that continue the life cycle from past to present. Ultimately, I argue that memory is an act of *construction* as much as it is an act of *reconstruction*, and that we may not only discover meaning through acts of remembering, but also that we may create meaning.

“You don’t have a home until you leave it, and then, when you have left it, you can never go back.”

- James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*



The relationship between memory, nostalgia, and the physical structures that make up our world have long been investigated. The word *nostalgia* was originally defined as an illness which manifested in patients “obsessively dwelling on images of home” (Wilson 21). In essence, *nostalgia* means homesickness. Despite the word having evolved beyond its nineteenth-century pathological origins, the fixation on home remains a core component of the word’s definition. And though an architectural structure (a specific house, for example) may not necessarily be connoted in the word *home*, the image of a habitable dwelling place is inextricably linked to the idea of home. Nostalgia has played a significant role in recent stages of my own life—even before I could articulate its presence in my creative practice, I was aware of my incredible ability to remember distant memories and minuscule details from my past. Unstable circumstances throughout much of my adolescence promoted active dwelling on the past, to the “simpler times” of childhood. The simplest way to weather the confusion of the present was to lose myself in the past. In that regard, the preoccupation with longing and nostalgia actually served as an anchor of stability, just as a real home provides.

The opening quote by James Baldwin establishes the core themes of my thesis work. It sets up the idea that home, and by extension, the physical spaces we inhabit, are deeply tied to our memory. My practice on a broad level considers the relationship between site, structure, experience, and memory. My work dredges the remnants of the past and transforms them into objects for the present and future. It begins as a simple act of remembering events that have transpired, of reaching back, of looking into the depths of the past and beginning a conversation with it. Rather than considering the past as a conclusion, I use it as a starting point. I find that my work relies on cycles of habit and memory, and that the work itself has a

life cycle of its own. These cycles represent the continuous act of acknowledgment and attempts to find meaning in the experiences and events extracted from my memory. My work begins from a signal that triggers a memory episode, and my goal then becomes to lift the memory out of the confines of the past and bring it into present time. In every iteration, I acknowledge that source memory while at the same time, I move ever so slightly away from it. My practice is a continuous venturing along a thread of time, the thread “that connects one to a former self and/or a geographical place from the past” (Wilson 11).



1 Charlie Hart, *dwelling 3.31.18 - 5.1.18*, 2018. Pine, plywood, brick, concrete, DuPont Tyvek HomeWrap, gathered objects. Dula Foundation Courtyard, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, St. Louis, MO. Photograph by Charlie Hart.



Sanctuary: The Dwelling & The Medium In Which It Is Held

The seeds of this project were sown in the spring of 2018, when I had the opportunity to work with my friend Charlie Hart on his architecture capstone project. Over the course of thirty days, Charlie built a rudimentary structure by hand and invited the help of friends to collaborate on the structure, which he called his Dwelling (Figure 1). For those who helped construct it, or to any who sat under its roof, it became a sanctuary over the course of its one-month existence. The structure was always supposed to be enjoyed and destroyed swiftly. But the inner preservationist in me was conflicted. I helped build some of this structure. I lounged in a hammock on this structure. I daydreamed, drew, and drank tea with this structure's

creator as the sun shined in and the breeze rattled its Tyvek walls. This structure was a sanctuary to all, of course, but it was the center of my universe for the thirty days it existed. I couldn't fathom letting that disappear. During a housewarming celebration on the eve of its final day, I created several photographs of the Dwelling bathed in the evening sun of late April (Figure 2). The solar presence of the structure and the life force it emanated are palpable in the photographs I captured on the evening of its final day. By the time I developed the film, however, the structure had been completely dismantled.

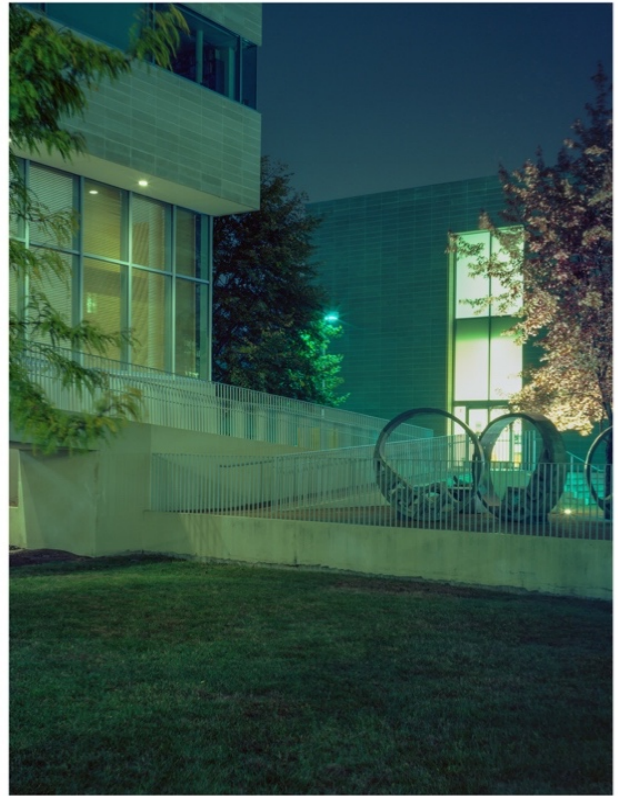
In photographing the Dwelling, I ensured that its spirit and memory would live on despite the reality that the structure, and the experiences it offered, were gone forever. The photographs I took of the Dwelling anticipate its eventual loss as much as they spoke of the immortality I wanted to give the structure. Photographs inherently mark the loss of their subjects into the ether of the past. Susan Sontag, in her treatise *On Photography*, compares photographs to *memento mori*, and states that all photographs “[testify] to time’s relentless melt.” (15). The photographic world is divorced from the world in which we exist. It is one that seduces us; we are pulled inward but never fully let in. The worlds captured in my *Dwelling* series are moments forever out of reach, worlds just out of our grasp. It seems fitting that the definitions of nostalgia inspire us to imagine dwelling places. In his seminal text *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard expands on this connection between nostalgia, imagination, and the dwelling place:

The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace...Therefore, the places in which we have *experienced daydreaming* reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time. (6)

Looking back at the photographs of the Dwelling, I am reminded of the daydreaming it facilitated, the anchor it provided to the confusion going on in my then-present. I am also reminded of another piece of writing which weaves together the idea of longing and looking back with the image of a home: “Nostalgia—that most lyrical of feelings—crystallizes around these images like amber. Arrested within it, the house, the past, is clear, vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and by its stillness” (Wilson 122). My photographs of the Dwelling show the sanctuary suspended in time—immortalized, but utterly inaccessible.



2 Dwelling #2, 2018. Digitized color negative.



3 *Meditations on a Dwelling #4*, 2018. Inkjet prints, diptych.

Returning to campus three months later, I found myself affected by the sight of the empty courtyard where the Dwelling once stood. The work that I made subsequently spoke about the desire to remember that which no longer exists and about the processes of remembering. In one series, I created four images of the empty site from the same vantage points where I had taken the original Dwelling images. Paired with those original images, they form diptychs that make evident the passage of time and the ephemerality of the structure. One in particular, *Meditations on a Dwelling #4* (Figure 3), pairs a distant view of the Dwelling as the sun set with the equally wide view of the now empty courtyard. In this series, one cannot understand the structure's presence without also understanding its absence.

At the same time, I was working on a longer project that again relied on the site and considered the passage of time. *The Futile Archive (30 Days)* (Figure 4), I took an exposure on large-format slide film of the same site once a day for thirty days and developed the slides in the same chemistry each day. The thirty-day photographing process mimicked Charlie's construction process for the Dwelling: an hour or two of labor each day for thirty days. However, unlike the Dwelling, the images became less and less complete as the days passed. Over the course of the month, the images became fainter and more blue. By the end of the project, almost all image information had faded away.¹



4 *The Futile Archive (30 Days)*, 2018. 30 large-format color slides mounted in lightbox.

¹ A more detailed description of the process follows: for a thirty day period, I photographed the courtyard once a day with a view camera on large-format color slide film. This film renders a positive image, unlike the traditional photographic negative. I chose slide film in order to display the original, and thus indexical, photographic object as the final artwork. On the same day of exposure, the piece of film was developed in a solution of color positive (E-6) film developer and fixer. The same solution of photochemistry was used for all 30 pieces of film. As a result of the continuous use, the chemistry exhausted beyond its recommended capacity, and it became less and less able to resolve a photographic image. Thus, each slide carries less photographic information.



5 Installation view, *A Living Room* 10/17/2019 - 03/18/2019, 2018-2019. Pine, plywood, steel, oil monoprints on vellum, latex paint, salvaged door, window and chairs, plant, lights, other artwork.



Room: A Dwelling for Memory

Though the images I created spoke to the strong presence of the structure and the weight of its absence, I desired a proper vessel for the memory of the Dwelling. The physicality of an architectural form intrigued me, one that could reference the Dwelling. In my studio, sixth months after the signal structure went down, I constructed an echo of it in *A Living Room* 10/17/18 - 3/18/19 (Figure 5). Though similar to the Dwelling in the rudimentary material and aesthetic, it was not built for the dwelling of people, but rather for memories. It existed solely as an acknowledgment, a vessel for the memory of the signal structure. Like artist Do Ho Suh, who could only create the full-scale nylon replica of his New York apartment (Figure 6) after he had left the real apartment for good, so too could I only create an echo of the Dwelling from the fertile ground of its absence. The processes of remembering and the subjectivity of memory that I sought to analyze in my work may be summed up in the research of psychologist Charles Fernyhough, who, in his book *Pieces of Light*, discusses a contemporary theory separating the act of remembering from the factual connotations of recall: memory



6 Do Ho Suh, installation view, *The Perfect Home II*, 2003. Translucent nylon. Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn, NY); Gift of Lawrence B. Benenson, 2017.46. Image © Lehmann Maupin Gallery.



8 Installation view, *A Living Room* 10/17/2018 - 03/18/2019, 2018-2019. Detail of steel pseudo-structure and vellum/luan unfinished wall.



7 Installation view, *A Living Room* 10/17/2018 - 03/18/2019, 2018-2019. Detail of four dye-diffusion transfer prints on shelf.

itself, he argues, is not an episode from the past retrieved from mental storage, it is rather a construction of the mind in the present, created on the spot and dependent on the context in which it is conjured (6-7). A memory will never be the same when recalled two different times, because there is no such thing as a complete memory. Just as a memory is never complete, *A Living Room* was never complete. I achieved structure through the use of 2x4 studs and plywood sheets. When the wood ended, the forms continued with printed lines or steel that teased architecture (Figure 7). The boundaries of the room were demarcated with translucent vellum, if demarcated at all. Floorboards were arranged in a piecemeal fashion, a permanently-unfinished decorative finish. And familiar, rather homey details such as framed pictures on a shelf are illegible and distant (Figure 8). The room existed for five months, and during that time I photographed it, added and removed furniture, and displayed other artworks inside of it. It took on a life of its own beyond that of the referent structure; it was a vessel for memory that also began to accrue its own memory. At this time, I considered a project by the German design collective raumlaborberlin 4562 Enright Avenue (Figure 9). In the gallery of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, the firm reconstructed the interior of a St. Louis house, while at the same time, the corresponding exterior shell at the namesake address was demolished. The project

“reimagin[ed]...a home—one private dwelling transformed into a place to project memories, to cultivate an openness toward something new, and to hold a collective space for imagining” (Fleischmann Brewer 12). The persistent echo of a home was undeniably present.



9 raumlaborberlin (Design collective, German, founded 1999), *4562 Enright Avenue*, 2016. Salvaged material from home. Pulitzer Arts Foundation (St. Louis, MO). Digital image © Alise O'Brien Photography for Pulitzer Arts Foundation.



Casting, Cataloguing, Transience, and Transition

One of the most poignant elements of the raumlabor project was the simultaneous acts of construction and deconstruction. While a home-turned-art installation was celebrated and analyzed in the gallery setting, the original structure in the city was quietly taken apart for salvage. Having begun my own body of work with an acknowledgement of the loss of one structure, I became fixated on the eventual deconstruction of my own room. The room as a vessel for the memory of the Dwelling could not live forever, but I could turn its deconstruction into a metamorphosis so that the new memory accrued in the structure could continue its life. It was at this turning point in the project that I sought further influence from contemporary artists. I also considered the work of Rachel Whiteread, whose casting process requires that the source structures end their lives as vessels for habitation and assume new



10 Rachel Whiteread, installation view, *Untitled (Rooms)*, 2001. Plaster, fiberglass, wood, and metal. Tate Britain (London). Purchased from funds provided by Noam and Geraldine Gottesman and Tate International Council 2003. Digital image © Tate, London 2014.

roles as vessels for the *memory of habitation*. In her work *Untitled (Rooms)* (Figure 10), Whiteread cast the negative space of several rooms, which had to be destroyed in order to reveal the sculptural form. The structural sacrifice allows the birth of new objects—the plaster casts—while the form of the casts, solids of negative space, acknowledges the simultaneous acts of destruction and creation. Before deconstructing my room, I borrowed Whiteread’s trademark technique and created three casts of my room for the piece *Traces of a Room that Once Was* (Figure 11): window, door, and floor. These three casts condense the essence of the room’s architecture into three new objects. These objects lie in repose, three mementos to the structure that once stood on their ground. At the same time, the casts are offspring from the architectural space of the room, its life force re-birthing into new vessels. On the opposite wall of the studio, the organized collection of all of the raw materials from the room lay also in repose as they awaited further use in an artistic afterlife. The objects on opposing sides of the studio conversed to one another about the acts of generation and deconstruction that occurred between the materials in the space where the room formerly existed.



11 Installation views, *Traces of a Room that Once Was*, 2019. Plaster, wood, steel, reclaimed wood, door and window, tape.



Archives of a Room; Closing One Door

The latest and final form of the deconstructed room is two series of boxes made from the room's material. These objects continue the life of the room by reconfiguring its raw material from that which created a structure to that which composes sculptural object. These works find art historical precedent in the assemblage boxes of Joseph Cornell (example, *Pharmacy*, Figure 12). Though the boxes I created are much larger in scale than Cornell's work, they serve a very similar conceptual purpose. Cornell and I are equally concerned with the role of the enclosed box as a framing device and a repository. In her doctoral dissertation, art historian Joanna Roche reads Cornell's boxes as microcosmic worlds which house memory. In Roche's words,



12 Joseph Cornell, *Pharmacy*, 1943. Wood box construction—printed paper, colored sand, colored foil, sulfur, feathers, seashells, butterfly, aluminum foil, fiber, wood shavings, copper wire, fruit pits, water, gold paint, cork, water, dried leaves and found objects. Private collection. Image © Christie's.

“Cornell's boxes contain the residue of the past, while simultaneously reconfiguring these collections into a new set of objects/memories which are gathered and constructed in the present” (26). My first series of boxes uses the material of the room as the framework for structure, but divorces the material from its architectural function (Figure 13). The salvaged lumber may no longer live as a room, but the box is nevertheless a structure for another world. The character of the room is archived in these boxes. The room archive boxes carry the memory that is imbued in the material and structural elements. The second series of boxes return the room to the photographic image (Figure 14). In *Twenty Four Photographs to Tell the Story of a Room*, various stages of documentation re-photographed and selectively fixed (thus rendering the images fugitive), return the memory of the room to photographic form. In re-photographing and re-presenting images that themselves have history, I engage a conversation between the history of the room's material and the history of the image-worlds which exist no longer. These two series of boxes answer a series of questions I raised when I first built my room: how could I construct in order to deconstruct; how could I assemble material to use it up. The boxes speak to the very life cycle of the room, having begun from photographs and material that metamorphosed into a structure that metamorphosed into objects that contain material with acquired history. The boxes—*Room at rest*—embody the opportunity to remember the signal memory of the Dwelling, and the journey that its memory has taken across time, in an intentional manner.



13 *Archive of a Room #1, Archive of a Room #2, Archive of a Room #3*, 2019. Salvaged pine, plywood, window, door, floorboards, steel, oil mono print on vellum, thread.



14 Left to right: *Twenty Four Photographs to Tell the Story of A Room; Thirty One Days, One Year; Constellation: Room*, 2019. Twenty four expired and selectively-fixed gelatin silver prints mounted in box of salvaged pine and plywood; thirty one un-peeled dye-diffusion transfer print packs mounted in box of salvaged pine and painted luan; permanent marker over forty integral dye-diffusion transfer prints mounted in box of salvaged pine and plywood.



Conclusion: A Continuous Signal

I take the title of this last section from the compilation essay by Zoe Leonard in the catalogue for her series *Analogue*, the text from which I sourced the Baldwin quote that began this thesis. Though boxes of material and photographs conclude this body of work, my creative process prohibits that any idea ever truly be finished. With the simple act of remembering, of peering into the well of time and searching for a memory crystallized in my mind, I activate a signal that continues in perpetuity. Dwelling, room, remains, capsules, vessels, archives. In dredging a signal memory into the present, I facilitate a necessary process of metamorphosis to bring the memory from a mental nebula into physical space. In that process of metamorphosis, the reinvigorated memories, which dwell in the work, embark on a life of their own. The life cycles that occupy my creative process and the works themselves speak to the circularity and pervasiveness of memory. I have long wondered why our minds oblige us to remember, or why our minds allow memory and emotion to dance together, when, for all intents and purposes, nostalgic feeling is often perceived as baggage that slows us down. To eschew reflection and remembrance is to dismiss personal or collective histories and suppress a natural impulse to collect and preserve evidence of the experiences, of people, and of the material that we interact with through our lives. My practice honors that impulse. Though time will inevitably shape, weather, and warp the memories of experiences we hold dear, for those memories most potent, they will never truly leave us.



“I began to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing.

Nothing goes away.”

- Margaret Atwood, *Cat’s Eye*

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