

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers

College of Art

5-2021

Sculpture as Memoir

Tirzah Reed

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Tirzah, "Sculpture as Memoir" (2021). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 91.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/91>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Sculpture as Memoir

Tirzah Reed

BFA in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

May 2021

Abstract

Questions guide my art practice, so they naturally guide the structure of this thesis.

Remember?

If I remember, what then?

What makes a memoir?

What is the work made of?

Nouns and adjectives—why have both?

What's the role of sound?

How does the form of installation relate to memoir?

How do we take an installation from situation to story?

What happens in the studio?

What gets me to the studio in the first place?

What matters?

Objects have power. They hold the histories of their owners—or if they have not had previous owners, they at least carry the connotations of their material. I collect objects—raw materials and personal items—and combine them together in the studio to create physically engaging installations. The work functions as sculptural memoir, driven by a desire to discover and tell stories.

Remember?

I was young—maybe 5 years old—and I crawled across the hardwood until I was underneath the baby grand piano, lying on my back, surrounded by its legs. Mom was practicing, so the body

above me thundered and shook the floor. When I looked up at its underbelly, a wave of music engulfed me, so I turned my head away, and my eyes caught sight of her feet by the piano legs. I saw, rather than heard, the comforting tap of her shoe on the sustain pedal. And then sound overwhelmed me, so I closed my eyes.

“To reminisce and woolgather is negative. You have to differentiate between memories. Are you going to them or are they coming to you here? If you are going to them, you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.”¹

- Louise Bourgeois

If I remember, what then?

Sometimes a memory drifts upwards, unbidden. Like being 5, and lying underneath the piano. I can't recall much of my childhood on command, so when a situation like this one resurfaces, I grasp at it. I must preserve it, make something of it. If I were a writer, and a writer alone, I would become a memoirist. Writing is a way to commemorate, to memorialize, because what draws us to memoir “is the need – not just the desire, but the absolute necessity – to commemorate major and minor moments in our lives and the people and places in them.”² This is the tug I feel when a rarity—a childhood memory—dredges itself up from my unconscious. I must commemorate the situation I remember, and also mark this moment of re-collecting it. The occasion calls for a memoir, but I am far too in love with the world of objects to settle down with words on paper.

¹ Rainer Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg, *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells*. 95.

² Kathleen Finneran, “Lying in the Land of Memoir: Straddling the Line Between Fact and Fiction.”

I am a sculptor, so I take the situation I remember, and I create a situation of my own. For example, in one installation I created, you walk down a set of stairs in a public building. Drifting upward from the bottom of the stairwell is an echo of layered sounds—voices speaking and singing, whistling, humming, and a steady clicking. The noise gets louder as you descend until you reach the last step, and peer around a banister to see the source: an inexplicable baby grand piano, shrouded in black cloth, tucked underneath the last flight of stairs. As you look closer, you see a pile of piano keys cast in white chocolate, sitting on top of the form. You peer underneath the belly of the instrument to find where the sound is coming from, and you discover that the piano is a façade—a mass of plywood, cardboard, and tape. You spot the speaker I installed inside, but just like the instrument, the sound, too, is shrouded—the spoken words tell of some narrative, but layers of voices and music wash over you, and you cannot make them out. You've stumbled upon the installation *Pedal Pression*.

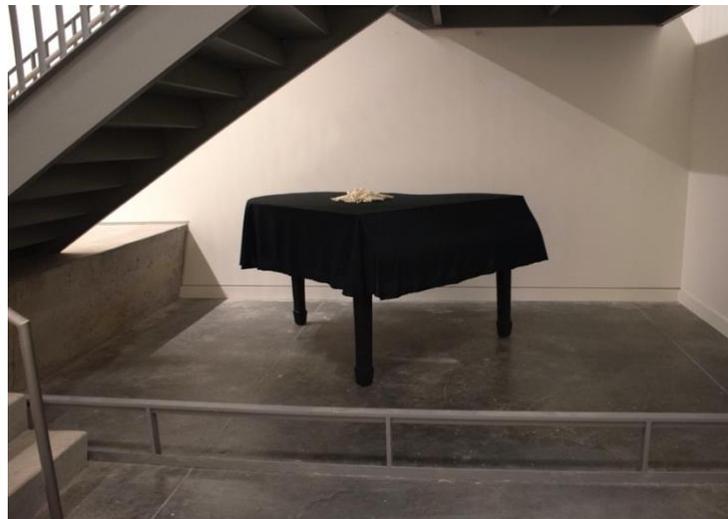


Fig. 1. Tirzah Reed, *Pedal Pression*, wood, cloth, cardboard, white chocolate cast piano keys, speaker, 6.5'x5'x3.5', 2019.

What makes a memoir?

These things—the memory of when I am 5, the piano installation—these are situations. But what I have given you are not yet stories. This is because in the world of memoir, there are two parts to any piece—the situation, and the story—and I have given you only situations. The situation is the facts—the who, the what, the where.³ Often, we learn about the situation from a scene: I am 5 years old and lying underneath the piano. And it does not matter if I describe this to you, or if my mother recounts this shared experience. According to anyone who was there, I will always be 5, I will always lie underneath the piano, and my mother will always be pressing the sustain pedal and turning pages. The story, however, is a different matter—it depends on who is narrating, and how they choose to tell it. The story is the “why,” or the internal experience of the writer as they tell us the situation. It is the emotional core of this work of art.

Writers working in the field of creative nonfiction have many tools at their disposal for creating stories out of situations. They pick apart descriptions of places and people. They decide which dialogue to include. They order their paragraphs so that each one is placed on the page in its own spot, to relate to the blocks of text that surround it. We glean the story from how the writer crafts their work, and as a sculptor, I do much the same. The tools at my disposal, however, look quite different, because my work extends beyond words on a page.

What is the work made of?

³ Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*.

You walk into a room. Near one wall stands a pedestal, at hip height, lit with one spotlight. Resting on the pedestal are layers of material—first a rectangle of black cloth, and then a white pillow, and then a pane of glass that flattens everything below it. You step closer and notice a pair of yellow socks compressed between the pillow and pane. Lines of text etched into the glass cast a shadow on the pillow, and you begin to read a poem that I wrote: “In thawed air, dead things proclaim pungence....”



Fig. 2. Tirzah Reed, *\$10,000 Socks*, fabric, pillow, Grandma's socks, glass, text, 33"x21"x44", 2020.

Many materials have a set of sociologically shared connotations. Pillows offer rest and comfort, and when cushioning an object, they proclaim that the object is of high value. Black cloth, when covering another object, signals mourning and preservation. In *\$10,000 Socks*, I make use of these shared association to prime the viewer with all of their prior memories and experiences of pillows and black cloth, associations that set the tone of the piece to match one of my memories. This memory is of a situation: the last time that I saw my Grandma alive. She sat six feet away in a wheelchair, feet swaddled in hospital-issued yellow socks.

I am not alone in this grappling with memory and loss. Felix Gonzales-Torres uses similarly autobiographical means in many of his pieces. He reflects on his relationship with his late partner “by means of pairings or intertwinings that represent the notion of ideal lovers.”⁴ In *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* he offers a situation—two



Fig. 3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, clocks, Museum of Modern Art, 1991.

identical clocks, with batteries that are destined to degrade at different rates—to tell the story of a slowly ending relationship as one partner dies. The clocks here function similarly to the black cloth or the pillow in *\$10,000 Socks*, in that they rely on their own poetic and shared connotations to set the tone of the viewer’s experience. Clocks are supposed to be accurate, reliable, infallible. They orient us and guide us through time, assuring us or sparking panic. This material, then, is poetic language for a story about relationships and death.

Mass-produced objects carry sociologically shared connotations, and these are the nouns of a sculptor’s vocabulary, whose arrangement hints at the story behind their situation. The clocks in *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* and the cloth and pillow in *\$10,000 Socks* are all nouns. And if objects with shared connotations are nouns, then we look next to adjectives—modifiers that add layers of information and allure. A mound of hair on a bed is a situation, but a mound of drenched hair on a bed is a story. Adjectives help us ask the right questions, and inch us towards the emotional core of a piece.

In terms of sculpture, adjectives are objects with personal significance— primary sources. The socks in *\$10,000 Socks* are an adjective because they are personal objects,

⁴ Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*. 26.

because of the “transaction between person and object,” the “psychic activities”⁵ carried out with that object. They carry an additional potency because of the specific memories attached to them. The yellow socks compressed between a pillow and a pane of glass are the socks my grandmother wore when I last saw her alive, and that memory—the socks’ physical history, and the psychic activity associated with them—is part of the object.

Nouns and adjectives—why have both?

Raw materials and materials with shared connotations serve as accessible invitations for the viewer. They are more recognizable, universal, and more immediately relatable. I leverage this for *Flour*, where viewers approach a section of carpet with a dusting of flour in the center. The carpet and flour immediately recall a domestic setting, one complicated by the objects’ uncommon relationship to one another.

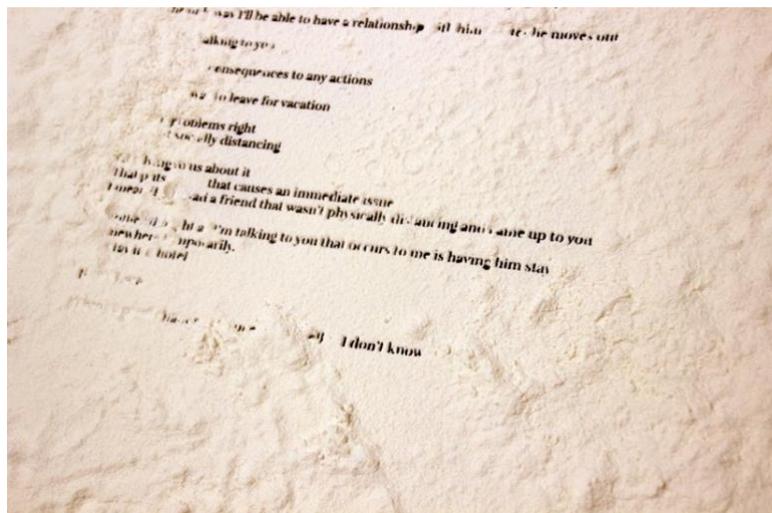


Fig. 4. Tirzah Reed. *Flour*, carpet, wood, flour, flour bag, speaker, 7.5'x5'x12', 2020.

⁵ Csikszentihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*.

These universal objects serve as the mediator between the viewer and the primary source(s) of a piece. Primary sources are component of a piece analogous to “adjectives.” They carry the potency of previous psychic activity and are often less immediately relatable to a viewer. These primary sources in my case are elements taken directly from life— artifacts from my experiences. In *\$10,000 Socks*, the primary source is the socks. In the case of *Flour*, the primary source takes the form of a written transcription. The transcribed text appears in the flour, sourced from a situation when I eavesdropped on a conversation between my parents. The content of the text is sensitive, so it is partially obscured by the flour, but viewers can make out fragments: *...consequences to any actions...causes an immediate issue...occurs to me having him stay...I don't know...* As the viewer crouches to read this text, their body mimics the posture that I was in when I originally transcribed the text. In this way, the installation carries both the psychic activity of the moment of transcription, and the physicality of that memory.

During this careful looking and reading, viewers are also met with sound. A speaker installed inside the flour bag hanging from the ceiling plays an audio track of my own voice, poetically describing a memory from the situation that my parents were discussing.

What's the role of sound?

“Sound is touch at a distance.”⁶

-Anne Fernald, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University

Audio, while invisible, is a physical medium, composed of waves that travel through air and bend the hairs of an ear drum. When audio takes the form of a human voice, it becomes a proxy

⁶ “The Link between Sound and Emotions | Greentree Audiology.”
<https://greentreeaudiology.com/blog/link-sounds-emotions>

for the personal, physical presence of the speaker. Sound also serves as a powerful psychological trigger, rendering it an excellent medium for recording, recounting, and honoring memories. Susan Philipsz takes full advantage of these truths in *Too Much I Once Lamented*, a 5-channel sound installation that uses a madrigal from 1622 about heartbreak as its content. Philipsz sings each part of the ballad, drawing attention to the bodily presence of her voice. The potency of the piece comes in part from the fact that she makes her “inhalations and pauses clearly audible.”⁷

Phillipsz uses the potency of human voice as song. But when human voice takes the form of spoken narrative, it then benefits from the powers native to writing—namely, the power of written stories. This is why many of my installations, unlike Philipsz’s work, incorporate sound and human voice as narrative. Narrative audio also serves an important role as a primary source. It has inherent personal significance (coming from and experienced by my own body), and the content of the audio recordings cements their standing as a primary source. I cherish the act of recording conversations, or of verbalizing something I have written. Much like a face in a painting, this recognizable human element offers a point of entry for a viewer. And much like universal objects, human voice is more immediately relatable, and so serves as a mediator between the viewer and other more enigmatic components of an installation.

In the case of *Pedal Pression*, I leverage human voice in both singing and spoken word. The audio emanating from the shrouded piano form serves as the primary source of the piece. The audio track includes field recordings of ambient noises, the creaks and echoes of a piano, and sounds such as the thump of the sustain pedal. The audio track also includes verbal recitations of poetry and prose that I wrote about a fragmented memory. During a field recording, or when I read my own words aloud, I’m surrounded by invisible yet physical sound waves. Recording these moments captures their embodied presence so that when I play the

⁷ “Susan Philipsz.” <https://pulitzerarts.org/exhibition/susan-philipsz/>

audio back for an audience, I'm replicating my original physical experience. In the case of *Pedal Pression*, then, the audio recording carries evidence of a psychic activity—my experience writing out the text and then interacting with the resulting soundwaves requires a psychic exchange between myself and those words and waves. This makes the audio file a physical primary source. And like the text in *Flour*, the written content of the audio recordings is what allows me to access a memory—access that then allows me to commemorate that moment of remembering.

How does the form of installation relate to memoir?



Fig. 5. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell 1*, glass, fabric, wood, metal, 83"x96"x108", 1991.

While Louise Bourgeois did not use sound in her *Cells*, her installation work physically engages the audience in different ways. In *Cell 1* from 1991, she presents a situation to the viewer: a ring of doors which enclose a space. Viewers circle the form, peeking through gaps between the doors, before finding a window they can stick their heads through. Like a memoir, the collection of objects in *Cell 1* presents us with a situation, in which the relationships between elements

divulges a story. And like the viewer's crouching position in *Flour*, this experience of physical discovery mirrors an internal process of re-collecting memory.

In *Pilfered* I leverage the same principles of to commemorate my own memories and offer space for the viewers' memories and stories. I present viewers with a situation: an eight-foot-tall pedestal, with a dog perched on top. A red bow is tied around the dog's neck with normally sized loops, but bow tails that cascade down the length of the platform, widening as they fall. This installation stems from a set of contradicting memories surrounding the story of a bow:

When I was young, a red bow was tied around the neck of a ceramic dog that sat on my grandmother's kitchen counter. I grew up with this dog, and it was subsequently gifted to me right before my family moved. At some point the bow was lost, and then replaced. In one set of memories, the bow is absent from the dog's neck when I go to pack it up for the move, so it sits naked until I source a new bow from a gift I get that Christmas. In another set of memories, the bow is lost during the move, and my mother replaces it without my knowledge.

The dog and its bow feel significant, and I must commemorate the situation I remember, but I am not sure which memory is true. What can I rely on, and how do memories change? What is the experience of recollection like, physically? Not knowing the truth about this dog makes me feel like a child—the age I would have been when I first started interacting with this ceramic dog, accruing psychic activity with that object.

To commemorate the situation I remember, and this process of recollection, the piece mimics both my embodied experiences as a child and my experiences as an adult as I recall contradictory memories. Just like the doors in *Cell 1*, or the crouching in *Flour*, an audience's exploration of *Pilfered* manipulates their body in space, priming them to draw connections to their own body's memories. The viewer is small. They must crane their neck upwards in order to

see the top of the pedestal and the dog that sits there. To mark these moments of multiple recollections, I situate viewers within the tension of simultaneous and contradictory text and audio. Audio emanating from a speaker hidden in the top of the pedestal recounts one narrative,



Fig. 6. Tirzah Reed, *Pilfered*, ceramic dog recreated from memory, screen-printed cloth with text, MDF, sound (2:15) emanating from the top of the pedestal, 2021.

while the text relays the other. This dissonance mirrors my experience of remembering, where I am unsure of the objective truth of a situation, and different possible versions of a memory compete with one another. The rendering of the dog, too, mimics the act of re-collecting: by

building the form entirely from memory, I engage in an act of careful looking through the mind's eye, externalizing the experience of recalling a three-dimensional object.

How do we take an installation from situation to story? What happens in the studio?

Before I arrive at a story, I create an installation. And before I create an installation, I must interrogate the relationships between the installation's components. And before I interrogate these relationships, I must gather the components in the first place. Therefore, before I become an artist, I am a collector. The things I collect range from universal objects—ones that often benefit from shared connotations— to highly personal, potent artifacts. These objects are ones that nudge me into action and whisper Little Questions at me—like the glass pane that I found which demanded an etching, and asked me *why am I clear?* Or a pair of yellow socks I inherited, which asked *what memories do I hold?* I collect things—objects and writing and sound—and then they sit in my studio cabinets, or they live on my hard drive.

Eventually, these pieces start to talk to one another. If I pay attention in my studio, I can eavesdrop on this conversation. And then I go from collector to artist as I listen to the weight of a glass pane and discover how it compresses a pillow. I play in my studio—placing a speaker next to objects or inside pedestals, feeding it different sounds until I find one that skims off a memory which has floated to the surface. I gather what I learn about the objects I collect, and installation takes form. Through it all I'm drawn by the need "to commemorate major and minor moments in [my life] and the people and places in [it]."⁸ This is the drive that prompts me to label my installations as "situations"—situations that then offer stories.

⁸ Kathleen Finneran, "Lying in the Land of Memoir: Straddling the Line Between Fact and Fiction."

What gets me to the studio in the first place?

I do not always feel like going to my studio. And even though I do often enjoy it, I do not always feel like the work I do on a daily basis matters much. I struggled with this feeling throughout all of my making and storytelling in the past three years—a feeling that had grown into imposter syndrome. But then I joined a book club at the beginning of the year. We met every month to discuss a chapter of *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* by Madeleine L'Engle. Before the first meeting I sat at my desk and reviewed the assigned chapters. When I came to this passage I stopped:

“We must work every day, whether we feel like it or not; otherwise when it comes time to get out of the way and listen to the work, we will not be able to heed it.”⁹

I highlighted this passage, and underneath it, I scrawled: “This. This is the reason to make when I feel like there is nothing to make, to struggle even when I do not feel—or when I cannot imagine—that I am an artist.” There were many days this year when there were no seeds for sculpture that demanded my attention. No memories that simply popped up, unbidden, no divine inspiration. Many days I did not feel like going into my studio, and I deeply doubted the importance of my work. But I went anyways and made something. The aggression of this method of making may seem like a departure from the practice that Louise Bourgeois advocated for, and the one I ascribe to, of letting seeds for sculpture come to me. But this is, in fact, the activity that precedes those seeds—waiting for sculpture to come to me only works if I have put myself in the situations in which I might encounter it. And that situation is most often found in the act of making itself. Work begets work. So, if I desire to honor and investigate memory, and if I crave the discovery of stories, then work is what I must do.

What matters?

⁹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, 15.

“Listen to me. All of writing is a huge lake. There are great writers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. And there are mere trickles, like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don’t matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake.”¹⁰

- Jean Rhys

Sculptors dig the lake deeper and wider. There are some great sculptors that wield massive excavators, like Felix Gonzales-Torrez, Louise Bourgeois, and Susan Philipsz. And there are those of us carrying little trowels, like Tirzah Reed. But all that matters is the lake—the spread of its water, and the practice of listening to its waves as we dig.

¹⁰ Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, 14.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Tirzah Reed, *Pedal Pression*, wood, cloth, cardboard, white chocolate cast piano keys, speaker, 6.5'x5'x3.5', 2019.

Figure 2. Tirzah Reed, *\$10,000 Socks*, fabric, pillow, Grandma's socks, glass, text, 33"x21"x44", 2020.

Figure 3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, clocks, Museum of Modern Art, 1991.

Figure 4. Tirzah Reed. *Flour*, carpet, wood, flour, flour bag, speaker, 7.5'x5'x12', 2020.

Figure 5. Louise Bourgeois, *Cell 1*, glass, fabric, wood, metal, 83"x96"x108", 1991. Fig. 6. Tirzah Reed, *Pilfered*, ceramic dog recreated from memory, screen-printed cloth with text, MDF, sound (2:15) emanating from the top of the pedestal, 2021.

Bibliography

Csikszentihalyi, Mihaly, and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things*. Cambridge university Press, n.d.

Gibbons, Joan. *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*. New York, NY: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.

Kathleen Finneran. "Lying in the Land of Memoir: Straddling the Line Between Fact and Fiction." Accessed March 10, 2021. <https://www.writersstore.com/lying-in-the-land-of-memoir-straddling-the-line-between-fact-and-fiction/>.

Madeleine L'Engle. *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*. New York: Convergent Books, 2001.

Pearce, Susan M. "Objects as Meaning; or Narrating the Past." In *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.

Rainer Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg. *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells*. New York, NY: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2008.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation. "Susan Philipsz: Seven Tears." Accessed March 10, 2021. <https://pulitzerarts.org/exhibition/susan-philipsz/>.

"The Link between Sound and Emotions | Greentree Audiology." Accessed March 18, 2021. <https://greentreeaudiology.com/blog/link-sounds-emotions>.