

Transformation: The conjunction of crafted process and the brain as memory repository.

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Abstract

Acknowledging Otto Von Busch's work, "Shapeshifting can be considered a capacity or potential of sentient beings, a capability of organisms to auto-transformations, as responsive agency to their settings." Fusing textiles and photography, this paper considers the contribution a practice-based, conceptual approach to textiles can make to the exploration and visualization of the morphing of memory and, in the process, considers the transformative, "shapeshifting" powers at work within the human brain. A cluster of diagnostic descriptors (including vascular cognitive impairment, Alzheimer's disease, dementia with Lewy bodies and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease) provide reference points for causal factors and anticipated transformative outcomes associated with changes in brain function.

This paper explores new territory with its linking of this "wearing" or "abrading" of memory to analogue photographic materiality and the understated significance of textile substrates or objects. All share varying degrees of disappearance or transformation: from the "gaps" that appear in recall; the physicality of the unravelling thread and thinning construction of the worn textile substrate; the "invisible" ubiquity of textiles: and the creased, faded, well-handled materiality of the analogue family snapshot or studio portrait (now increasingly supplanted by digital files). The repositioning and revaluing of a return to craft, to labour intensive, accumulative practices, play their part in this evolving narrative of creative practice. The paradigmatic shift can be expressed through the conjunction of image and substrate; process and outcome – constructing, re-imaging, unpicking, re-forming, transforming and revealing – a transformation that calls upon this twinning of concept and substrate, craft and process to explore the universal human concern of the morphing of memory housed within the shapeshifting repository of the human brain.

Keywords: memory, memory loss, memento mori, photographs, disconnection, reconnection

Introduction



Figure 1.

This image (purposefully uncaptioned) serves as a signifier for the complex issues that interconnect, diverge and reconnect within this paper. Linking expressions of zeitgeist with the concept of shapeshifting, the paper positions the human brain as the repository of ideas, memory and identity with changes in memory function resulting in corresponding changes in this repository. Pursuing a visual and tactile exploration of this position through a tacit engagement with textile design practice, a number of strands are considered within this paper. These strands are unpicked and recombined in an attempt to communicate the unravelling and reconnection of these fragments of ideas, these aspects of porous memory. They include zeitgeist concerns with the morphing of memory, increasing engagement with expressions of craft practice (both textile and photographic, handcrafted and digital processes), tactile substrate awareness and the social context within which creative expression is framed. The activity of identifying and the teasing out of these strands and their subsequent bricolaged reconnections led to the “Mem-or-y” series of textile interpretations exhibited in the United Kingdom in 2013 in the “Beyond Surface &

Material” exhibition at the Rugby Art Gallery and Museum. Presentation of the research and practice that underpinned this work at the Shapeshifting Conference (AUT, 2014) provided directional filters for this conceptual, practice- based engagement with visual manifestations of these shifts in the concept of memory and identity.

The predominant means of communicating information and experiences concerning the morphing of memory is through the written word, from academic research papers and journalism through to “confessional” literary memoirs and novels that draw on themes of the morphing or loss of memory. Whilst this is the predominant means of communication, this paper presents the potential that textiles (as a sensuous means of personal engagement and communication of complex ideas) can make to the field, particularly when a tactile textile approach is enriched by the fusion of hand-crafted and digital processes and interdisciplinary practice.

A visual signifier

“Every photograph contains a range of possible meanings” (Kuhn, 1999, p. 153).

The untitled image 1 acts as a signifier on two levels; as a generic encapsulation of the bricolaged issues embedded within this paper, and on a personal practice level having direct links to the “Mem-or-y” series of textile interpretations.

Family photograph albums act as image banks, storing and protecting our images. With the aging process, as memory recall starts to diminish, bringing a shift in the awareness of personal identity, these repositories can function as memory triggers. As the album begins to wear and disintegrate, both mental and physical issues of ephemerality, accessibility and permanence are invoked. Emphasis moves from the imagined contents of the container (the protective album with its evocative images) to a sensuous appreciation of material qualities, an awareness of the nuances of substrate and construction with the tactile textile qualities gaining increasing significance. The animal hide of the leather substrate could be compared to the biological covering of skin with the abraded wear analogous to the shedding of layers in the constant activity of renewal and repair. The stitching process penetrates the skin with the textile fibre reconnecting sections with the structure of the stitch. The ties are sequenced, braided textile constructions beginning to unravel and separate

at the stress points caused through usage. As they break they are knotted and then re-knotted to reconnect and to rejoin the sections into a re-functioning “whole”.

What wouldn't be revealed, by looking at this image, is that these are three of a large collection of family albums started by C.H. Stevens at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued throughout his life. Filled with images taken on his Kodak camera and personally printed and hand coloured, the early images are now fading and gradually disappearing. The context and narratives are also unravelling as the early volumes have had images removed and re-housed. The collection is no longer a unit as individual albums are dispersed among family members. The leather, the stitching and even the retied shoe laces of these albums provide clues to C.H. Stevens' post Australian army career as a boot and shoe repairer, ironic in the circumstances as he had both his legs amputated below the knee as a result of shrapnel injuries on the First World War battlefields of France.

There was also a personal reason for selecting this image as it acts as a signifier for the “Mem-or-y” series of textile interpretations that runs as a thread throughout this paper. These albums and their contents started the initial train of thought that linked the illustrative with the sensuous, the craft of analogue photography with the craft of textile construction within the overarching concept of personal identity and the morphing of memory over time.

The above is the author's reading of and knowledge concerning this image, but as Kuhn (1999) has noted photographs can initiate a range of interpretations. To reveal responses to and readings of this image an A4 colour photocopy was presented to fifteen individual participants who worked within an art and design environment as administrators, study skills support staff, or academics and practitioners in a range of art and design disciplines. They were asked for their personal response. To ensure there were no suggestive or indicative triggers to influence the reading, no contextual information relating to the image or specifics of the use of the image were given beyond the generalization that the image would be used as a visual signifier for an academic paper. The responses could be categorized into two broad areas:

1. Nostalgic narrative interpretations suggested by the Kodak branding of the illustrative label, the graphic style and conjecture about the imagined contents - the information hidden within the closed covers.
2. Sensuous responses to the materiality and ageing patina of the covers, the tactile detail of the ties and the abraded colour nuances within the image.

Responses included:

- it's an image that promotes nostalgia – memory and experience - can connect to the past – sensory experience
- treasure trove – beloved memories – people who are lost and forgotten – hidden stories
- memories – forgotten – worn – missing sticker – something was there that isn't there makes it more intriguing trying to decipher it – crazy bit of knotting
- historical, ancient, slightly nostalgic – intrigued to know the context, i.e. the bigger picture – series of books, photograph albums – intrigued by the chronology of the string, the binding
- nostalgic collection of memories – textiles from worn leather to handbinding to string leather card application, rusted metal with it – feeling that it's travelled, it's been used
- nostalgic feel – Kodak references - age suggested by patina of objects & material indicate age – sensory response to do with materiality – reminds of old photograph albums grandparents have of seaside trips, land of the box brownie – held in some esteem and value because of the repairs in various ways, shoelace holding one together – worn nature of leather looked at quite a lot – with age long term memory stays, short term goes - drawing together disparate strands – old photos trigger thoughts, they're a seed to make thoughts go a particular way.

Unravelling and reconnecting

“Only fragments remain” (Grant, 1998, p. 16).

In presenting the research and practice elements underpinning the “Mem-or-y” series of textile interpretations, four key threads contributed to the project. The broad areas

of influence were theories and concepts of memory, changes in the memory repository and the sharing of research and personal experience relating to this, the significance and contribution of photographs as memory triggers, and textiles and the inter-connectedness of thread, cloth and memory. A bricolage approach was used in the teasing out and reconnection of these strands. This accounts for the intermittent and at times idiosyncratic connection of ideas as the iterative approach revisited key links from various perspectives. The following sections explore these four threads that underpinned and contextualized the “Mem-or-y” series.

1. Theories and Concepts of Memory

There is a significant, established, almost overwhelming body of academic writing relating to theories and concepts of memory. “Memory” has been embraced by many disciplines, including academics writing about textiles and photography.

Yates’ (1992) seminal text traces the ancient Greeks’ invention of the art of memory, “mnemotechnics”, based on the manipulation of images in memory. This scholarly work traces the adoption, modification and influence of this invention from a complex historical perspective up to and including the Renaissance period. Sutton (1998) takes a philosophical approach. Ranging from Descartes to the present day, he presents theories of autobiographical memory. “Traces, brains and history”, the subtitle of the introduction, indicates the rich blend of scientific, historical, philosophical and cultural approaches covered within the text. Starting with the 1960s and focusing on contemporary visual arts practice, Gibbons (2007) thematically explores both the significance and the diversity of contemporary art engagement with the subject of memory citing the work of a wide range of visual artists. The thematic chapter “Epilogue Oblivion: the limits of memory”, includes discussion of the collaborative engagement between the artist, Becky Shaw, and Alzheimer patient Michael Gill, and the outcome of this collaboration – “Twelve Museums”, shown at the Sackler Centre for Arts Education, Serpentine Gallery, London, in 2002.

Reading these texts, fragmentary traces have emerged, fleeting thoughts with their own resonance, making contributions to the cycle of porous memories that have

influenced the “Mem-or-y” series. Listed below is a small sample, providing a snapshot of ephemeral starting points for iterative engagement.

Human consciousness and memory have become of central interest across many disciplines during the last decade of the century, which has been dubbed the decade of the brain. Yet, exactly how the brain works, and where memory resides, remains a mystery. (Johnson, 1999, p. 6)

“ ... Memory is essentially an unstable and variable phenomenon that, nevertheless, has been captured and represented, tested and contested in multiple ways in contemporary art” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 147).

Acts of memory in the contemporary world are about entering reflective spaces, recalling ourselves and others through time; a narrative, poetic act rather than a storing of facts; part of the process of constructing and reconstructing identity in a changing world. (Johnson, 1999, p. 5)

“ ... there is often a cross-over between types and categories of memory or ‘memory- practice” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 30).

“ ... memories are blended, not laid down independently once and for all, and are reconstructed rather than reproduced” (Sutton, 1998, p. 2).

“ ... which view memories as dynamic patterns rather than static archives, fragmentary traces to be reconstructed rather than coherent things to be reproduced” (Sutton, 1998, p. xiii).

“In order to function effectively, the mind has to find ways of limiting and selecting memory within the parameters of too much or too little memory” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 141).

2. Changes in the memory repository: sharing research and personal experience.

“Remind me who I am, again” (Grant, 1998).

With a statistical increase in longevity in the United Kingdom, (Office of National Statistics, 2013), there is a growing awareness of the increasing prevalence of the effects of ageing, particularly in relation to memory. The medical profession has a

long research history of controlled trials investigating this aspect of health and wellbeing. They have assigned specific diagnostic descriptors to a range of conditions causing a progressive decrease in memory function– from Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) or Cognitive Impairment, No Dementia (CIND) - the “my memory’s not what it used to be” aspect of ageing – to the distressing diagnostic specifics of Alzheimer’s disease, dementia with Lewy bodies, etc., that progressively impinge on memory, identity and behaviour. Through professional journals and conferences, this knowledge is disseminated to members of the medical profession. As the national press became increasingly interested in “headline” stories and statistics extracted from this information, there has been an increase in reports with attention grabbing headlines that help to account for the general public’s increased awareness, with examples including Alzheimer’s Diet “can stop brain shrinking”, (Briggs, 2011), Alzheimer’s research “needs new strategy” (Briggs, 2014), and “Decline in Trials for Alzheimer’s disease” (Briggs, 2014).

There has also been a significant change in the content, attitude and style of communication. Experiencing or living with memory loss or dementia would formerly have been considered a private concern, something not spoken about, but now, personal and sensitive experiences are being published. Rebecca Lay’s weekly Guardian column “Doing it for Dad”, published from 21 July, 2012 to 11 May, 2013 (forty-two weeks in all), is particularly revealing. The evocative titles include “Dad does not recognise us”, “My dad appears to actively dislike me” and “Dad is slipping out of view”. In her last column, “The father I loved is all but gone” (number forty-two), she shares her reasons for deciding that it was now time to stop.

A new genre is also appearing, with these experiences becoming the subject of the literary memoir, branded as “confessional” literature. Grant (1998) raises her concerns about some of the moral dilemmas confronted in *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*, an account of her mother’s dementia and the relationship between memory and identity. Of particular concern was the basic question of, is it right to subject your family to forensic scrutiny? The possible help and indirect support this sharing of personal experiences might give to those in similar situations justified this exposure. The general public’s engagement with this supportive, experiential information is further confirmed by the reception received by Sally Magnusson’s

Where Memories Go: Why Dementia Changes Everything, (2014), listed in the Sunday Times best seller list.

3. Photographs as memory triggers

"Themes of growth, decline, and even renewal seem to emerge from family photographs because they are part of the very chronology of our lives" (Hirsch, 1981).

As a visual cultural theorist writing on memory work, Kuhn (2002) considers that the personal family photo and photograph album serve as memory prompts to feed into reflective, interpretive or analytical readings, setting the scene for recollection. In his interview for the Guardian in 2013 titled "My Mother's descent into dementia", Melvyn Bragg spoke of his search for ways of trying to retrieve his mother's memory and found that old photographs helped. He brought in a book of old Wigton "... and she fell on it. It was as if I was watching her come alive – she was back in the town."

The family photograph could be considered as a straightforward act of recording, but the simultaneous need for holding on and letting go means the reliability and permanence of this record occupies a questionable space. Many have written about this inherent anticipated loss, including "All our family photographs are stalked by death" (Hirsch, 1981, p. 124), and "The photograph's seizing of a moment always, even in that very moment, anticipates, assumes, loss. The record looks towards a future time when things will be different, anticipating a need to remember what will soon be past" (Kuhn, 1999, p. 14).

4. Thread, cloth and memory.

As the substrate focus shifts from analogue photographic paper-based images to textile substrates and textile interpretations, the accumulating fragments of text continue to influence the formulation of the "Mem-or-y" series.

"Cloth ... has sensory and suggestive powers, which can stir both conscious and unconscious memory" (Curtis in Barnett & Johnson, 1999, p. 2).

"Membrane, fold, thread and pattern: cloth and memory. The relationship between cloth and memory is a rich seam and one that has been discussed and developed by writers, curators and textile artists over the years" (Millar, 2013, p. 15).

“Cloth, that old silent companion of the human race, has always kept very special company with artists” (Constantine & Reuter, 1997, p. 9).

“Cloth, more than any other human-made goods, abolishes apparent dividing lines between art and life, both past and present” (Constantine & Reuter, 1997, p. 11).

The embedding of illustrative “portrait” imagery and group photographs into or on to cloth has led to very diverse artistic/craft practice. In Peta Jacobs’ *Shadows of Distinction 2013*, a large installation piece produced for the “Cloth and Memory 2” exhibition curated by Lesley Millar at Salts Mill, aspects of a group photograph of men at the Bradford Wool Exchange in the 1950s has been enlarged to life size proportions, printed on to fabric with selected fibres eroded through the devoré process. This haunting, ephemeral piece, part ghostly figurative narration and part constructed and eroded fibres barely holding the images and threads in a readable sequence, creates a powerful narrative of imagery and materiality.

Using photolithography as the means of image transfer, Stefan Poplawski, in his piece titled “Cardiogram of Generations, Vilna 1910, Michalowo 1935, Paris 1975 and 1978”, transferred images from his family album on to linen fabric. “By manipulating both the subject and the process, he made it appear as though the image was woven into the fabric of the cloth” (Constantine & Reuter, 1997, p. 229).

In Christian Boltanski’s installation “Jewish School of Grosse Hamburgerstrasse in 1938” (1994) an enlarged photographic portrait appears on a backlit draped, stretched cloth, simultaneously suggesting an indistinct presence and an implied absence.

Personal or intimate memories – Marlene Little, “Mem-or-y” series, 2013



Figure 2. "Mem-or-y" 1 (2013).



Figure 3. “Beyond Surface & Material.” Rugby Art Gallery, United Kingdom (2013).

“When we know that a particular photograph is that of a family member we can easily fit it into whatever fabric of family experience time has already woven. It acts as a new thread in an old weave” (Hirsch, 1981, p. 5).

Appropriating Gibbons (2007) “memory-practice” as a genre descriptor for this ongoing series, the paper has focused on the fleeting but repetitive bricolaged influences that have accumulated in the gestation of this work. Returning to figure 1, the visual signifier for the paper and the initial trigger for the series, this can now be titled and acknowledged as “The family photograph albums of C.H. Stevens”, a repository for the photographs of the Stevens family.

C.H. Stevens was my grandfather. The albums contained many images of my father throughout his childhood and adult life, from the classic 1920s naked baby on

the sheepskin shot through to war images and beyond. In his old age David Stevens became a sufferer of vascular dementia and gradually the fading of the images also started to mirror the fading of his memories as the disease accelerated.

Living in the United Kingdom, but with a father in Australia suffering from vascular dementia, the images contained within these albums would become a much-valued resource. Digital copies were brought back to the United Kingdom; prints made of some of the images and posted to him at his nursing home. They provided welcome triggers for moments of recollection and conversation during family visits.

The “Mem-or-y” series grew from these experiences. The images that provide the starting points for the series are family photographs, but they have moved forward a generation. No longer contained in coherent, narrative albums, the images include formal staged studio portraits, black and white analogue images printed in makeshift darkrooms and commercial colour machine prints. Some are loose, some housed in incomplete albums – a rather ramshackle way of preserving vulnerable objects further complicated by the move from analogue negatives to digital files. The images mark particular moments in life; some formal, most casual snapshots. The focus is on close-ups of members of the family, rather than a broader locating context.

But how to interact with these images? A fascination with the creative potential of transformed materiality and the interdisciplinary contribution of craft processes were key. There is a cyclical investment in time and craft processes, from analogue black and white photographic printing, to transfer to digital files, to digital textile print on woven linen substrate, to considered deconstruction of the interwoven fibres of the linen substrate returning the work to a mix of constructed imagery and dislocated, disassociated threads.

The series considers concepts of construction: the construction of theories of memory and identity, the construction of life experiences, the construction of the fabric of life, and the literal construction of fabric, of cloth. Experiential knowledge of the properties; the fibre, structure and behaviour of the linen union fabric, considered at the fabric design and construction stage assumed a reverse direction as the characteristics of the substrate morphed in the process of deconstruction. This was not a simple task. As expected, the warp threads were strong and with care could

be unpicked, but the weft threads were extremely fragile with the loose slub construction shedding and separating with the friction. A fabric that appeared very strong and durable gradually revealed its fragility. Image 4 of a jacquard loom captures a stage in the construction process with the individual ends of yarn being threaded in preparation for the sequential interweaving of these ends into fabric. The “Mem-or-y” series reverses this process, unpicking and deconstructing the ordered sequence into an inconsistent tangle of connection points.



Figure 4. Threading of the jacquard loom.

Projecting into the future, the work considers the images and memories as they are currently held, as the photographic imagery and substrates show signs of wear and vulnerability but also as memory and identity erode through the ageing process of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) or the more extreme and distressing diagnostic specifics of dementia including vascular cognitive impairment. This “fabric”, this “memory bank”, also passes through progressive stages of unravelling and

disappearance gradually reverting to the original starting point of loose threads in the process of being threaded and joined into a constructed narrative substrate.



Figure 5. Textile substrate



Figure 6. Textile substrate detail

Evocative words and phrases that have emerged during the processing of this visually-led research and craft practice include porous memory, disconnection, re-connection, unravelling, tangling, patches, traces, fragments, erosion, displacement, disappearance, ephemerality, descending into darkness and the progressive stages of *memoire trouve* and the object as *memento mori*. These words have provided prompts for a tacit, experiential exploration of the union of imagery and materiality within the complex overall concept of memory and identity.

Conclusion

This paper has centred round the concept of the morphing of memory housed within the “shapeshifting” repository of the human brain. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the media’s interest in issues concerning memory loss and links with personal identity. The latest developments in medical research produce headline grabbing articles, supportive columns are written sharing personal experiences, the literary memoir (a new genre of confessional literature) has emerged, and novels continue to be written referring to these issues that draw very

heavily on personal experience. With the focus on writing and talking, to date the emphasis on the visual and tactile as a means of researching, considering and communicating the interconnectedness of these complex issues has been limited.

Taking a tacit, experiential, iterative approach to materiality and craft processes, this paper has touched on complex strands encompassing theories and concepts of memory; the zeitgeist expression of sharing research and personal experience surrounding loss of memory and the manifestation of personal identity, the value of photographs as memory triggers, and the sensory links between textiles and memory. Using a bricolage approach, these interdisciplinary strands have been assembled, interwoven and unpicked. The “Mem-or-y” series of textile pieces exhibited in the “Beyond Surface and Material: The meeting point between photography and textiles” exhibition at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, United Kingdom in 2013 joins and reassembles these strands of the “wearing” or “abrading” of memory through the craft interventions of analogue photographic materiality and the understated significance of textile substrates or objects. In addition to the written and spoken word, textiles can be a sensuous and engaging means of communication particularly when linked to the crossover areas of handcrafted and digital processes and interdisciplinary practice.

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