Breaths, Monuments, Offerings

By Halley Ritter, Curatorial Assistant

> Life without memory is no life at all. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.
>
> Luis Buñuel, 1983

Remembering is a strange phenomenon in that we just do it without necessarily understanding how. We rely on memory for nearly everything – our conception of self and our appreciation and comprehension of the world around us – yet it remains elusive, ethereal, and quite often, just out of reach. I do not know that we, humans, were really built to fully grasp the things that we cannot see or hold or touch. We like to be able to prove to ourselves that intangible things, like memory, are real and reliable; we need a benchmark that verifies our experiences and our history. Being sensory, tactile creatures, it is quite common to treat objects as artifacts of, or placeholders for, moments in the past; to imbue benign things with dense meaning as a way of hanging on to memories. "Remembering is entangled with things,"[i] after all. Sometimes formed intentionally and other times subconsciously, the connections we make between our memories and the material world around us can alleviate some of the stresses associated with the impermanence of memory, but not without calling to our attention other complicated feelings and truths.

Pinpointing a definition of memory is a surprisingly complex task, given that we know it intimately and experience it constantly. "Memory is often thought of as some kind of physical thing that is stored in the brain; a subjective, personal experience that we can recall at will,"[ii] but it is so much more than that. "Memory is the key to personal and collective identity,"[iii] it can be anecdotal and autobiographical, forming "the core of the psychological self."[iv] Additionally, memories comprise our comprehension of the world and how we navigate through life; all our experiences and the lessons we have learned, all the joy and sadness and unnameable feelings in between. Memories are inseparable from who we are and how we understand ourselves to be, both individually and on a wider plane; "memory and culture are actually two faces of the same coin."[v] Memory is a building block of history, "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society."[vi] Memory is tradition, folklore, generational

knowledge, inherited feelings of fear and love. “Memory is the result of connection and assemblage of knowledge shaped by different discursive genres, media and social practices.”[vii] Memory is taught, transferred, and inherited, passed down through song and story in ways that are hugely significant with seemingly boundless impact on our lives, and yet memory manages to exist on an even more expansive plane that we might not consider so frequently. Scientifically speaking, memory is a constant exchange of chemicals between neurons,[viii] the abstract notion of storage and retrieval of information,[ix] which is to say, memory is, essentially, everything.[x]

It seems excessive to explain the bounds of memory in so many words because it feels as though the immense scope of memory is something of which we are aware on an instinctive level. Remembering is something that we are not taught to do and yet it is something that we do constantly. Many functions of the body that are most crucial to our survival are carried out subconsciously by our various cells and systems. Our lungs do not usually need to be trained to breathe, our hearts do not typically require a lesson in pumping blood, and our minds do not need instructions to encode and store our memories. When information enters our consciousness through sight, sound, meaning, or feeling,[xi] it is automatically encoded and stored, “first in short-term memory and then, if need be […] in long-term memory.”[xii] We know, somehow, what to keep on hand for a short while and what we need to hold on to indefinitely, and how to access that information later – through recognition or association, sequentially or semantically[xiii] – based on where, why, and how we keep it.[xiv] These are just things we do, actions that come built in to our being to keep us alive and moving through the world. To that effect, memory, like other critical elements of existing, is something that we tend to take for granted until it is gone. The loss of memory comes in waves that wash away varying degrees of knowledge. We know that at the best of times, losing memory leaves us with gaps in our recollection, moments we can no longer revisit, but we also know that at the worst of times, loss of memory can be devastating and debilitating, affecting one’s ability to function independently in any capacity. We know, intrinsically, how important and vast memory is but we become especially aware of its scope in its absence.

Memory, while we have it, provides us with a bit of certainty. It allows us to feel that a few things are certain. That in a world full of stress and questions and unpredictability, we still have the past – something concrete to turn to that will always stay the same. “Nostalgia serves as a kind of emotional pacifier”[xv] when times

are bleak. It gives us places to go where we feel safe and loved, sure of ourselves and our surroundings.[xvi] While this strategy is entirely valid, even beneficial for our mental health, turning to memories for a sense of reliability is inherently flawed. Memory is not as trustworthy as we wish it to be. "Retrieval [of memories] is subject to error, because it can reflect a reconstruction of memory."[xvii] We often imagine remembering and forgetting to be solid, separate concepts, entirely opposed,[xviii] when really, the two are constantly at play with one another to shape and mould our perceptions of the past. It is understood that each time we recall a memory we likely adjust details dependant on the context of remembering, altering our perceptions of the past bit by bit until they are potentially unrecognizable, all without realizing any change had occurred.[xix] Memories are apt to wear thin with use after years of retreating into them for comfort, just as a baby blanket or childhood toy is bound to take on some wear and tear after years of hugs and naps and messes. Whereas I gave my toys to my Baba* to stitch up and outfit with tiny handmade clothes when they were torn, I subconsciously gave my memories to some deep interior part of my brain to patch and rewrite when their theoretical stuffing began to fall out. In both cases, the repaired versions contained much of what made the originals meaningful and special, but they wound up being undeniably different and new. While memories can hold the essence of our past, the spirit of old feelings and the gist of where we have been, we know memory to be "an assemblage of different sources"[xx] rather than a crystal clear, quotable account of the what, when, and where that we once knew. The idea that something so crucial to our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and the world at large is this fragile, fallible, and unreliable is spooky, justifiably stirring up anxiety and fear over the details we may lose from our lives, and how many we may have already lost.

Objectively, the loss and alteration of our memories is something that we should be able to rationalize rather than fear. Memory, in its purest, least tangible forms – oral history shared through storytelling, for example – has been the primary method used for eons by innumerable cultures to maintain their traditions and ways of life. But as a highly nostalgic person, knowing the truth about memories and their lack of truth makes me want to outsource my memory entirely, to find an external means of preserving my past that I can count on more than my own built-in remembering mechanisms. Many people, myself included, must have this feeling because we do consistently outsource the storage of memories, whether we are entirely aware of it

or not. We keep the essence of memory in the objects we create and accumulate. Collections of materials allow us to "to relive, in a fraction of a second, memories of places and events, of feelings, and of people we have met but long forgotten."[xxi] They act as signifiers of our stories, visual triggers and reminders which "furnish recollection"[xxii] and prove the validity of our memories as relics and artifacts of the past in the present. Sometimes, this materialization and monumentalization happens on purpose; when, at ten years old, I put my ticket and t-shirt from my first concert into a Ziploc freezer bag the moment I got home, I was certainly hoping that sealing them away would preserve the magic of being there and miraculously meeting my favourite boy band and I have scarcely opened it since for fear of letting that feeling slip away. Other times, the process is unintentional; boxes packed with the mundane odds and ends that once filled my Baba's apartment - archives of handwritten grocery lists and kitchen cloths, half-finished word-searches and almost resolved knitting projects – evolved, over a few months spent stacked in my living room, into a tiny museum of who she was, a collection to be cherished rather than sorted through or thrown away. There are also entirely subconscious associations we make automatically and calculated depictions we craft from scratch. To some extent material associations with memory are inevitable, but personal and cultural inclinations greatly affect the attitudes with which we approach them and the extent to which we rely upon them.

When Marie Kondo and her methods of decluttering became trendy a few years ago, I remember thinking it might be a good idea to minimalize my way of living, but upon trying to implement her strategies I was instantly filled with dread. She recommends leaving the sorting of sentimental items for last, but I could not find a way to make a distinction between the things that held my memories and the things that were just things. Beyond that, the idea of giving up on something because it did not create or recall joy felt incredibly unnatural. Not all my items spark joy, but they all spark something. The thought of throwing away the catalyst for a feeling that I could experience again and again goes entirely against everything I have known and thought about personal history and memory. I am Jewish, so I was raised on memory and sentimentality. We are a people who spend a lot of time looking into the past. It is not a past that is fun to look back on, but it is important to do so, nonetheless. To hold on to tangible things and accumulate a collection of any sort is a great privilege not afforded to many of my ancestors, and not taken lightly

by me. Given that Jewish people have historically had their belongings repeatedly stripped from them, it feels like a luxury to surround myself with physical monuments to my memories. Having the ability "to hold close and care deeply for objects and people that have historically been taken away,"[xxiii] to take advantage of the opportunities we have to make our memories as visible and permanent as we can, allows us to honour, to the greatest extent possible, those who came before us who were far more restricted. Really, I have never been able to make sense of the notion of letting go in any area of my life. Historians and archaeologists spend decades searching for the smallest details and relics to fit together the pieces of narratives lost to time. I do not want my life and my stories to be lost in time; I do not want anything to be lost to time. To have a grasp on anything that helps me to tell a part of my story – even if only to myself – is a gift I cannot justify relinquishing. Holding on to objects is not only a method for remembering, but also a testament to one's "will to remember."[xxiv]

This tendency to materialize memory, keeping things as a way of keeping record, can certainly provide some level of assurance, but it also comes with its own emotional complications. Most obvious among them, perhaps, is that by externalizing our memories we make them more difficult to avoid. There are many things in life that one might want to remember, but also many that one might hope to forget. The funny thing about memory and objects is that we do not always get to decide which objects will signify which memories. Often the associations we make subconsciously stir up recollections of difficult moments. Physical monuments to memory also make our most personal moments accessible to the outside world, more likely to be asked about, inspected by others, and put in the path of scrutiny. Additionally, by keeping a physical record of our memories, we not only prove to ourselves that what we recall was real, but also that those things – the people and moments remembered – are, in fact, gone. By "[endowing] a thing with affect,"[xxv] we must confront the absence of the original source of the memories we seek to store; having proof of the past proves that it has passed. There is also the unfortunate reality of the impermanence of objects. We cannot truly hold on to things indefinitely, and therefore charging material possessions with emotional value creates a situation in which we must eventually, consciously, part with objects that are incredibly meaningful. Very few things can really last forever. I cannot stop the silk fibers of my Bubbie's** scarf from disintegrating, even if I avoid wearing it, and I could

not stop her collection of tiny glass animals from shattering when the shelf on my bedroom wall collapsed last spring. Realistically, my memory of her is not reliant upon the little box of glass shards or the scarf stowed away in my closet, but the idea of getting rid of her things – even sad and broken things – still makes me feel as though I would be losing a part of her.[xxvi] What all this boils down to is that when we find ourselves surrounded by materializations and monuments of memories, we also find ourselves "[vulnerable] to the throes of nostalgia, [susceptible] to the temptation of looking back at something that provokes mixed feelings."[xxvii] To be a person who collects in this way, who lives in layers of inherited objects and nostalgia for old times, is to know both the comfort of warm memories and the melancholy of those less pleasant, and to learn to live in and appreciate the bittersweet.

It would be fair to assert that we have yet to find a perfect system of storing memory. Whether or not there is a perfect method to be found, or if perfectly reliable true-to-life accounts of all our memories would even serve to benefit us, is impossible to say. Still, our conscious and subconscious minds continue to seek ways to turn our memories into something tangible, visible, substantial. To turn toward the comfort of memory in tough times can be effective, sure, but lonely. Hanging on to souvenirs and keepsakes and tiny monuments that recall the past, creating art and music and literature inspired by our own personal histories, trying to make physical and real the things we know inside is a way of externalizing that comfort for now, and of preserving our memories for later. We try to find ways to keep the things and people and places we love alive so that we can continue to share our time on earth with all that means the most to us, and so that one day when we, too, are gone, our memories might find a way of living on.

* A Ukrainian word for Grandmother, my maternal grandmother Anne z"l
** A Yiddish word for Grandmother, my paternal grandmother Hinda z"l

March, 2022
Edited by Donna Jones and Zoë Lebrun.
Made possible thanks to inspiring work by, compelling conversations with, and wonderful support from Blair Fornwald, Lauren Prousky, Natalie Hunter, and Shellie Zhang.

i László Munteán, Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik, "Things to Remember: Introduction to Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture," in Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 1, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46475.

ii Gregorio Zlotnik and Aaron Vansintjan, “Memory: An Extended Definition,” Frontiers in Psychology 10 (November 7, 2019): 1, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02523.
iii Kerwin Lee Klein. “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse.” Representations, no. 69 (2000): 135. https://doi.org/10.2307/2902903.
iv Ibid.
v Daniele Salerno, “A Semiotic Theory of Memory: between Movement and Form*,” Semiotica 241 (2021): 95, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0125
vi Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” New German Critique, 65 (1995): 126. https://doi.org/10.2307/488538.
vii Daniele Salerno, “A Semiotic Theory of Memory: between Movement and Form*,” Semiotica 241 (2021): 91, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0125
viii Gregorio Zlotnik and Aaron Vansintjan, “Memory: An Extended Definition,” Frontiers in Psychology 10 (November 7, 2019): 2, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02523.
ix Ibid., 3
x Ibid., 4
xi “How Memory Works,” The Derek Bok Centre for Teaching and Learning (Harvard University, n.d.), https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works.
xii Ibid.
xiii Ibid.
xiv Ibid.
xv Danielle Campoamor, “Why We Reach for Nostalgia in Times of Crisis,” The New York Times (The New York Times Company, July 28, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/smarter-living/coronavirus-nostalgia.html.
xvi Ibid.
xvii “How Memory Works,” The Derek Bok Centre for Teaching and Learning (Harvard University, n.d.), https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works.
xviii Daniele Salerno, “A Semiotic Theory of Memory: between Movement and Form*,” Semiotica 241 (2021): 88, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0125
xix Marla Paul, “Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game Each Time You Recall an Event, Your Brain Distorts It,” Northwestern Now (Northwestern University, September 19, 2012), https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game.
xx Daniele Salerno, “A Semiotic Theory of Memory: between Movement and Form*,” Semiotica 241 (2021): 90, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0125
xxi László Munteán, Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik, “Things to Remember: Introduction to Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture,” in Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 2, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46475.
xxii Ibid., 13
xxiii Lauren Prousky, “To Build Tiny Monuments Is to Gather What's There,” Lauren Prousky, n.d., https://www.laurenprousky.com/To-build-tiny-monuments-is-to-gather-what-s-there.
xxiv László Munteán, Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik, “Things to Remember: Introduction to Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture,” in Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 2, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46475.
xxv Ibid., 15
xxvi Arielle Bernstein, “Marie Kondo and the Privilege of Clutter,” The Atlantic (The Atlantic Monthly Group, March 25, 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/marie-kondo-and-the-privilege-of-clutter/475266/.
xxvii Ibid.

Bibliography

Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” New German Critique, 65 (1995): 125–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/488538.

Bernstein, Arielle. “Marie Kondo and the Privilege of Clutter.” The Atlantic. The Atlantic Monthly Group, March 25, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/marie-kondo-and-the-privilege-of-clutter/475266/.

Campoamor, Danielle. “Why We Reach for Nostalgia in Times of Crisis.” The New York Times. The New York Times Company, July 28, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/smarter-living/coronavirus-nostalgia.html.

“How Memory Works.” The Derek Bok Centre for Teaching and Learning. Harvard University, n.d. https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works.

Klein, Kerwin Lee. “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse.” Representations, no. 69 (2000): 127–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/2902903.

Munteán, László, Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik. “Things to Remember: Introduction to Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture.” In Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture, 1–25. New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46475.

Paul, Marla. “Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game Each Time You Recall an Event, Your Brain Distorts It.” Northwestern Now. Northwestern University, September 19, 2012. https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game.

Prousky, Lauren. “To Build Tiny Monuments Is to Gather What's There.” Lauren Prousky, n.d. https://www.laurenprousky.com/To-build-tiny-monuments-is-to-gather-what-s-there.

Salerno, Daniele. “A Semiotic Theory of Memory: between Movement and Form*.” Semiotica 241 (2021): 87–119. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0125.

Zlotnik, Gregorio, and Aaron Vansintjan. “Memory: An Extended Definition.” Frontiers in Psychology 10 (November 7, 2019): 1–5. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02523.