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Original Citation

Andersdotter, Sara (2010) Déjà-experiencé – Pastness, Personal Narratives, Memory and Metaphorlessness Discussed Through a Practice-Led Research Project. In: Narrative, Memory and Ordinary Lives. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 25-38. ISBN 978-1-86218-090-1

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/9577/

2 Déjà-experiencé – Pastness, Personal Narratives, Memory and Metaphorlessness Discussed Through a Practice-Led Research Project

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> Later, when he had time to reflect on these events, he would manage to piece together his encounter with the woman. But that was the work of memory, and remembered things, he knew, had a tendency to subvert the things remembered. As a consequence, he could never be sure of any of it. (Auster, 1999: 13)

Introduction

This paper examines how roles of memory, notions of pastness and belonging interact within a contemporary art practice in a practice-led PhD project. It aims to challenge generally held ideas of the functions of memory that are based on outdated metaphors and expressions, in order to go beyond what has already been discovered and search for new forms of expression.

The importance of this research project lies in the hunt for an art practice that circumvents repetition of 'the same', the expected, the 'already discovered', deceptive or erroneous notions of the themes involved in my practice; an art practice that poses encounters and challenges preconceived ideas of how pastness and our experiences of it can be expressed. Gilles Deleuze hence serves as a key figure within my research; across his oeuvre he encourages experimentation, the creation of new concepts, the creative discarding of that which has already been discovered, and the disruption of dominant languages (2004).

The paper will discuss various historical and contextual relations, before connecting to the art practice that drives this research project, and will reference not only other art practices and Deleuzian thought, but also photographic theory, fictional writing and a brief history of metaphors of memory.

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Removal of Presuppositions

The research project, commenced in 2006, is formed around questions of how memory is expressed through art practices, language and theory, with the aim of developing a practice that discusses memory, or *experiences of pastness*, beyond representation, beyond the metaphor. Such an endeavour involves a battle with presupposed ideas of what memory and the past 'are', and how these can / cannot be expressed or communicated.

Problematic contentious relations between memory, personal narratives and photography became clear in the early stages of this project; I started the research project by focussing on my inability to recognise my childhood in my family photographs; these frames did not seem to match, adequately reflect or represent my internal experiences of memories of my childhood. I began to wonder how these *internal experiences* can be discussed, expressed or reflected upon within an art practice and in the wider cultural context.

The results of a pre-doctoral survey into how family photographs and memory are considered stood in stark contrast with my own experiences (Andersdotter, 2005), leading to an initial critique of how metaphors inform, or influence, thought. 60 participants across a range of age groups, professions, locations and nationalities gave their responses to questions on their thoughts and feelings about their family albums. One of the questions, *How would you describe a family photograph*, resulted in a 45% response that it is *A 'physical' memory* (see *fig 1*). Other responses to this question included *An aid for memory*, *An aid for telling a narrative* or *A mere object*, with the additional *a communication tool*, *a piece of evidence* and *a tool for bridging distances*.

Figure 1

☐	A 'physical' memory (45%)
■	An aid for (37.5%)
▨	An aid for telling a narrative (11.5%)
▦	A mere object (1.25%)
⊞	Other (5%)
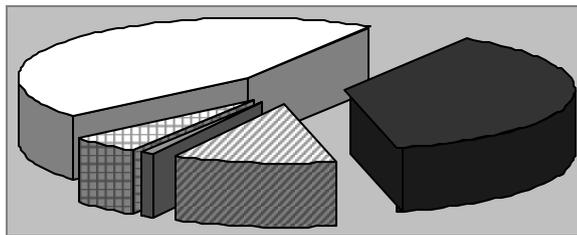
A question from a 2005 survey with 60 participants answering questions on family photographs and memory. Participants answering 'Other' to this specific question gave examples such as "a communication tool", "a piece of evidence" and "a tool for bridging distances".

(Andersdotter 2005)

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Where possible, one-to-one interviews were carried out with some of the participants after the survey was completed. When asked about the response *A 'physical' memory* to this particular question the participants appeared to feel strongly about the photograph's role as a *physical* memory.

There appeared to be a gap between my own attitude and wider cultural expectations of photography to function in a particular manner, to encapsulate, evidence, freeze, preserve and accurately reflect the past in the form of 'a memory'. My experiences of encounters with photographs had led to a particular viewpoint, whilst my understanding of memory reflected something entirely different from photographs; something fleeting, something vague, unsettled and mutable, a present absence, sometimes almost graspable, and at times unpredictable. This gap became a point of scrutiny within my research, a gap that demanded a removal of presuppositions.

The eradication of pre-existing beliefs and opinions before attending to a question may be an ideal prerequisite, however, this is a difficult and complex undertaking, a problematic task that Gilles Deleuze outlines in the chapter *The Image of Thought* in his primary doctoral thesis *Difference and Repetition* (2004: 164-213). He criticises the use of 'commonly held ideas' as foundations for a theory, and discusses the prevalence of such applications: 'Many people have an interest in saying that everybody knows "this", that everybody recognises this, or that nobody can deny it' (ibid 166); but adds that such theories will only hold as long as they remain unchallenged. Deleuze does, however, stress the difficulty in removing presumptions and dominant beliefs: 'Where to begin in philosophy has always – rightly – been regarded as a very delicate problem, for beginning means eliminating all presuppositions' (ibid: 164). Baruch Spinoza, by whom Deleuze has his acknowledged influences, also addressed this problem, and warned that it is our own knowledge that limits us to 'inadequate ideas' (Buchanan 2000 5). Deleuze's search for 'adequate ideas' means a disentanglement from set beliefs and ideologies, and an aim for absolute freedom of thought (ibid 6), however utopian such aims would be.

Metaphorless Utopias

Though we may have come to rely on metaphors to the point where we cannot linguistically do without them (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), it is nonetheless important to acknowledge and question our usage of these. In essence, metaphors simplify the often complex concepts or structures they are designed to communicate, and confusion between context and expression occur. A revision of traditional communication models that allow for such confusions may be a difficult, if not quixotic undertaking, however, it may lead to an

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autonomy of concepts and systems with their own values, meanings and distinctive structures.

Difficulties in discussing Memory

Douwe Draaisma's well-illustrated *Metaphors of Memory* (2000) gives a wide overview of a range of known allegorical descriptions of memory, dating back to Antiquity and Aristotle. If we were to crudely summarise these, we can see that this history can roughly be described as a looping of a few strands of ideas in regards to memory: images, and writing, architecture, and mechanical devices or materials used within the sciences (see *fig 2*).

Figure 2
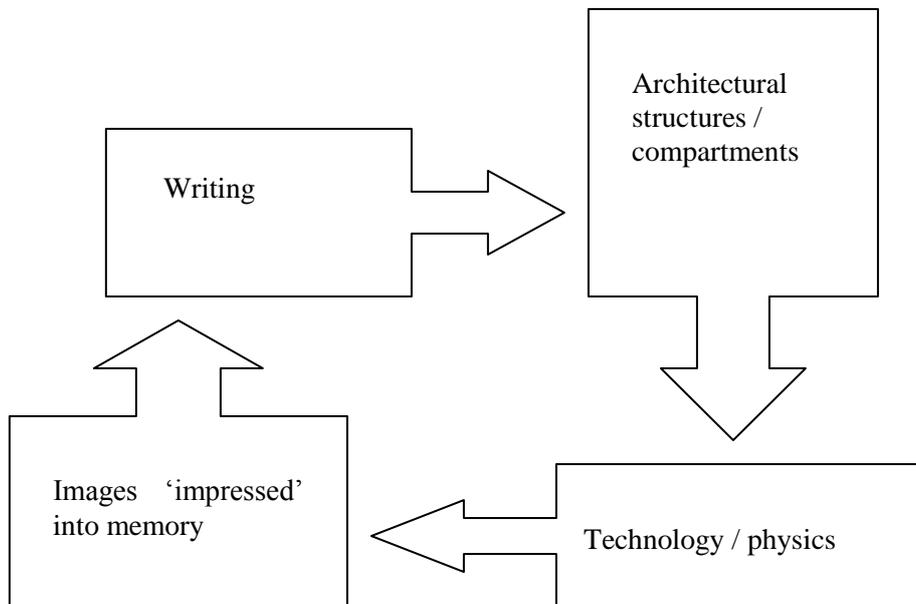
These four basic categories, containing recurring ideas and themes, have since Antiquity been expressed in a variety of forms, from Aristotle's classic wax tablet metaphor, in which memories were impressed into the wax of the soul, leaving a permanent *eikon* or image, to the Socratic 'internal scribe' writing in the soul, which initiated the idea of the problematic 'memory trace' that was still referred to in the 20th Century. Antiquity also presented architectural or compartmental theories of memory, which gave rise to a number of metaphors,

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from temples and churches, to palaces and storage rooms. These first three strands remained dominant throughout the Middle Ages, and were only superseded by the mechanical, technical or scientific metaphors from the Enlightenment onwards, aside from a short interruption by Romanticism.

The vague and ungraspable nature of memory has undoubtedly led to this wide range of metaphors in attempts to grasp, understand and communicate its properties (see *fig 3*), however, it is questionable whether we have come to a greater cultural or scientific understanding of memory and our experiences 'pastness'.

Figure 3

- Wax tablet / slab of wax
- Painting; portrait
- Aviary / bird cage
- Storage room; storehouse; depository
- Compartment; drawer; niche; cell; treasure chamber
- Cavern
- Temple; palace; cathedral
- Book (with an 'internal scribe' / 'engraver' / 'painter'); library; mystic writing pad (Freud)

- Attic
- Phosphorescent material
- Mirror
- Landscape
- Ravine; abyss
- Depth of the ocean
- Stream; brook; creek
- Forest
- Vast labyrinth
- Photograph; gallery of photographs; album; compound photographs; magic lantern slides
- Mechanical piano

- Loom
- Phonograph; album of phonographic sheets
- Switchboard at a central telephone station
- Railway track (memory trace theory; necessitating a 'mental switchmnan')
- Film; cinematic relations
- Computer
- Hologram

(Draaisma, 2000)

The Photographic Metaphor

The photograph, a result of a multitude of both sequential and parallel scientific research projects (Batchen, 1997), became associated with memory in its early stages in the 19th Century (Draaisma, 2000: 69, 104). However, it was not without its critics; the writer Johann Huber and scientist Théodule Ribot were quick to oppose any photographic relations to memory (ibid: 123, 125). Yet, the metaphor survived.

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The photographic metaphor of memory's inadequacy lies in its inability to account for many of memory's characteristics – only a chosen few – and since a majority of metaphors of memory are based on already existing objects, systems, concepts or narratives, they too are inadequate. The photographic metaphor is seen through and supported by terminology including expressions such as 'picturing' or 'visualising' 'memory images', 'in our mind's eye' in regards to remembering, and photographs are often referred to *as* material memories, linguistically and cognitively blurring the line between physical objects and metaphysical ideas.

Figure 4
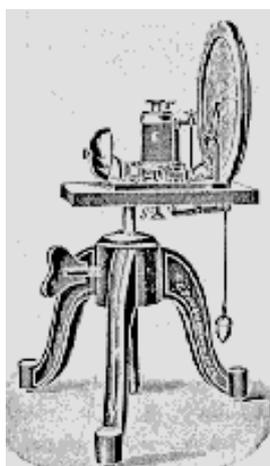
Ranschburg's apparatus for investigation of comprehension, association and memory, 1903

Illustration used with permission from Dr Thomas Perera at Montclair University
© http://chss.montclair.edu/psychology/museum

Photographs, Memory and Sensation

Within photographic theory, the relationships between photographs and memory are discussed to various degrees. Photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen's *Forget Me Not* (2004) evidences some of these discussions, noting that:

> Some of photography's most insightful critics have argued that photography and memory do not mix, that one even precludes the other… [Roland] Barthes, for example, has claimed that 'not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory… but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory'… for Barthes, it seems, memory is not much image as sensation.   (ibid 15)

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This 'sensation', as different from 'image', is further explored in Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1979/1993), in a discussion on Marcel Proust's *A la Recherché du temps Perdu* and Proust's dissatisfaction with photographic images. Proust's often referenced protagonist experiences surges of involuntary memories from the taste and texture perceived from consuming a tea-saturated *petite madeleine* (2003: 50); here, the experience is overpoweringly nostalgic and sensual – in place of the image, textures, flavours and scents coalesce and form a 'sensation'. This experience, triggered by what Deleuze in the chapter *The Secondary Role of Memory* in *Proust and Signs* (2000: 52-66) calls a 'sensuous sign', is a sign that demands 'reading', interpretation; hence, the *petite madeleine* in the case of Proust becomes synonymous with Combray.

This 'sensation', ultimately, derives from a sense of longing and desire for what cannot be physically returned to. With this notion of the 'sensation' in mind, Batchen notes:

> To induce the full, sensorial experience of involuntary memory, a photograph must be transformed. Something must be done to the photograph to pull it (and us) out of the past and into the present. (2004: 94)

This 'something' may take the form of personal narratives, a drawn identification with that image and its contents. However, such links are inherently fragile, impermanent, shifting, and difficult to transfer or communicate. The photograph as a 'sensuous sign' to the past, a monument, commands reading. This preservation of matter or 'sensations' through these monuments do not encourage recall; instead, these monuments demand *fabrication* (Thanem, 2001: 32). The recollection-fabrication act hence requires what Mieke Bal calls a 'narrative agent' who through using reflections of the past as a 'narrative device' is able to 'manipulate the linearity of time' (2000: 8); a narration emanating from the images. The photograph here, as a 'sensuous sign' attached to 'narrative devices', becomes a mise en abyme; an object generating infinite images, narratives and ideas within itself *as* an image, narrative and idea.

Fleeting reflections on memory

If we consider the past to be uninhabitable, a point to which we cannot return, and a part of what Deleuze refers to, in Bergsonian terms, as 'that which makes the present pass' (2004: 80), we find ourselves in an ever shifting continuum of events. How do we reflect or express this accumulation of pastness, or our experiences of it, as it pushes the present into being?

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Art and Memory

I set out wanting to propose a less static manner of speaking of memory, a less ocularcentric approach, proposing, perhaps, a shift from a déjà-vu to a déjà-experiencée. In terms of 'making art', that meant moving away from the pure image to working with space, or more accurately, towards creating works to be *encountered* in space.

Looking towards other art practices with similar ambitions resulted primarily in examples within installation art. Having become 'restless with the flat surface of the screen' and letting his work 'evolve into the rest of the space' (www.broadartfoundation.org), the contemporary artist Doug Aitken's 2002 *new skin* video installation uses more than just moving images; it is a work that looks both at video *and* space, pushing the boundaries of the 2-dimentionality of film. Four projections draw together on large, elliptical display screens, both revealing Aitken's interest in the non-linearity of memory and perception, as well as allowing the viewers to spatially experience the piece. The video exposes the affecting descent to blindness of a young woman, desperately searching her flat for images in order to 'memorise' them before losing her sight completely. She knows that she is facing an 'internal' existence, hoping to rely on her memories of experiencing the 'external world' in order to remain connected with it. As she scrutinises the images, she finds that these new visual impressions seem to rub out earlier memories, revealing: 'The more I see, the less I believe in the images I find' (ibid).

Other expressions of non-linearity and spatial considerations of memory and personal narratives include Tacita Dean's *Totality* from 2000, or her 1996/97 piece *Disappearance at Sea*, in which the central character finds himself lost in the vastness of the sea. Dean's preoccupations with the individual's experience durée, notions of time, space and human longing heavily influence her work in the desire for creating an experience in which the viewer becomes immersed in the space; noting that she wants them to 'feel drenched in time' (Szymczyk, 2005: 78).

Navigating Through New Terrains

My art practice, in the search of a way of connecting to my past and a way of addressing memory beyond the metaphor, deals with experiences of pastness, nomadic existences, loss and disconnection. These issues may be personal, but still reflect our – as living beings – relationship to the past and that which cannot be returned to.

Unable to connect to the past through my family photographs, I decided to return to my native Sweden in order to see what I do connect with. This

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decision has turned into regular journeys, each time with the conviction that 'this time' I will connect, 'this time' I will find that sense of belonging. And I leave for Sweden, and I arrive, only to realise the actuality of my nomadic existence.

This 'return' has come to serve as a key feature in my work, as it has turned out to be a futile return; I cannot 'come back' to my place of birth 'as it was', I remain the 'outsider'. The sense of futility here, much like the mnemonic device, derives from a fundamental inability to return; the memory trigger only offers one sense of a 'return' to what has-been, a metaphysical but never a physical return to the past. In my practice, however, I physically do return to my country, but it has ceased to be what it once was for me, and I am only able to connect with it and my past through these journeys in a much severed manner. Our uses of the memory-trigger – like my journeys 'back' – are, however, not futile in a negative sense; on the contrary, I believe it is very important to acknowledge this futility and understand what it means, and does. Here, the realisation of the futility or the failure becomes a valued and useful element – *understanding* that we are unable to return. This 'thinking-through' practice as a process has formed my own understanding of this non-return.

The impossible return, leaving us in a permanent form of exile from the past, is actualised through the making of the present – Henri Bergson (1988) would have claimed that it is this past that pushes the present into being, a present that is nothing but a contraction of the entirety of our past – and it is by realising this impossibility of such a return that we are faced with time, and ultimately our own mortality. Roland Barthes, alongside Susan Sontag, realises the memento mori of the photographic image, and he elaborates on the intricate relationship between photographs and the realisation of our imminent death in *Camera Lucida* (1993), in a discussion on the marking of time that reveals his discomfort over the sound of the shutter closing, as it represents another instant passed, and another step towards his inevitable death.

Hunting

My continuous journeys to Sweden have resulted in a series of photographs of hunting towers (Andersdotter, 2009) that are found scattered across the rural landscape – strange non-loci that I visit; common unregulated structures, unmarked on maps (see *fig 5 and 6*). They do, however, through their ubiquity across the Swedish landscape form an important part in my identification of that landscape. They form a part of the Swedish psyche, of my memories of my childhood, and form a rare connection between myself and my place of birth, the country I 'should' be able to relate to and consider 'home'. Though anyone may climb up, enter, sit in, and occupy these towers without permission from

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the hunter or hunting team who built them, they are purpose built structures for the act of killing – viewing, hiding, waiting, aiming, watching, firing, from an elevated point.

Figure 5

Sara Andersdotter, *Hunting Tower*, C-type photograph, 2007

These towers have come to serve as representations of my childhood; the kind of childhood that was never documented photographically, but is yet remembered. In this search for a way of relating to previous, undocumented experiences, I have tried to reflect on them in various manners – often taking into consideration the emotional and connective values of materials – mainly found materials – temporal tensions and the bodily experience of particular encounters, primarily in terms of installation work.

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Figure 6
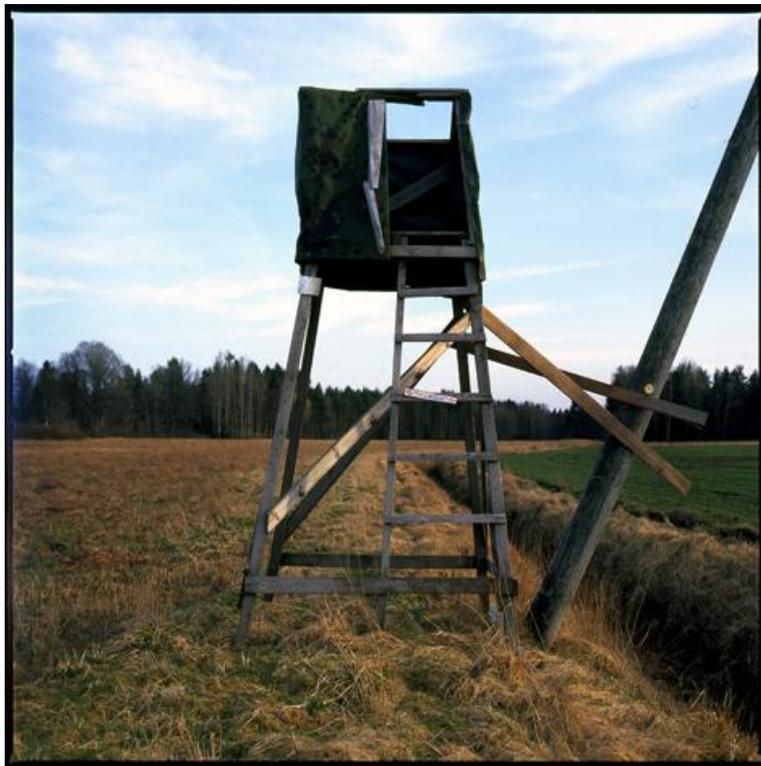
Sara Andersdotter, *Hunting Tower*, C-type photograph, 2009

Aside from the series of photographs of hunting towers, I have created installations on memories of coming to terms with certain aspects of life – things that most of us learn at some point in childhood – predominantly on death, on the sudden understanding of the precariousness of life, and the realisation of adulthood as the next but not the final stage of existence. One such installation, *She felt empty in my hand* (see *fig 7*), consisted of several parts; a life size hunting tower-like structure built inside the exhibition space, a square of grass grown in the exhibition space on soil brought over from Sweden, a small taxidermied bird resting on the grass, a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling above the grass, and an audio recording of the sound of breathing emanating from the top of the enclosed tower.

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Figure 7

Sara Andersdotter, *She felt empty in my hand (Learning about Death)*, installation [wooden tower, grass, Swedish soil, taxidermy bird, light bulb, audio piece (breathing), brown wrapping paper, map], 2009

The tower, reaching all the way up to the ceiling, was inaccessible, and the dead bird was placed out of reach on the grass; both alluded to the impossibility of physical return and access to that which has passed. There was a tension between the obvious lifelessness of the bird and the sound of breathing, which could be taken as an attempt to breathe life into the dead bird, though there are also connections between my childhood experiences leading to recognition of the inevitability of death, and a deeper cultural acceptance of death as a part of life. The installation provided encounters with various materials, but it also played on the tensions between those materials; tensions that could only be felt in their presence. The inability to reach or to access, the bringing together of familiar materials, and the translocationary nature of the exhibition mirror my feelings about the very experience of memory – something familiar, fleeting, mobile but also part of that which cannot be returned to.

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Conclusion

This paper was written with a particular art practice in mind, a practice that is formed around notions of memory, pastness, narratives and personal identity within a nomadic existence, and the contextual and historical issues that such a practice references. The purpose of this research is to push the boundaries and challenge ideas of how these issues can be reflected upon in an art practice, in order to create new forms of experiences within art practices.

The journey is a recurring element of my practice, which appears to be as elusive as the notions of memory I have attempted to tackle in this paper. However, it seems as if I am only able to connect to experiences of pastness through the journey itself; an 'event' that can only be defined through movement and never through that which is fixed – it is to the journey that I belong – a shifting sense of 'home'.

Metaphors are vital to our language, but I also believe that it is important to bear in mind that they have a *pharmakon* effect; the double-edged ability to be both constructive and deceptive at the same time. In terms of my field of study, metaphors generally appear to have obscured rather than clarified our understanding of memory, which has led to ill-informed expectations of external systems such as photographic images, in order to calm the anxiety of the unknown – here memory, as it is still largely an unknown phenomenon.

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