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Memory as Medium?

By Isabella Ellaheh Hughes

Memory is identity. I have believed this since… oh, since I can remember. You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life, you cease to be, even before death.

-Julian Barnes[1]

In art, and particularly art being produced since the 1960s, the concept of 'medium' is extremely broad, lending it an inherently illusive quality. Much like it is impossible to reach a one-size-fits-all definition for the term 'art', the same can be said for 'medium'. Inherent to art being produced in the 21st century, as well as with much of the art that was created in the last century, is an unequivocal amount of ambiguity.

It is fully accepted by those operating in the peculiar ecosystem of the global, contemporary art world that anything from bodily fluids (Marc Quinn's ongoing *Self* series of portraits, which are composed out of the artists' frozen blood, or Daniela Kostova and Olivia Robinson's *Waste to Work* ongoing series, which uses sweat to power galvanic batteries[2]), to garish, giant stuffed animals cobbled together (seen in the work of the late Mike Kelley), or remnants of captured breath of an artist (Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Breath*), are all legitimate mediums. These somewhat obscure, yet nonetheless accepted and legitimised (via the vehicle of the art market; collectors and institutions that acquire them; writers and critics who cover them; and curators who include them in exhibitions) mediums are transformed by the artist's (or artist assistants') hand and/or conceptual projection, into an 'artwork'. These artworks often go on to fetch millions of dollars, as in the case of Kelley, whose largest sculpture was sold to MoMA in 2013 for $4.15 million, with *The Wall Street Journal*[3] reporting on the news of this acquisition in an almost comedic fashion, with the headline, 'MoMA Buys Stuffed-Animal Artwork for More Than $4 Million'. Nonetheless, even in an era where fluids and stuffed animals are acceptable mediums, the idea of memory operating *independently* as medium, rather than a conceptual framework, idea, or 'point of inspiration' behind a piece, has rarely been

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1 Keeley, Allison, *The Art of Identity: Memory as the Maker.* Available from: < *http://www.theharvardadvocate.com/content/art-identity-memory-maker*>. [2 January 2015].

2 *Waste to Work*. Available from <http://oliviarobinson.com/site/wastework.html>. [4 January 2015]

3 Crow, Kelly, *MoMA Buys Stuffed Animal Artwork For More Than $4 Million.* Available from < http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/03/15/moma-buys-stuffed-animal-artwork-for-more-than-4-million/> [4 January 2015]

examined critically and reflectively by curators, critics, and theorists alike. This raises then the question: can memory be a medium in its own right?

As curator Mandy Merzaban writes in the introductory text from the first part of the two-part exhibition, *aide-mémoire,* which opened in December 2014: '*aide-mémoire* is a French term that translates as an *aid to memory* often pertaining to notes, the exhibition presents a collection of photographs, videos and sculptures, that can elicit subjective responses from spectators'. Merzaban goes on to explain that 'many of the artists in this exhibition reference memories that are personal or collective, showing how they can be recorded or fictionalised through aesthetic creation.'

Memory as identity, whether personal or collective, real, or fictionalised iterations and reiterations of reality, is very much relevant to the works in *aide-mémoire*, as well as to numerous other artists and subsequently the artworks they produce that are not part of this exhibition. With memory being so fundamental in the creation of artworks, why then has memory been largely left unexamined regarding its agency as a medium, rather than mere point of inspiration and/or idea for an artwork? One possible answer as to why memory has been left out of the conversation of medium is due to the personal and intangible nature of memories themselves, which has left memory largely unexamined as an ephemeral medium in its own right. However, is memory no more intangible than many of the mediums referenced earlier, such as the physical and decaying remnants of an artist's captured breath, or collections of human sweat? With artists today operating increasingly in a multiplicity of artistic identities, often serving as one-part social historian, cultural theorist, along with performance artist, mixed-media artists, photographer, etc. perhaps now, more than ever it is important to examine and legitimise the idea of memory as medium, simply because it can provide some orderly framework for connecting disparate artistic practices, giving some semblance and order amidst the chaos and ambiguity that perpetually pervades the field of contemporary art.

In many ways, the curatorial framework put forth in *aide-mémoire* and work by the artists included in the exhibition, directly opens up the conversation and offers room for rumination as to whether or not memory can be a medium in its own right. Rather than offering a definitive answer in this essay, perhaps it is best for readers and viewers to reach their own conclusion based on their experience and engagement with the artworks that are part of *aide-mémoire*, as well as through the responses collected by some of the participating artists below, who were posed with the following question:

How does memory operate as medium in your practice?

Adel Abidin: *Memory works as a crucial matter of absence in my work. In order to claim its absence, I need to claim its presence first. That is, it is something that my work does not entirely rely on, nor creates itself from the flame of memory. However, it is indeed an element that leaves its traces on my artistic practice. The main functioning component in my work is my own perception, which interludes between the memory and the created artwork. The point is what I do with 'the memory' (here*

I refer to any event, notion or subject that is stored in the 'memory compartment' of my brain), how far I take it away from my childhood, my country, my earlier life and in which format I deliver to the viewer.

Youssef Nabil: *Memory plays a very important part in my work, as all my subjects are related to cinema, old black-and-white Egyptian movies that I still remember and grew up watching on TV. This all inspired me and made me want to tell my stories in a cinematic way, same with my technique of hand-painting on black-and-white photographs, which also came from that era. In my first film, You Never Left, I wanted to talk about my country, Egypt, which still lives within me, in my memories and has never really left me, no matter where I go.*

Ziad Dalloul: *I think memory is a fundamental pillar of my work, it contains [on a practical level] knowledge and expertise, but it is especially a great way to recharge your childhood, an ultimate and inexhaustible reservoir of images, colours, smells, sensations, and wonders. The memories in my work are raw materials, like pencils and colour pigments.*

Nedim Kufi*: This particular questions opens up several channels that go back in time. I can describe them as a network of canals in an imaginary orchard. The water disappears into the orchard, but reemerges as subjective, affective ramifications that blossom in imagination as branches, which keep stretching out of a tree of events and people until the moment ends. What I am suggesting here is that my artistic practice of photographic memory is a different type of documentation.*

It is not easy to outline or confine 'memory' within a specific, conventional definition as long as we are immersed in visual and technical theory. Thus, my experience after twenty years away from my country of origin tells me that memory is a set of multiple accumulations. I have been reading so much lately about what subconsciousness is and how it operates. This drew me closer to memory's imagination, which is abundant with photographic elements.

My extreme interest in old images goes beyond the idea of nostalgia or yearning for the past itself. It seriously involves the depth of a very special way of looking that pierces through the unknown which we long for more than we do towards elements already there in the image. I specifically refuse the idea of memory being a temporary suspension of reality, or a sedative, regardless of how special, unique or important that memory is. It has to be an organic motive, which produces shadows to the memory itself.

If a memory is not an act of escape, it is undoubtedly an act of travelling.

Ali Cherri*: Having lived in a city with a violent and charged history, from Civil War, to assassinations, to social unrest, I consider memory an artifice and a construct. Whether a war memory is a traumatic memory or not, the act of remembering brings spectre of the re-emergence of experiences, and of loss and dread. In my practice, the personal autobiographical memory is functionally and structurally related to the*

creation of cultural myths and social narratives. When I use "I remember," the "I" signifies the collective social body and not my own personal story. Through this porosity between the personal and the public, I try to blur what we consider as fact, dissolving personal memory into the collective memory.

That's how in one of my earliest videos, "Un Cercle autour du Soleil," I appropriate Yukio Mishima's childhood Second War memoirs in Japan, to talk about my childhood in a war-torn Beirut.

Mohamad-Said Balbaaki: *Two experiences have played a crucial role in my work regarding memory:*

1. *Migration*
2. *The War [Lebanese-Israeli] in 2006*

Migration brings back loads of memories for me, recalling misery and despair, which has been impossible for me to forget. When I stand in front of one of my 'Heap' paintings, it literally re-enacts a whole set of memories lost in a pile of rubble, making it more difficult and challenging to remember as time continues forward. Images of war, destruction, displacement, and ruins reside in my paintings, which form a vague, yet strong picture on what I have experienced. As a result, 'Heap' becomes both a personal biography and also, part of a collective memory.

The War in 2006 visibly created a shift in my artistic approach. This shift took a historical and conceptual form; I started looking back in history through current events and city corners in search of a theme as a compensation of personal memories, which had been suppressed and lost. The more I search in history, the more I find myself as an outsider living in a current reality, which is continuously repeating the past, and possibly predicting an unknown future.

Jumana Manna: *Memory is the origin of all works of art.*

Abdelkader Benchamma: *Memory is essential for an artist and even more so for a draughtsman. For a draughtsman, looking leads to memorisation. You can see an object, or you can look at an object. These are two very different types of perception. When I look at an object, I print it visually with all its details, and it becomes a possible subject matter. Many of my drawings are realised directly without a sketch; however, they are not 'invented;' my hand tries to follow a mental image of a scene or an object shaped by a subtle blend of memory and imagination.*

The schism between the object and its memory is equally interesting because this schism creates sliding and mistakes in reproduction, which constitutes one component of the nature of drawing. Drawing doesn't indeed reproduce reality, but proposes another vision. Memory is also subjective: one same event won't be recounted the same way, depending on who has observed it. Memory is therefore blended intimately with fiction.

Sadik Kwaish Alfraji: *It's unimaginable to see a work of art where memory has not been part of the essence of its creation process. Memory is life itself- the force that negates death and grants our existence the ability to jump towards the future and form consciousness, imagination and the distinctive features of people and their identities. Memory cannot be without imagination, and imagination in turn, cannot survive without memory.*

Memory not only travels to the past, but also enables imagination. This imagination derived from memory has the power of shaping ideas, concepts and images. Here, memory is a medium, a tool and a vast space for creativity.

Memory is an intrinsic element of all the concepts and ideas associated with my practice which tackles daily existence with all the involved nostalgia, thoughts and feelings drifting inside the heart and mind, and stories unfolding in the past, present and future. Nonetheless, I cannot draw a line that separates what is past and what is not, regarding the topics of my works. All elements interlock and boundaries are blurred. I may be working on a childhood dream, but as I move on, it takes the shape of the present, breaking all the barriers that limit it to a certain time. It is like memory, when associated with art, shuns its retrospective quality and stops in the middle of all the engagement to merge the past, the present and the future. This could be the reason, or one of the reasons, that what I produce is often floating in space with no clear indication of time, where memory is always present.