Memory Trace

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between memory and representation to photographic images. Through my practice of archive and image space deconstruction I investigate the ability of images to be traces of collective history and tangible representations of memory. My practice uses a feminist auto-ethnographical approach to challenge the notion that archives are assembled with objectivity. I deconstruct and fragment my own family archive as a way to address the way in which our preconceptions of photographic truth can lead to misrepresentations of identity and memory.

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Introduction

There are three major chapters in this document that cover the context for my art practice, the methodologies used, and describe the methods I employ. I begin with the chapter "The Archive & The Omission" as my practice itself begins within an inherited family photographic archive. My art practice asks how photographs function in relation to memory, truth, and representation in the context of image space and archives. I deconstruct and reassemble my own family archive as a means to examine the ability for images to be artifacts of existence and memory, traces and proof of a life-lived. As photographic archives are inseparable from memory, the next chapter "The Memory & The Apparatus" explores the relationship between memory and archives and questions what we want from images. Do images exist to be tangible representations of experience? Is the need to revisit and understand the past so strong that we must be able to pull its representation from a photo album and envelop it in our hands? I approach the archive as a disappearing trace, as the context and oral stories for these images are lost to time I question if their meaning shifts. How can I claim my own place within an inherited archive and shift my encounter from passive to active? How can I recognize the problematic nature of my own collected history that emphasizes male achievement while omitting my female relatives? I examine my own agency within the archive in the final chapter, "The Shadow & The Trace". This section covers my use of the self-reflexive method of autoethnography for both my research and art production as well as the future trajectory for my practice. Each chapter begins with an auto-ethnographical writing that gives insight to my own experience encountering and working through my family archive.

It is important to recognize my own situated experience of living in this present time in relation to the photographic discipline. I do not remember a time before the proliferation of digital images and the ubiquity of the camera. By the time I was born a hierarchy of images was already established[1] and digital image culture began pervading every element of Western society. The digitization of the image has shifted public

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[1] See Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *E-flux Journal*, vol. 10, Nov 2009, pp 1-9. PDF file.

perception of images to one of scepticism, one shift that has some scholars believe will lead to its death as an art medium[2]. How can I sustain an art practice within a photographic discourse when the apparatus of the camera has become synonymous and inseparable from Western society? How can I consolidate my conflicting feelings of the desire to take photographs while understanding their limitations as mimetic representations?

Figure 1. *Marilyn Lewis-Steer*, date unknown.

[2] See Batchen, Geoffrey. "Ectoplasm: Photography in the Digital Age" *Over Exposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, edited by Carol Squiers, 1999. pp 9-23. Print.

I am familiar with this place, a place I have been countless times. But there is a sense of fear that comes with complete darkness, even as it pervades a space that I once situated as my home.

You can never really go home.

My instinct causes me to reach above my head at the bottom of the stairs where I know there is a thread, my experience tells me this thread (when pulled) will turn on the light bulb that precariously hangs loose from the ceiling.

The archive I am seeking is in a dark basement, unfinished and cold. At one point it was supposed to be finished but eventually it was forgotten.

The force of my hand turns the light on and the bulb jerks wildly before settling in to a rhythmic swing. My shadow shifts across the room, unsure of where to settle.

I see my hand reach out to encounter the archive in front of me. I have seen it before but not with this intention of looking.

The book spines face me and each is different in form, only one constant remains the same between each one - my Grandmother's neat blocking printing denoting each book with a date and location.

Truthfully, I only posses this family archive because the patrimony was broken by my Grandmother.

From what I can gather these images situate themselves between the 1920's and the 1990's, although I understand that I make this conclusion based on the didactic information provided to me.

They seem to be markers for milestones, a graduation here, a family vacation there. These are images are photo-biographical, a history of my family before I was born and intended to live on after I am gone.

The Archive & The Omission

A family archive distinguishes itself as a collection of images belonging to and passed down through a generation of relatives for the purpose of posterity; in that sense it is not gathered by a traditional institution. The family archive acts as evidence, it is meant to tell a collective familial history to the viewer, to be auto-biographical. It is a way for the creator to re-visit and pass down their lived experience and memory. The role of the archive has been discussed extensively in an art-historical context, especially in its role of photographic truth. In his essay "Archives of the Fallen" Charles Merewether, a contemporary art-historian and writer, defines the role of photography within the archive by saying:

> Photography is critical to the practice and authority of the archive… it folds together history as representation and representation as history… The archive gains its authority to represent the past through an apparent neutrality, whereby difference is either erased or regulated (160).

Of course Merewether is referring to how the nature of collecting the archive controls the representations within it, and the general understanding that what we see presented to us in archives is an objective truth. My artistic practice is about questioning photographic truth through challenging the archival paradigm. In the text "The Body and the Archive" by art theorist and writer Allan Sekula, he describes opposition to archives as a method to portray the oppressed[3], in my own case I am challenging the patriarchal structures of archiving, particularly in family archives. By looking backwards and deconstructing photographic history I am presenting a contrary narrative to the contemporary need to imagine the future. While archives hold history it is also important to acknowledge that they can be myopic and purely reflective of their creators[4], my practice aims to recall what was forgotten and omitted.

The creator of this family archive sees their life reflected in images, objectivity in its assemblage is impossible and representation is controlled. The individual who

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[3] See Sekula Allan. "The Body and the Archive". *October*, vol. 39, 1986, pp. 345-389. PDF.

[4] For more on a "crisis of history" see Roelstraete, Dieter. "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art". *E-flux Journal*, vol. 4, 2009. Web. Accessed 01 January 2016.

constructs it chooses the collective history to share with future generations. While family archives are meant to be objective histories they fail in their subjective assemblage. In the essay "On the Concept of History*" German Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin spoke of this by saying: "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was'… Not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious" (3-4). Meaning the dead have no agency within the family archive, no choice in how they are represented, their identity is stored and arranged after their disappearance. While this quote serves to contextualize the disappearing traces within archives it is important to note the drastic differences in contexts. Benjamin is critiquing Marxist historicism and the idea of history being presented as a all-encompassing and truthful picture, he instead advocates for history as "self-standing experience"[5]. My interactions and disruptions within my own family archive are meant to acknowledge the gap between representation and the image, particularly within the archive which asserts itself as 'truth'.

The work *Untitled (Clusters)* begins with the family archive, I remove and deconstruct subjects within these images to create fragmentations (Figures 2 and 3). The term "deconstruction" in my artistic process is quite literal in a material sense, I cut away the figures from their photographic context, the act of cutting seems both precarious and violent. However the concept of "deconstruction" in my practice also refers to the act of revealing a flaw or bias within the archive[6]. I begin my process by scanning these archival images, I make no attempt to remove scratches or dust from the photographs; their age and wear are apparent. I want the images to carry the burden of time and age as this process is not about repairing history. The dust, scratches, and cracks act as a evidence of the photograph as a disappearing trace; they will all eventually fall to time. The process is iterative and often in flux, archival photographs are dematerialized to a digital space and then reproduced in print form. It is important to note I do not alter or deconstruct the original archival material itself, but

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[5] For more see Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory*, vol. 12, no. 4, August 1984. PDF file.

[6] See "Deconstruct" Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. Accessed 10 November 2016.

rather printed reproductions of these images[7]. With these image fragments I construct free form collages where the subjects are displaced from their context and arranged into new assemblages.

Figures 2 & 3. Brittany Nickerson, *Untitled (Cluster 1 & 5)*, 2016, archival matte freestanding collages, installation view, approx. 1' x 1' each.

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[7] I will discuss the use of reproductions further in this text in the chapter "The Shadow & The Trace".

The installation of this work has seen two forms, the first consisted of five separate clusters of freestanding image fragments (Figures 2 and 3). This method emphasized the lack of pictorial frame typically seen in photography, arranged to the confines of a typical rectangular image but lacking the definitive edges. The second installation used all of the fragments to create one long cluster that addresses a visual collective history (Figures 4 and 5). This installation method references a visual timeline that reflects my own linear experience of cataloging and deconstructing my archive. By reassembling and constructing an archived history I am asking how images can serve in the place of memory.

The process of working through this archive and the collage construction began with "punctum"[8], what "pricks" me within the photographs. While I use the term "punctum" to describe this process it is important to acknowledge the absolute subjectivity of it. While my selections are certainly tied to sentimentality or nostalgia I still feel my process has an aberrant quality. I found myself drawn to particular moments, figures, and even the categorization of the archive. As I worked through these images I found my process of collection shifted when I realized the original intent of the archive was placed on highlighting male achievement while women were either absent or seen only in roles of feminine domesticity. The archive as a power system was apparent to me, these collected photographs exerted control over the representations of my female relatives. From there my process shifted to addressing this problematic history by cutting away figures and fragmenting them from their image contexts in order to emphasize this absence in the archive. This process of deconstruction and collage gave me agency within my archive and a method in which to critique how oppressed figures are represented in archival structures[9].

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[8] "Punctum" was coined by Roland Barthes in the book *Camera Lucida*, it describes how we make connections with images, what "pricks" or "wounds" us within them. This describes a very personal meaning for the individual and because of its subjectivity it is not easily communicated through language but it describes what holds us to an image. For more See Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.

[9] For more on collage and feminist representation see Lippard, Lucy. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*. New Press, 1995.

Figure 4. Brittany Nickerson, *Untitled (Clusters)*, 2017, archival matte freestanding collage, installation view, approx. 12' x 3'.

Alongside the archival subjects I insert image fragments of my own hand into the collaged groups, my hand is arranged to manipulate or construct the other components. I visually reflect the process of unearthing the images within the archive and their deconstruction within the piece itself. *Untitled (Clusters)* is embedded with my act as artist-as-archivist and does not attempt to mask or hide the process of deconstruction.The disruption of these images brings what is absent to the forefront, figures are cut in half or hands are removed from the body; I use this method to question the validity of images to be traces for authenticity and truth. It also brings attention to the exclusions within my family archive, particularly the missing documentation of female achievement. In *Untitled (Clusters)* I bring the female figures of my history forward to question past representations and lost identities within my cumulative history. While family archiving is traditionally taken up by women it often emphasizes male achievement, by digging through my own archive I want to reclaim space for female figures of my collected history. In a broader context I am offering a

feminist critique of family archives and their assemblage, I want to examine the nature of history to march forward while leaving the forgotten behind.

Figure 5. Brittany Nickerson, *Untitled (Clusters)*, 2017, archival matte freestanding collage, detail view, approx. 12' x 3'.

Many contemporary artists have turned to archives as a source material for their practices, particularly in a contemporary context as archival material becomes more readily available on the Internet. In "An Archival Impulse" an essay by Hal Foster he comments on the contemporary trend of using archival images:

> Archival art is as much preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned
> less with absolute origins than with obscure traces, artists are often drawn to
> unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects… that might offer points of departure
> again (5).

My own practice stems from this sense of "obscure traces", I feel a particular longing to unearth representations in the archive that are limited by the conventions of static images. In the essay "The Way of the Shovel" curator Dieter Roelstraete discusses the contemporary need for artists to investigate the past in order to understand our relationships with history. Roelstraete uses the term "meta-historical mode" to describe a method of making that is about addressing forgetfulness and the process of remembering and forgetting (par. 2-3). *Untitled (Clusters)* is a way to contextualize my own relationship with my collective history that addresses purposeful omissions, it aims to create a process of remembrance from absence. In a wider context my practice addresses the problematic classifications of how we perceive and interpret history, it recovers and re-contextualizes voices that were forgotten within a photographic archive.

Contemporary artists working within archives and a photographic discourse include Tacita Dean and Esther Shalev-Gerz. Tacita Dean's practice has also come from the archive, *Girl Stowaway* a work created in 1994 is about the process as the artist-as-archivist and how the unearthing by the artist unveils the failure of the archive as an objective container for history. Dean's unearthing in *Girl Stowaway* is described by Foster in "An Archival Impulse": "In a sense her archival work is an allegory of archival work - as sometimes melancholic, often vertiginous, always incomplete" (12). *Girl Stowaway*, like my own series *Untitled (Clusters)* is less about tracing a specific historic truth and more concerned about the artist journey of uncovering. It's a idiosyncratic method of examining the process of archiving as an artist, to unearth figures that are stranded or omitted in documented history in order to better understand the present. Both of these works implicate the artist-as-archivist as a methodological process, *Girl Stowaway* describes Dean's journey through this piece as one of mystery and chance[10] while my own work *Untitled (Clusters)* seeks to unveil omissions within my own collective history. There is a desire to unearth something that has been lost, something that could be found.

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[10] Since Dean found the photograph she found it suddenly pervading every element of her life, she saw echoes of the image everywhere she went and *Girl Stowaway* became less about finding the truth to this story and more about the journey of chance. For more see Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse." *October*, vol. 110, 2004, pp 3-22. Print.

Esther Shalev-Gerz's series of photographs *The Open Page* documents the hands of archivists holding or turning the pages of historical archives. The work emphasizes the archivist's hands as a collaborative process of uncovering history, history seems to be controlled by the hand (Laurence par. 3-4). It is revealing the way in which history is interpreted and inherited through generations but also how the hand guides the telling of history, how the individual's subjectivity unveils a moment of history within the archive. *The Open Page* is an inquiry into the "living archive", it is about unveiling stories in the archive as a way to address the accessibility of archives (Shalev-Gerz, par 2-3). In *Untitled (Clusters)* I feel an impulse to work within my family archive, there is a longing to address the history as incomplete, especially in a broader social context of using archives as a power system to diminish the achievement of women. I use my own hand to find fragments within my archive, uncovering traces. I feel there is an important link with the use of individual subjectivity dictating the process of unearthing the archives.

The photograph is ingrained in popular culture as a tangible representation of memory. In the popular 1985 film *Back to The Future* the character of Marty Mcfly carries a family photograph of himself and his siblings to keep a constant for their existences. As he changes the future he looks at the image to see the impact of his meddling in the past, as he and his siblings cease to exist in the future they fade away from the image[11]. In the 2000 film *Memento* the lead character suffers from retrograde amnesia, he relies on an archive of polaroids as a substitute for memory, as the character shakes the polaroid to life his memory literally develops[12]. This begs the question, how can an archive of images act in place of true memory?

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[11] During the film while discussing the Mcfly family photograph the character of Doc uses the line "Erased… from Existence" to describe the image fading. See *Back to the Future*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, performance by Michael J. Fox. Universal Pictures, 1985.

[12] For more see Gargett, Adrian."Nolan's Memento, Memory, and Recognition". *Comparative Literature and Culture*, Purdue University, vol. 4, issue 3, 2002.

If you can take a moment to imagine my situation.

I am sitting at my Grandfather's dining room table, I am in a room that is typically seen in a middle class suburban home. The one that is rarely entered, for entertaining guests that seem to seldom come. The chairs and sofa are even covered by old bed sheets to preserve the fabric.

I must be careful to use a coaster to protect the longevity of the table.

On my left is a digital scanner, on my right is a gathering of thousands of images from my family archive.

I am sifting through the archive as gently as possible, removing each image and clipping it from its plastic wrapping. Even protected the images have degraded to time and exposure, the surface is marred with dust and cracks, yellowed with age, held together with tape.

Periodically I sip my weak black tea, its the same tea I have whenever I come here. The same tea my Grandfather always makes me, it is certainly not my preference but I was also never given the choice, it is presented to me each time.

The imperfections on the surface of the image are important to me, they seem to carry the narrative of the failure of preservation.

My younger sister used to come to the archive with me, at first intrigued by the plethora of images. I found the archival process cathartic but eventually she stopped coming with me. While I was hypnotized she grew bored.

The Memory & The Apparatus

Since its conception photography has been intrinsically linked to memory[13]. Photography seems transparent in relation to memory, what was truly there was captured and represented, in a sense it is easy to see and interpret. While the memory image seems hazy, over time it fragments and shatters, its takes on an ambiguity and opaqueness[14]. The act of taking an image is to place the apparatus between yourself and experience. To define apparatus within a photographic context, and this text, I will use a well-established theory on the camera as apparatus, although it is important to note there are many definitions of an apparatus[15]. This concept comes from writer and theorist Vilém Flusser's text *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, a seminal text in photographic discourse. Flusser saw the camera as an apparatus that produces symbols and every photograph was a realization of the program within the camera, any image produced by the apparatus that did not carry new information is considered redundant (25-27). In this text he further describes the snapshot (largely the source material of my practice) as redundant because it offered nothing new to the photographic universe[16]; while our own family histories in snapshots may seem significant on a personal level, to Flusser they offer no new possibilities. Flusser's definition of apparatus therefore defines the source material of my practice as redundant, under this definition does my disruption and deconstruction change the significance of the images in the context of the photographic program? Certainly I could classify my source material as redundant (in a sense that family photographs are not unique) however it is my critique of these images through my practice that changes their

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[13] So much has memory influenced photography that Kodak developed color film to replicate memory rather than reality, it is embedded with memory's alterations. For more see Lehmann, Claire. "Color Goes Electric." *Triple Canopy*, 31 May 2016. Web. Accessed 23 December 2016.

[14] For more on memory image see Kracauer, Sigfried. "Memory Images". *Memory: Document of Contemporary Art*, edited by Ian Farr. Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 45-57.

[15] For more information of the apparatus see Agamben, Giorgio. *What is an Apparatus?*. Translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford University Press, 2009.

[16] For more information on the photographic program see Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion Books, 2000.

meaning. They are not acting as simple family snapshots anymore, instead they are being used to question the ability for photographs to represent moment and identity.

How can memory be represented in an image when releasing the shutter reduces an experience to a single static frame? My series of four photographs *1976 (I cast my own shadow)* again begins within my family archives and addresses the gap between the moment in time a photograph is taken and the memory of it in present time (Figures 6 and 7). With this series of four photographs I remove three female subjects from one source image and place the figures within new collaged contexts. The fragmentation of subjects is seen in this work again, appearing as memory fragments pulled from images. The method of this construction is not meant to be a seamless interaction, the background images are folded and warped, and the female figures are adhered to the collage with colourful tape. My intervention and construction is apparent through bold material gestures, my own disruption within the archive is crucial to the critique of its problematic beginnings.

As seen previously my process with this work is also iterative, from this moment the collages are re-photographed and printed - these large (and sculptural) images are reduced. I use an iterative process and the meta-image to question the mimetic properties of photography. The final images see my own hands place these reduced collages within an archival book in a sterile, white environment. My hands place the image within the archive and also peel back the plastic sheet of the archival book in a revealing gesture. Now the original image of the three figures is three steps removed from its original context, it is a copy of a copy of a copy. As a result the image space is apparent, the apparatus of the camera is obvious as the viewer is so distanced from the original photographic object. Like a memory each time it is reproduced it is further away in time, it loses more information and becomes harder to recall. It is a circular process, I begin within the archive and this series sees me place my own intervention back within it. The construction of these collages, and my attempt to reproduce them is a way to shift my interaction within the archive from one of viewer to participant. It asks how I can contribute to my own familial history through material intervention. This iterative copying

is also a reference to the archive the images are derived from, many duplicated images were found alongside their originals. These facsimiles were often poorly photocopied and re-photographed, a gesture that emphasizes the need for posterity. It is not enough to simply have the original, it must be reproduced.

Figure 6. Brittany Nickerson, *1976 (I cast my own shadow)*, 2017, 1 of 4, inkjet print and hemlock frame, 3' x 2'.

Figure 7. Brittany Nickerson, *1976 (I cast my own shadow)*, 2017, 2 of 4, inkjet print and hemlock frame, 3' x 2'.

Certainly it is important to recognize how other theorists have approached the concept of reducing memory to image. In the book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart discusses the need for the souvenir to be a material representation of time and moment, the analogy of the souvenir is one that can firmly relate to that of a photograph. She says of the souvenir: "This capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences" (135). Our need to preserve memory is so evident in the way photography has pervaded daily life, we shrink moment to a single photographic frame in a way that is not truly representational. The image serves as a fragment of memory, a single frame of the

original, it reduces experience to a second-hand representation[17]. This notion seems apparent in family archives, as context is lost to time the photographs seem to blur together, all family trips become the same trip. With my encounters with the archive I found myself in a strangely liminal space. Looking upon these old photographs I feel displaced from the present by a particular longing to experience the past. When we look at an image we exist in a space outside of time, we certainly cannot physically relive the past through image and the act of remembrance removes us from the present. Already I am reimagining this collective history which has been curated, already I am enveloping these second experiences in my hands.

Contextualizing my practice within a contemporary context I will use a method of categorization outlined by Frank van der Stok in his essay "Mental Images" from the text *Questioning History*, this model examines how artists reimagine history through contemporary art. I find my own practice can be placed in the model of "deconstructing history" that van der Stok offers[18], he describes this method of making by saying: "this method deconstructs the way in which visual and other media supply information to our personal and collective memory, by exposing their underlying constructs… calling them into question" (Stok 113). In my own practice my purpose is not to change my own collective history, but rather to deconstruct it in order to emphasize both the omissions within it and its failure to be a mimetic representation. Generally Stok uses this models to describe artists who are working with specific historical events that are fantasized, reimagined, or deconstructed by the artist, and while I am not working within one specific event I find myself unearthing and constructing narratives from the images within my archive.

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[17] For more see Calvino, Italo. "The Adventure of the Photographer." *Difficult Loves*. 1970: 42-47. PDF file.

[18] In "Mental Images" Stok also offers other categorizations, including "alternative histories:. For more see Stok, Frank van der. "Mental Images." *Questioning History: Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art*. Edited by Frank van der Stok, et al, NAi Publishers, 2008, pp 104-120.

In relation to both van der Stok's model and a contemporary field of photography I draw a connection to the artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin as well as photographer Augusta Wood. The archive, and the image in general, is perceived as truth, in *Reading an Archive* by Allan Sekula he states: "The model of an archive is a powerful one in the photographic discourse. This model exerts a basic influence on the character of the truths and pleasures experienced in looking at photographs" (444). The point here being that we engage with an archive with the preconceived notion that what is presented is 'truth' and that is where our engagement arises.
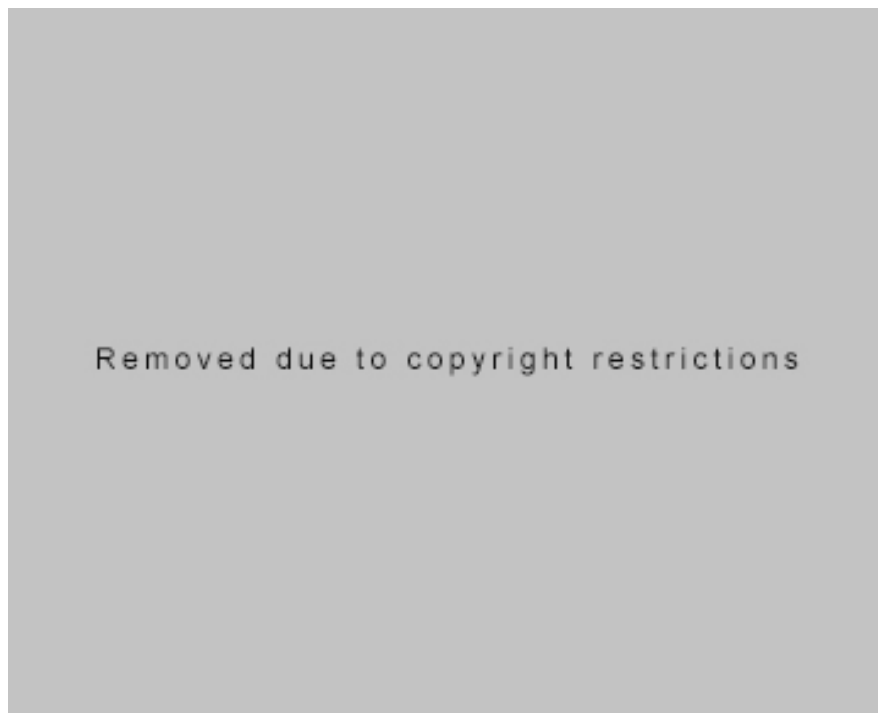

Figure 8. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *96 JULY01 sheet 25 st Mary's exhibition andy McDonagh,People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground,* 2011*,* C-type print*.* Removed due to copyright restrictions.

Artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin use archived images to critique power structures of photography in relation to memory and its apparent objectivity. Addressing issues of war, terror, and politics they use photographic archives to examine our relationship with images and the notion of spectatorship. Their series *People in*

Trouble used public archive material of the Troubles to show the defacements made to the images over generations (Figure 8). In the text *Image, Author, Failure, and Chance* a review by Rachel Somerstein she says of this work: "The images bear, and bare, the traces of their uses, making plain attempts to occlude or highlight certain people or moments— an economy of the image otherwise invisible to most viewers" (14). This series uses an archive to both question the effect of the individual and the collective experience on history and calls into question the reliability and authenticity of the photographic medium. The important link I make with Broomberg and Chanarin's work is the pull between truth and fiction, absence and presence, and subjectivity and objectivity. An important question emerges, is it the function of an archive to be a collection of objective evidence or is there room for personal interpretation in a collective history?
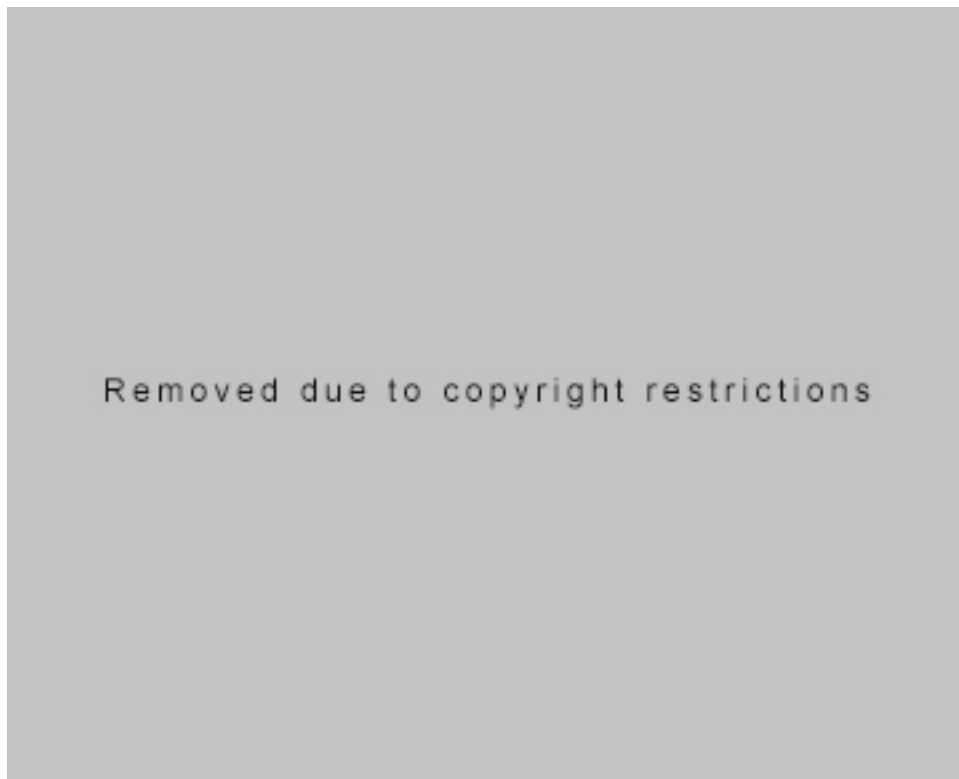
Removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 9. Augusta Wood, *Rosy and Posy, inked feet, Miseres Humaines (1974, 2012, 2013),* 2013, Chromogenic Print. Removed due to copyright restrictions.

Augusta Wood is an American artist whose series *Whether it happened or not* uses images from her family archive to juxtapose the present and past in the same pictorial space (Figure 9). *Whether it happened or not* reconstructs the past using slide image fragments to question the reliability of memory in image (Michno par 1-3). My own work *1976 (I cast my own shadow)* also begins in a family archive, it delves into a personal history and allows the viewer to become a voyeur to my deconstruction. Wood uses the archive to question how photographs depict experience and memory, and particularly how images can function to direct remembrance in what Wood calls a "cumulative history" (par. 1-3). My own experience in the archive found a similar pull, between what I remembered and what was presented to me in images. However I do not attempt to reconstruct my collective history, I am *deconstructing* the images to reveal the traces left behind in archives. *1976 (I cast my own shadow)* is less about trying to find a definitive truth and more about my own process of revealing within the archive. Here I can recall the Roland Barthes quote from *The Grain of the Voice*: "It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more" (356).

My exploration through image and memory has seen my implementation of fragmentation and deconstruction to speak to transformative memory. I see transformative memory as a way of remembrance that is influenced by our situated experience and perception, as time passes our memories become more fractured. How can we reconcile fractured memories with the apparent truth presented to us in images? My practice feels the pull between truth, memory, and absence in the archive, but it also emphasizes my own personal experience of working through these concepts.

I am having a three-way video chat with my mother and aunt, historically speaking I have known them to never get along.

Even as a child I found myself interrupting their petty arguments, they seemed to fight for the sake of fighting. Looking through this archive all I see is their closeness, their smiles, an un-situated observer may mistake them for friends.

I wonder now if it was a particular moment that fractured their relationship or if this sisterly intimacy was always a performative depiction for the expectations of the camera

This is not a question I will ask them in fear of prolonging this current argument.

I simply asked the two of them to identify the year and place a particular photograph was taken, honestly it was to satisfy my own curiosity. This image shows the two of them in a Girl Guide's uniforms standing at attention alongside my Grandmother.

Neither can seem to agree on when or where this image was taken, or they are simply disagreeing because it is in their nature to disagree.

In this case has the image failed the memory or is the reverse true?

Even with a seemingly tangible representation of moment neither of the subjects can arrive at a conclusion of its context.

The video chat keeps cutting away, breaking in to a distortion of pixels and fractured voices. The strength of the video is only as strong as its weakest connection.

The Shadow & The Trace

In both works discussed, and my overall artistic practice, I use autoethnography as a self-reflexive research method. To conceptualize the term autoethnography we can look to the text *Handbook of Autoethnography* written by Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, which defines it as: "One characteristic of all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (Jones et al. 22). It is important to emphasize that autoethnography differs from autobiography, this is a method that must also examine the personal experience of cultural interrogation. This point distinguishes autoethnography from autobiography, again from *Handbook of Autoethnography*:

> "If an author… reflects of the nuances of that experience, writes to show how the aspects of experience illuminate general cultural phenomena… and how the experience works to diminish, silence, or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes autoethnographically" (Jones et al. 22-23).

While the point here specifically uses the example of auto-ethnographical writing this method can be used by all creative practitioners. Specifically in the visual arts, photographers have used autoethnography to understand their personal experiences within a greater social significance[19].

Dr. Anniina Suominen wrote her PhD dissertation *Writing With Photographs, Reconstructing Self: An Arts-Based Autoethnographic Inquiry*, in which she examines her personal life through family photographs to understand and critique a greater structure of cultural identity (2-5). This thesis focuses on research taking an active form of self-reflexivity and a way to understand utilizing personal experience as a method in understanding identity and cultural production (Suominen 5). My practice uses my own situated experience encountering and deconstructing my family archive, I intentionally emphasize my own experience within it. I use my own personal and collective history to critique the domination of post-WWII masculine achievement within my archive, and in a broader sense address the patriarchal structures of historical collection. I want to bring

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[19] For more examples of autoethnography and the visual arts see Jones, Stacy Holman, et al. *Hand Book of Autoethnography.* Left Coast Press Inc., 2013.

forward the omissions from the archive while also embedding my own undertaking of this process. This method has seen its challenges within my practice, because I am working with personal history and memory I have struggled to create access points for viewers. Certainly my gestures can be construed as overly sentimental, a question I have grappled with is how to make a personal work accessible to a larger audience.

Autoethnography takes several forms in my artistic practice, both in process and presentation. From the beginning it was impossible for me to approach the archive with any kind of objectivity, especially as I see my own image reflected within it. My work critiques my own collected history as it is presented to me, as well as the tendency to silence oppressed voices in history. The process of deconstructing is made obvious, images are cut into sharp fragments and brightly coloured materials are used to emphasize my intervention and experience of the process itself. It is crucial for the viewer to understand there has been an intervention by the artist. Further, the visual use of my hand, and the hands of women, is a way to visually situate myself into the work. The hands control the narrative itself, a reference to both the nature of archiving and the act of deconstructing. The hands are a visual embodiment of my encounter with this archive, a way to claim agency and address an untold story within the archive.

The use of reproductions (as opposed to the archived originals) and the presence of shadow are important elements in my auto-ethnographical methods. Both act as trace for intervention and speak to the need for images to be representational of memory. Here I will define trace according to Charles Merewether from the essay "Art and the Archive":

> "Events and experiences always leave behind them by means of an index, or residual mark, of their occurrence… the archive contains the potential to fragment and destabilize remembrance as recorded" (10).

I have experienced myself this feeling of destabilization, to see an image of yourself in a situation you recall differently calls into question what is truth. Specifically the use of reproduction acts as a trace for process and representation while the shadow acts as a trace for my intervention and the material presence of the work.

In the work *Untitled (Clusters 1-5)* the images are reproduced copies of the original archival material, this reflects both my process of collection and my unwillingness to obliterate my collective history by destroying the originals. The image fragments are displayed several inches off the wall, giving each assemblage a shadow. The shadow is a trace for the material presence of the work, photographs are often confined to digital space or are seen as two-dimensional. Here the shadow functions as both tangible and ephemeral, the shadow relies on both the figure and time. The shadow changes and shifts, evolving in temporal space. There is an illusion of three-dimensionality, one that references the typically limiting and flat nature of the photograph. In *1976 (I cast my own shadow)* I use reproduction to create an obvious image space that addresses the space between apparatus and moment. This work is a photograph, of a photograph, of a photograph. In this series my hand, placing the image within the archive, casts a shadow across the image space. My intervention is again solidified as a shadow, this ephemeral movement is frozen in time within the image. Here there is a search for agency within the archive, I long to leave a trace, a shadow within my own collective history.

My latest work *Untitled (Performance Frame)* that was shown in the thesis exhibition consists of thirty-three image fragments presented in a vitrine (Figures 10 and 11). These fragments were taken from the frames of a filmed performance that saw me bind an archived photograph of my Grandfather's football team. This work is less concerned with the actual content of the bound photograph and instead focuses on the intervention of the artist and acts as a reaction to the discovery of suppressed female representations within my archive. Again my hand is a visual embodiment of my reconfiguration of collected history, as its carries out the act of disruption it moves the image within frame and gradually obliterates the photograph with tape. I see this gesture as a feminist method of autoethnography that emphasizes the experience of unearthing hidden representations.

Figure 10. Brittany Nickerson, *Untitled (Performance Frame)*, 2017, archival matte prints, installation view, approx. 6' x 2'.

As seen in my previous work this is an iterative process, a photographic reproduction of the performance itself that has been fragmented and collaged. This work builds in its iterations to speak about the space between moment and image and how we come to understand that space. It addresses the conventions of the flatness of the frame in photography as well as sees the transformation to photograph-as-object. As the image space is stripped away its absence is made apparent to the viewer and takes on a particular three-dimensionality. Continuing the trend of the shadow as trace each fragment is slightly elevated to cast a shadow within the vitrine. This emphasizes their material presence and again speaks to the need for tangible image as memory.

Figure 11. Brittany Nickerson, *Untitled (Performance Frame*, 2017, archival matte prints, detail view, approx. 6' x 2'.

This thesis project and my art practice has aimed to investigate and critique the relationship between memory, mimesis, and image. I have utilized established archives as the material source for this current arc of my practice. I see the future trajectory of my practice as continuing to draw from archived materials, as this practice develops I wish to turn to other institutional archival systems to examine and unearth hidden traces from a feminist perspective. As photography continues to pervade everyday life its potential for usage in my art practice only increases. The sheer amount of archived imagery available has created a generative and fruitful space to inquire within. My work will continue to embed the personal experience of uncovering within the work. I want to continue to critique the way visual history is collected and curated and how this archival paradigm can misrepresent oppressed identities.

I will also continue to investigate the nature of the photograph as the visual embodiment for memory as well as my own subjective struggle with this idea. There has always been a desire in my practice to employ photographic methods while still

grappling with my own understanding of the limitations of photographic representation. I feel my lens-based practice will always pull between the objective expectations of image and its empirical nature. Moving forward I want to examine the ways in which temporality functions in relation to the still image and memory. Particularly the immediacy of the digital image in contrast with the slowness that a physical archive seems to contain. Working with iterative reproduction has been a constructive method for my developing art practice. By addressing the apparatus and the image space I have created a way for the viewer to think about their own relationship with images and the camera. By moving the viewer further and further away from the original image I want destabilize the relationship we have with images. Ultimately the goal of this practice is to use self-reflexive photographic methods as a way to ask how images function in relation to memory and collected history.

Figure 12. Brittany Nickerson, *Memory Trace*, 2017, exhibition installation.

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