

The Binnewater Tides
Women's Studio Workshop Press
Volume 9, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1992

Remembrance of Things Past, Present, and Future

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I was on a cross-town bus through a city that was new to me. I would be staying for only two months, not long enough to call it home. I looked out the bus window at unfamiliar places, trying to map this new territory, but each site reminded me of another place. My eyes were seeing the present; my mind was seeing the past. It probably was not a coincidence that I had decided to read Marcel Proust's **Remembrance of Things Past** during those two months away from home. This place was nothing like Combray, the air was not filled with the smell of freshly baked madeleines. How was it possible that Proust's memories were reaching into my own, bridging the gaps of time, gender and culture? How was it that memory, highly personal and malleable, could be made into a subject matter common to anyone? There are many artists who have used their pasts both to lead us into their lives and to re-examine our own. When these bits of life stories are made into artists' books, we can read them as if they were diaries. We can hold these intimacies in our hands, turn the pages and enter our own psychological space.

The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at the time.ⁱ

Laison Tong exposes thin slices of the past in **HOMING**ⁱⁱ a small Coptic-sewn volume the size of a Polaroid picture. The book is a memory photo album of places the artist has lived. It is something private, yet shared with us. The square, sepia-toned photographs show bits of buildings, a yard, a neighborhood. Every other page is UV Ultra paper, a translucent veil through which we see the images. The paper acts as a physical metaphor for the veil of memory. In order to see the picture more clearly, you pull aside the veil or turn the page. The place is no longer the same. Now in sharp focus, it has its own daily reality that is harsher than we thought it before. Simple texts are printed on the translucent paper, beginning with the address of each building. The specificity of the address anchors the memory bits, which also float through the page: "always smelled like rain on the second floor." We may not know that building, but we know that place. The bare bits of information give us clues as to the lives lived there, which in fact may be quite dissimilar from our own. We make mental jumps between our memory pictures and the artist's.

In the broad daylight of our habitual memory the images of the past turn gradually pale and fade out of sight, ...we should never recapture it (the past) had not a few words...been carefully locked away in oblivion, just as an author deposits in the National Library a copy of a book which might otherwise become unobtainable.ⁱⁱⁱ

In **WOMEN AND CARS**^{iv}, Susan King unlocks a flood of memories and stories triggered by the two elements of the title. The structure of the accordion book, developed by Hedi Kyle, involves a series of cards attached three to a row of the accordion, or guard. They can be read down or across each row. If read page by page, the images on one side of the cards are disjointed, each card being only a small rectangular section of an unseen bigger picture. When fully opened, the bits of image visually join together to become a picture of a woman standing in front of an old model car. The image is degenerated, as if it were made from successively grainy photocopies. The image loses detail and the color is reduced to a flat, nostalgic tan. The effect of these photographic manipulations is to place before our eyes an image that seems to be fading from our memories. Small sections may conjure up the whole, but the overall image is slipping away. The texts bring it back into focus. Written on the opposite sides of the cards, most are fragmented memory tales about two aunts. The details of their lives are traced by their relationships with their cars, from rolling Daddy's car to matching their hair color to a paint job. The texts do not flow neatly into one continuous story but hopscotch across the structure of the book. Adding to these reference points of memory are phrases from other women writer's stories of cars. The binding packages all of these disparate items into a workable whole. The structure supports and unifies the subject. As the readers we make the conceptual unity by filling in the spaces. Each card prompts another mental association. Our own stories of growing up are unlocked and become the internal structure binding these stories together.

...since memory begins at once to record photographs independent of one another, eliminates every link, any kind of sequence between the scenes portrayed in the collection which it exposes to our view, the most recent does not necessarily destroy or cancel those that came before.^v

Images do not have to be stored chronologically in our memories because we are able to make these mental jumps or connections. There are circumstances where we can lose that ability. Scott McCarney traces one such circumstance in **MEMORY LOSS**^{vi}, a book about his brother, following an accident. The accordion book is bound in the form of a venetian blind that would fit a small window. This is not a random choice. A blind covers a window, obscuring the view both inside and out. It can be drawn up to let in the light. Here the blind is a physical manifestation of his brother's brain damage and resulting loss of memory. A blind is drawn over his mind and the memory lights are dimmed. On one side of the book, the shadows of the Venetian cords are printed onto the page. These shadows hold strips of typed sentences, photographically tied around the shadow. Like a string tied around a finger, they serve as mnemonic devices for something that should be remembered. But the word strips are only fragments. Their meaning is lost along with their original contexts. Barely discernible photographic images are scattered across the page. They are fuzzy, vague, and hard to read. Drawings of hand shadows are nearby, each set of hands appearing as a shadow face. Whose face? The hands move, the face becomes someone else. Mirrored profiles turn into the "is it a face or a vase" diagram of positive and negative space. They are both at the same time. Emphasizing this slipperiness of meaning and memory is a repeated image of a snake. Its S-curves squiggle across the folds. This same snake is seen on the other side of the book. Here the slipperiness of meaning is not due to memory loss, but clinical jargon. Diagrams of the brain, public relations statements from a residential physical therapy program, and medical-ese jockey for space, all trying to tell us the facts. This supposedly

“meaningful” information is just as elusive as the fuzzy images on the other side. The mind wants to make a cohesive whole out of the jumble of facts and images. But the most important fact is seen in the photo of McCarney’s brother. He looks out a window, or back into the room, or at us. He shows us a simple face, innocent yet questioning. He, too, is trying to make connections between what his life had been, and what it is now.

Those years of my earliest childhood are no longer a part of myself; they are external to me; I can learn nothing of them save- as we learn things that happened before we were born- from the accounts given me by other people.^{vii}

The main character is Johanna Drucker's **SIMULANT PORTRAIT**^{viii} is also without memory. In this case, the Simulant has no past to remember. An artificial being whose present is informed only by the evidence of past events, she hires a biographer to construct a narrative from these evidentiary documents. The fragments are synthesized to create a memory story. Those same fragments could be reconfigured to tell another story, but the one given is complex, cool and sad at the same time. The story traces the act of becoming, an existential search so primary that even a non-human is propelled by it. The Simulant’s search includes the creation of her own gender, as she is created with a neuter body on which either sex can be draped. She chooses to be a female because “everything pictured was a female.” With that one choice we view her life and by extension our own, as a media-constructed reality. As a performer, her very self is one of being consumed by the media; her personal relationships are integral to the tabloids’ reporting of them. She is an artificial creature, ultimately made by the media, others’ expectations and exterior relationships. Who is she really? The false past, an attempt to fill in the spaces to provide her with memories, is as exterior as the rest of her life. In effect, the biographer creates a mythology to give credence to a media dictatorship. All of these narrative details are supported by their presentation in the book form. The dominant color is an unnatural green, an artificial color that correlates to both artificial intelligence and artificial memory. The digitized images and laser printed texts are the output of a computer, our present day simulant with its own memory.

Like the computer and the Simulant, we add memory, edit, delete and change bits of our own past to suit our ever-changing present. Memory is an amalgamation of so many things: dream images, other people’s stories, media influences, photo albums, remembered events. There is a co-mingling of the personal and the specific with the generic and the impersonal. This comingling enables us to understand the worries of a French adolescent at the turn of the last century, or to empathize with an artificial being at the turn of the next. We are caught up in the stories of others’ lives, conjoined and wrapped around our own. Reading these stories, we are able to examine the life story we each make within ourselves, the story we call memory.

ⁱ Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Originally published between 1913 and 1927. This and all other citations from the Vintage Books edition, Random House, 1982. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Volume 1, Swann’s Way, Place-Names: the Name, p462

ⁱⁱ Tong, Laison, *Homing*. 1989. Available from Printed Matter, 77 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10012

ⁱⁱⁱ Proust, *Volume I, Within a Budding Grove, Place-Names: The Place*, p. 692

^{iv} King, Susan, *Women and Cars*. 1983. Co-published by WSW and Paradise Press, P.O. Box 5306, Santa Monica, CA. 90405. The book is no longer in print, but WSW does have an archive copy.

^v Proust, *Volume I, Within a Budding Grove, Place-Names: The Place*, p. 936.

^{vi} McCarney, Scott, *Memory Loss*. 1988 Available from the artist, 22 Cayuga St. Rochester, NY 14620.

^{vii} Proust, *Volume II, The Guermantes Way*, Chapter 1, p.7.

^{viii} Drucker, Johanna, *Simulant Portrait*. 1990. Druckwerk, 601 West 115th Street #94, New York, NY 10025.