

# THE ART OF MEMORY BY KATE FORDE

Alice Anderson's new work asks you to take a journey into memory. Walking through a series of rooms you will encounter shapes that seem at once familiar and strange – a car, a record-player, sketch books, a bicycle, even a staircase have been transformed into glowing trophies – lending the experience a hallucinatory quality. Each item has been tightly bound with copper wire, which preserves its outline but removes its function. Divested of purpose these mute objects appear suspended in time, compelling you to rediscover what you thought you already knew intimately. Some may remind you of your own belongings, a few will prompt reminiscences about things you loved then discarded, some will remain abstract and enigmatic. A number of sculptures are presented 'naked' – as work in progress – so you may, if you wish, bring about their transformation by helping to 'mummify' them in the gallery. As you move through each space the works become increasingly mysterious and distorted as they respond to the pressure of the metal thread and morph into even more curious forms. This is no invitation to nostalgic reverie but a request to be fully awake and conscious of your own ability to weave memories in the here and now.

## DISEMBODIED MEMORY

We live in a world in which the art of memory seems almost obsolete, having been first consigned to the printed page and now outsourced to communications technology, through which images and information are endlessly uploaded and reproduced. These contemporary methods of digital record-keeping led Anderson to think about the impact they might have upon our perception of ourselves and the world, ultimately triggering a new direction in her practice. In response to the idea that memories were becoming disembodied and living online, her work took a decisively sculptural turn.

In the studio one morning in 2011, Anderson began to wind copper wire around her video camera, a charged act for an artist who had started out as a film maker. Finding the work surprisingly satisfying, she spent the whole day on it without noticing; next morning, when she returned, the bound object seemed to her to be 'protected' like a time capsule or a mummified treasure from a Pharaoh's tomb. Anderson quickly resolved to apply this technique to the other objects and furniture in her studio, soon moving on to its architectural elements including the doors, steps and window frames. Having irrevocably changed the status of these things, she is committed to a future living without them, and has determined never to replace what is 'done'. The reincarnation first realised in her series 'Weaving in the Studio' (2011) was in part an attempt to preserve items from Anderson's past life, and, as she puts it, to prevent them from disappearing. But these works also demonstrate that even those objects

that speak to us because of their enduring familiarity are fundamentally altered by our experience of time.

With this latest work Anderson is exploring one of science's most startling discoveries about the process of remembering. Rather than fixing our histories, it appears the brain is malleable, and functions by continually reimagining the past, connecting together what Israel Rosenfield in his essay refers to as a "flow of perceptions".

While this understanding represents a radical departure from the psychological and philosophical approaches which dominated the study of the brain during the 20th century, its emphasis on the unstable and profoundly creative nature of recollection finds echoes in the way our ancestors practised the art of memory.

## COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE

In the oral culture of Ancient Greece the survival of legends was entrusted to the Muses, the daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. It was their task to ensure that valiant heroes and fearsome gods did not drift into silent obscurity, a feat they achieved by bestowing upon mortals the gifts of poetry and song. In pre-literate society, therefore, the passing on of history is an undeniably imaginative act, the poem is recited, sung and reinterpreted by an audience already familiar with its theme. In this fleeting exchange collective identity is reinforced, and meaning is conveyed not merely through words but through the performing body. These ideas about the active nature of recollection, the ability of physical communication to convey meaning, and the reciprocal relationship between the artist and her audience all find expression in Anderson's practice. They also remind us that memory, as Oliver Sacks has written, "is dialogic and arises not only from direct experiences but from the intercourses of many minds"

James Putnam has eloquently described the way in which Anderson "performs" her work, using her hands, feet and entire body to manipulate red fibre, copper wire and thread, turning rhythmical movements into drawing, installation and sculpture. This emphasis on the body as medium is liberating for the way it enables an emotional and intuitive as well as intellectual reading of the work. It evokes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insight that vision and the body are tangled up in one another and that we cannot hope to observe existence or to understand art from afar.

Anderson's practice may also remind us of another artist, Eva Hesse, whose sculpture has bodily connotations and who was similarly concerned with the literalness of materials and the importance of process. Like Hesse, Anderson draws upon the vocabulary and aesthetic of minimalism while challenging its rigid commitment to objectivity and attempt to purge metaphor and self-expression from form. Anderson's 'Ropes' is a tribute to Hesse's 'Untitled (Rope Piece)', made in 1970 while she was dying and finished with the help of her friends. While Hesse's snarled web of latex-coated string has a visceral quality, Anderson's 'Ropes' are supple, lustrous coils of energy. Both

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## THE STUDIO

The association between Hesse and Anderson is a corrective to the myth of the artist as a 'divinely inspired' prodigy and the misconception that artworks function as direct translations of personal experience. Instead the works testify to the creative act as an ongoing process of learning and experimentation that is always in dialogue with others. When Anderson first began working on the larger elements in her studio she invited a group of people along to help, and she has explained how this collective action produced patterns of movement and even music as the bobbins of thread rattled in their ceramic jars. Inspired by the energy generated by this event and people's enthusiasm to join in, Anderson set up the Travelling Studio – an itinerant space in which participants perform within the defined convention but formulate their own gestures and methods of mummifying and their own understanding of what it is they are doing. Evoking the spirit of Andy Warhol's Factory (the name he gave to his New York studio between 1962 and 1968), Anderson's space is the latest in a series of experiments into collaborative artistic practice. Refuting the idea of the individual artist working in isolation, Anderson's work expresses her own belief in art as a powerfully charged communal ritual.

In 1957, Marcel Duchamp gave a lecture in which he explained that "the work of art is not performed by the artist alone" and that the spectator's point of view affects the all-important "transubstantiation" of inert matter into art. What is blandly referred to now as audience participation was for Duchamp a mystical process, a way of overcoming the habit of seeing artworks as self-sufficient entities. This was achieved by acknowledging that the art object's meaning was defined by contingent factors such as the gallery context and the associations people would inevitably bring to bear. Anderson's latest works enable a similar conversion to take place: poised between abstraction and

representation they rely on our readiness to interpret them liberally, to awaken our own memories and give instinct free rein. In Anderson's case we are invited not only to interact with the work but to become involved in the process of making it; the democratic spirit of the enterprise is pushed to its conclusion and the boundary between artist and audience dissolves.

## THE WORK OF FORGETTING

Anderson's interactive art presents us with a chance to reimagine our relationships with people and things, not by providing us with any idealistic vision of the future but by giving us licence to play for a while in the present. This, in our predominantly consumerist culture, represents a rare opportunity to enact and reinforce social bonds outside the sphere of the market. The Studio itself has more than a purely imaginative function: it provides a model of action, enabling spectators to become participants through the creation of 'social sculpture'. (Here Anderson invokes Joseph Beuys's extended concept of art and his belief in its potential to bring about revolutionary change.) And so we return to the theme of connection, present in Rosenfield's account of our "relating... between moments" in order to create new memories, and in the associations we make with each other in the gallery. Thus, Anderson's work exhorts us to bridge the gap between then and now, while also inviting us to construct a collective identity in the present.

As we participate in Anderson's contemporary ritual, we might consider Walter Benjamin's remarks about the celebrated Penelope, Odysseus's faithful wife. Waiting for his return from the Trojan Wars, Penelope kept her suitors at bay for 20 years by weaving a shroud which she unpicked each evening, claiming she would remarry only when it was finished. Benjamin suggests that in order to keep her husband's memory alive, Penelope must make it the task of each night to forget and the aim of each day to remember. What he calls the "work of forgetting" is poignantly articulated through Anderson's ongoing project. As we struggle and fail to resurrect the past, we may become aware that the stories we tell ourselves are all the truth we need.