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INTERPRETING
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ARCHIVE

N. KNEZEVIC

M.V.A. (PRINTMEDIA)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

2009
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MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS
2009
DISSERTATION

Interpreting the autobiographical archive

by
Nina Knezevic

July 2009
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Introduction
This paper looks at the position and meaning of the autobiographical archive in my art practice and in contemporary art.

The process of collecting, categorising and archiving have played a central role in the work I have produced over the past five years. In Chapter I, titled Autobiographical Archive, I look at the development of the use of family photographs in my art practice. I evaluate my process of collecting and archiving autobiographical objects by isolating ideas set forth in Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Collecting* and Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. In most recent work the role of the archive has come to the fore. In earlier work, the centrality of this role was not so clear.

Throughout this paper, I look at several bodies of work I produced in developing my use of the autobiographical archive. Its collections are used to structure the chapters in the paper. They are: Familial Photographs, Travel Memorabilia, Correspondence, and Time Capsules. In each chapter, I briefly describe the genesis and process of working with each collection, evaluating their role as mnemonic objects. I evaluate the influence of working with the autobiographical archive and provide an account of the artists and/or writers whose work and ideas have been influential to my development throughout the candidature. I concurrently refer to the bodies of work developed throughout my candidature and the work I am presenting for my M.V.A. examination.

In the conclusion, I look at the similarities between the collections and reflect on using the autobiographical archive in my art practice.
I spent the summer of 2005 at my family’s mountain house in Vrdnik, exploring the possible ways of interpreting a group of familial photographs into my artwork. From this point onwards, the collection of photographs I have been building since 1999 became the basis of my art practice. In 2006, during the Honours Programme at Sydney College of the Arts, I began to question this relatively new commitment. I began to read and research a range of theories dealing with photography and memory, identifying some key aspects of utilising the photograph as a source. I became aware of the photograph as an object and its context, for example, the family album, which presented a tabular, authored structure. The opportunity to recreate family narratives inspired me to question and contest the photographs authority. By working with remembrance and a type of remapping of the photograph through the process of drawing/painting, I began to reinterpret my own family history and hence my own sense of identity.
As well as family photographs, I collected other objects, intending to use them throughout my M.V.A. candidature. These objects were various mementos of my journeys to Belgrade, Wellington and Sydney and included photographs of cityscapes, country landscapes, maps, public transportation passes and cultural institution tickets. I also began to collect various correspondences such as letters, notes and envelopes and to group clusters of miscellaneous objects into time capsules. Despite beginning to accumulate travel photographs, I continued to work only with the family photographs. It was at this point that I realised my commitment to utilising the family photograph was binding. Although I was aware of why I was using the photographs through my instinctive way of experimenting with them, I was unsure of my motivations for using the new material I was collecting. I needed to develop my understanding of the 'why' of my studio practice. Looking back, this represented a moment of crisis related both to my art practice and to my sense of self as artist. As the production of art embodied both these aspects it became important to find a solution. I set out to gain an overview of my practice to date and to explore the question of why I was so fixated on this source material.

Initially, I turned to researching the idea of collecting and came across an essay titled *The System of Collecting* by Jean Baudrillard. Objects are mutable because of the way in which we use them. They are able to move away from their functional use to our subjective use of them, because, as Baudrillard remarks, the "singular object never impedes the process of narcissistic projection". The immense subjectivity of my collections is only one part of knowing my microcosms. In the above quote, Baudrillard isolates why we collect. My motivation to collect these objects stemmed from a desire to remember. This is directly connected to my experiences with immigrating. My family immigrated from Belgrade, Serbia to Wellington, New Zealand in my early teens and later, in 1998, to Sydney, Australia. The objects were collected during my numerous travels to see loved ones and friends, and revisit favourite places of former daily trajectories in the city and the countryside. Over the last five years, I have reimmigrated and lived in all three of these cities. As opposed to Baudrillard's collectors' more covert narcissistic projection of self (e.g. collection of pins, marbles, fine bone china,

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paintings...) it was my collection’s *index of differences* that revealed their static signification as *literally* subjective, or autobiographical. Whether through the ongoing process of extending the association between diverse types of objects and self, or collecting autobiographical mnemonic objects it seemed “it is invariably oneself that one collects”\(^2\).

A fortuitous opportunity arose to live in Belgrade for six months in 2008. It provided the ideal mise en scène through the symbolic and unique link with my past. As in 2005, I was able to step back.

**Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever**

Identifying the collecting process as belonging to an autobiographical archive cannot be discussed without mention of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. Although my reading of Jacques Derrida’s œuvre is not extensive, below I isolate and comment on the influence his interpretation of the role of Archon and archiving have had on my visual research.

In the first segment of the book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida presents an etymological introduction of the word archive, which goes back to Greek *arkheion* and *Archon*, one of nine chief magistrates in ancient Athens, to whom the archive would be consigned and permanently housed in his private residence - *arkheion*. Beyond recalling and imposing the law, the Archon could also exercise power via interpretation of the laws. This ordering of signs/meaning (Derrida’s *consignation*) underlines the difficulty of accurately grasping the archive’s signifying quality. An archive consists of that which it is (documents of various importance and type, non-secret, public) and that which it shelters (through being authored, its secretive, private meanings). Because the concept of an ideal configuration of a single corpus is the driving force behind this duality, Derrida explicates that the archive’s contents inevitably operate through exclusion of other contexts. By looking at my process of collecting, I recognised my own position as mirroring that of the Archon, as I gather together signs of importance in my life. I arrange the objects into collections and order them in accordance with an indexical mnemonic investment. I realised I had been

\(^2\) ibid, p. 12
creating an autobiographical archive, whose contents, for example photographs, serve to be interpreted. The autobiographical archive is like a locus that serves to be interpreted in my art practice.

I also discovered there is a duality between my role of Archon, creator of archive, and my role as Artist, creator of art objects. I become the authority and the authored at once. Where the primary self-produced ordering of objects can make the autobiographical archive seem finite, the secondary reordering of the archive’s objects can occur through my work as an artist. But are the cardinal roles of self as Archon and self as Artist of equal status? This duality seemed to be the paradox of my crisis. The autobiographical archive may present the system of consignation (Derrida) of self through mnemonic objects, but even as an authored entity, potentially chaotic and disembodied, without my engagement, it becomes static. The autobiographical archive presents an opportunity, to interpret the mnemonic object but also - if unsuccessful, to homogenise, or use it negatively.

Interestingly the symbol of the archive, the double-headed Janus, which stand one turned to administration the other to research, imply that at heart, the archive operates through a layering of these roles, of ordering and interpretation. Rather than to completely unravel the boundary created between the self-defined compartmentalisations of the archive and allow it to spill over into the flux state of creativity, it seemed better to acknowledge the archive presents itself as a risk and an opportunity at once.
Chapter II

Familial Photographs

Personal narrative as introduction

December 1999
Following my grandfathers' heart infarct, in the summer of 1999, my mother and I travelled to Prijedor. I had not been to Prijedor, Bosnia since I was a child. I felt lost in this world, yet also that this was in some way - my world. To our great relief and delight, my grandfather pulled through. Before leaving my auntie and grandmother gifted me some small Polaroid photographs, which I took with me. With each consecutive journey, this collection would grow, leaving my grandmother's photo album with a lot of empty pages.
As time fades photographs it can also fade memories. A large part of the Familial Collection is made up of old, faded and often-obscured small format Polaroids. The Polaroids do not carry a wealth of visual information; yet their obscured shadowed features are able to elicit a truth through remembrance. Photographs have this unlimited potential to carry our projections, which often has nothing to do with their referential qualities. These photographs, dating from my mother’s youth, depict scenes of my mother and my extended family. Even though no photograph in my collection depicts my own family, or myself, they are directly related to my sense of family lineage. This generational gap, the sense of intimacy by way of kinship and photograph as relic reveal the conditional relationship between the photographic image and our memories. In cases where the visual data of the photograph is missing or is ill defined due to the photograph’s age, it is supplemented by my memory and through my work. The trace that has referentially disappeared can magically reappear. In my artwork I imbue the image with more detail and information that comes from a process of remembrance related to the locus of the photograph. I never completely transform and remove the relationship to the drawing’s source, for example, the face remains behind the branch and the profile shot remains a profile. This obedience to the original image extends to the strategy of semi-photo-realistic figures. The watercolour technique is fittingly sensitive to this process, as it requires applying thin washes over a long period of time. I sometimes take up to six months to complete a watercolour. Thus far, both my conceptual and technical processes have relied on treating the photograph as a cipher. This allows me to unravel a recursive process of remembrance, sometimes using the parameters of the photograph as a starting point, sometimes as a strict guideline. These two aspects can often be seen working simultaneously in my work, where the photograph provides a referential backdrop for the swaying flux of the mnemonic endeavour (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 below).
Specifically, in the case of the river photographs, I know the colour of the river, the height of the trees, the warmth of the season, and the idiosyncrasies of the personalities of my mother, aunties, grandfather, and grandmother. I link and extend my lived experiences by means of the affect of the photographic relic. For example, I have been in these places at one time during different periods of my life. This encounter with the aged, faded photograph allows me to more easily be in a place I can no longer be, due to the passing of time.
Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida

In *Camera Lucida*, French philosopher, semiotician and literary critic, Roland Barthes examines the nature of our relationship to photographs by positing at its core a highly subjective problematic, the death of his mother. Rummaging through a collection of photographs in his deceased mother's apartment, Barthes seeks out a truth or an essence of his deceased mother in a photograph. In my work as an artist, I've found a similar reliance on affect, both in remembrance via the photograph and in the process of making art. Death of a loved one seems to amplify the reliance on remembrance. For Barthes, a subject's likeness is a type of referential dead-end. It cannot represent the subject's truth, yet a truth is found in a photograph of his mother, titled Winter Garden Photograph, of her as a child.

When looking through my collection, through visual details, I claim to be able to recognise my kin, my extended family. Yet whenever an incident occurred in which others or myself could not recognise, for example, the image of my grandfather, I was reminded of how much we rely on both our visual faculty and remembrance. In so many photographs, there is the moment and possibility of the unrecognised person, a stranger becoming familiar and vice versa. This makes for a wonderfully tenuous engagement with the photograph. My truth is the equivalent of my visual ability to recognise. I experience this limitation as literal and metaphorical. In this way, my engagement with the photograph relies on what is literally in front of my eyes to unravel into/with what is a memory. An autobiographical archive acts as a gatherer of signs and promises of not forgetting and this understanding of its fragility acts as creative inspiration.

Outside of the visual referential scope, my photographic mementos, unlike Barthes', remind me of the entirety of my memories. This is where my relationship to the photograph becomes complex. The layering of memories occurs through the event of travelling, meaning that each new significant event becomes like a new mnemonic layer. The photograph's ability to infinitely absorb the scope of my mnemonic projections may be why, as an object, the photograph features prominently in my collections. Photographs are in fact, easily collected. Using the style of personal narrative again, below I will briefly outline the events I am currently most interested in.
exploring. Later in the chapter, I will set out to explore how the revelation of the autobiographical archive affected my way of working with this collection.

**August 2003**

The news of my grandfathers' death arrived via a telephone conversation with my mother, in July 2003, sometime after his funeral. In Serbian Orthodox religious traditions, the soul of the deceased person is believed “to remain on the earth” for 40 days. After this period, the memorial funerary traditions, like putting up a tombstone in place of the simple wooden cross and laurel can take place. In effect, one has two funerals. I arrived from Wellington to Prijedor in time to attend his “second” funeral. This duplicity soon gave birth to the idea of multiplicity with encountering the Obituaries in the local newspaper. Namely, a portion of the newspaper is dedicated to families and friends paying respects to the deceased. Sometimes entire A3 page spreads are filled with a series of messages/biographies of various sizes dedicated to the same person. Often the photo used in each message is the one provided by the family. Thus the same image is repeated all over these pages. I’ve still got a copy of this newspaper. The idea of a brief summary or message to the deceased, coupled with their recurring image, offered an interesting example of the intersection of private/public domains of a life. Can anything meaningful be said through such ways of commemorating the dead? Perhaps nothing could offer me a ceremonious appreciation at my time of mourning. I took from these events the intersection of peculiarity, through the idea of two funerals, and multiplicity of images of commemoration. Since seeing him that last time, I had nothing to bridge these two traumatic experiences other than their sheer intensity.

I began to observe the prevalence of the figures of my grandfather, becoming more aware of what I have been remembering or looking for in my recent drawings. By cross-referencing the collection as a whole, under the context of the autobiographical archive, it became impossible to ignore the trauma of the event of my grandfathers’ death. Drawing the deceased invoked a superstitious reverence, because ‘seeing’ him anew, through the process of imagining a scene, made the end process, the drawing seem like a type of fabricated memory or mutation. The physical presence of the photograph never ceased to be relevant. In fact even now, it reminds me that each time I draw my grandfather, by placing him in every drawing, or repeating his image, the photograph as a reference to what-was-there becomes conflated, by way of a mnemonic impossibility.

Through the process of remembrance and imagination, the drawings temporality represents a recreated moment of the past, in the present.

**Gerhard Richter’s Atlas**

In recent drawings, (such as Fig. 3), I’ve begun to understand how this strategy can have a negative effect on my memories. Perhaps this is what led to the archive becoming problematic as both source and strategy. Like the double headed Janus symbolising two inseparable aspects, by using my memories as both mnemonic truth, and seeking to create them – to author them, I risked damaging the original memory by, in a way replacing it with the new, authored one. It was through looking at the work of Gerhard Richter that I gained a deeper insight into this element of my own work. I first came across his work when researching his varied and longstanding use of the photograph. Most recently I became interested in how the photograph and the archive are employed in his work.

![Fig. 3](image_url)

In 1961, one year after moving to West from East Germany, Gerhard Richter had started *Atlas*, a project he completed in 1995. In discussing Gerhard Richter’s project, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh refers to idea of *memory crisis*. A small collection of family photographs that depict Richter’s own family are presented framed, in neat tabular order
in the first four panels. These few self/origin/familial referencing photographs stand amongst hundreds of panels of similarly arranged images. Indicating the family photographs as the inception of the Atlas project, Buchloh wrote: "mnemonic desire...is activated especially in those moments of extreme duress in which the traditional, material bonds between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation appear to be on the verge of displacement, if not outright disappearance."³

The first four panels seem to stand like a thin layer, representing the idea of personal authenticity of the photographic image. The subsequent panels are composed of found photographic images (fashion, travel, soft-core pornography and advertisements). This presents a cultural context, as they represent the prohibited types of imagery in East Germany at the time. The fifth panel could be seen to represent a first instance of a discontinuity of narrative, or simply a continuation of another narrative, outside the familial. The Atlas project’s unyielding strategy is successful, because it doesn’t adhere to absolutes, neither the émigré’s memory crisis nor the socio-political/ideological context of a divided post-war Germany, or the broader crisis of the photographic image’s effect on painting. Richter adopts what is essentially an archival strategy of collecting, cataloguing and displaying photographic images, imbuing them with a tabular order. It allows him to examine the role of the photographic image at its most personal and public in chorus (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4

The memory crisis is identified through a process of repetition, a strategy that has a distancing effect. The photograph’s original significance of its depiction of familial history is diminished by repetitions. The creation of equal grounds for the spectator denounces the preciousness of and negates the familial photograph’s self-referential quality, but only as subjugation, never to the point of it disappearing.

My reliance on the photograph as an object largely occurs in the process of remembrance. By way of affect with a specific photograph, I let all memories that stem from this visual encounter be represented in a drawing or watercolour. I never exhibit the photographs, or any part of my autobiographical archive. My drawings represent a type of index of the photograph. In this sense whether they are my family or anyone’s family it doesn’t matter.

Richter’s strategy could be thought of as related to the mnemonic techniques popular in classical antiquity and the medieval period, which consisted of putting items to be remembered in specific places in imaginary spaces. This walk’s inherent linearity with each item of remembrance being linked to each subsequent item is similar to the temporal experience of the visual-tabular order of Richter’s Atlas. Although one is imagined and one a real experience of walking through museum’s rooms the process is similar to the interpreting an autobiographical archive, in the sense that its tangible products, i.e. artworks, become the place of remembrance. For example, when I lay out all the family photos at once, I select three or four most interesting ones, at a given time. Their independent mnemonic factors are brought. Then they are linked through their similarities. For example, colour, the presence of the same person in each photo, or the type of photo indoor/outdoor. The photographs, through this affect and their heightened subordination to remembrance, suffer a type of death of their referential power. The interaction through multiplicity, which is quantitative in nature, brings dissolution of the mnemonic factor in the work of art, helping it become a plaything of fiction and narrative and fusing the present with the past. Richter’s use of the photograph as object, which relies on this idea of multiplicity and disturbs the idea of an original, parallels my recent practice.
Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*

"I'll never get used to these constant resurrections."

- Professor Snout, Solaris

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*, adapted from Stanislav Lem’s science fiction book, introduced to my practice the idea of resurrection or multiple existences, which I will isolate in the following section. In the film, the psychiatrist Kris Kelvin, prior to setting out on an important mission on planet Solaris from which he may not return, burns most of his belongings in a fire outside his parents' house. During this process, he encounters a photograph of his late wife, Hari, and throws it into the fire with other documents. The photograph misses the fire. On his arrival to Solaris, he finds the crew on the ship have become very mentally unstable, and soon the effect of the planets Solaris oceanic frequencies “reincarnate” Hari. Kris wakes up one morning finding her peacefully sitting on a chair, looking at him. Hari is the perfect likeness of his late wife, even wearing the same outfit as in the photograph. Acting out of a sense of fear, Kris tries to dispose of her by sending her into outer space. The following night she returns.

When crewmember Professor Snout uses the word resurrection, he is fully aware that Hari is not a human being. He makes light of a situation in which whether or not Hari is physiologically real becomes irrelevant to both Kris and her. Is the process of repeating my grandfather’s image in my drawings somewhat similar to this type of resurrection? I am drawing someone I can no longer see in reality. The photograph seems to signify the end of this possibility. Surely I am aware that by drawing him, I cannot bring him back, yet at the same time, the temporal process of drawing allows me to relive a memory by making it material. Since my grandfather’s death, the importance of images of him grows, both in the familial archive and my art practice. I have become interested in the idea of repetition of an image, a figure, a multiplicity of the image, because it mirrors the way remembering can be a type of “seeing again” (see Fig. 5).
Kris goes on to become haunted by Hari’s immortality, and her resurrections, because she cannot die. Remembrance seems to agonise Kris through the fragmented immortal entity manifested in Hari. Although a product of his subconscious, she begins to gain her psychic independence through Kris’s admittance that she is the “real” Hari, but also through her painful encounters with her own immortality. Hari’s being is a product of Kris’ subconscious, an amalgamation of remembered elements of the past that she did spent with Kris. As a sum of memories she seems to be an archive of Hari, whose author is Kris. Similarly our memories are authored, simply because we cannot remember everything. The natural process of exclusion of memories also seems akin to an archive.

The multiplicity of her image in the film reminds me of my encounters with the photograph whose physical presence is material. By placing my grandfather in every drawing or repeating his image, I explore my memories and thus end up reliving my trauma. The drawing becomes a visual evidence of this process, where the memory itself becomes distorted and reauthored. The photograph as a reference to what-was-there is contested through the drawing, which presents a chronological and mnemonic paradox. This shows how remembrance contests the original, authentic experience of an event or identity. Giving a filmic sense of continuity, creating a link in a narrative within each work and how they are viewed, as a continuously expanding series, presents
itself as a new strategy in my work. As each new drawing presents a treatment of the past or a memory, it seems to add an independent new affect and memory. In this sense, Solaris reminds me that each time I draw my grandfather; I am and am not drawing him. Both in my work and this film, the significance of remembrance and ultimately identity is its continuous renegotiation. An authored memory can be dangerous because it ends up disturbing the ideal of truth, or rather because it points at the fragility of this construction (see Fig. 6 below).

What strikes me in this film is how our identities are confirmed by the admission of others, and especially by those close to us. The construction of identity, both the documented and the more elusive immaterial one can be found in the way the autobiographical archive functions. Both are constructed to an empirical order, yet the elements within are nothing but fragments of the past - a passport without a photograph. In this system, the key to the autobiographical cipher is it’s Archon (myself) and the way the mnemonic element is interpreted in a work of art. It is not through the authenticity, truthfulness, nor accuracy that the archive is essential, but through the flux of the mnemonic factor. To observe the archive’s outward appearance is worthless. It is in the way the original photograph is contested by remembrance that the ideas of truth and identity are negotiated.
Over the last seven years I have re-immigrated to my city of birth, Belgrade and my other home cities Wellington, New Zealand and Sydney, Australia. Being in possession of three passports, being a citizen of all these countries hasn't lessened the geographical and personal disharmonies of living in such a way, or recursive immigration. The recursive travelling and living in each place ends up being the core material for my art practice. My autobiographical archive is integral to my work as an artist. Though I do not re-immigrate solely for my art practice I have begun to look forward to each new journey as it inevitably enriches both my art practice and the autobiographical archive. The Travel Memorabilia collection consists of: maps of the cities I've lived in (Belgrade, Wellington, and Sydney); rural landscape, urban cityscape photographs; miscellaneous other maps (such as vintage, tourist and road maps) information and boarding passes, tickets (theatre, museum and tram passes), airline luggage name tags/labels. As temporal traces Travel Memorabilia, references the place of obtainment and marks the routes of my re-immigrating journeys over the years. For example, the process of flying and its metaphoric or metaphysical quality is embodied in the memento of the boarding pass, which, for example, reminds me of being in transit and informs me of the exact date of my journey. Another example is the photographed panorama of a city, which captures the way it looked at the time of each re-immigration, the season, the year and the time of my visit.
I have made my most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient... How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!  

Walter Benjamin, born in Berlin in 1892, studied philosophy and literature and later worked as a freelance critic and translator. I became interested in Benjamin’s writing about his experiences of travelling, and memories of his native city Berlin, as they seemed to mirror my own experiences of recursive travel and relationship to my archive and memories of these experiences. In the above quote, from *Unpacking My Library*, we see an indication of his mnemonic relationship to ownership of objects, like books. Benjamin’s library operates via a mnemonic externalism. The relationship to his library and its contents, some few thousand books, each a little snippet of his life, suggest both metaphorically and literally how interwoven the relationship between objects and their meaning can be. A library is an actual entity, and here it is taken to be the building blocks of Benjamins’ memory, its ultimate mnemonic referent.

The idea of unpacking the library also suggests a renewal of this relationship. The absence of his library due to his travels and its emergence out of dusty boxes through unpacking is a fruitful reunion not just of his library but of the memories each book reminds him of. The cartographic extent of the mnemonic function can be like pins on a map and have the function of taking us to different places. In light of Benjamin’s self-confessed lack of direction, up to the age of thirty, which parallels mine, the orienting function is highlighted and seems more relevant. When Benjamin compares his library to an architectural entity, he links a physical entity to a mnemonic matrix, thereby linking the personal, his library and his memories to the public, the city’s arena. This type of association is akin to mine. A major part of the mnemonic function of my collection is to aid my remembrance of the travels and journeys in order to use this context in the art making process.

What is quietly absent in Travel Memorabilia collection is a sense of linear chronology. Benjamin toys with the idea of presenting his bios on a map as a series of markers. In evaluating and engaging with my collection, I have begun to notice its elements serve to

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also remind me *where I am not*, in relation to where I am *presently*. For example, like
Proust’s involuntary memory, an autumnal morning in Sydney reminds me of an
autumnal morning in Belgrade, which in turn reminds me of the first months of primary
school, which in Europe starts in September. I take the disorder of such remembered
events, in particular their sense of chronological and geographic discontinuity, as an
opportunity to recreate such remembered events through my art practice. I aim to
present them as an amalgamated patchwork of remembrance that is cohesive, or visually
real.

![Fig. 7](image)

![Fig. 8](image)
In a 2007 series of watercolours (see Fig. 7), I worked with these ideas by using portions of photographs of Belgrade cityscapes and New Zealand landscapes. Initially, the two were placed next to each other. In a later work, I layered a cityscape line wash over a landscape (see Fig. 8). In both cases, I aimed to order the experiential world in accordance with my memory. I realised by doing this, I was dissolving countries, borders and temporal distances in my drawings. I had always been wary of the idea of linearity, perhaps for a very simple reason, it stopped fitting my life experiences from my early teens. Once I saw paper as a single plane, on which I could fix a unified presentation of the idea of many homes, cities and experiences I began zooming in to the lines and marks and explored the possibility of breaking them up.

Ilya Kabakov’s Rope of Life

Ilya Kabakov is a dissident Russian artist, who spent most of his career as an artist creating conceptual art outside the Socialist Realism ideology. After his relocation to the U.S.A. his work received critical acclaim and has remained centred around the experience of living under a bureaucratic regime. In the Rope of Life installation, 1985, Ilya Kabakov attached small miscellaneous objects to a rope. He left both ends of the rope free of objects and placed it on the ground of a gallery floor on a heap of earth. In this way it resembled an aerial view of a river. In a linear fashion, Kabakov placed small cards on the ground, parallel to each object, but not attached to it. Written on each card was a short memory from his life, followed by the year in which the memory happened (see Fig. 9 and Fig. 10).

The cards provided a brief description, for example: Autumn 1935 Running through the grey gates along the cobblestones pavement until the next block. The relationship between each object and the card was created via their proximity as opposed to the object having any actual relationship to the event described on the card. The metaphoric rope, as a linear entity, seems to be able to keep a promise to unify. Kabakov writes: And what about the observer? Where will he go? What will happen to him? It is impossible to say anything about this, for to tell the truth, he existed only because the rope existed. If we were to zoom out, they would seem like rubbish, or insignificant entities too. Rope of life demonstrates that the system behind narratives and linearity could be enough to piece together seemingly disparate or highly subjective objects. It also underlines that there are instances where the marriage of art objects and a system
can be harmonious for the spectator and could prove to be engaging beyond the artist's intention.

In the abovementioned series of drawings, I placed different cities and landscapes alongside each other, like Kabakov, to reorder experiential events to a mnemonic order. The idea behind these drawings was not to present a homogenised view of my past, but in relying on a linear system to put together, by way of adjoining or connecting these mnemonic experiences, made me reflect on whether this was an appropriate method of working. The digging up of ones past is natural, yet under the context of my autobiographical archive being possibly another science-of-self, the very idea that I could be subjugating myself via a process of differentiation disputed Baudrillard's attestation: “The gaze on an entity that doesn’t gaze back at me is why one invests in

Fig. 9

Fig. 10
objects all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships". The possibility of the Travel Memorabilia, and in general, my autobiographical archive becoming a locus of difference inspired a temporary relinquishing of the archive.

The autobiographical archive is strongly embedded in the idea of the past. As my past and current state of being is strongly influenced by the experience of immigration, and later re-immigration, the idea of multiplicity is challenging to interpret. When applied to the inherent motivation behind the use of the autobiographical archive, by combining different elements of different cities to create visual evidence of ordering and change, I wondered if an ephemeral process of remembrance could be criticised as something that homogenises. As I am drawn to re-stratifying past experience, and breaking through ideas to do with nostalgia of the past and the paradox of feeling like I was homogenising my lived experience also came from investing in collecting and cataloguing objects with strong mnemonic functions. The idea of using remembrance to present an all-inclusive experiential drawing as a strategy could be either good or bad. The existence of the archive doesn't minimise the risk factor of making mistakes and regressing without breakthrough as an artist.

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Chapter IV

Correspondence

This collection consists of empty envelopes, handwritten notes and letters and a digital archive of e-mails. It has proven to be the most difficult to understand, in terms of what is to be produced out of it and its material significance to my art practice. Below I will outline why the envelopes were collected and the ideas behind the ongoing project Exploded Drawings. Later in the chapter I will also outline the events of an unrealised project, and reflect on its impact on how I use my autobiographical archive.
Envelopes

Archives contain paperwork that no longer circulates in the bureaucracy, paperwork that has lapsed and become garbage.⁶

Like a warrant to an incident between the outside world and myself, the empty envelopes are a remnant of correspondence between the institutions I am affiliated with via membership, enrolment and employment. The collection of envelopes has been most easily seen as rubbish, viewed as no more than a hoarding impulse, something to be frowned upon. To understand the intrigue behind this treasure, previous to it becoming an envelope, it was a letter that arrived in the mailbox. To look inside, we must open the envelope. However, prior to the moment of knowing the contents of the letter, we first encounter the pattern of the interior of the envelope, and then the story unfolds. I collect the envelopes because of the pattern inside the envelope. The clash is between legibility, meaning and symbolic reading of the mark. The repetitive slopes, curves and colour hold as much semiotic meaning to me as a note that is written by hand on paper. The optical effect of movement on the paper surface has a filmic quality, like a heart line communicates the functioning state of a cardiovascular system.

The pattern as mark became most interesting to my process of drawing. Two meanings surfaced: the pattern as an abstraction of writing and the pattern as an abstraction of the cartographic language. First, the pattern is visually encountered before the moment the letters true significance is revealed. The pattern presents itself as the narrative at a moment my emotional suspense and investment are at their peak. The empty envelope is a remnant of this suspense and investment and also a mnemonic visual language that serves to remind me of finding out what was inside the envelope. The good news versus bad news ratio is pretty even, I believe. Over the years I’ve collected about fifty envelopes. They are also kept for all the usual reasons letters are kept, with the added contrasting and unifying appreciation of the reading of the mark being broken down in preference to the mnemonic function.

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Julie Mehretu

I can no longer claim to remember each envelopes event, because it has taken me a long time to find a way to interpret this collection in my art practice. As a whole, it is in danger of becoming more of a memento of the past process that inspired their colation, like an index to ways of remembering or a red thread on the finger. Julie Mehretu’s work has been influential in giving me an insight into the possibility to re-stratify the meaning of the mark. An artist of Ethiopian origin, she creates cartographies by utilising drawing and painting techniques. She could be said to produce explosions of painterly effects and a diverse style of drawings. The directional lines or marks belong to an array of disciplines including architectural drawings and cartography. The large works rely on the optical effects of depth, movement and colour. In Mehretu’s treatment of these seemingly neutral visual languages, they become expressive through repetitions and layering, having the effect of ordered chaos. Although she uses perspective in her work to create a sense of locus, centre and depth in the work, all the signifying marks and their ordering point to a collapse of their original referential quality. Here what started as a familiar mark that references territory, maps and cities becomes animated, looking more like a swarming array of lines without a cohesive direction. Mehretu’s visual language creates a revolutionary reordering of graphic line (see Fig. 11).

Fig. 11

 Appropriately, her work focuses on public spaces such as airports, museums and stadiums as places where people circulate to, swarm to in large numbers, to illuminate the underlying order of this circulation. By creating an animated, bright disorder she
seems to obliterate the aspiration to order contained in these types of linear images. By literally working through the representational image, she presents a space strategically broken up, liberated from a language that served to order it in the first place. As a use of an existing language cartographic, topological and architectural, her drawings present an interesting possibility of how new different meaning can be conveyed without completely losing the marks iconographic origin. The idea of expressiveness of the mark is achieved through its spatial relationship with other marks, as opposed to a painterly method like expressive brushstrokes, which seems to have the effect of turning the system against itself.

Mehretu’s artist archive consists of numerous photographs of crowds, stadiums, aerial views of prisons, cityscapes, soldiers and riots. Her appropriation of these images is different to my own interaction with photographs or my autobiographical archive, except for the sense of amalgamation. Where numerous directional marks are very purposely present, they also seem very impersonal, like the mark of a technical draughtsman. Both our practices seem to use personal experience to a degree, but where Mehretu’s work operates is political on a mass scale, mine remains on an intimate and very insular scale.

In an ongoing project started in 2007 titled Exploded Drawings, explored the idea of how to restratify meaning. I provided my colleagues with a pencil and a piece of paper and asked them to draw me a map of their first home from memory. I scanned these maps and decided to alter them; I began by pulling apart each drawn mark in order to break its cartographic reference. This proved to be a painstaking task, as an average of a couple of hundred strokes made up each map drawing. Working with bitmap based software allowed me to zoom in and notice the cartographic hand-drawn mark as painterly. As I pulled apart each mark, I would move it to a linear heap, like little specimen. I left a title for each group of lines, for example railway line or street name. Through removing the cartographic language, I aimed to scrutinise and transform what is essentially a semi-fictional spatial reference to a memory. The outcome was an abstraction that was grouped and indexed by a title. In another way, by removing the pictorial aspect of the map, I highlighted how a memory can fail to accurately inform, direct and locate. In comparison to my other drawings, this project also seemed to follow the idea of altering the original. However, this is the only instance where I was working with material not part of my collections.
Whether the mark or line is cartographic or merely a pattern or handwriting is of no importance. In Exploded drawings (see Fig. 12 and Fig. 13), the content of the original map drawing was stripped of its cartographic meaning, and reordered into another type of signifying drawing. This exercise concluded with abstracting a representational drawing, whereas the envelope’s pattern is already an abstraction of an event that occurred after my encounter with it. In situations where the strategy cannot speak through representational qualities, it seemed able to gain meaning through the strategy of systematic ordering.

**Digital archive: the events of an unrealised project**

He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance advances
from small to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows even mightier.7

Walter Benjamin suggests that the ways in which we can reinterpret our past and memories is inexhaustible. I would not be able to reflect on this unrealised project, if I had not made clear aims and outcomes when developing the idea of typing out the letters my fiancée and I sent to each other while in a long-distance relationship during 1999-2002. Below is an account of this unrealised project.

I won my first and only bid on E-Bay for an Ettore Sottsass Jr. Olivetti Valentine typewriter. I photographed the moment of opening the package from the post office. Besides being very dusty and containing a dead fly, I found my typewriter couldn’t type. I replaced the ink ribbon and transferred my energy into conducting a search for the e-mails in several countries. After finding they were nowhere to be found8, I was traumatised.

The typewriter came into my archive not as a mnemonic element, like the familial photographs for example, but as a vehicle for archivisation of a digital archive. The typewriter, a red Olivetti Valentine, Ettore Sottsass Jr. was going to be a specific, which I would use to materialise a virtual archive stored on a computer database. The reversal of a resurrected trace was going to be approached like a project whose premise was to retype all the e-mail correspondence my fiancée and I sent to each other, during which time we were in a long-distance relationship. While concurrently measuring the time it took me to perform this task, I had also envisioned documenting the process of typing itself in a filmic setting with a whimsical mise en scène of a 1950s office.

Of course, the Valentine and the love letters were meant to celebrate the fleeting first moments of love, but the documented quantifiable element was meant to serve as a pertinent reminder that a virtual archive is immaterial, much like a memory. As I have found in the past, the silent absence of the loved person, like in a long-distance

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8 I am currently left with one last possibility, if they could still exist somewhere it could be in a room used for storage in Wellington, New Zealand on an old hard-drive of a dismantled computer.
relationship, creates a greater need to cling to material remnants as mementos of the loved one. In a way this was a trauma too, which inspired me to cling to these traces, collect them and in the end, to create archives. Although unrealised, this project raised an important question that has influenced the way I view my art practice.

Examining the original versus the manufactured/fabricated/new archival material I wondered whether this art could be a form of archivisation in its own right. If it was created out of an autobiographical element of my archive and materialised through the process of making art, how could I be sure it was not part of my archive? Since I would have been willing to exhibit this work, the retyped emails as an object, for example as an artist book would only be relevant in relation to the duration it took to retype the emails, its documentation and mise en scene. Its conceptual reason for existing would be the essential objective of the work, rendering the materialised e-mails into the realm of the archive.

The main trace of this love at the time was immaterial, virtual and that it was through the a posteriori process of retyping that a materialisation of this period was to take place, and become part of my archives as a material object. The filmed account of this process would transgress my art practice as its produce, as opposed to becoming an element of the correspondence archive. Considering the unlikelihood of finding the emails and since the faulty typewriter could not write, I feel the impossibility of going ahead with my project. I feel stripped of my own memory of the contents of the letters. Through performance, the letters would be reprocessed from a virtual archive to a material one. This progression is ironically carried out with a retro machine to suggest not a finished artwork, but rather more material for a fresh archive, that references my history and well as the original mnemonic trace of the time and place they were created in.

Perhaps the trauma element that inspires the creation of archives potentially destroys the memory of what is being archived, like a contractual clause. The ominous two incidents and the amnesic feelings they left behind, annihilated both my process of reinterpreting this period of my life through my art practice and denied me the ownership of its traces. This project was meant to quantify the time it took me to retype some thousand letters written by my fiancée and I over three years. The fact that the Olivetti still didn’t work,
even after replacing the ink ribbons, eventually allowed me to see a humorous side to the process.

Here again I was working backwards in a way, through the creation of a Para-archive or archivisation. The virtual mnemonic factor of the process of exchanging letters between two people is embodied with the imagined duration as a conceptual orientation of this project. Materialising a virtual archive through a performance, produced from a type of middle point between its starting one, the archive and its finishing one, the art object. The praxis of working with the interpretation of mnemonic objects transgressed a system yet concurrently, stayed loyal to it by adapting to its immaterial specificity.
Chapter V

Time Capsules

Archives do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost. Instead, they remind us like Warhol’s boxes, of what we have never possessed in the first place. If that is a paradox, it is perhaps the paradox of modernism itself.⁹

Moving backwards into my collections, I am left with the Time Capsules, the final collection that seems to rely on assemblage as the crucial point since they are already curated collections. The method of cleaning out and revising accumulated bits of the daily accumulation of paper can be done periodically even reverently. Then there is the more prescribed cleanout, which could be prompted by moving out and leaving a home. Finally, there are more extreme situations such as sorting out the possessions of a deceased member of family, emigrating or finding yourself in exile because of war.

The nature of inhabitation of a space, like a home, implies that other than you or the people you share it with, there will also be objects of both functional and non-functional meaning that will move in with you, defining the new space into a home. Prior to moving in, is moving out, and with this process, a careful shedding, revision and purging of accumulated paper, objects, keepsakes and clothing will need to occur. The entire contents of the home become suddenly visible. Some people feel disbelief that there are so many objects and things that they own. There is a hierarchy brought up under the circumstance of moving out and the specifics of using a single suitcase as a measurement tool, a guide to tell you how much you can take, and in the case of air travel a specified amount of kilograms. The hierarchy at once brings up a stocktaking frame of mind that is applied to the idea of becoming lighter, owning less and keeping the most important items only. I would take this archive everywhere I go and its portability was crucial. As someone who travels frequently and has temporary homes, I tend to minimise my collections so that they can be packed up and put into my next hand luggage. Although this is not something I am aware of at all times, I believe it the main reason behind the archive as a whole being portable. During the Second World War, when he was living in exile in Paris, Alberto Giacometti produced very small works, so that he could fit them inside his suitcase if forced to move quickly. Necessity often extends or is inspired by a lack of finance. If my collections numbered in hundreds I would need to either be fixed geographically or work with individual items from the archive. Without a reference of the whole, or its unity, I would feel like something was lacking. The portable scale of the archive allows me to move frequently and not be at a loss. I am not tied down.

My model of creating/thinking mirrors, more often than not, the traditional make-artwork and exhibit-artwork model. This in turn represents one divisive line in my process, drawn each time a work of art is completed. Throughout this paper, I’ve been outlining the particular mnemonic quality and nature of each of the collections that make up the autobiographical archive. The completed work of art stands independent of the archive. I have never wished to exhibit an actual portion or item of the archive alongside the work of art. The significance of the time capsules, outside of their individual item based quality, is their assemblage. The time capsules have inspired me in an altogether different way. As I was time and again packing up all my belongings to re-immigrate somewhere, I realised a process of re-ordering occurs within the archive as
well. In my case, I would rearrange these capsules each time I would move or when I found myself running out of space. Each time the assemblages become changed, they inspired new mnemonic connotations.

Recently I made my first visit to the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade. I found the museum had only half of its collection exhibited; the rest was in storage, quite haphazardly placed in the foyer and upper level of the house. Featured in the south of the museum were his urn, and the models of his most famous inventions and workstations. I became fascinated by the idea of a home having the function of the archive. The messy half-packed up contents of a museum in a former domestic residence resembled my own continuously reimmigrating chaos. This was followed by a visit to the Ivo Andric Museum, situated in his apartment residence in central Belgrade. Perhaps the most well known excursions into re-ordering the house as museum is Freud’s museum, where artists like Sophie Calle and Susan Hillier have created new relationship between its objects and our reading of them. If anyone’s house could be viewed as an archive of personal familial contents, since their structuring undoubtedly has a mnemonic function like the case with Benjamin’s library, a family heirloom, photo album or inherited collections, could the product of my autobiographical archive also operate through the logic of a time capsule, whereby the interrelation between collections is also very crucial?

In looking at some of the images in my collections there are photographs of houses being constructed. As a representation of a process of archiving, or creating of archives, that is the spatial significance I have been interested in and is one of the ideas behind my work. The construction of houses or archives through the ordering of its contents like in a time capsule have a curatorial quality to it. As a strategy the archives significance lays both in the risk to obliterate mnemonic function and also be able to inspire affective creation. Like the unrealised project, this idea starts in the middle somewhere, and through the idea of re-ordering it, could inspire new affects and possibilities for the process of making art objects and the way and where they are presented.

When discussing the ancient Athenian political structure, Derrida reminds us the Archon’s home used to be the safe haven, or place of consignment for the archive. My
archive travels with me everywhere I go. Where is the home of such an archive? Is it the studio or the exhibition space? I cannot remove the idea that, for my portable archive, the home has a curious duality. I take my archive everywhere I travel and live. But when I have a studio, the archive lives there. In my recent solo exhibition, I experimented with this idea by placing drawings made using the familial collection next to maps painted using the travel memorabilia. More accurately, I placed the small works below each drawing. By trying to see how the maps could function next to drawings, I was looking to see if there was a possibility one would spill into the other. This made me realise I was using a topological archival ability to interpret objects in relation to their placement within a system. In attempting to use the exhibition space as a type of box I could place the works in, a life-sized crate, in a way, I was also applying an archival method outside the archive itself.
Conclusion
Objects are material, making them an easy focus of archiving. However, objects do not contain experience. Through a mnemonic trigger, it is remembrance that allows numerous further experiments and ultimately interpretations that encompass both memory or the past and identity or the present. Whether the artwork could be seen to be the new form of an archive will be left open. Nevertheless, with the advent of understanding the autobiographical archive I have noticed I utilise not just the objects that are within it but the many systems it can operate under. I am now interested in its logic as well as its mnemonic power.

An archive does not contain experience; its bits and pieces are broken up to create new things, creations unobstructed by their previous life. In my art I have used the archive to present a new negotiation, the objects themselves have no place in the art world of galleries and museums. It remains locked in the studio, in the process. With the autobiographical archive comes a type of fine print, *use with caution*. What type of control could I be exerting on my life or lived experience? At the beginning of my candidature, I felt encapsulated into a process I could not understand and in not wishing to continue to develop without an awareness of the specificity of my art practice, and within it the autobiographical archive, my progress was halted until I was able to find the appropriate other currents of influence to aid my problem solving process.

The autobiographical archive’s fixed, apparently rigid and even amnesic qualities exist alongside the way it is utilised in my art practice and its in-flux mnemonic relationship to my art production. Again the double-headed Janus, where one is administration through the archive the other is research through my art practice. Together they do not represent opposites but rather present a visible material content to aid my own processing of the past through the present. This as a strategy, adopts both archival and affective methods of working, which although always risking a type of oblivion and chaos or embarrassing homogenisation of difference, entail a subtle, yet quite powerful opportunity to create new connections, affects, meanings and memories. Allowing me to process and come to terms with some traumatic experiences at its most subjective, it also allows me to create affective works for the audience/spectator, which in the end do not explicitly rely on their very subjective inceptions or the exact specifics of an historical event.
As Joan Gibbons wrote in Contemporary Art and Memory: "... memory is complexified by a conflation of past and present, in which that which is retrieved is contingent on what is felt or experienced in the present and becomes as much a feature of the present as of the past." Interpreting this autobiographical archive serves as a trace to a larger autonomous history, a way to tap into pertinent issues that have been the defining moments and events of my life so far, through the process of making art.

As a projection into the future, I conclude by wondering what I would do if all the contents of my archive went missing? Would I forget everything? Surely not, the need to cling to material possessions as comforting affirmations of the existence of something from the past, or as mementos of important events are more like strong preferences. Could I work backwards, making limited edition works and stripping the objects of their significance, thereby reversing the process of collecting, for example returning the family photographs? Wondering if my process of collecting will ever come to a halt, I realise something more important. Whether the objects in my autobiographical archive are able to continue to become layered with more meaning and events will only become apparent through the process of making art.

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Catalogue of Work Presented for Examination
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Nina Knezevic, Untitled 7, graphite on paper, 2009, 27.5x19
Nina Knezevic, Beach Scene, graphite on paper, 2009, 25x28
Nina Knezevic, Birth of sisters, graphite on paper, 2009, 25x28
Nina Knezevic, Untitled 8, graphite on paper, 2009, 27.5x19
Nina Knezevic, Untitled 9, graphite on paper, 2009, 27.5x19
Nina Knezevic, Map 1, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 2, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 3, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 4, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 5, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 6, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 6, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Nina Knezevic, Map 6, watercolour, oil pastel and chalk on paper, 10x13
Various installation views of examination exhibition titled Paperless, August 2009.