(RE)COLLECTIONS : PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMORY, AND FORGETTING

A Thesis

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by

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For Grandma Kay, Grandpa Gay and their children whose memories
I've borrowed for this research
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PREFACE

Henceforth, I would have to consent to combine two voices: the voice of banality (to say what everyone sees and knows) and the voice of singularity (to replenish such banality with all the élan of an emotion which belonged only to myself).¹

Roland Barthes

The relationship between photography and memory is a topic that has been explored through both visual means and text since photography’s inception. Numerous essays, books, and images have been dedicated to the topic and therefore, I must concede that there is little, if anything, new to observe about this relationship. The most I can hope for is that my personal experiences with memory and photography are viable illustration for the observations and theories proposed by the critics and philosophers who mused on this relationship before me. I make no new claims; I only consolidate and illustrate some of the vast amount of information available.

FAMILY FOLKLORE

*We are linked by blood, and blood is memory without language.*

Joyce Carol Oates

My mother’s house is full of ghosts. These ghosts are not malevolent. They do not slam doors or flicker lights. Instead they live in photographs and objects collecting dust on the living room mantel.

I grew up in a two-person household. My parents divorced when I was young and my mother was my primary caregiver. Without another adult for her to confide in and without a sibling for me, we became each other’s confidants. She saw me through my first heartbreak, and I saw her through the annual anniversaries of her first child’s death. She supported me when my father remarried, and I saw her through the deaths of her mother, her younger brother, a love, and several close family friends.

When dealing with the death of a loved one, my mother turned to storytelling to help her cope with the loss. I’ve spent hours listening to my mother
talk about the past and the people she knew, the experiences they had together. There were stories about growing up in a small town with three siblings, about cheerleading in high school, and about her life with her first husband. There were also stories about growing up with an alcoholic father, her brother leaving to serve in the Vietnam War, and losing her brother to meningitis when he was an infant. Although I did not live through these experiences as my mother did, they have become just as much a part of my own history and of the story of my past.

There are many terms to describe this type of remembering: inherited memory, blood memory, ancestral memory, and post-memory, among others. Although these different terms specifically define slightly different aspects of multi-generational memory, they all describe the concept of relating to something that happened, but that you did not live through yourself. Marianne Hirsch defines the term post-memory as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to constitute memories in their own right.”² She goes on to say, “post-memory is distinguished from memory

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² Hirsch, Marianne, “The Generation of Postmemory”, (Poetics Today 29.1; Spring 2008), 103
based on generational difference and from history based on personal connection. It characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation.”³ Although she developed this term in relation to children of Holocaust victims, even she acknowledges that it may be helpful in describing other second-generation memories of events or experiences.

One of the most distinct differences between memory and post-memory is that, while memory is mediated through the act of recollecting, post-memory is mediated through imaginative investment and creation.⁴ As children we rely on our imaginations to understand events that preceded our birth. I grew up “knowing” my brother although I knew we could never meet. Even as a child I felt a connection to a person who had long since passed away. In order to understand this connection, I would imagine having known him in our mother’s womb. I imagined us reclining on sofas and watching television together, sharing...

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a bowl of popcorn and a soda in the comfort of our mother’s body. This imagined experience was the only way I knew how to understand the feeling of knowing someone I would never meet. Fantasizing was the only way to express my sense of a living connection to the past. The stories from my family’s past and the experiences that they went through have been played over and over in my mind. Mistakes in the past become my mistakes, their accomplishments become my accomplishments, and their pain becomes my pain. Every choice my ancestors made has affected who and where I am today. Without this specific history, I would not be specifically me. I do not recollect these stories, as they are not my memories to call upon, but I am a character in these stories; I play the role of the future.

Through storytelling and photographs, the ghosts from my mother’s past continue to haunt the present. People who died long before I was born continue to play a role in my life today. When I see a photograph of my great-grandmother, I recognize her. And although she exists only in photographs, I imagine that as I look at her, she also looks back and recognizes me.
PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MNEMONIC DEVICE

Those whom we love no longer leave us in dying, as they did of old. They remain with us just as they appeared in life; they look down upon us from our walls; they lie upon our tables. Our own eyes lose the images pictured on them, but the unfading artificial retina, which has looked upon them, retains their impress... and a fresh sunbeam lays this on the living nerve as if it were radiated from the breathing shape.\(^5\)

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Due to photography’s connection to the referent, it has been utilized as a key mnemonic device since its inception. Unlike a painting, which can also refer to a referent, photography is literally an emanation of that which was in front of the lens; it is a “mirror with a memory.”\(^6\)

Part essay on photography and part eulogy, Roland Barthes' book Camera Lucida investigates the effects of photography on the viewer

\(^5\) Holmes, Oliver Wendell. “Sun-Painting and Sun-Sculpture: With a Stereoscopic Trip Across the Atlantic” in Soundings from the Atlantic (Boston: Ticknor and Fields. 1864), 170.

through a deeply personal discussion of the lasting emotional effect of certain photographs. The investigation originates from Barthes’ desire to find a photograph that has captured a true likeness of his recently deceased mother. When he finally discovers this photograph, we find that it is an image of his mother as a child. How is it that for Barthes, the one and only image he can find of his mother that reveals to him her true likeness, is of her as a child, taken far before he was born? For Barthes, he finds in the image of his mother as a child “the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever, without her having inherited it from anyone.”

He continues by questioning, “how this kindness could have proceeded from the imperfect parents who had loved her so badly?”

I can relate to Barthes’ revelation, for when I think of my grandma I remember her as she looks in her high school graduation photograph, an image taken close to 60 years before I was born. I never really knew my

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grandma; she was moved into a nursing home and diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease by the time I turned eight years old. I wasn’t old enough to form concrete memories of my own before she was too far into the disease to remember who I was, let alone who she was. Everything I know about my grandma comes from the stories that I was told by my mother. I have known the photographs and stories that remain from my grandma’s life more fully than I was able to know my grandma. I no longer remember the sound of my grandma’s voice, the way that she smelled, or the way that she held her body as she walked. The image of her in her youth, at the beginning of her long life, has superseded the more corporeal parts of my memory of her.

Many photography critics and scholars have questioned photography’s usefulness as a mnemonic device. Although Barthes eventually finds an image that speaks to him of his mother’s true essence, the process of searching for the image compels him to claim that “not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory... but it actually blocks
memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory." Here Barthes refers to the way in which a photograph can surpass a more overwhelming or spontaneous act of remembrance. For example, how much do you actually remember from your childhood? For me, when I think about my childhood, the images that come to mind resemble the photographs I've seen of my childhood; birthday parties, holidays, family vacations. It is rare that a memory comes to mind of which I have no photographic evidence. Does this mean that photography has replaced my memories? For Barthes, a memory is more sensation than image. But we cannot ever smell, touch, taste, or feel what is pictured in the photograph.

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THE FAMILY ALBUM AND THE ARCHIVE

The minute you put a pipe into a display case, it stops being a pipe. You can preserve something but it’s no longer the same. If you take a pipe and put it in a display case, it’s no longer a pipe, but just an image of a pipe. A pipe is made to live, to be smoked.\textsuperscript{11}

Christian Boltanski

The collecting and storing of photography or the archiving of memories has been a practice since its inception. The family album, like family folklore, is a means of storytelling. Sociologist Richard Chalfen defines the family album as “a site of cross-generational exchange and cultural continuity.”\textsuperscript{12} Loved ones are kept in frames or albums around the house as evidence of what people looked like. They allow us to teach our


children who is in their family. Family photographs allow us to scrutinize faces in search of features that resemble our own. It has given families the ability to put the names from stories to faces, but without those stories the people depicted in photographs become unrecognizable.

Family photographic albums are all more or less homogenous. Family photographs represent the family in a particular way; they tend to show the family happy and at leisure. They are group shots taken at family get-togethers, images of children at the beach, and young lovers departing for a date.

*Family photographs show family groups bound together. Since signs of this integration are universal to all family photographs, it is claimed that ‘all family albums are alike,’ that their subject matter is ‘astonishingly narrow’ and that they have the ‘overwhelming sense of similarity and redundancy.’*14

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Despite the particular images and whom they may depict, family albums normalize the family experience. They siphon out moments of tension or conflict in favor of a grander narrative of integration and connectedness.

The French artist Christian Boltanski uses these innate characteristics of the family album to explore its universal qualities. In the piece *Photo Album of the Family D* from 1972, Boltanski displayed 150 images taken from the family photo album of a friend of his, Michel Durand; a man whom he says was “the prototype of the true French Family.” Boltanski’s interest in the family album derives from the idea that all photo albums and family snapshots are more or less the same, they all tell a specific story with a different plot line but the events that take place are all quite similar.

_The artist sends out a sort of stimulus, and the viewer takes the image, appropriates it, and finishes the work. If you show an image of a child running on a beach, everyone is going to recognize this image and read it differently, based on his or her own experience...The artwork necessarily speaks about the self, but that’s of no importance: it becomes each person._

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The homogenizing power of a Family Album poses a problem when I look through my grandma’s images. The images in her archive would suggest that she led a particularly easy life when in fact the opposite is true. From childhood on my grandma dealt with many hardships. At eight, my grandma became quite ill. Because of this severe illness, she developed epilepsy from the high fevers. She was told that she should never work, have children, or get married. She managed to overcome these obstacles; first by enrolling in teaching school and gaining certification to work as a teacher, which she did for many years. When she was 33 years old, a spinster by anyone’s definition in the 1940s, she married my grandfather. As evidenced by the letters that were written between her and my grandfather during their separated engagement, she still suffered from complications left over from her childhood illness. Still, she went on to have four children. Although she overcame these early obstacles in life, she went on to suffer through a marriage that in the end left her penniless. My grandfather suffered from alcoholism and eventually drank away not
only their money, but also all their friends and family. When he eventually passed away from lung cancer, my grandma flourished for the decade before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

Although my grandma suffered through her life, the photographic evidence left behind suggests a life of promise and hope. The images suggest the American Dream: childhood, education, friendship, family, marriage, and parenting. There are no indications in the images that my grandma’s health was wavering, that she was weak from frequent seizures, or was treated several times for various mental health issues. There are no indications that she married a man who could not provide for his family due to his thirst for alcohol, a man who spent more time at the bar than at home with his children, a man who eventually drove away friends and family.

An archive of photographs may serve as a hospice for memory: a place for memories to reside while they slowly lose their original referent and become only images of a distant unknown past. The organization and selection that is innate to a photographic archive distorts the truth and allows a fantasy to develop about the people depicted.
MONUMENTS AND COUNTER-MEMORIALS

Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument.17

Roland Barthes

The only thing I was ever really told about my grandfather was that he was an alcoholic. Memories from my mother's childhood are told as stories of abandonment, financial hardships, and unstable family dynamics. I never understood why my grandma didn’t leave him until I was given the letters that were written between them during their engagement. I was given a different understanding of my grandfather, he wasn’t always a monster, but he was plagued by a disease that transformed him. How do you memorialize or honor someone who was simultaneously a victim and an offender?

Traditional memorials are the products of a collective memory of a certain group, in a certain place and time. In the term coined by Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is the past and history of a unified group of people as remembered by those people.

While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is the individuals as group members who remember. It is of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located within a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past. 18

For example, collective memory is the reason we have a holiday such as Columbus Day, but it is also the reason that controversy has arisen over the validity of honoring Columbus as a hero. The attitude of the public in respect to Columbus changed as our cultural knowledge about him expanded and our cultural intolerance of abuses of basic human rights grew stronger. We no longer remember Christopher Columbus as the brave hero who conquered the new world; instead, we remember him as a man singularly focused on wealth and power, a man who enslaved and tortured (and worse) the native

people of the land in order to achieve his goal. We still remember Columbus and his accomplishments, but we no longer believe him to have been an infallible man. Halbwachs argues that collective memory serves as a flexible framework which molds the past in respect to social needs in order to help maintain social continuity and equilibrium, and connect individuals to communities and nations.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. Society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other.}\textsuperscript{20}

One way in which this space has been navigated, arguably successfully, is to take into account the phenomena of the “counter-memorial.” The term counter-memorial was coined by noted Holocaust scholar James E. Young as a way to talk about the memorial culture in post-war Germany. The counter-monument has arisen as an answer to the problem of how a nation full of former perpetrators begins to mourn their victims. The counter-

\textsuperscript{19} Doss, Erika Lee. \textit{Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America}. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6

\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in: Doss, Erika Lee. \textit{Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America}. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6
monument questions the premise of traditional monuments and memorial forms and raises doubt as to whether the monument is able to provide a fulfilling place for historical memory.\textsuperscript{21} Traditional monuments are never changing, never evolving forms that instead of triggering and honoring memory, stifle and dilute it so that it becomes unrecognizable to future generations who come looking for it.\textsuperscript{22} Traditional monuments insist on remembering for you, allowing you to forget your own memory over time. In contrast, the counter-memorial’s function is to return the burden of remembering on to those who come looking for it - instead of remaining forever, it disappears; instead of rising tall, it sinks below ground.

In the article “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” James E Young writes at length about the \textit{Harburg Monument Against Fascism} created by Jochen and Esther Gerz. Often referred to as the “disappearing monument,” the artists sought to create a

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\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{21} Young, James E. Interview with Adi Gordon and Amos Goldberg. (\textit{Shoah Resource Center}, The International School for Holocaust Studies, Jerusalem. 24, May 1998)

\item\textsuperscript{22} Young, James E. “Memory and Counter-Memory: The End of the monument in Germany”. In \textit{Harvard Design Magazine}. (MIT Press, Fall 1999, No.9.)
\end{footnotes}
memorial that resisted “usurping the community’s will to remember” without using what they regarded as “the fascist tendencies in all monuments.”

Totalitarian regimes, such as that of the Nazis and the former Soviet Union, have used the monument as propaganda and as a way to control the collective memory of the public. To ask the oppressed to use the memorial language of their oppressors creates an uncomfortable paradox in a space meant for remembering.

Jochen and Esther Gerz’s answer to this challenge was to create a monument that in essence was against itself, literally disappearing from public sight over time and forcing visitors to remember for themselves. In 1986, the monument was unveiled and visitors to the site were invited to add their own names to the side of the monument. The monument was lowered in one-and-a-half meter sections until the monument was completely sunk into the ground. Nothing is now left at this site, but the top surface of the monument, which has been covered by a burial stone and inscribed to “Harburg

Monument against Fascism.” The Harburg Monument against Fascism’s aim is

*not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet.*

In the counter-monument form, Jochen and Esther Gerz have taken the language of the traditional monument and subverted the traditional outcome of its use, navigating the space between perpetrator and victim in a respectful way.

The photograph holds memory much in the same way that traditional monuments and memorials do. Both photographs and monuments are never changing, never evolving forms that stifle and dilute memory until it becomes non-existent to future generations. Instead of triggering a memory, the photograph and the monument exist to remember for you. They supersede spontaneous acts of remembrance, replacing them with more regimented and formulated ideas of what one is supposed to remember.

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24 Young, James E. “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today”, in *Critical Inquiry.* (Vol. 18, No. 2: Winter 1992), 277
RE:COLLECTIONS

The images I’ve chosen to replicate in my work, Re:Collections, are images that depict the every day. They are snapshots of my family’s past, images that were “casually made, by untrained amateurs, and intended to function as a document of a personal history.” But these images don’t tell us anything in particular about the people that are shown. Instead, they are witnesses to a collective ritual. They are images of childhood, young adulthood, marriage and parenting. The images are easily recognizable as images from the past; the clothing style, the size of the photograph, and even that they are film-based images, denote them as this-has-been. Barthes calls this element of interest the ‘studium’ of the photograph, “it is culturally that I participate in the

figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.”26 While the images I’ve used may be photographs from my actual family’s album, they just as easily encourage the casual viewer to recall their own family album.

Drawing from the research on traditional and counter memorials, the work Family Portrait challenges the notion of memory as a fixed image. Much like the counter-memorials in post-war Germany, Family Portrait intentionally violates and desecrates objects that are commonly believed to hold their own memory. The images, reproduced from my grandma’s archive, are those of a happy family. The wine that is allowed to slowly drip on to the images and the subsequent destruction and staining of the photographs, simulates the way that time plays a role in the erosion and manipulation of memory. It represents the way in which over time my grandfather’s drinking eroded the family unit. By purposefully destroying the images, the desire to forget is physically manifested.

With tragic memories, like the one dealt with in Family Portrait, there is a constant struggle between the desire to forget and the propensity to remember. In the pieces re:Stacks, Timeline, and Tapestry, I explore this struggle further.

through the reutilization and undermined attempt to preserve the stained photographs from *Family Portrait*. Wrapped in cheesecloth and then dipped in wax, each stained photograph becomes even more difficult to read. Although the gesture is made through the desire preserve, the act itself obscures the photographic traces further, denying full access to the images and the memories they presume to contain. By sewing each cloth-like unit together in the piece *Tapestry*, the images begin to create a story with each individual photograph becoming a word, or a sentence within the larger narrative. The patchwork represents the desire for unity and understanding between the sometimes-disparate stories and images of the past.

The work in *Re:Collections* draws from personal family history, thoughts on the photograph and the family album as mnemonic devices, and research on traditional and counter memorials to explore the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting. The installation is comprised of several individual pieces that when shown together reveal themselves as distinctive steps of an ongoing process which becomes a physical manifestation of the constant struggle between the desire to forget and the human propensity to remember.
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APPENDIX:

FIGURES

The following pages contain examples of work following conceptual criteria outlined in this document and created during my three years at the University of Notre Dame.\textsuperscript{27}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{27} All images by the author
Family Portrait; Found photographs, Wine, Wood, Glass Bottles, Rope; 96 x 84 x 60 inches; 2012
Detail: *Family Portrait*, 2012
For Later Consumption; Found photographs, Wine, Glass Bottles, Wood, Cork; 76 x 54 x 5.5 inches; 2012
Detail:  *For Later Consumption*; 2012
Timeline: Wine stained photographs, Wax, Cheesecloth, Wood, Nails, Lights; 74 x 84 x 4 inches; 2012
Detail: *For Later Consumption*; 2012
re: Stacks; Wine stained photographs, Wax, Cheesecloth, Wood; 168 x 15 x 5.5 inches; 2012
Tapestry; Wine stained photographs, Wax, Cheesecloth, String, Wood; 120 x 32 x 84 inches; 2012
Detail: *Tapestry*; 2012
Installation View; Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame, IN; 2012
Installation View; Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame, IN; 2012
Installation View; Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame, IN; 2012