

Excerpts from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

Burnt Norton

I

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

 But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

How do memories evolve over time? If we are composed of our memories—and they are constructive/reconstructive—how do they come to define us? My project revolves around how memories build associations with each other and our current perceptions. I was curious as to what triggers a memory, and why some are stronger than others. Why do some memories intuitively seem more important, although they might first appear insignificant? Do memories have a form or shape, or can they manifest themselves in anything? These are some of the questions I explored when I was researching and making this project. I looked at the precise, calculated, scientific answers, but rather than stopping there, I also explored the more abstract side of memory. I wasn't necessarily interested in answers, either. Exploring the whys and hows through introspection led to a more interesting hypotheses that I could have reached by developing a formal thesis about neurons and the complexity of the cells in our brains—although researching this was essential to my exploration of the abstract.

Every time we access a memory, we alter it in some way. Whether it is a memory of someone who died that is now tinged with sadness, or a situation we have new regrets about; memories change. Even simply looking back with fondness on an experience, something new emerges, or something else fades. When you take a book off the shelf to read, it is not returned in the same condition. Maybe there are stains of coffee or jam, some sand in the spine, a folded corner or a starred page. Maybe the bookmark has just been moved to a new spot. But something is left; to be found there the next time you remove the book.

When I remember things, I find that they are reduced to their core aura or feeling, usually linked to an odd detail in the memory; perhaps the color someone was wearing, or how the light hit an object a certain way. From then on, whenever I see those tiny triggers in any form—that color in something else, or similar lighting—the memory comes back to me. Although the memory is more compacted or elemental than the whole, original scene, the simplified version

can be almost more enhanced. When I look back on old memories, I recall strange, usually unnoticed details about my past, even from when I was very young; I have a tendency to zoom in on quirky or obscure aspects of a scene. These snapshots of memory are encapsulated in objects and sensations. There is no file cabinet or index where they are organized; they exist in a nebula of images and feelings. To find a specific memory, sometimes you have to dig around for a while, encountering things you wouldn't expect or forgot existed.

If "memory makes us who we are," then who are we without our memories? (Foer, TED talk). I think a memory can never be truly erased from the mind. It can be buried, diluted, altered, or made temporarily inaccessible, but can still be revived with a memory trigger. Just the other day I walked past a house with a door the color of blue porcelain teacups. It is also the color of one of my dad's silk ties; when I was a child I would examine all of them lined up neatly in my parents' closet, mostly solid colors but a few with subtle linear designs. There is a small window in that closet that light comes in through in the late afternoon, illuminating the dust in the air. It looks like sparkles. How did my brain build an association between the door I passed and my childhood hideaway in the closet? I had not thought of that tiny room since we moved almost six years ago; yet it had come back, seemingly pulled out of nowhere. I looked at a color and in a matter of seconds the memory flooded my brain. The fact is that this is what our brain is doing every single moment of each day. When I am in math class, the teacher gives a new lesson. Meanwhile, my brain furiously searches for something learned in the past to relate or compare it to. Establishing those connections and associations is essentially how we access memories from our past, but also how we learn and grasp new concepts.

For this topic, I considered many approaches and mediums for making the artwork, ultimately realizing that Robert Rauschenberg's work contains the exact ephemeral quality that I was striving for. He has an ability "to combine disparate elements and materials (Hopps 21). He is also revered for "breaking down barriers among art-making genres and methods ... by fusing and intermingling painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and performance" (Hopps 21). Over the course of Rauschenberg's life, "his paintings have evolved...to include collage, assemblage, and the direct transfer of images" on a wide variety of surfaces (Hopps 20). Rauschenberg called his paintings "Combines," as a way of acknowledging that they are mixtures of three-dimensional assemblages and paintings. This combination of sculpture and painting is a form that speaks to my idea, and is the perfect way to represent the compilation and assemblage of memory. The concept of merging the two mediums to evoke the quality of memories—where color, objects, emotion, and all other elements are so closely linked—seemed to be the most powerful and successful way of communicating my idea.

II

Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.

I think there are new, undiscovered memories that exist within us, but ones that can only be accessed through smells, songs, textures, feelings, colors and moments. Deja vu always seems like an awakening; the lighting up of a dark corner of the brain. Every memory is intertwined with so many emotions that opening one unleashes something new and fresh again, preserved. If we open them in connection with a new experience, suddenly we recolor the memory, even if we think nothing has changed. Regardless, there is always a nugget, a core of some brilliant experience, incubated and marinating with time and feelings. These cores can occasionally be withered, but in other cases are perfectly preserved and sanctioned.

Unlike a computer that uses direct memory, our minds use associative memory, which “searches or fires the whole memory just as we search our whole past when we try to place a familiar face in a crowd” (Kosko 175). We need to associate places, people, and moments as a way to leave behind a path to find that memory again. I have memories that I cannot connect to a place or time; this is frustrating, because I naturally want to know when and where things occurred, but it is also fascinating. How do these unmoored memories exist, floating and disconnected from a concrete timeline or map? These fragments are usually tiny snippets of sensation—a view of a countryside, blue bed sheets, rain outside someone’s bay window, a cake with white frosting and strawberries on a long table, getting lost in a maze of hedges. How young was I when these occurred? How and why do these fragmented memories come back to me at seemingly random times? Scientists have realized that “[your brain] changes a little bit every time you see an image or hear a sound or feel a surface or taste a flavor or walk on new ground. Everything you sense changes your brain. Your brain measures things and those things change your brain. It learns new changes and forgets or unlearns old changes. A single photon of light changes your brain. TV ads and movies and books and talks and ad jingles and all the stuff that your mind eats change your brain” (Kosko 206). Our minds are malleable and constantly perceiving and analyzing what we see. If our memories are in constant flux, how do some memories hold significance? Is it the number of times we reference that memory, or do we just know when we see something that it will be important later? I think the answer is some combination of the two. Some memories only gain significance later on in life.

Our minds are not broken into separate, isolated cubicles like an office. They are more like a map of a city, where roads are constantly rearranging cars and people. Information flows in and out, the city is constantly changing, life buzzing and intersecting. Our minds are a comparable web, where each “brain starts out with about 100 billion neurons or brain cells and ends up with several billion fewer...The neurons do not act as computer memory sites. No cell holds a picture of your mom or the smell of lime or the idea of God” (Kosko 206). We do not have concrete blocks of memory—they are malleable and composite. In a way, our mind is one gigantic, abstracted Venn Diagram. A certain smell has a relationship to a person, but also a feeling that comes with it. That feeling could be connected to numerous other pieces of the mind, and so forth. It turns out that what is more important than the memories themselves is how they are related; “what counts is the wires between the cells. They account for about 40% of your brain mass. We call these wires synapses or neural connections. Each neuron in your brain can connect up to 10,000 other neurons...Learning and memory lie in the great tangled web of synapses. Not in cells, in webs” (Kosko 206). If memories form a kind of map, then is it possible to ever truly lose a memory? Perhaps this explains how seemingly random memories come back to us. Subconsciously, a sensory memory, likely relating to our current setting/experience, led our minds down a forgotten path to some stored remains of information, in some degree of disrepair. If it were possible to recall everything, what would a memory map look like?

Everything would be jumbled together; some elements would be foggy, ghostly, and obscure, while others would be clear and tangible.

My artwork is messy but sometimes organized. It evokes, but does not deliver a clear transcription of memory. In some ways, that's all memories are: evocations. I was intrigued by this concept of assembling memories, and laying them out in a way that conveyed their indefinite qualities but also the emotions that come with them. Throughout the exploration, I was constantly considering how "the process of assemblage raises materials from the level of formal relations to that of associational poetry. Just as words and numbers, on the contrary, tend to be formalized" (Seitz 84). Composing objects and images from memory is a poetry form of its own. The material in the artwork is significant, but what holds the true weight and importance of the piece comes down to how they are assembled. I laid out selected maps, objects, fabric, images, and other fragments, but at a certain point the process of making the piece came down to my reaction to what is in front of me. The way that all the elements come together derives from my instinctual associations between them. An important aspect that I considered when assembling the piece was how this web of memories would manifest itself in a physical form, and how all the elements should interact. In my work, the subjects are camouflaged in a network of other images. They are neither "transmuted" nor "absorbed into the medium...[like] abstract Expressionist painting" (Seitz 84). They are meant to be semi-distinguishable, but not obvious upon first glance.

East Coker

I

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

For this project, I visited some of my favorite spots, ones that contain many memories. I hiked to Kehoe Beach, in Point Reyes, where I collected driftwood, shells, and other finds. When I was younger, my family and our friends once made a sculpture of a horse out of driftwood and kelp. I remember how fun it was to collect sticks, and how we all helped put it together. I hiked to other places in Point Reyes and gathered things there too. My dad and I found several abandoned, collapsed buildings along the roads in Napa. I was struck by how the buildings were falling and the way they were becoming 2D through a process of decay and abstraction. As time

passes, the building slowly collapses—yet the structure is inherent, readable, and recognizable. The meaning of the building is intact, though it is slowly becoming a ghost structure. I took materials, finding old shingles, pieces of wood, honeycomb from an old bee colony, and various metal parts. I took what spoke to me most and seemed to contain the ephemeral quality I was looking for—some of the structure's essence. The history in these buildings was alive, even as it sunk to the ground. The twisted forms of the fallen roof created a new sculpture. The next place we explored was the derelict Sonoma Pacific Company, where it looked like there had recently been a fire. There were trucks there that were twisted and mutilated from heat. Some looked exploded, and others looked skeletal. Like the collapsed buildings, these were capsules of time. The whole concept of the building and the trucks seemed to represent memory; something that is slowly decaying, but with an inherent quality that is unchanging. There is also art in the process of how things morph and evolve; yet the original components are still there.

The process of making the artwork—collecting, recollecting, and researching—became an art in itself. Whether it was carrying driftwood back from the beach or finding books on the side of the road, the act of culling and accumulating these materials became a ritual. Everything I chose felt like it had a long history. The driftwood could have come from another continent or spent many years out at sea. The shells contained living creatures that had lived on the floor of the sea. The pieces of shingles were part of a roof that once kept someone dry, and the old cookbooks had writing in them, a special touch to the recipe. All the objects were alive and full of stories; my role was to form connections between them to map out what a memory could look like. My goal was to present the objects in a visual assemblage that would add new information to what already exists.

Little Gidding

III

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives - unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory:
For liberation - not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

Although we can conduct experiments and form hypotheses, to what extent does scientific research uncover what is actually true? Will truth, for the most part, remain an abstract mystery? Some things can only truly be explained through some form of abstraction, because the thing itself is not concrete. Perhaps William Faulkner best captures this idea in a passage from *Light in August*: “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.” So what am I composed of? Neurons and brain cells. But

am I not more truly composed of fragments of time, tangible and real and beautiful, memories of parachute men from vending machines, the swing on my grandparents' screened porch, a dresser drawer with a message written on the bottom? It is impossible for us to not live in the past when we ourselves are composed of past. The body I live in is not made merely of flesh, but of objects and places and colors and sounds that remain precious as semi-decipherable pockets of memory, which is life.

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