

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

Debra Porch – Biography

Dr Debra Porch is a practicing artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Debra has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has received awards and grant funding including, the Australia Council, the NSW Ministry for the Arts, an Asialink artist residency in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the Art Gallery of NSW artist residency at the Cité Internationale des Artes, Paris. In 2005 her work was commissioned by the State Library of Queensland as part of the project *Sufferance: 100 Years of Women's Suffrage in Queensland*.

Debra's research focuses on the relationship of presence and absence to memory, mortality, and the body. Her installation works have integrated visuals and objects to trigger in the viewer the visible (or presence) of memories, stories, or physical ties that are now invisible. The visual work has emphasised the importance that everyday objects have in representing these concepts. Her PhD, *The Visible and the Invisible: Connecting presence and absence through art, memory, mortality and the body*, examined these ideas and questioned the potential that objects, used in visual installation practice have to evoke that which is invisible or absent from a viewer's sight. She curated the on-site project and residency *9 Lives* at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and *Non Criminal/Criminals* at the Hyde Park Barracks Museum, Sydney.

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence – Abstract

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence, speculatively alleges that visual installation has the potential to operate as an adhesive that enables the viewer to forge poignant connections between the past and present. It proposes that visual installation acts as a pivotal source to weave memory and the imagination in the present to the fact, fiction or hoax of the absent past — addressing the critical role that absence and presence play in relation to one's memory when confronting an installation piece. Two questions the paper proposes of visual installation's connection to absence and presence are:

- Does visual art installation have the potential to reveal recollections of the past or the finding of things otherwise forgotten when the individual confronts or encounters it?
- Does memory have the capacity to shift what may have been deemed an ordinary experience into an extraordinary experience by one's encounter of an installation? (Noting that the context of the extraordinary also references the awareness of the recollection itself.)

The relationship of memory to absence and presence will be explored through visual installation as a conduit in revealing past events or experiences embedded in one's memory—questioning what of memory is fact, fiction or hoax. The paper presents a view that visual mechanisms utilised in installation practice provide links to traces of absent events or experiences. These traces can once again become tangible when certain objects and images activate memory's condition to them.

[Note: Specific writers, artists' works and exhibitions will be referenced to demonstrate that a range of visual mechanisms in art installation can provide the links to that which is absent or invisible from sight. These include: Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, specific works by, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Ed Ruscha, Doris Salcedo, and *the Interrupted Life* (New York), *Concert for Buchenwald* (Germany) and *Non Criminal Criminals* (Sydney).]

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Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

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The American writer and social commentary Mark Twain coined the phrase ‘truth is stranger than fiction’—the entire phrase being ‘Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn’t’.

In 1999 when I saw Ed Ruscha’s *Brave Men Run in my Family* on the side of the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art I couldn’t decide if I wanted to laugh or cry—the silhouetted ship and the pink sky hovered over me and I immediately thought of all the men in my family. Were they all brave because they did brave deeds *or* were they all brave because they managed to escape particular situations? Ruscha’s phrase reflects an absurd contradiction—because as it is alleged, brave men don’t run. And there appeared my memories and in no particular order.

In front of me I can see a short bald man, accompanied always by a cigar—the man, my grandfather. And I see him in his dining room talking to his pet budgie that is flying around the room. I open a drawer in the same room that smells of wood and cigar and it contained what I imagined to be a treasure chest—the array of pens and pencils he collected on his daily walks. My memory connects me to these past objects and spaces. In the ‘Present Tense of Space’ Robert Morris elucidates on the connection of the object to space, memory and experience and says,

Shift to recall of the spatial experience: objects and static views flash in the mind’s space. A series of stills replace the filmic real-time experience. Objects are obviously experienced in memory as well as in the present.¹

My grandfather’s physical being has long since passed but the memories of him linger, filling my head with a vision of him puffing away and recalling the smell of cigar smoke. The ever-present cigar has become the mnemonic tool—the visual and olfactory connector to my *real or imagined* memories of one man.

History is identified as knowledge that deals with past events, or the recording of past events (in particular) that deal with the human race. Or as we know, it is often what is referred to as the written record of past events. History also acts as the marker for one’s understanding and context for events in the present.

However, memory can be defined as the mental capacity or facility of retaining and reviving impressions. It also involves recognising or recalling previous experiences and

¹ Erika Suderburg (ed.), *SPACE, SITE, INTERVENTION: Situating Installation Art*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.1.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

views of the past. But memory also involves the length of *time* that recollection extends over. An individual's response to past events is unique and associations made between past and present events accentuate awareness of the self. Memory can also provide a key in understanding one's own sense of mortality.

Memory is a potent experience, and may have the capacity to transform the *everyday* into the *extraordinary*. Thus acting as a powerful catalyst that connects an individual's awareness of a past experience to the visuals and devices they may confront in an installation.

I am looking at memory as one in which mechanisms used in installation can provide links to the existence of that which appears to be absent. This centres on the ways in which visuals and other sensory devices can act as conduits for insights into past events or experiences that were once visible to an individual—but now exist only as an invisible trace. These traces can once again become tangible when certain objects and images activate memory's condition to them. In installation the relationship of time, memory and feelings associated with human mortality may be investigated through the creative use of images, objects, space, sound and movement while also enhancing an individual's broader perception and understanding of contemporary art.

A key point is that installation has the potential to act as the adhesive for connecting one's recollections of the past to the present, and for me two questions arise:

- Does installation have the potential to reveal recollections of the past or the finding of things otherwise forgotten when the individual confronts or encounters it?
- And does memory have the capacity to shift what may have been deemed an ordinary experience into an extraordinary experience by one's encounter of an installation? (Noting that the context of the extraordinary also references the awareness of the recollection itself.)

Visual art, specifically installation, can act as a pivotal source that weaves memory, the everyday and the extraordinary, imagination and evidence to absence and presence. I have taken a particular rationale in the approach to installation in that I believe that one must physically experience an installation. This is a key element, as the experience or connection one makes to the work is not singly dependent on sight but on the body's presence (or interaction) in a space and also via one's senses.

The potency of memory as experience lies in its capacity to transform what may be identified as an everyday experience into one that becomes extraordinary. The everyday refers to what is ordinary, commonplace, quotidian, as well as routine or trivial—and what constitutes the everyday differs from one culture to another. The extraordinary is what lies beyond the ordinary or routine. It relates to the exceptional, unusual or

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

remarkable. Memory encompasses infinite compositions of recollection that function through associations of similarity or continuity. Through the recollection process, oppositional shifts between the actual and the fictional can occur. The written word in the form of a novel often has the ability to transform an ordinary experience into one that becomes extraordinary. Memory and its impact on experiences has been a focal point for a multitude of writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A notable example of the correlation between memory, experience and the object is provided in Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1913:

*And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory . . .*²

Crucial is the phenomenon of *time* and one's perceptions of oneself in response to an installation linking the past and present, and the critical role that absence and presence play in relation to one's memory when confronting the spaces an installation resides in. Images, objects and devices used in installation often have the ability to perform as conduits to evoke one's recollection of past experiences or events. It is important to acknowledge that the artist is aware of the important relationship that time has to memory, particularly in what may be regarded as real or imagined states. Contemporary artists have employed installation as an art form to address issues pertaining to time, experience, memory and perception. Artists have incorporated a multitude of visual and sensory devices to create installation work that forges poignant connections between the present and the past. In the foreword to *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses* Jonathan Crary states:

*For the last several centuries, the most compelling forms of Western visual art were often works by artists who critically engaged with the experience of human perception, who tested its limits and expanded its possibilities*³

A number of artists have embraced installation to conceptually address issues pertaining to experience and human perception. Contemporary artists such as Bill Viola use images that generate nostalgic allusions. Christian Boltanski uses haunting black and white images with atmospheric lighting to reconsider the past. Both have retraced memory

² Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Book One of *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, (London, Penguin, 2000), p.56.

³ Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley & Michael Petry, (eds.), *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2003), p.6.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

through installation practice to present found or invented stories and histories. But their work also searches for other contexts. These include duration, as individual stories or histories are inevitably about time. They also include an understanding for the specific spaces for the work to operate convincingly as a bridge for these stories or histories. Roland J. Onorato makes an important point about installation as a process that moves within space and time stating:

Since the beginning of the 1950s, artists have been making works characteristic of what is now called installation art. Fundamental aspects of installation artwork are its habitation of a physical site, its connection to real conditions—be they visual, historical, or social—and often, its bridging of traditional art boundaries: public and private, individual and communal, high style and vernacular. The aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in the singular, commodified object but in an ability to become, rather than merely represent, the continuum of real experience by responding to specific situations.⁴

Contemporary artists including Mona Hartoum, Theresa Margolles and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook have focused on issues relating to memory through the use of installation to actively involve the viewer. They have particularly contributed to ways of validating the story of the everyday. Nicolas De Oliveira states:

In a rapidly changing world, time and memory are key concerns for contemporary artists. Though borrowing from existing methodologies, artists depart from personal experience to construct their own spaces of memory. Many artists have shied away from commenting on the grand narratives, preferring to focus on the story of the everyday. They have used this concern with memory by focusing on official and unofficial means of retrieval, in an attempt to question existing systems through more private and individual means.⁵

A key function of installation is its ability to assist in retrieving and reclaiming personal meanings and significances for both artist and viewer. The artist uses memory in specific ways to create and construct visual spaces of memory of everyday stories and histories that project both personal and public concerns. The viewer's individual perception of perceiving the past is then activated by the engagement with the installation.

In 1991 curator France Morin chose over forty international artists to address the theme of death from a range of personal and political perspectives. This compelling exhibition, *The Interrupted Life*, at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, raised issues of mortality, the body and memory through objects and visual forms addressing illness,

⁴ Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, *Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969–1996*, (San Diego, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 1997), p.13.

⁵ Nicolas, De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley & Michael Petry, (eds.), *Installation Art in the New Millennium: the empire of the senses*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2003), p.132.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

old age, victims of war and violence. Some work also questioned Western culture's tradition of hiding death. In the preface to the exhibition Marcia Tucker stated that 'Artists tend to make work that addresses, directly or indirectly, big issues, and death is certainly among the biggest of them'.⁶

The Interrupted Life included works by Joseph Beuys, Kiki Smith, Christian Boltanski as well as Peter Greenaway's short film *Death on the Seine*. Moran orchestrated the exhibition to operate through installation of objects, film and photography to directly confront the viewer's awareness of their own mortality. The exhibition provoked one to ponder not only the nature of time (past and present) but also personal ideologies and experiences. The exhibition also offered a wider understanding of human absence through the presence of artworks.

Memory becomes the cogent catalyst in installation that connects one's awareness to an absent (or invisible) past. The French artist Annette Messager links memory with the use of ordinary and usually considered benign objects, that thru her manipulation may have the capacity to transfer one's ordinary experience into one that becomes extraordinary and also in turn questioning what is fact or fiction in one's recollection of the past. Messager has been using quotidian materials in her art for thirty years. Her preoccupation with the everyday and private experience is reminiscent of many artists, including Joseph Cornell and Ed Ruscha, but it is her exploration of humanity made manifest through her use of materials that is unique. Her installations are not comprised of 'ready-made' objects, rather Messager manipulates, combines and transforms objects and materials to create personal and public scenarios that simultaneously become theatres of the real and imagined. Cuddly stuffed toys are decapitated and taxidermied animals and birds become metaphors about human predicaments.

The works of American artist Ann Hamilton focus on the body, memory, time, and histories of place. They operate on multi-levels that can provide for the viewer links to the awareness of physical presence and absence. For example, in her work *tropos*, the installation space was covered in massive quantities of horsehair. The strands of hair are dead tissue—but unlike a dead and decayed body, the hair continues to live as the carpet that simultaneously represents the physical presence and absence of the body.

Absence, presence and time can be approached with particular attention to relationships with the human body and one's sense of mortality. That is, how memory and perceptions of mortality are moulded by one's awareness and responses to visible experiences and events in the past and present. The work of Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, and in particular his use of common or readily available materials (such as wrapped candies, light-bulbs and newsprint paper) is pivotal in relation to the changing

⁶ Marcia Tucker, *The Interrupted Life*, Morin, France (ed), (New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), p.11.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

nature that an artwork (and the body) can experience thru time. Gonzales-Torres's work embraces issues to do with memory, absence, presence, the everyday and mortality. He also challenged the definitions of private and public.

Since his death in 1996 (according to his instructions and wishes) his installations continue to be re-installed throughout the world. Therefore, the works are still being produced and are indeed present in his absence. Gonzales-Torres' piece *Untitled (Placebo—Landscape for Roni)*, 1993 was comprised of (approx.) 1200 lbs. of candies individually wrapped in gold cellophane. It was originally made in response to the artist Roni Horn's work *The Gold Field* which Gonzales-Torres saw at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 1990. He was extremely moved by Horn's piece and said:

*There it was, in a white room, all by itself, it didn't need any company, it didn't need anything. Sitting on the floor, ever so lightly. A new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty. Waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved to a place of the imagination. This piece is nothing more than a thin layer of gold.*⁷

Minou Roufail in the catalogue *Jurassic Technologies* describes Gonzales-Torres's approach to *Untitled (Placebo—Landscape for Roni)* and his use of ordinary materials:

*In Duchampian style, he transforms ordinary objects—strings of light bulbs, clocks, mirrors, and posters—into art by placing them in a gallery space. The liberty not only to touch, but to eat, an artwork, does fetter the institutional imperative to consume and control art . . . certainly the communication of ideas is central to his work. But also, as Gonzales-Torres said, reflecting on the artistic impulse, 'it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here'.*⁸

The Columbian artist Doris Salcedo bridges memory, absence and presence, the ordinary and mortality in her works such as *Atrabiliarios* and the *Orphans tunic*, both exploring the unsayable and the invisible and encapsulating the body, absence and mortality. Her work for over 20 years has focused on the *desaparecidos* or the disappeared ones that were killed, tortured or went missing as result of Columbia's violent drug wars and military aggression. Salcedo has woven complex and poignant reflections on memory, presence, absence and mortality through her practice by incorporating ordinary objects such as chairs, tables, shoes, etc. to signify the presence and absence of the body. Her works have represented not only the absent and missing body, but have provided for the

⁷ From 'Felix Gonzales-Torres and Roni Horn', site: <http://www.andrearosengallery.com>, accessed 03/05/2005.

⁸ Lynne Cooke, (ed.), *Jurassic Technologies, 10th Biennale of Sydney*, (Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, 1996), p.123.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

audience the opportunity to contemplate their own memory through the memory of others.

For an artist the process of making installation can be compared to working in a laboratory—experimenting with objects, images and spaces. I continually reflect on the fact that it is impossible for the artist to predict a viewer’s response to the work. The artist perceives and then the viewer re-perceives. It also centres on the peculiar phenomena that can happen when one engages with an installation. The capacity and influence that installation has in an individual’s awareness of absence and presence and the relationship to memory and mortality can be overpowering.

Installation may centre on an artist’s individual as well as familial collective memory. The approach to the work may incorporate what constitutes the everyday or the extraordinary in one’s recognition of past events that have been locked away but are retrieved by memory. Installation can use objects to illuminate the unpredictability of memory. It can also focus on the non-prescriptive use of object, image and space. In this regard it is important to restate that the viewer’s perception or understanding of the work will be unpredictable.

Memory is dependent on time and questions keep arising as to how many of my own recollections are accurate and how many are my own fiction. Memory changes as we edit it. Recollections may evolve out of one’s imagination and be called ‘inventions’.

Integral to memory and installation is *place*. A place can continue to resonate over time, such as my experience of visiting a specific pagoda south of Hanoi city in 1996 to witness the re-emergence of women practicing Buddhist teachings. Then I picture the street barbers with vast nests of black hair around their feet in central Hanoi’s old city. A city that was colonised by the French and spatially modelled after medieval Paris. Hanoi also provides a powerful play between presence and absence. The city was extensively bombed by the USA during the war in Viet Nam resulting in the complete disappearance of buildings. Bombs were dropped from such altitudes that pilots could not see what they were bombing. There are those residents who now remember the city’s presence through architectural absences. However, the generation born after this war only have recollections of the city’s past from the stories they have heard. My perceptions of Hanoi are now fading and are becoming distorted over time, and I am now uncertain if my memory of events is exact, exaggerated or are being invented.

In his *Art work* from 1979, Robert Barry wrote . . .

IT IS ALWAYS CHANGING
IT HAS ORDER
IT DOESN’T HAVE A SPECIFIC PLACE
ITS BOUNDARIES ARE NOT FIXED
IT AFFECTS OTHER THINGS

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

IT MAY BE ACCESSIBLE BUT GO UNNOTICED
PART OF IT MAY ALSO BE PART OF SOMETHING ELSE
SOME OF IT IS FAMILIAR
SOME OF IT IS STRANGE
KNOWING OF IT CHANGES IT ⁹

Reflecting on the works by Messenger, Gonzales-Torres or Salcedo's I think about Barry's words. The conceptual and material properties of making an artwork undergo a continual process of change according to the artist's particular methodologies. The work's meaning depends on the context in which it is displayed. The work occupies a place within the studio but outside this space the work's interpretations will shift and change. This is evident in installation work as the meanings of the devices used are often dependent on the site and space they occupy. The physical boundary for the installation is determined by the space it occupies. However, the physicality of the space can also have the potential to elicit unlimited perceptions and interpretations of the work. The question remains: Do the visual components operate and speak in a wider context for the audience, different from that of the artist's?

The 'solitary' condition of the viewer's physical body in an installation space also contributes to the experience of the work. Installation is often not about mass visual distraction but rather quiet intervals of solitary contemplation. It can operate as a theatre of memory for temporal and sensory observations that emerge from one's substantive past. Or the installation may beckon the viewer to form new images, similar to the way in which one forms their own images while reading a novel.

Installation often poses a paradox, as a seemingly empty but perceived to be a full space filled with the viewer's individual recollections. The artist strategically encourages imaginative responses from viewer—to further communicate and aid wider interpretations. And one's perception of an installation can be a temporal marker used to accentuate the importance of time in relation to presence, absence and the physical body, or as Henri Bergson states:

*In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experiences.*¹⁰

⁹ Robert Barry, *Art work*, from the catalogue *Projections: Anti-Materialism*, 1970, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, as included in *Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969–1996*, (San Diego, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 1997), p.15.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by N.M.Paul & W.S.Palmer, (New York, Zone Books, 1991), p.33.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

Installation works may not present a linear history of past experiences but of history consisting of incomplete fragments. These fragments may appear in a similar way as a melody does when one unconsciously hums. Recollections can be evoked by sound and smell. One's awareness of the past can shift and change from the unconscious and disassociated images one encounters in an installation.

Visual elements may reflect one's intermittent recollections of how an invisible, momentarily lost memory murmurs and vibrates on a subconscious level—the envisioning of a past that is frequently retrieved unconsciously or even through daydreaming. Installation can also highlight the awareness of mortality by confronting us with absence.

Perhaps installations are twofold in that they are provocateurs for the viewer to reflect or recollect their own past, and also act as signposts for a wider history. The important spatial relationships that occur between the visual and other sensory contents of the installation and site can become catalysts that provoke the viewer to recount an experience that has been previously dislocated or hidden from awareness. These relationships become critical for one's memory to conjure up perceptions and images of the past or, as Gaston Bachelard said, 'Dreams, thoughts and memories weave a single fabric'.¹¹

The recollection of things past can strike any time. The memory of people no longer here (with us), particularly family members and lovers, can be activated by the most ordinary of objects—a hat, dress or a pair of shoes.

This paper, *Fact and Fiction—Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence*, speculates that installation has the potential to evoke in the viewer to poignant connections between the past and present. It proposes that installation does act as a pivotal source to weave memory, imagination, and fact and fiction into a new perceptible present. I come back to Annette Messager, who, when asked about why she made art, quoted the artist Robert Filliou: and said, 'Art should make life more interesting than art'.¹²

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated from French by Maria Jolas, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1994), p.175.

¹² Conkelton, S. and Eliel, C., *Annette Messager*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art New York, (New York, Abrams1995), p.41.

Revelation: installation art and its capacity to interpret and elaborate places of historical significance

Debra Porch

Fact, fiction or hoax – Memory, the intertwining of presence and absence

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