

I.B. TAURIS

Contemporary Art *and* Memory

IMAGES *of* RECOLLECTION
and REMEMBRANCE

Joan **Gibbons**



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*For Karen Trusselle, artist and rare friend who died just
before the publication of this book.*

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FOREWORD

The material covered in this book sits within some broad parameters, and I think it helpful to make these clear from the start. In the first instance, I feel it important to note what I mean by contemporary art, which encompasses a wide range of practices and now extends over a substantial period in history. Following critic Arthur C. Danto, I have treated contemporary art as a development that began in the 1960s with the diversification of avant-garde art after the post-war dominance of High Modernist abstraction. As Danto observes, this diversification saw the end of any *a priori* criterion concerning what art must be and left the museum without an overarching narrative into which its contents must fit.¹ While it might be argued that the word ‘contemporary’ carries connotations of that which is new or current, in terms of art it now covers a period of forty years or more and involves two generations of artists. Nonetheless, the term ‘contemporary’ obviously does not apply to all art produced in this still growing time span, and neither does it apply only to art that attempts a radical break with the past, which was perhaps the case with modern art. As critic Hal Foster, notes, there has been a twofold trajectory in the development of contemporary art. On the one hand, art has moved away from ideas of intrinsic value that dominated the High Modernism between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s and replaced the criterion of ‘quality’ with that of ‘interest’, from ‘intrinsic forms to discursive problems’, further characterising the paradigmatic shift observed by Danto. On the other hand, artists of the neo-avant-garde have not jettisoned the art of the past or situated themselves at its pinnacle, as was the case with High Modernism, but have engaged critically with its outstanding issues.² The artists that I discuss are contemporary because their art fits this notion of discursive practice. Their discursivity, of course, lies in the ‘memory-work’ they perform or in their critical response to ways in which that past has been previously construed and represented.

The second set of parameters concern the choices that I have made with regard to the scope of the book and which artists to include and which to leave out. This, I feel, has been a bit of a no-win situation. To include every artist who has addressed memory in his or her work would have made the

survey so wide as to preclude the sort of analysis and comment that would render it a critical account, but to exclude artists that could have sat easily within the remit of the book opens it up to sins of omission. In the end, I have tried to achieve a balance between substance and scope, mindful that a single book can only cover so much ground and that it is the making of a contribution that counts. But, having made my choices, the danger became one of pigeonholing artists under the thematic headings of the chapters. To counteract this, I have been at pains to make connections and identify cross-currents between the content of individual chapters, pulling the discussion together from chapter to chapter into what I hope is an elastic or flexible whole. Nevertheless, in the end, although I have covered a considerable amount of ground, the field is still open to further excavation or cultivation as the case may be – and rightfully so.

Thirdly, while I have examined a wide range of memory-work in contemporary art, I have consciously avoided rehearsing theories of memory per se, drawing from them as and where relevant. I have put the artworks first and sought to explain approaches and attitudes mainly through ways in which memory has been conceptualised elsewhere in the arts and social sciences. Memory theory is wide and diverse, and not all of it is applicable to the ground that I have covered, but for those keen to gain an overview of the complexity of memory and its theory I would recommend The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (available online), which gives a comprehensive entry under ‘memory’ accompanied by a substantial bibliography. Bottom line, this book is an exploration of the many ways in which memory has been addressed in contemporary art. I have not allowed its content to be prescribed by theory but have sought to use theory in the interest of exegesis and extrapolation.

INTRODUCTION

The nightmare of having little or no memory is told in Christopher Nolan's film *Memento*, released in 2000. The severely amnesic main character has messages tattooed into his own flesh in order to conserve basic clues about himself and his history and he has to record even the most recent events by Polaroid if he is to retain them. Apart from providing the pretext for an effective thriller, the extremes of amnesia represented in the film underscore the fact that memory is one of the most vital of our faculties, the apparatus that allows for recognition (re-cognition) without which the powers of cognition itself remain transient and unframed. However, memory is never just a straightforward process of recording lest we forget and, even in the best equipped of minds, it can be a slippery mechanism. It can be both elusive and intrusive and we can rarely be completely sure of its fidelity to the events or facts that it recalls. Given such mutability, it is not so much the reliability or fallibility of memory that is at stake today but the way that memory is harnessed and deployed in the negotiations of life, from the 'little' moments and events of the private and the everyday to those 'grander' moments and events of formalised and public occasions. The claims that are made and the stories that are told in the name of memory can alter people's understanding of the world and, of course, alter the ways in which they act in or upon that world. With all of this in mind, I want to address the ways in which memory is valued and used today by examining it as it is deployed and represented in the context of contemporary art. What is also worth bearing in mind is that contemporary art has harnessed memory in such a wide variety of ways that it can readily be taken as representative of the range of attitudes towards and uses of memory in the culture as a whole. My claim is that such an exploration will contribute to a far more general understanding of both contemporary art and contemporary memory.

A good and accurate memory that can store and retrieve knowledge and experience used to be one of the most desirable attributes of learning and the acquisition of knowledge. The valuing of memory in this way has a long history. The ancient Greeks, for instance, depending largely on whether Plato or Aristotle was being followed, saw memory as a means of recovering divine knowledge of the ideal world or of recording experiential knowledge.¹ In both

cases, what was required of memory was the ability to develop an effective means of retaining and recovering what were often vast quantities of knowledge and, in both cases, similar techniques were recommended for these processes. As the historian Frances Yates has shown, these mnemotechnics or memory skills were regarded as one of the liberal arts (alongside the sister art of painting in the Middle Ages and Renaissance). In its most spectacular instances, the art of memory often resulted in amazing displays of recollected data, from the recall of long complicated word sequences to the recital of epic poems such as *The Odyssey*, which the speaker could just as easily repeat backwards as forwards.² The apparatuses of memory that developed were referred to as ‘the artificial memory’, distinct from its opposite, the untutored and less regulated ‘natural memory’. As will become evident, these categories are akin to Marcel Proust’s notions of voluntary and involuntary memory, with the difference that Proust found authenticity in ‘the natural’ or involuntary memory rather than in the more organised recall of the automatic or voluntary memory.

The development of ‘the artificial memory’ was highly dependent on techniques of visualisation, such as the location of a piece of knowledge in an imagined, clearly defined locus (often a building) or the attachment of data or ideas to striking (and therefore more memorable) images.³ In other words, the art of memory was essentially a visual art and remained so for centuries to follow, its skills of visualisation persisting even today in the sort of popular memory improvement courses found in the small ads. However, while memory is still writ large in the visual arts, the understanding of memory as a highly skilled art form that is essential to the production, retention and transmission of knowledge no longer carries quite the same value. A change in attitude towards memory and its importance began to take hold in the seventeenth century, when, for instance, British Empiricist philosophers laid stress not so much on memory as a vehicle of knowledge but as a type or form of knowledge rooted in experience.⁴ Even so, memory was still often characterised in visual terms, with philosophers such as John Locke claiming that the knowledge that is recalled is frequently reproduced through images or sense impressions. Because of this emphasis on imaging or the formation of impressions, memory became closely related to the imagination. Two things emerge from this shift in thinking about memory that are significant for the understanding of memory today. The first is that the veracity of memory began to be questioned by some of Locke’s contemporaries on the grounds that images and sense impressions are exactly that, never the real thing, making it difficult to distinguish memory images from those produced by the imagination. The second is that memory began to be actively co-opted as an agent for the imagination – the opposite of its traditional function as a means of accurate recall.⁵ This use of memory for more

fanciful purposes is evident, as Mary Warnock has amply demonstrated, in late eighteenth early nineteenth-century Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who frequently invoked memory as a means of access to the innocence of childhood and a means of access to the child's more authentic view of and participation in the world (Nature).⁶

The legacy of this understanding of memory as both a form of knowledge and an agent of the imagination is to be found early in the twentieth century in the work of Proust, who has become famously associated with memory through his extensive seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, 1908–1922). In his quest for authentic personal knowledge, Proust, like Wordsworth and Coleridge before him, treated memory as something that has an emotional rather than an intellectually organised base – as an important constituent of a person's inner self.⁷ Moreover, Proust was to recognise and comment on the important role that memory has as a creative power in bridging the gap between past and present in a way that connects personal truths to a wider audience or readership.⁸ In developing this relationship between private understanding and its public expression, Proust's deployment of memory in literature is well in advance of and perhaps fundamental to many of the practices of contemporary artists of our time, as is the case with many of the artists discussed in chapter 1. In searching for 'lost time', Proust ponders on two types of memory: the voluntary and the involuntary. As Warnock has noted, Proust tends to characterise voluntary memory in terms of the production of images which convey the outer appearance of things, events or experiences.⁹ Far more meaningful, on the other hand, is the sort of unsolicited recall sprung by the involuntary memory, as produced, for example, by the randomly encountered taste of a *petite madeleine*, which, uninvited, calls up an assemblage of sensation and emotion that is beyond the reach of the intellect and voluntary memory.¹⁰

Scepticism towards images is expressed in favour of a knowledge of the past that is more deeply embedded in the psyche and which can be evoked in its complexity, not simply by 'snapshots' of the event but by an everyday experience that manages to key into the whole host of sensations and emotions experienced in the moment or event. In making this contrast, Proust reflects some of the changes that were taking place in the avant-garde art of his own time between traditional forms of representation that are based on mimesis and new forms initiated by Symbolism that privilege subjectivity and the inner life and recognise the inadequacy of traditional forms of realism to express such states. This rejection of traditional mimetic forms by Symbolists such as Paul Gauguin or proto-Expressionists such as Vincent Van Gogh in the late nineteenth century opened up the floodgates to the plurality of approaches developed by the early twentieth-century

avant-gardes, and most certainly paved the way for the plurality of practices that characterise contemporary art and that make much of it conducive to the evocation of involuntary memory. As will be seen, most of the works discussed in this book are not literal renderings of memory but are often allusive and suggestive of the past, tapping into our reservoir of emotions as much as into our store of cognitive knowledge.

The way that memory is valued, then, has shifted enormously from the idea of it being a storehouse of data which, given the right techniques, is recoverable in an ordered manner to the notion that it is a key to our emotional understanding of ourselves and the world. The present superfluity of the old techniques of the art of memory is due in part to the existence of some vastly sophisticated systems that are literally artificial and exist outside the mind itself. These range from traditional catalogued and perhaps more limited material archives to the potentially ever elastic and ever-expanding virtual storage space offered by digital technology. Such archives, from libraries and museums to the internet, including those computerised databases that make libraries and museums accessible online, make the need for the memory skills associated with 'the artificial memory' largely redundant and have further affected people's attitudes towards memory. However, it is only the techniques of the traditional art of memory that have become redundant; storehouses of knowledge are still integral to the functioning of society, and have in fact been given a significant amount of attention in contemporary art. The critiques that have emerged of this sort of organisation and control of knowledge are discussed in the final chapter of this book alongside a discussion of archival practices as a methodology in the work of several contemporary artists.

In addition to these developments in archiving there has also been a recent discrediting of the accuracy and impartiality of memory with the emergence of 'false memory syndrome'. This issue gained particular notoriety in the 1980s, when techniques used for memory recovery in psychotherapy were found to be unsound. The querying of the accuracy of personal memories also relates to a mistrust of the memories that are constructed and represented as history. The viability of the traditional narratives of patriarchy, imperialism and colonialism were vigorously challenged in the second half of the twentieth century and disproved by the sort of reassessment of history called for and developed by marginalised groups and societies. This sort of undermining of the truth and authority of history is exemplified by Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, which issued a clear challenge to the ways in which colonial history was constructed and biased.¹¹ It was further consolidated in the influential ideas of French theorist Michel Foucault, whose work is also underpinned by a desire to expose the ideological biases of history.¹² The result of the reappraisals of history that took hold in

the latter half of the twentieth century has been a widespread recognition of the relativity of history, which has led to a favouring of memory as something which can maintain ‘vital links with the surrounding culture’.¹³ This move from history to memory is clearly manifest in the many recent attempts to reclaim lost and marginalised histories which have taken place within the remit of contemporary art, and which provide the focus for chapter 3.

In a nutshell, the subjective, or even the fictionalised, aspects of memory now seem to take precedence over trained and disciplined memory and its equivalent in history in the negotiations of the world. This is not to say that memory is no longer a vital agent of knowledge, without which our experience of the world would be ever transient and ever instantaneous; it is simply to say that the contingency of the knowledge that is held by memory is now widely understood, and that this has occasioned changes in its status and in the roles that it is given as a tool for understanding and navigating the world. The fact that memory is as vital as ever for knowledge of the self and for knowledge of the world is fundamental to the assertions I want to make concerning art and memory, in particular that art has become one of the most important agencies for the sort of ‘memory-work’ that is required by contemporary life and culture.¹⁴ This returns to the key question of the ways in which memory is both necessary to and deployed in contemporary culture. Here, it is opportune to note that an increased preoccupation with memory in Western culture has already been signalled by a number of contemporary theorists, resulting in a growing body of scholarly works that have addressed the shifting significance of memory. In a move that recalls the shift towards subjective memory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries described above, this newer theoretical perspective has tended to explain the current understanding of and preoccupation with memory as a consequence of the shift from the more objectifying and universalising impulse of modernism to the more subjective, relativist ethos of postmodernism.¹⁵

Arguing along these lines, Andreas Huyssen, for example, clearly points to a relationship between the reordering of the notion of memory and the breakdown in the coherency of modernism’s utopian narratives (the idea of the redemptive powers of technology, for example was severely tested by the carnage of the two world wars of the last century). Further to this, Huyssen argues that our current obsession with memory derives from a crisis in the belief in a rational structure of temporality, signalled in the early twentieth century in the works of Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin (who represent an underside to the universalising tendencies of modernism, prefiguring postmodernism).¹⁶ For Huyssen, this crisis in the way that time is perceived and experienced has become even more evident in the way that both time and history have been collapsed by an information revolution that threatens to make categories such as ‘past

and future, experience and expectation and memory and anticipation' obsolete. Hence, the current preoccupation with memory can be seen as an attempt

to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non synchronicity and information overload.¹⁷

In other words, Huyssen sees the current preoccupation with memory as a way to 'find a new mooring' in an age of uncertainty. It does not matter if memory is now deployed more subjectively or that 'the old dichotomy between history and fiction no longer exists'.¹⁸ In our postmodern condition of contingency and relativism, it seems that there is no way in which the fictional or confabulatory aspects of memory can be denied. This aspect of memory surfaces in chapter 5 in which I discuss enactments and re-enactments in art as memory practices. The fictional aspects of memory bring the discussion back to the dilemma of what is important, or even radical, about memory in contemporary Western culture. For Susannah Radstone, the crux of this issue is not just the ways in which memory is harnessed or deployed but, rather, the tensions and equivocations that are produced by the ambivalences of memory.¹⁹ In characterising the significance of memory as a matter of tension and equivocation, Radstone notes the way that memory tends to occupy a number of threshold or liminal positions: not only those borderlines which exist between subjectivity and objectivity, the outer and the inner world, the self and society, but also the boundary that exists between forgetting and remembering, the tensions of which have enormous implications given the potential for a purposeful use of memory to transform the present into a better future.²⁰ As will become evident from much of the material covered in this book, the borderlines identified by Radstone resemble the sort of ambiguous and marginal territories that are frequently haunted by contemporary artists, who often seem to thrive on the tensions and equivocations that go with such territories.

The understanding of memory as a set of liminal practices invokes one of the best-known early twentieth-century writers on memory, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who defined memory as the intersection of mind and matter.²¹ It is a short step from this to see art as constituting a similar intersection, but, in this case, acting as a 'memory-object' or a memory-work that intervenes and forms a connection, as Proust knew, between the work and a number of minds – or, better, a number of persons.²² In performing this function, art provides a locus in which the re-cognitions and reconfigurations of memory can be communicated and shared. The idea of 'places' in which memory is harboured is central to the work of