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Jean Robertson + Craig McDaniel

themes of contemporary art

THIRD EDITION

visual art after 1980

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5-1 Peter Eisenman | *Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe*, **1998–2005**
Courtesy: Eisenman Architects

CHAPTER FIVE

memory

The theme of this chapter—memory—is closely connected to the theme of time. The passage of time gives each of us a personal storehouse of memories, one that we are constantly adding to as we go through life. We also accumulate objects as time passes—documents, photographs, clothes, mementos—that serve as stimulants and props to memory.

Time, as we know, also plays tricks on memory. As time passes, we remember some people, places, and events vividly while other memories fade; we find we remember things differently than other people do; our memories are fragmented, scattered, and often unreliable; and there is much that we forget. Memory is not a simple recording device that preserves everything our senses take in. Instead it filters and selects, reorders and distorts.

The theme of memory is almost inseparable from the theme of time when it concerns dates and durations, either specific personal experiences (my birthday, the summer I was sixteen, the flood and its aftermath) or larger historical events (Independence Day, the Hundred Years' War, the Long March). Memory and its close companion, history, connect with time in an expansive way whenever we attempt to recall the vast record of people and events that went before us. As with our personal histories, our ability to remember collective history depends on records and artifacts from the past. All of human time before the present moment offers potential subjects for remembrance, but many things inevitably will be forgotten, left out, or revised.

The authors encountered many intersections of time and memory during two extended visits to Berlin in 2009 and 2010. The city itself—including its buildings, city plan, public monuments, and museum collections—has been profoundly shaped over centuries by the imprint of German history and the history of Berlin. Sitting side by side are reminders of the German Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Nazi era (the Third Reich under Hitler), World War II (1938–45), the cold war era (1945–89), and a reunified East and West Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Our explorations of the German capital were layered with personal memories. One of us recalled visiting Berlin as a child during the cold war, when the Berlin Wall cleaved the city into Soviet-controlled and democratic zones. Vivid memories rushed back of seeing the wall looming everywhere and barbed wire engulfing the

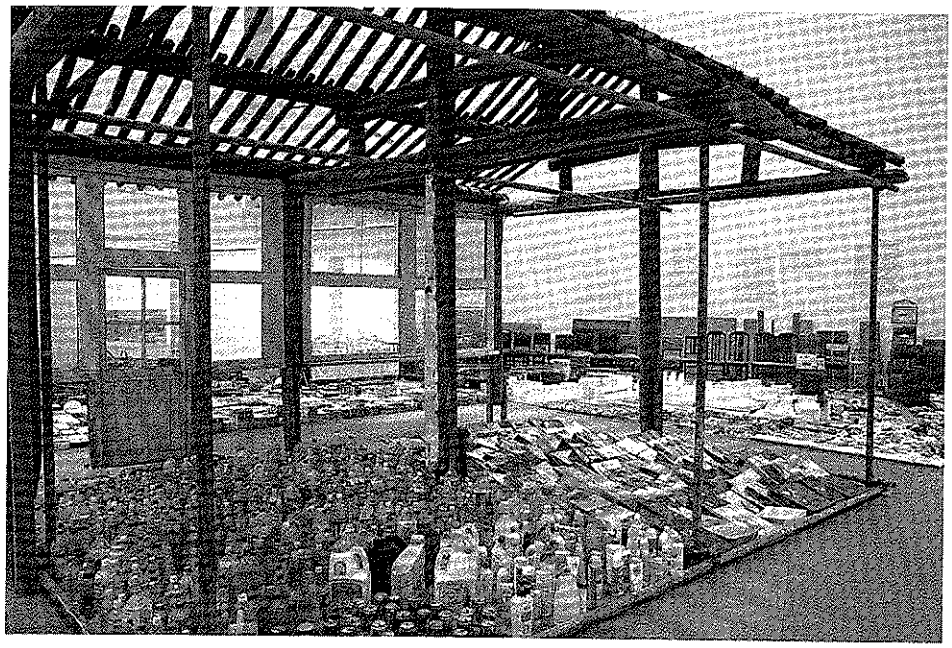
Brandenburg Gate. She remembered crossing from West to East Berlin through the heavily guarded barricades at "Checkpoint Charlie" after a thorough search of the family car. Today that spot is thronged with milling tourists, who pose for snapshots with smiling actors playing guards in military uniforms. The wall has been completely demolished all across Berlin, leaving only a few sections preserved as a kind of open-air museum. The only other trace of the former barrier is a discreet line of cobblestones embedded in the ground that map the wall's former path for those who know to look down.

Everywhere we went in Berlin, past and present jostled for our attention. Some monuments to past glory remain prominent, including the classically inspired Brandenburg Gate, built in the late eighteenth century, which has served as a constantly reinterpreted symbol for a succession of rulers. All over Berlin, futuristic buildings designed by world-class architects from the 1950s to the present coexist with restored buildings from past eras. There are a plethora of newer public artworks, too, among them the dramatic and enormous *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (1998–2005), designed by the architect Peter Eisenman [5-1]. Built on sloping ground between what were East and West Berlin, 2,711 massive rectangular concrete blocks are arranged in a vast grid. Visitors who wind their way through a labyrinth of undulating paths encounter gray slabs of constantly changing heights. The blocks recall both modernist sculpture and grave markers and are an abstract memorial to the *Shoah* (the Hebrew term used by many Jews to distinguish the Nazi Holocaust from other genocides).

Because history is a concept closely related to memory, throughout this chapter we include artists who, like Eisenmann, delve into history as an aspect of their thematic programs. But our overarching topic is memory. History refers to a recording and analysis of the past, performed from a perspective that aims for factuality, even neutrality. But as professional historians recognize, history can never be impartial. In our view, memory is the larger conceptual container, and history is a subset of memory. Memory makes explicit the emotional process through which the past is filtered; memory recognizes that our views of the past are never impersonal. By focusing on personal, subjective responses, artists present their memories and ideas of the past in forms that are more imaginative and idiosyncratic than any standard account of history.

Joan Gibbons, in her study of contemporary art and memory, explains, "Memory, of course, is inherently selective and there is a proven tendency to rework the original facts of an event or experience in a way that coheres around the wishes and values of the person remembering."[1] Artists are more than willing to restructure the past to make an artwork more effective. In addition, some freely add elements of fantasy. Memory as a motivating theme in making art allows for and thrives on the emotional, personal, imaginative dimensions of the slanted perspective.

An example can be seen in a work of Beijing-based artist Song Dong, who was born in 1966, the first year of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, a harsh period of Chinese history. Song Dong's father spent more than ten years in a reeducation camp, separated from the family. In 2005, a few years after his father's death, Song Dong and his mother collaborated to create the installation *Waste Not* [5-2], which displays the



5-2 Song Dong

Installation view of the exhibition, "Projects 90: Song Dong." June 24, 2009 through September 7, 2009. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographer: John Wronn. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

complete contents of the mother's home—some ten thousand items accumulated over more than five decades of personal and societal hardship, when the habit of "waste not" was basic to survival. Sorted by type, the items are displayed around and within the actual house. Blending art and life, the installation is an act of mourning for the deceased father and husband and an illustration of how politics impacts the life stories of individuals and families.

Memory itself has been the subject of research in an enormously broad range of fields, including behavioral neuroscience, cognitive psychology, animal conditioning, history, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and archaeology. Researchers in these fields, often through interdisciplinary collaborations, are constantly making important findings.[2] The social sciences and psychology have proven to be particularly pertinent to today's visual artists, especially in autobiographical works. For example, with the theory of *nachträglichkeit* ("deferred action") psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) proposed that a person dealing with a traumatic event represses it, then retrieves the latent memory later to process it. The retrieved memory is not purely about the past but is reconstructed according to what the person is experiencing in the present. Gibbons has analyzed this "synthesis of past and present" in the work of

French-American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), who made many works based on fearful memories of her childhood. For Bourgeois, "the function of memory is not only to recall, reconstitute or reconcile the past but also to construct and represent the present."[3]

Memory and Art History

Memory is a central theme in contemporary art. It also has been a driving force for artists throughout history. Art historian Albert Elsen, writing about historical purposes of art, maintained that ancient artists often memorialized people who went before them. Elsen wrote, "In ancient China, if one is to judge by the art that has survived, greater attention may have been paid to the dead than to the living. As in Africa, Egypt, and Rome, veneration of departed ancestors was considered important for the successful conduct of life."[4] People in these ancient societies believed that the dead could still intervene somehow in the course of events.

Visual art has long served the purpose of helping people remember important people, places, and events. Grave markers recorded and memorialized the dead; the triumphal arches of ancient Rome glorified military victories; and innumerable paintings and sculptures have depicted both persons and events from the past.

Much art invested in memory is narrative in form. Throughout art history, most of these visual stories were culturally shared ones—creation myths, religious stories, epic literary tales, and accounts of life-changing historical events such as wars, epidemics, and natural disasters. In European art history, stories from the Christian Bible dominated art of the Middle Ages; mythological and literary subjects from a range of cultures (mainly ancient Greece and Rome) were incorporated during the Renaissance; and gradually art also began to represent the actual events of history, particularly events involving the families of the powerful and wealthy. Such works of art functioned both as memory aids and as a means to promote an officially sanctioned version of history. History is written by the winners, the saying goes, and the winners commissioned art that focused on the stories they preferred.

History painting was a catchall category used by European art academies in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries to denote a grand style of figure painting illustrating significant events from ancient history, religion, or literature. History painting was promoted as the highest genre of art, and those who aspired to be the greatest painters trained many years in order to practice it. Strongly indebted to Italian Renaissance art, academic history painting blended an illusionistic pictorial style and idealized subject matter, often glorifying dramatic events performed by gods, heroes, and leaders. In the nineteenth century, painters also took the then-unusual step of depicting current events, those that living persons remembered or may have witnessed with their own eyes. Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), which represented a current event involving a group of passengers set adrift from a sinking ship on a makeshift raft, is a famous example.

After an extended period beginning in the late nineteenth century, when art about history, mythology, and tales from literature fell out of critical favor, interest in the past revived in the late twentieth century, notably in the work of the neo-expressionists, who

were creating contemporary versions of history paintings. Neo-expressionists such as Anselm Kiefer in Germany and Mimmo Paladino in Italy focused on their respective national histories and cultural origins, referring to history, literature, mythology, landscape, and religion in their heavily symbolic paintings. In the United States, painters Leon Golub (1922–2004) and Robert Colescott (1925–2009) used a dramatic expressionistic style to tell politically charged stories (about current wars and other forms of violence in Golub's case and about the history of race relations in Colescott's work). A variation on the grand tradition of history painting can be seen in the twenty-first century in the work of Neo Rauch in Germany [1-3], among other painters.

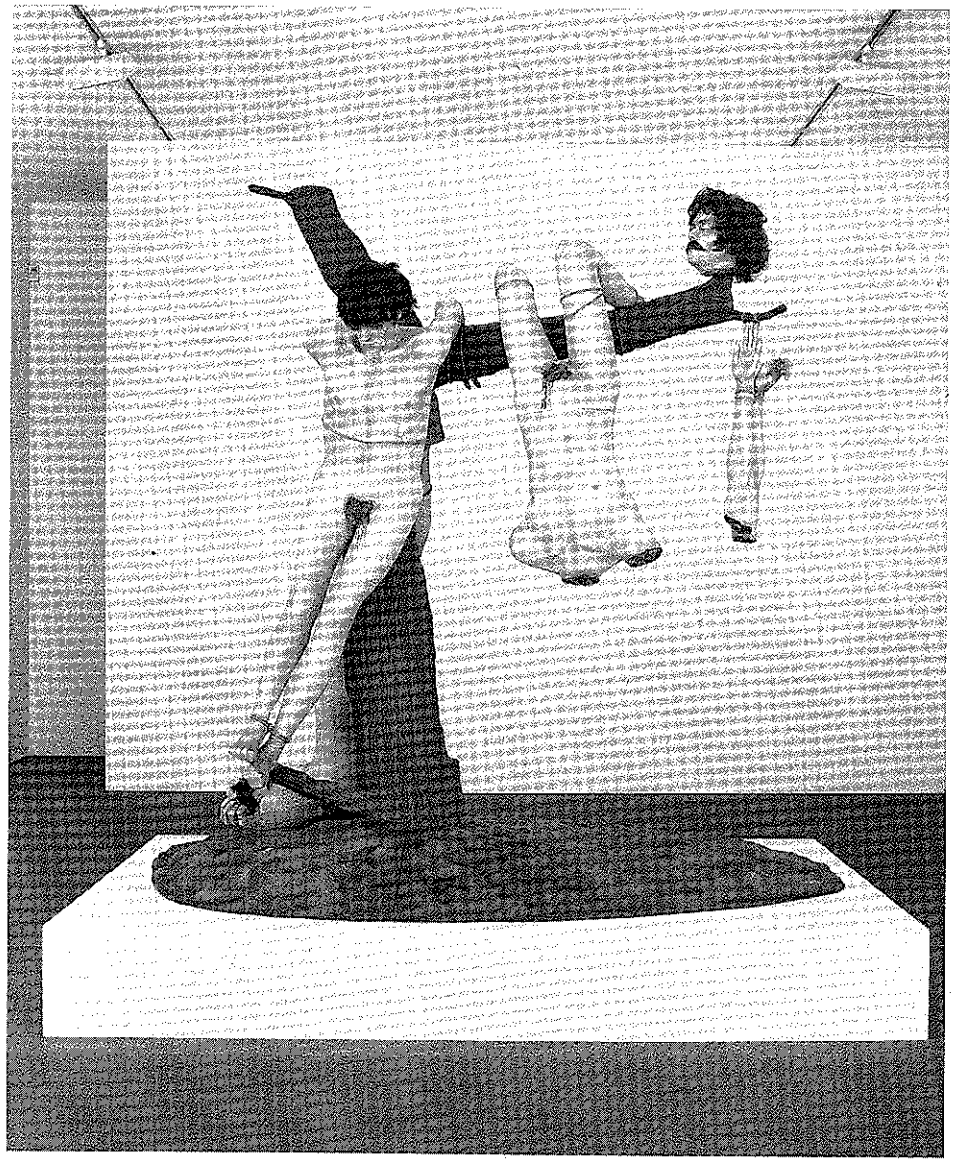
Numerous artists over the past few decades have focused on history for political and ideological reasons. Among this group, many have been motivated by a desire to recover the neglected or forgotten histories of women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. The radical revision of history in contemporary art and the arguments about which events of the past are to be valued are explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

In addition to political and social history, artists have also been interested in the history of art itself. Artists have copied styles or subject matter that came before them as a matter of expediency or cultural pride, to meet the expectations of their audience to see familiar forms, or to pay homage to the greatness of the past. As a result, a special type of memory that underpins many works of art is the artist's and viewer's memory of art itself—the recognition of a variation on a tradition or an affinity (whether intended or not) to earlier work. When the viewer looks at a new painting with an expressionistic, representational style and observes, "this painting reminds me of the late triptychs of Max Beckmann," memory is enriching the viewing experience and deepening the critical interpretation of the art.

The desire to revive and revisit past styles has been persistent in art history. The contrary view, that an artist's role is to be avant-garde, or try to invent a new style or subject, is relatively recent, having arisen in Europe in the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the romantic movement. Before then, and even continuing in the nineteenth century among the majority of artists who were traditionalists, artists openly and eagerly borrowed what they considered to be the best from the past. They were proud to be historicist, to copy directly from precursors.

After nearly a hundred years in which most avant-garde artists insisted they were more interested in what was new right now, or *the modern*, rather than what was inherited, the appropriation of styles, images, and information from earlier periods has resurged in recent decades. However, this trend differs from early historicism, in which a coherent style or composition from the past was revived virtually intact. For example, the neoclassicism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe was clearly derived from classical Greece and Rome, as well as the Italian Renaissance (although noteworthy neoclassical artists such as Jacques-Louis David, 1748–1825, added new ideas and subtly altered the tradition). The nineteenth century also saw considerable revivals of past styles in architecture. These, too, were historicist. Generally, architects copied just one precedent when they designed a new building, in a kind of simulation of a period style. Clients in England particularly wanted neo-Gothic buildings that revived medieval forms.

In contrast to historicism, contemporary artists' appropriation of visual ideas from the past has resulted in mixtures drawn from many sources. In addition, elements are not borrowed intact but in fragments that are mixed and layered. American literary critic Fredric Jameson's concept of *pastiche*, referring to the eclectic, decon-



5-3 Jake and Dinos Chapman | *Great Deeds Against the Dead*, **1994**
Fiberglass, resin, paint, and wigs
109 x 96 x 60 inches (277 x 244 x 152.5 cm)
CREDIT: White Cube
© the artists

textualized appropriation of past images (or compositions or styles), became associated with much so-called *postmodern* art that arose in the 1980s. The seemingly cobbled-together mixtures of styles and images dovetailed with developments in visual culture generally, in which, for example, styles of cars and clothing became available in ever greater variety. Visual culture, including art, soon offered the heterogeneous mixture we see today: styles that reflect the past, present, and imagined future coexist, as when different styles of houses occur on the same street or styles are merged in one building, as in a colonial-style house that has Palladian windows. Numerous artists, from Elizabeth Murray and David Salle beginning in the late 1970s to Christian Schumann and Kerry James Marshall in the 1990s to Shahzia Sikander, Whitfield Lovell, and Neo Rauch in the 2000s, have forged individual styles by the characteristic manner in which they recycle and remix elements of the past.

If an artist "quotes" earlier works of art or images from popular culture, the viewer who recognizes these quotations interprets the new work of art in part as an exploration of the visual precedents. For example, in their sculpture *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994) [5-3], British brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman borrowed the gory tableau of mangled body parts dangling from a tree from an early nineteenth-century etching with aquatint in Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* series. Knowledgeable viewers find themselves weighing the bad taste of the Chapmans' macabre scene against the genuine despair of Goya's firsthand witnessing of the real horrors of the Napoleonic wars (although Goya himself partly based the torsos on fragments of classical sculpture). American comic book artist Alex Ross, who has a cult following among devotees of the genre, appropriated famous characters such as Superman and Captain America and imagined them in middle age in one of his comic books. The conceptual subtlety of Ross's work depends on his audience's knowledge of the past exploits and foibles of his superheroes when they were young.

The Texture of Memory

Remembering is one of our most valuable abilities. Indeed, memory is fundamental to our survival; if we do not have good memories, we need to surround ourselves with people and tools that remember for us. Without the aid of record-keeping devices, such as books, maps, cameras, and audio and video recorders, we would find it difficult to navigate through life. Today our well-being and success continue to depend on the knowledge stored in permanent records that aid our long-term memory. Short-term memory is just as essential for our well-being. Without it, each moment in the present would be divorced from preceding moments, and perception would no longer lead to conception.

Memory Is Emotional

Memory is not just a practical faculty. It constantly underpins our thoughts and emotions. Our reminiscences of family members past and present, our recollections of lived experiences shared with those we encounter, and our ideas about the collective past of our country or community or tribe are fraught with feelings. Memory can be a matter of pride, regret, sorrow, nostalgia, amusement, or joy. Through memory, we construct identity, purpose, and meaning. No wonder we fear

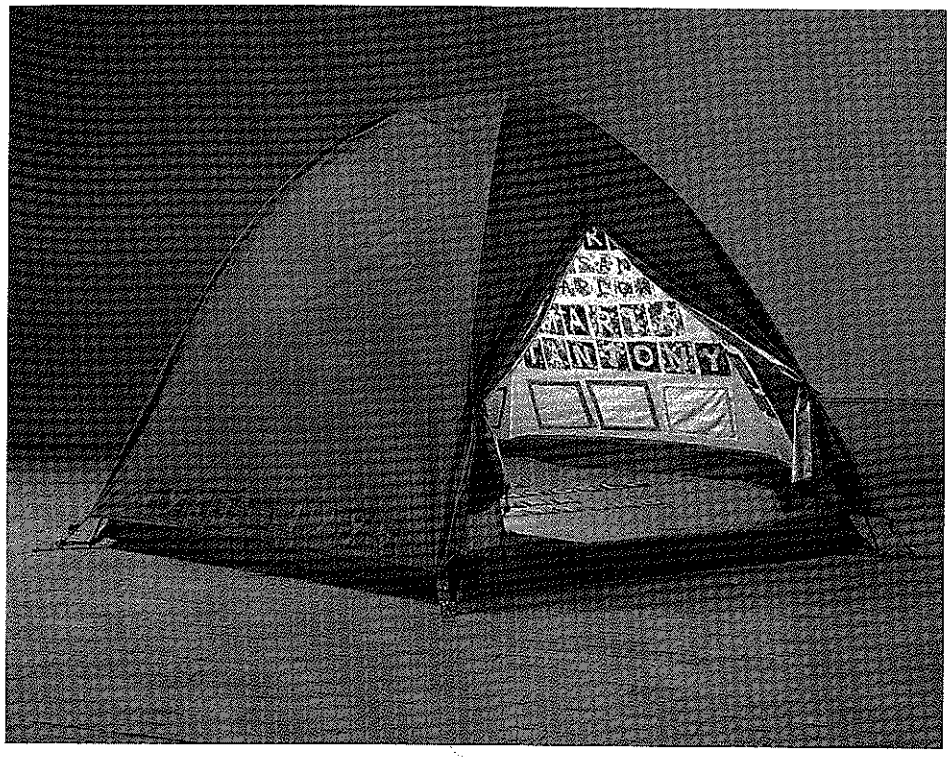
Alzheimer's disease and the dissociative disorders of mental illness; beyond our worry about losing the practical ability to function in a rational way, we dread the loss of the emotional and spiritual connections we have forged through memory. American Tony Oursler exposes the psychological suffering of such diseases in sculptural video works in which he projects onto small dummies the faces of actors spewing a stream of incessant chatter. The puppetlike "talking heads" babble, quarrel, curse, whine, and needle the viewer passing by. Critic Lisa Saltzman interprets Oursler's amnesiac figures as living in a "perpetual present" and "making palpable, visible, and horrifying the considerable costs of living not just in the absence of historical knowledge, but, even more, the considerable consequences of living in the absence of memory."[5]

We all keep physical reminders of our personal and family histories. In albums, drawers, and cardboard boxes, we store away relics and mementos of the past. But the human psyche is an even richer repository of past experiences and feelings, both conscious and buried. Contemporary artists have been widely attracted to psychoanalytical ideas, following lines of inquiry that reflect the writings of theorists ranging from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan to Julia Kristeva. Artists as diverse as Louise Bourgeois, Gillian Wearing, and Tracey Emin have emphasized the psychological force of memories linked to acutely personal lived experiences. Wearing's video installation *Trauma* (2000), for instance, shows people Wearing recruited through a newspaper ad to talk about traumatic childhood experiences while being filmed. To disguise themselves, the subjects wear masks with the faces of children. It is unnerving to hear dreadful memories being recounted while watching plastic faces with expressions that do not change. The lines between documentary and fiction and between psychoanalytic sympathy and voyeurism are uncomfortably crossed.

Emin is known for her confessional art, through which she reveals private details of her often troubled life. Her installation, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995) [5-4], was a tent sewn with the names of all the people Emin went to bed with for any reason over the prior three decades (102 in all).[6] The names included former boyfriends (i.e., sexual partners), family members, friends, and drinking partners. To different viewers, the tent itself might suggest a womb, home, homelessness, shelter, or migration. Emin's *My Bed Work* installation (1998) displays a rumpled bed surrounded by used items dumped on the floor: cigarette butts, condoms, bloodied tampons, dirty underwear, an empty vodka bottle. The implication is that the items all came from Emin's apartment at the time, although the line between fact and fiction is blurred. Emin's art can be discussed within a category known as *abject art*, a concept introduced in chapter 3, "The Body." Abject art is a trend that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, partly in response to the writings of Kristeva.[7] From a psychoanalytical perspective, the abject approach relates to the theme of memory because it explores a child's inability to separate from its mother, symbolized by bodily secretions and moist, formless substances, and the psychic conditions of trauma and repression.

Memory Is Unreliable

Memory is not a straightforward process that results in a trustworthy, unchanging record of the past. Recollections are fragile, contradictory, partial, and fluctuating. We



5-4 Tracey Emin | *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995
Appliquéd tent, mattress and light
48 x 96 1/2 x 84 1/2 inches (122 x 245 x 215 cm)
Photo: Stephen White
Courtesy White Cube
CREDIT: © 2011 Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

argue about the past with others when we do not recall the same events or when we interpret the same events differently. We forget a lot (which is useful when the information is unimportant), and we omit other people's stories if they do not serve our needs. We understand that we cannot remember everything; indeed, we *should not* remember everything. Total recall is neither possible nor desirable. Not having a perfect memory is invaluable, for it allows us to prioritize and generalize, to think in abstract terms.[8]

Many artists who work with memory as a theme are interested in the unreliability and instability of memory, as well as how much of the past we should or should not try to recall. William Kentridge is a South African artist who makes animated films using his own charcoal drawings, which he constantly erases and redraws [4-6]. One of his chief subjects is the recent history of apartheid in his nation, a period of institutionalized racial oppression, and its aftermath, in which both perpetrators and victims are trying to coexist. In his animations, people, landscapes, and buildings are in a state of flux, appearing and disappearing, while traces of past drawings remain faintly visible

underneath new layers. According to Saltzman, "Kentridge has described the situation in South Africa as a struggle between the forces of forgetting and the resistance of remembrance, between amnesia and memory, or, in his words, between 'paper shredders and photocopying machines.'" Should one remember and try to learn from a difficult past, or try to forgive, forget, and move on? Kentridge's work, Saltzman argues, "stands firmly on the side of the production of memory."[9]

Recall is unreliable because we constantly reinterpret the past and layer new ideas and information onto the "original" versions of events. American Paul Pfeiffer worked with this concept in his sound-and-video installation *The Saints* (2007), which was based on the 1966 World Cup Final between West Germany and England. That match has achieved heroic, even mythical, status as one of the most thrilling games ever in soccer. It was England's only World Cup victory, achieved in overtime after a contested final shot that may or may not have been legal. Pfeiffer's installation includes a tiny screen replaying a segment of the original televised game, from which Pfeiffer digitally erased the football and all the players except one lone figure appearing to run aimlessly about. Meanwhile, fourteen wall-mounted speakers play the sounds of a roaring crowd that seems to rocket back and forth between extremes of joy and despair. In actuality, as revealed in a two-channel video elsewhere in the installation, the soundtrack combines noise made by the original crowd with the responses of an audience of a thousand Filipinos who were hired by Pfeiffer to watch a recording of the match in a movie house in Manila while he directed them on how and when to cheer. Crowd noises become the dominant impression of the match; the specifics of the particular game fade compared with hearing the familiar rhythms of a mass audience seeming to share the same emotions.

Memory Is Multisensory

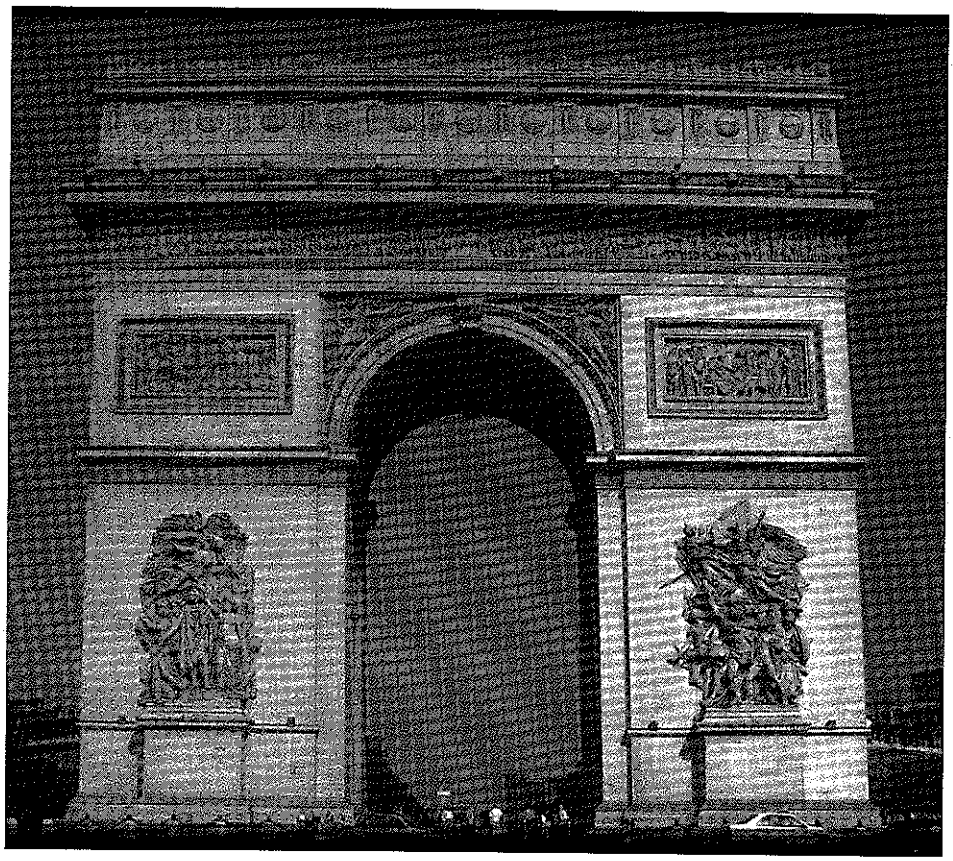
As suggested by the roar of the crowd in Pfeiffer's *The Saints*, memory is multisensory. Smell, sound, taste, and touch have a powerful effect on memory and the imagination, just as does sight. Some visual artists capitalize on this phenomenon by engaging more than one sense.

Ann Hamilton [4-7] often makes site-specific installations that respond to the social history of the site and incorporate everyday materials such as bread or candle wax. The sounds, smells, colors, and textures of her materials contribute equally to the meaning of the work. Photographer Nan Goldin's epic work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* uses sound along with hundreds of photographs shot between 1979 and 1986 of friends and associates involved in the hard-drug subculture of New York City's Bowery district. A version of the work owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York is a forty-three-minute slide show with a soundtrack that includes songs by the Velvet Underground, James Brown, Petula Clark, and others. The music and photographs evoke the gritty late-night downtown scene of the 1980s and serve as an elegy for some of the friends Goldin photographed who were ravaged by AIDS and drugs.[10]

American Bill Fontana makes acoustic sculptures using ambient sound effects recorded at places of historical significance. His *Sound Island* (1994) involved a temporary sound installation utilizing forty-eight loudspeakers on the façade of the famous

Arc de Triomphe, a much-visited war monument on an island-like plaza in the center of a grand traffic circle in Paris that is always thronged with cars and people [5-5]. Although the visual impact was minimal—the speakers were barely noticeable against the massive monument—the aural impact was large. *Sound Island* transmitted to this busy site the sounds of the sea crashing against rocks along the Normandy coast in northern France, muffling other noise and creating the illusion for anyone near the monument that the cars circling the traffic island were silent. The ocean sounds, which were being transmitted live via underwater equipment, were partly intended to take listeners back to the decisive hours when Allied troops landed on the Normandy beaches, turning the tide of World War II. In fact, *Sound Island,* a temporary installation, was commissioned to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of D-day and the subsequent liberation of Paris. While the sound sculpture was in place, the neoclassical Arc de Triomphe was awash with sounds of a distant place and, for some, memories of another war.

Multisensory artworks tend to be relational, inviting viewers to move around and through them, and even to interact with the works in some way that helps to trigger



5-5 Bill Fontana | *Sound Island Paris,* **1994**
Courtesy of the artist

recollection. The late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–96), a Cuban-born American, made many influential relational works of art that engage the senses of sight, touch, and even taste. Among his installations, those referred to as "spills" consist of individually wrapped candies arranged in geometric piles. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), is about remembering someone loved and lost, specifically Gonzalez-Torres's partner, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. The spill of multicolored candies, arranged in a triangular heap in a corner, weighs 175 pounds, Ross's ideal weight. Visitors are invited to take away a piece of candy, and the diminishing pile represents Ross's weight loss in the period before his death. The Art Institute of Chicago, which owns the installation, is expected to replenish the candies regularly so that Ross's ideal weight is restored. Presumably anyone who takes a piece will later unwrap the candy and put it into his or her mouth, tasting the sweetness as it disappears.

Strategies for Representing the Past

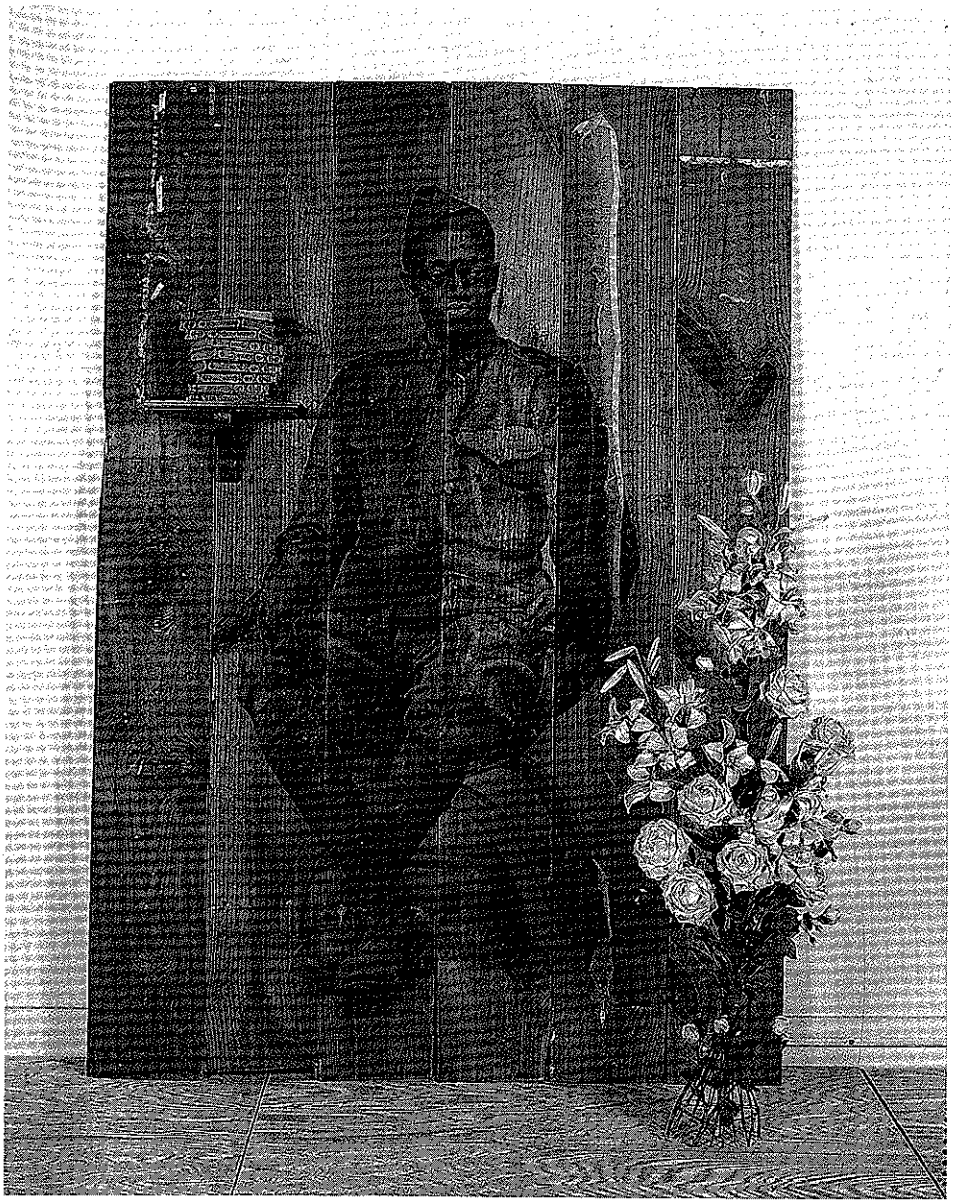
Artists may draw on their own memories when they present both personal events and historical events that they witnessed directly. Although artists tend to edit and restructure memories for creative reasons, direct memories can still be a powerful starting point for an artist. However, usually artists combine ideas and information from a range of sources when they represent the past, especially when the event is one that goes beyond their own private experiences.

Sources that artists might turn to for information about the past include other people's recollections, photographs and videos, news accounts, history books and novels, Internet websites, museums, other art, and many kinds of objects that survive from the past. Drawing on these sources, artists use many different strategies to represent the past. In this section, we explore a few strategies that have been particularly effective and prevalent in the past few decades.

Displaying Evidence

If an artist wants to suggest that he or she is being more or less truthful and accurate about the past, she or he can use materials that have inherent value and authority. Anything from the past that still exists in the present is tinged with special significance. The surviving thing seems to provide direct evidence that the person or event it was associated with really existed. Hence one strategy that artists employ to represent personal or collective memories is to appropriate and recycle found materials. *Found objects, artifacts, relics, traces*—these related terms are part of the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of modern and contemporary art.

Recycled materials that are truly old are tied to the past in a direct way. They are a form of relic, an actual piece of a thing made and used for some purpose in the past, and thus these materials have strong associations with a specific historical time (and embody that time in their physical presence). Relics have the power to evoke memories and temporal reflections. American artist Whitfield Lovell, for instance, combines charcoal portraits based on vintage photographs of African Americans from the early years of the twentieth century with found historical objects. Lovell draws the portraits [5-6] on worn wood planks, similar to the floorboards or wallboards found in older houses. Writing



5-6 Whitfield Lovell | *Epoch*, **2001**
Charcoal on wood, found objects, 77 1/2 x 55 x 17 1/2 inches
Collection: Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan
Photo courtesy DC Moore Gallery, NYC
CREDIT: Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, NYC

about Lovell's art in an exhibit catalog, Dominique Nahas explained that the artist "wants the viewer to connect with a phenomenon of time past being time present.... We can, he suggests, consider these people either as ciphers in a large historical continuum or as individuals who have attained fulfillment with honor and grace."[11]

Lovell's art exemplifies a curious paradox of much art that uses aged materials to represent the past. Using distressed wood with peeling paint as a support for the artist's drawn portraits reproduces the frayed and faded look of an antique photograph, but these qualities of wear were not present in the objects when they were seen by people in the past. Originally, the wood was smooth and freshly painted, and the photograph was in mint condition. The worn qualities we observe today more accurately signify the distance separating our time from the bygone era rather than representing that era in its original state. A time traveler from the past would note the effect: "Look at how these objects and photos have aged. I hardly recognize them."

The representation of the past through an artifact or relic is an example of using a symbol or semiotic sign, also called an *index*. To function as an index, a symbol requires more than an abstract or arbitrary relationship to that which it signifies. (Actual smoke, for example, is an index of fire; the English word *fire*, on the other hand, is not an index of a real blaze.) In the example of Lovell's art just discussed, the qualities of peeled paint and distressed wood are the direct result of the aging of these items, so they serve as an index of the passage of time.

British artist Rachel Whiteread has focused, throughout her career, on the strategy of casting the negative spaces within, around, and between physical structures such as furniture and houses. Casting the spaces between chair legs or under a set of stairs, Whiteread creates a physical index that bears a direct relationship to the original structure although in a peculiar way: her sculptures mold pure space into a solid form. By materializing the negative spaces, the artist memorializes what is gone as a kind of ghost. We remember the chair or staircase not by seeing its fossilized remains or even a cast that duplicates its actual form; instead, we see the trace of the empty space that once encircled the solid thing. Whiteread's negative casts may bring to mind not only the absent structure (chair, stairs) but also the function of the structure (people sitting, people climbing up stairs). Her artworks also serve as physical echoes of the memories of lives lived in relationship to those chairs and stairs. For example, the viewer may picture a person of a certain economic class living in a house that had a particular kind of a stairway leading up to the bedrooms. The negative spaces transformed into palpable, colored volumes (the casting material is often a tinted, translucent resin, sometimes a ghost-white cement) evoke rich remembrances.

Photographs, video recordings, and sound recordings provide significant indexical records of the past, for they capture images or sounds on tape, film, or digital media, such as memory cards, at the moment they are occurring. The photographs and songs in Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, described earlier, are indexes of a particular time and place, downtown New York City in the 1980s. The artwork has a powerful effect on memory because it contains indexical traces, immersing an audience in the ambience of the past.

In addition to their emotional force, physical traces seem to provide evidence in an almost legalistic way. The term *forensic aesthetic* is sometimes used to describe art that borrows from the methods of crime labs and courts of law by systematically providing

material evidence that something happened or someone existed. An institutional space and the arrangement of items within it—interpreted as a crime scene—might also be the target of the artist's scrutiny. Models for this kind of work include both real detective investigations and fictional crime stories. Song Dong's *Waste Not* [5-2], which spreads out his mother's actual possessions around remnants of her house, is forensic in nature.[12]

The degree to which forensic artworks tell factual stories or contain bona fide evidence varies. For example, an artist could make new objects appear old by artificially creating a weathered look; in such cases, the artificially aged surfaces are a simulation of an index. Whereas some artists go to great lengths to disguise simulations and fabrications, others openly encourage viewers to recognize falsified evidence and reflect on the ways we know history.

The Lebanese artist Walid Raad, who now lives in New York, frequently represents the recent history of Lebanon. His work includes a fifteen-year project exhibited under the name of a fictitious research foundation, the Atlas Group (1989–2004), which purported to collect films, photographs, notebooks, and other artifacts that provide evidence of the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990 (including the period during which Raad was a teenager in Beirut). Some documents come from known sources; others are dubiously attributed to imaginary individuals, including notebooks of the obsessive fictitious historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. One series of photographs purports to show the remains of cars exploded by bombs; another shows Beirut's bullet-pocked buildings overlaid with colored dots, which Raad claims are color-coded to specific arms manufacturers, based on his own collection of shells embedded in the buildings. The provocative blend of fact and fiction in the Atlas Group's archives suggests the role that photography and other documentary evidence play in constructing meaning about historical events, as well as the ease with which falsified information can be emotionally convincing. Raad's photographs of exploded car parts are affecting, whether or not they were fabricated.

Reenacting the Past

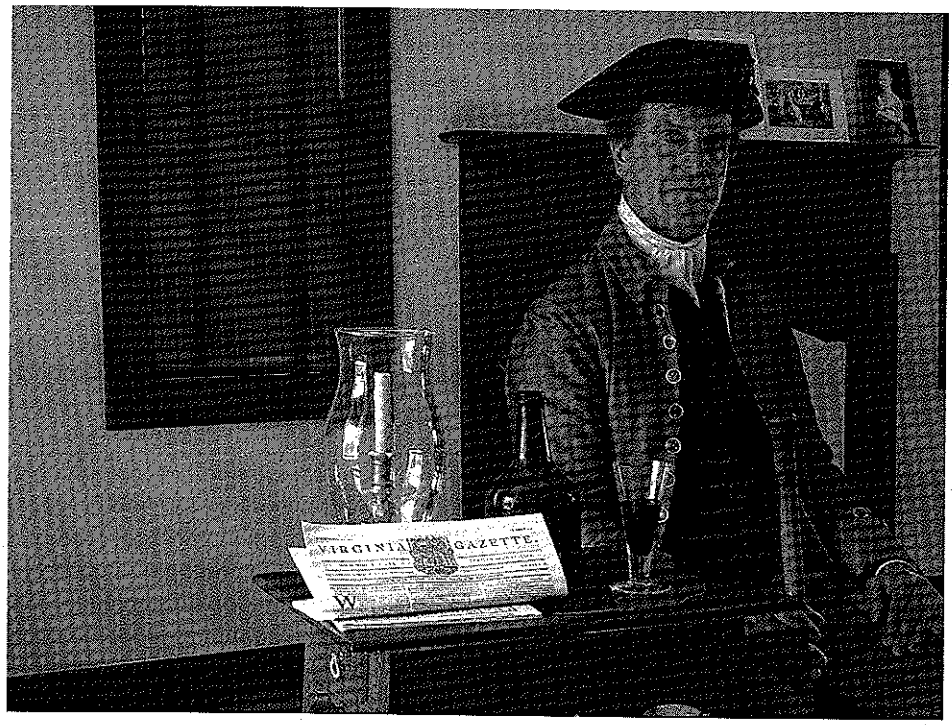
Popular culture feeds an interest in memory and history with simulations that are immersive and often participatory, including pageants and parades, war reenactments, living history museums, and certain video games. Most of these try to be historically accurate in their details, although there is a phantasmagoric quality to all of them, as various scholars have argued. With these forms of presentation, we have not really taken a time machine to the past; we are watching a staged scene in the present. Theatrical reenactments that involve people in costume performing a scene from history and evocative sites such as former battlefields are particularly potent in creating a sense of the past. They draw on the power of interactivity and a feeling of immersion in another reality to trigger the sense of being a witness to history. Reenactments are simulations that try to be convincingly real. Sven Lütticken drew parallels between the immersive power of reenactments and Fluxus events and happenings during the pop art era. Whereas those artists' performances "celebrated the now," reenactments were "historicist happenings" that "tried to create an experience of the past as present, or as much present as possible."[13]

In a reenactment what we really are witnessing is a particular version of history shaped and edited for us by people in the present. Reenactors have hindsight, with all

the limitations and psychic overlays that brings. Jennifer Allen observed, "In contrast to the chaotic unfolding of the original event, the reenactment knows what will happen and, more importantly, when this happening starts and finishes.... Reenactment depends on a linear construction of time."[14]

Contemporary artists who use reenactment strategies want to capitalize on the immersive power of the form but also to deconstruct its assumptions and problems. Artists' reenactments are not historicist, according to Lütticken; instead, "the most successful artistic reenactments or reflections on reenactment upset the balance, disrupting the clichéd assemblage of detail and delirium that is as typical of contemporary historicism as it was of earlier forms."[15] In this vein, *The Muster* (2005), a public art project by American Allison Smith, mixed the aesthetic vernacular of the Civil War reenactment community with idiosyncratic contemporary expressions. Smith invited fifty individuals and collaborative groups to build campsites at Fort Jay on Governor's Island in New York City, making costumes, banners, flags, and installations intended to celebrate whatever anyone was fighting for. *The Muster*'s participants deviated freely from any obligation to recreate the details and ambience of the Civil War era.

Israeli-born, Berlin-based Omer Fast creates videos that provide a sense of immersion in multiple histories simultaneously. Fast's two-channel video projection *Godville* (2005) [5-7] shows segments from interviews the artist conducted with eighteenth-



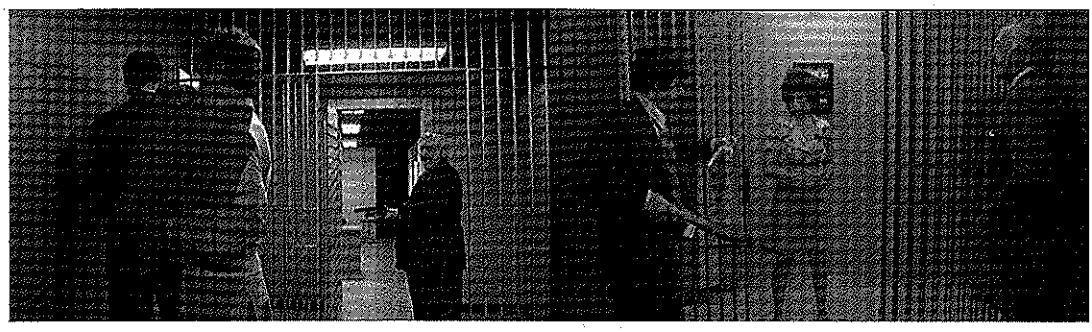
5-7 Omer Fast | *Godville*, **2005**
Two channel-video.
51 minutes
Courtesy: the artist, gb agency, Paris, Arratia Beer, Berlin

century character impersonators who work in Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Virginia. The interpreters speak both in the personas of their eighteenth-century characters and as themselves in the present. Fast edited and reconstituted the interviews until the differences between the impersonators' stories and their present-day lives become entangled. One person, for example, is a veteran who did a tour of duty in wartime Iraq and now impersonates a colonial militia member in Williamsburg. Watching the video, as spliced by Fast, viewers become amused and confused about which war the militia man's rambling and often ranting remarks apply to.

French video artist and filmmaker Pierre Huyghe engaged with both actual history and a Hollywood version in his double-screen film installation *The Third Memory* (2000) [5-8]. Huyghe invited John Wojtowicz, the surviving robber of a Brooklyn bank robbery in 1972, to reenact the robbery on a film studio set that reconstructs the bank's interior. Carrying a rifle, the elderly Wojtowicz orders actors performing as bank customers into positions around the set. Huyghe's nine-minute film includes 1972 news clips of the robbery, as well as footage from a feature film by Sidney Lumet, *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), a fictionalized version of the robbery starring Al Pacino as Wojtowicz. Wojtowicz's reenactment appears as heavily influenced by the film version as by his own memories.

Projects like these might seem unsurprising to a generation raised with reality television shows such as *Survivor*, fake news programs such as *The Colbert Report*, and false news stories that "go viral" on the Internet. We are already skeptical about what is real and what is not. Nevertheless, Huyghe, Fast, and other artists who reflect on reenactments challenge us to be more critical of the ways we learn about history.

Recent years have also brought reenactments of classic live art performances from the 1960s and 1970s, which were originally conceived as unique, ephemeral events. Some artists, including Yoko Ono and Dan Graham, have reenacted their own performances; others have restaged the performances of other artists. Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy restaged sexier versions of Vito Acconci's works of Body art from the early 1970s to film their video *Fresh Acconci* (1997). Marina Abramović has restaged both her own and other artists' performances. A reenactment of an artistic performance



5-8 Pierre Huyghe | *The Third Memory*, **2000**
Double projection, beta digital
9 minutes 46 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

might be a historicist attempt to represent the "original" performance by repeating it as exactly as possible; often, though, reenactments involve efforts at revision and reinterpretation.

Fracturing Narratives and Reshuffling Memories

Historically, narrative structures have been one of the most common ways of representing the past in art. The surviving art of the past includes many examples of wall paintings, easel paintings, sculptures, tapestries, and illustrated manuscripts that tell stories. For most of art history the storyline was easy to follow, especially if you were part of the culture in which the art was made. Clarity was aided by the fact that the stories themselves were shared ones that lots of people knew by heart. Today's artists continue to tell stories about the past, but they often abandon clarity in favor of a more jumbled, ambiguous, complicated view of what happened and how it is remembered. And they freely combine both actual and fictional sources. Narrative art is still made but frequently occurs in fractured, pastiched, layered forms.

A significant way in which artists today dismantle a narrative is by breaking down a consistent temporal sequence. Instead of clearly distinguishing past, present, and future events, artists may represent events out of chronological order. This approach goes beyond the flashbacks and flash forwards that are a staple of commercial films. Contemporary visual artists often depict memory fragments in a state of collision or confusion. Fast's *Godville*, discussed previously, is a work of this type. Conceptually, this fracturing approach is associated with the deflation of the modernist view that history is progressive and has a coherent, knowable shape. In addition, the fracturing of chronological time can metaphorically convey the qualities of memory and dreams, in which the rational structure of time is perpetually breaking down and meanings are fleeting.

In addition to fracturing any coherent order, some artists also use the technique of juxtaposing or layering seemingly disconnected images and references to create ambiguous, unresolved narratives. These artists work in ways that tend to destabilize the perception of the present; vague mementos and snippets of the past are presented in what appears to be a random way. The paintings of David Salle and Sigmar Polke often have this quality of dissociation and disconnectedness. Other uses of juxtaposition rise to the level of surrealism, by which they seem to express something uncanny and incredible but oddly convincing, as in a dream. The film narratives of British artist Isaac Julien, which mix documentary and fictional scenes, evoke this dreamlike quality. Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) is a fifty-five-minute film installation that combines a poetic soundtrack and three different videos: archival footage of an actual raging storm in 2004 during which twenty-three Chinese workers collecting cockles were drowned by an incoming tide on the northwest coast of England; footage of a reenactment of a classic 1930s Chinese film directed and filmed by Julien; and scenes of a white-robed actress playing the role of a flying goddess. The three films are viewed on nine double-sided screens, allowing viewers to move and watch from different vantage points within the darkened space of an art gallery, as scenes and characters drift in and out of the visual field. Viewers must try to navigate the multiple narratives linking China's ancient past, modern China, and the present.

The critic Craig Owens applied the term *palimpsest* to the layering practices used in postmodern narratives, referring to the ancient practice of scraping text off a parch-

ment, which was then reused with the old text still vaguely discernable through the newer writing. As applied to contemporary art, Owens meant that layered elements inevitably will be "read" in relation to one another. Because the elements are disjointed and clash, reading is difficult, and no single meaning can be gleaned and fixed.[16] Matthew Ritchie's ongoing project, *The Hard Way* [4-4], a fantastic epic tale that mixes imaginary ideas and images ranging from the mythic past to the distant future, is a palimpsest in this sense, as is Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves*.

A new term for the remixing practices of contemporary art is *super-hybridity*. Digital technology allows images and other information to circulate rapidly and also facilitates creating mixtures; as a result, borrowings have become ever more eclectic and rampant. According to art critic Jörg Heiser, "In recent years, a number of artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers have dramatically increased the number of cultural contexts they tap into when producing work as well as the pace at which they do so....This phenomenon could be termed 'super-hybridity' and is obviously to do with the dynamics of globalization, digital technology, the Internet and capitalism."[17] Heiser points to Sigmar Polke, Bruce Nauman, and Adrian Piper, among others, as precursors who decades ago began freely crossing between and mixing media, genres, disciplines, and contexts. Works illustrated in this book that could be discussed in the context of super-hybridity include Keith Tyson's *Large Field Array* [1-9], Christian Marclay's *The Clock* [4-1], and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* [7-13].

One of the characteristic qualities of super-hybridity is the global sharing of memories and historical events, which can now be quickly transmitted to and from any place in the world. Likewise, information about all periods of history is immediately available. Then is now. Everywhere is here. Elements of the multifarious past are ripe for picking and rearranging in the present. Although the result may appear to be a jazzy soup of cultural references, such a practice raises serious questions: Does engaging in a strategy of super-hybridity allow the artist to cherry-pick from the heritages of others? And, if so, does this mean that super-hybridity invites a new type of colonialism in which those who control the most information control how we perceive the past? In a roundtable on the topic of super-hybridity facilitated by Heiser for *Frieze*, several participants criticized the term *super-hybridity* as a term that sounds exciting and cool but too often refers to an uncritical mishmash. Philosopher Nina Powers critiqued as irrelevant "work that, magpie-like, simply wants to reassemble bright shiny things from all over the place without paying attention to the routes by which ideas and objects arrive at your feet."[18]

Storehouses of Memory

Memory depends on stored knowledge that can be retrieved. Before the invention of writing, knowledge was passed down by word of mouth, stored in people's minds, and recounted in songs and stories. Sometimes visual records in the form of drawings, paintings, and sculptures, maps and diagrams, artifacts and relics, and even casts (such as a death mask cast from a deceased person's face) served as memory aids. In the contemporary world we are fortunate to have visual and written records that are preserved in physical storehouses, such as museums and archives, or virtual storehouses, such as computerized databases, that allow us to easily access information.

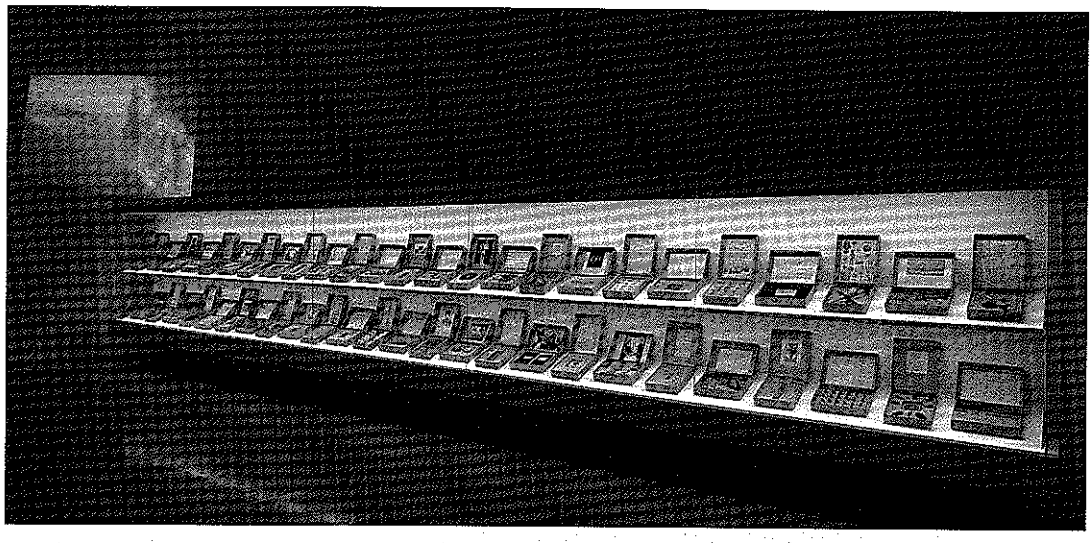
The storehouses in which information is preserved may seem to be neutral entities, but in fact they reflect various institutional practices of organization, display, and retrieval. Questioning the objectivity and authority of such collections and the logic behind displaying them has become a part of artistic scrutiny. Projects that deconstruct the operations or presentations of museums, libraries, and archives have abounded in contemporary art, from the influential, pioneering parodies of museums by Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) to Sugimoto's photographs of dioramas in the Museum of Natural History [4-12]. American Fred Wilson is well known for reorganizing and reinstalling objects from a museum's own collections in order to question museum biases and misrepresentations of history. In his acclaimed reinstallation of part of the collection of the Maryland Historical Society, entitled *Mining the Museum* (1992–93), Wilson placed expensive possessions such as silver goblets alongside humble items such as iron slave shackles and ironically labeled the whole group of objects "Metalwork, 1723–1880" [5-9]. Wilson's installation, which included educational labels, aimed to demonstrate, by counterexample, how mainstream exhibits of material culture may not tell us everything we should know. (In the metalwork display, the museum label for the silver set read, "Silver Vessels in Baltimore Repoussé Style: 1830–1860." The label for the other metalwork read, "Slave Shackles: Maker Unknown/Made in Baltimore, c. 1793–1864. The shackles with lock show signs of wear." Wilson intended the poignant pun on the word *wear*.) Two decades ago, when Wilson created this display, many

5-9 Fred Wilson (curator) | *Metalwork.* Installation view of *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, 1992–1993

museums would keep such items in separate galleries, if they displayed the shackles at all. Wilson wanted the worlds of slave and master—the labor that supported a lavish lifestyle—to collide.

Susan Hiller also takes as her raw materials collections of items from the past, including her own collections. Originally trained as an anthropologist, Hiller has made many installations that critique institutional practices of collection and display. Hiller acknowledges that artifacts provide empirical evidence of the past. But Hiller is more interested in the psychic traces of such materials, or the irrational memories, feelings, and ideas they provoke. A recurring focus in her work is involuntary memory—knowledge that comes from the unconscious or from altered states of consciousness, such as dreaming—and how we cope with suppressed memories when they surface. Her installation *From the Freud Museum* (1991–97) at first glance appears to mimic a form of display often used in archaeological museums [5-10]. Objects and images are displayed in forty-four archival storage boxes, which have been left open and arranged in a glass display case, with various identifying labels and tags attached. But whereas the container boxes and labels imply a logical organization of the items, the contents of the boxes defy rational explanation. Hiller collected the materials herself, selecting the kind of personal, trivial, and ephemeral materials that are typically overlooked or unexplained in institutional collections. She arranged items into suggestive combinations in each box without providing interpretations. For example, a pair of china cow creamers stands below a photograph of the American outlaw Jennie Metcalf brandishing a gun.

Hiller developed the concept for her "museum" during a residency at the Freud Museum in London, where she was immersed in Freud's ideas about the unconscious



5-10 Susan Hiller | *From the Freud Museum*, **1991–97**
Vitrine installation, size variable, 50 units
Collection Tate, London © the artist

and the structure of dreams. Gibbons connects Hiller's use of archival and museum formats to philosopher Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of the psyche as a kind of archive that psychoanalysis tries to sort through: "For Derrida, the archive is not just a place to which knowledge is consigned...but is also a general feature of our mental life that can be questioned and examined through the work of Freud. Derrida uses Freud's topography of conscious to unconscious layering to demonstrate his argument that psychoanalysis is an archival practice as much as an excavation of repressed memory."[19]

Computer databases provide an emerging topic for artistic attention and critique with respect to memory and the comprehension of history. The information age, and information overload in particular, is having an impact on the process of remembering in ways social commentators are only beginning to understand. Vast quantities of information are stored in computer databases and can be accessed rapidly at any moment using technology. These digital archives have freed us from needing to remember detailed information; at the same time we have had to learn new strategies for retrieving, organizing, and evaluating information stored in this way. Andreas Huyssen, a historian of contemporary culture, has observed that increasingly we abdicate our power to remember as individuals and as communities to the artificial and mediated memory banks supplied by technology. Every snippet of coded information about the past, present, and future is available almost instantaneously to anyone with a computer and high-speed Internet access. The result, in Huyssen's words, is a "synchronicity of the archive" that dissolves time and confuses memory, leading to a form of cultural amnesia.[20]

Information is generally stored in a digital archive in a nonhierarchical manner, and open-ended search engines and hyperlinking make the retrieval of digitized information highly unstable and unstructured compared with using a physical archive. The relational and nonhierarchical structure of digital databases tends to conflate past and present. This synchronicity, along with the huge volume of data that can be accessed, can make it difficult to evaluate and understand information. The super-hybridity of some recent artworks, discussed earlier, is in part a response to the extreme fragmentation and rapid retrieval of information that computers have fostered.

Some artists create works that employ, create, or critique digital databases to address themes of memory and history. The most successful of these have navigation systems that are easy to follow and allow many people to contribute content. A pioneering project is *The File Room* by Spanish media artist Antoni Muntadas, started in 1994 and ongoing. *The File Room* is an open database to which anyone can report cases of censorship from anywhere in the world throughout history. Another example is a 2011 collaboration of artist-writer Emily Roysdon and computer engineer Kellan Elliot-McCrea, who designed a website providing an interactive timeline of history. Visitors to the site can contribute to the timeline by placing an event and a related concept at the appropriate point in the chronology. The welcome page highlights selected entries along the timeline, ranging from ancient goddess worship to recent events of the sort that receive intense attention in the media for a few weeks and then are forgotten. A concept connected to ancient goddess worship states, "When humans worshipped the goddess there was peace on earth." An entry for April 29, 2011, referring to the hoopla surrounding the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton in England, reads,

"The Royal Wedding—the decision to spend 20 million pounds of public funding in the era when public arts funding is being slashed and the global economy is struggling." The addition of subjective comments to an interactive timeline of history encourages the inclusion of alternative events and viewpoints.[21]

Revisiting the Past

In this section we turn our attention to artists who use history in the form of collective memories of the past as their principal content. In some cases personal or family histories figure into their projects.

Visual representations of history have changed dramatically in recent decades, reflecting a profound shift in how the past is remembered and interpreted. Today it is widely recognized that there are many actors in history, both famous and not famous, privileged and disadvantaged. The choices of who and what actions we focus on are open to constant negotiation. Likewise, the interpretation of an action can vary; a historical event that one country celebrates may register as a tragedy in another. At the same time, even the simplest statement of historical fact requires documentary and physical evidence to support it. For anyone engaged in writing, telling, or visually representing history, the search for a convincing *why* seems especially problematic because motives are always subject to question and doubt.

Our views about the past have changed in recent decades, partly due to attitudinal shifts in the culture at large that have affected the study of history. Throughout the modern period in the Western world, an allegiance to the idea of historical truth remained paramount. Historians, politicians, the public, and artists may have lacked the data needed to confirm historical truth, but there was a tacit assumption that if sufficient information were available, the truth about the past could be established. Today the idea that there is a singular truth in history is no longer taken for granted. Skepticism is widespread, including among artists.

The factors that contributed to the dismantling of the concept of a "grand narrative" of history are numerous. Certainly since the 1960s the influence of minorities, who felt that their stories were not accounted for in mainstream history, led historians to expand the scope of their research and writings. (These minorities might be tribal, religious, geographic, racial, sexual, or economic.) Henceforth, not one history but multiple histories demanded exploration and expression. French historian Michel Foucault, who strongly influenced postmodernist thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, wrote about the concept of multiple histories. According to Foucault, the hidden histories of those who lacked sufficient power to control the formation of knowledge always existed alongside official history. Many groups since then have set about excavating and expressing their previously excluded histories.

Contemporary artists who are interested in collective memory and history seek to understand who and what is remembered, and how and why. They scrutinize the content and approaches of historical accounts and widespread forms of remembrance.

Recovering History

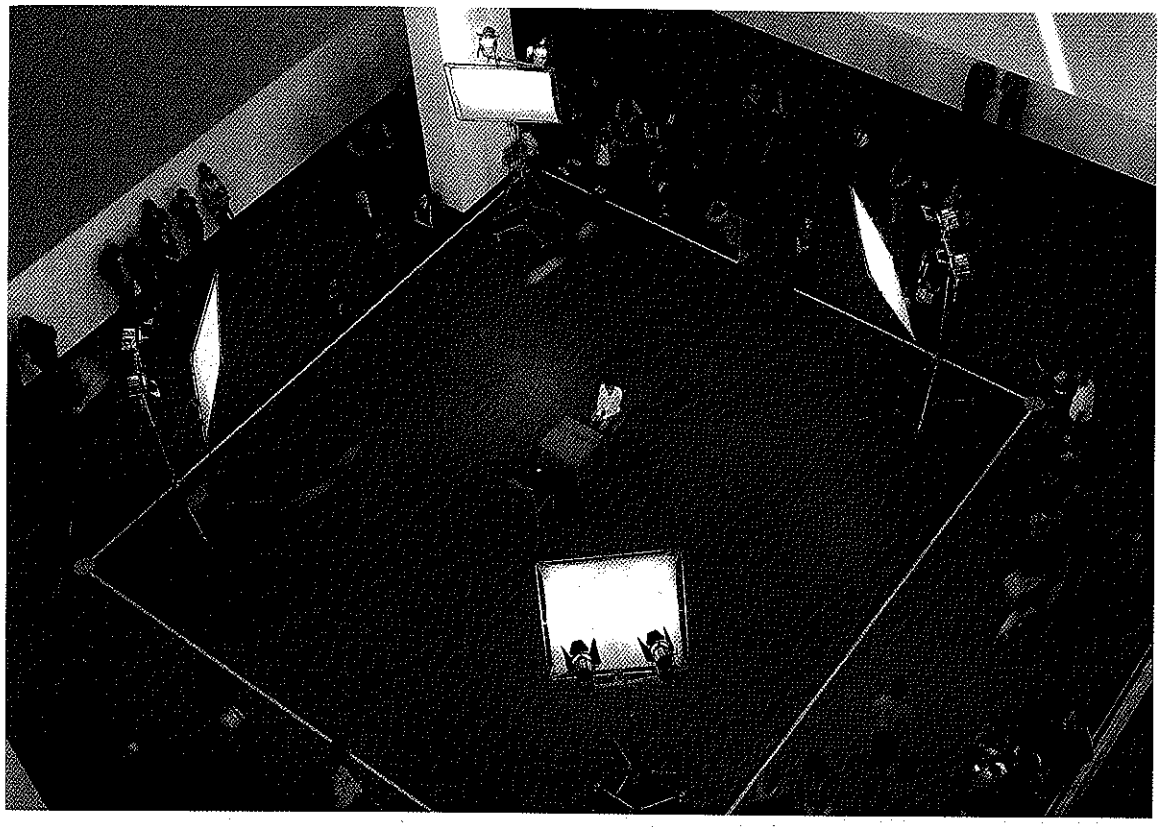
Contemporary artists often want to collect and tell the stories of people who for a long time were left out, or marginalized, in history books and the visual record, particu-

larly when they themselves belong to a marginalized group. Foucault coined the phrase *counter memory* to describe this recovery of lost history. According to curator Douglas Fogle, the term describes "a new kind of historiography where the marginal and the everyday take precedence over world historical figures."[22] Judy Baca's mural project *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–83) was a monumental effort in this inclusive vein. More than thirteen feet high and almost half a mile long, the mural depicts a multiethnic history of the Los Angeles area from prehistory until after World War II. Her subjects include women's suffrage, the Japanese internment camps, and the zoot-suit riots between white sailors and Latino youths. To complete the mural, Baca and her collaborators interviewed hundreds of residents and academics about the history of Los Angeles and arranged for 450 inner-city youths and 40 community artists to execute the designs. Baca says, "Murals embody certain qualities of visual storytelling. First, there is the difference between public voice and private voice. Murals are pulpits: what you say in the pulpit is different from what you say to an intimate. Next, you must consider their scale. Scale is about amplifying the voice, about making it the voice of people who were excluded from history."[23]

Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão makes regular references in her work to the iconography of the seventeenth-century Baroque, which was the leading artistic style in the European countries that conquered South America (Portugal in the case of Brazil). Her motives include the (postcolonial) desire to challenge the long-accepted standard history of Brazil—a history that suggests that European culture subsumed and replaced indigenous culture, as exemplified by the prevalence in Brazilian art and material culture of Baroque-inflected designs and motifs. Varejão believes that indigenous people were able to absorb and transform the colonizers' culture without completely losing their own cultural memory—their own history and identity. The process was marked by struggle; hence the violent, visceral imagery in much of her work. One series of sculptural reliefs depicts writhing masses of bloody, fleshlike forms erupting from beneath floors tiled in *azulejo*, the terracotta tile used widely in Portuguese national art and in Portugal's former colonies, including Brazil [5-11]. Like a number of other Brazilian theorists and artists, Varejão uses cannibalism as a metaphor, sometimes showing images of humans consuming one another in her paintings. According to Rina Carvajal, the artist's use of cannibalism as a cultural allegory "suggests the swallowing, the critical absorption of foreign influences; of the discourse of 'the other,' and its re-making in Brazilian terms."[24]

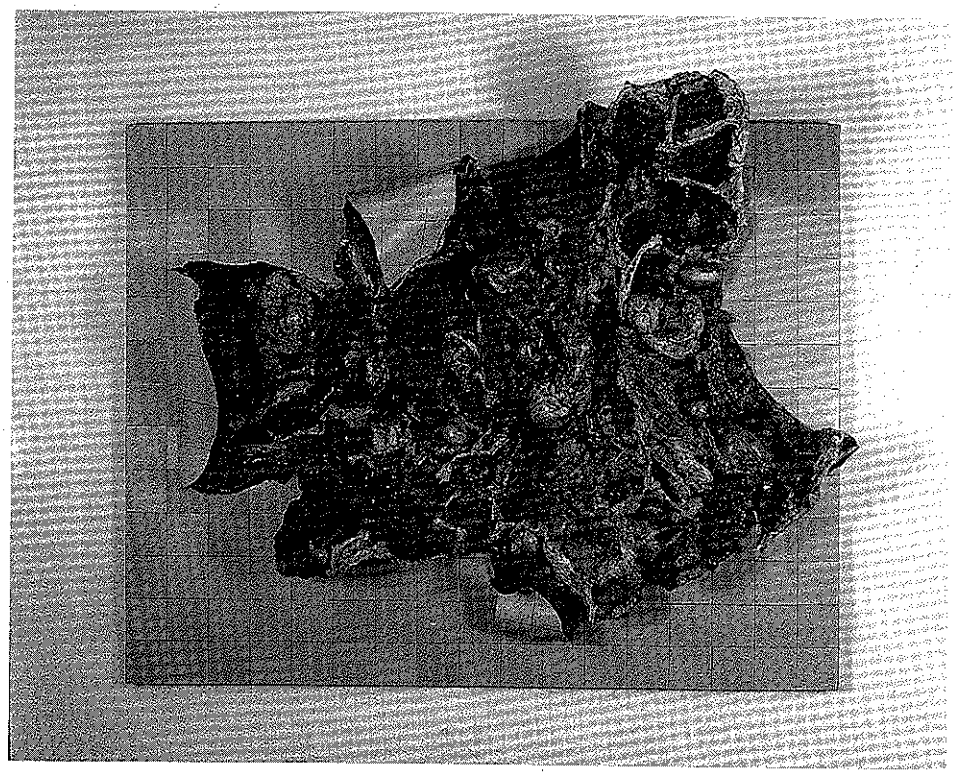
Colombian artist Doris Salcedo uses art to expose and recover recent traumatic events in her native country and elsewhere that have been deliberately suppressed by the government. In one series she reshaped worn-out domestic furniture, clothing, and other found objects to create dysfunctional but physically assertive assemblages intended to give presence to the victims of political violence—those who have disappeared or been silenced by fear. Some of the objects Salcedo collected were the possessions of those who vanished, indexical evidence of those missing from history. Salcedo, however, manipulates the forms and surfaces of these historical objects, often deliberately scarring the surfaces to signify violence, creating an additional layer of meaning.

Artists who want to recover history may build on their own personal and family histories when these connect with specific larger events. Autobiography and social



1 Marina Abramović | *The Artist Is Present*, **2010**
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery

© 2011 Marina Abramović
Photo © 2011 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Photo: Jonathan Muzikar



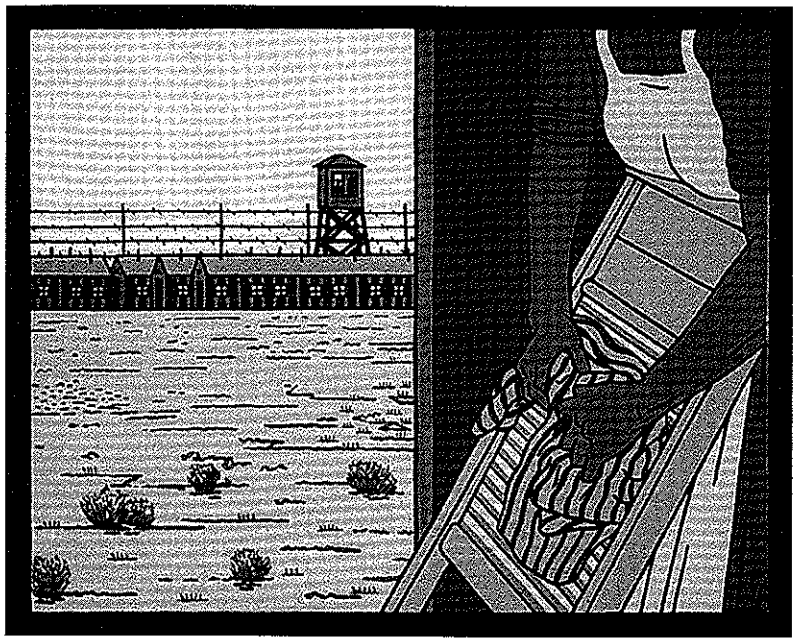
5-11 Adriana Varejão | *Folds*, **2000–2001**
Oil, foam, aluminum, wood, and canvas
76.77 x 98.43 x 25.98 inches
195 x 250 x 66 cm
CREDIT: Private Collection, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

history are not distinct realms and cannot be wholly separated. For example, Roger Shimomura, an American of Japanese descent, was inspired by his grandmother's diaries, as well as his own childhood memories, to create prints and paintings depicting life in the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho during World War II [5-12]. Shimomura wants to call attention to this shameful episode in U.S. history and its impact on real people's lives.

The motive of those engaged in the process of recovering history is perhaps best summed up in the well-known warning formulated by philosopher George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Rethinking History

Besides recovering lost or hidden histories, some artists are interested in examining how historical accounts represent (and misrepresent) the past. Every account of history uses some kind of form, or model, to convey information, and the form inevitably affects



5-12 Roger Shimomura | *American Diary: October 16, 1942 (Minidoka)*, **1997**
Acrylic, 11 x 14 inches
CREDIT: Courtesy Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

the content and perception of history. Art historian Eric Fernie states, "It is probably impossible to think about the past without giving it a metaphorical shape, such as a map or a road, or images of strata from archaeology, or sequences of rooms and spaces from architecture. The character of the model being used needs to be acknowledged and understood, as it carries assumptions which can affect the way in which historical problems are handled."[25]

Thus artists have deconstructed not only the content but also the standard formats, images, symbols, and methods that are used to record and shape accounts of historical events. For example, a timeline is a standard format in academic and official histories. The alternative timeline by Roysdon and Elliot-McCrea, discussed earlier, seeks to probe the authority of timelines as a source of historical information. The timeline includes subversive concepts that challenge the authority of a typical timeline and expand its reductive design.

Yinka Shonibare is a Nigerian British artist who has devoted his career to creating artworks that rethink the history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century—the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and of colonialism and brutal encounters with Europeans in much of Africa. (Nigeria, for one, became a colony of the British Empire in 1800, not gaining independence until 1960.) Enlightenment thinkers could be hypocritical, extolling the rights of man and liberty from tyranny in Europe while turning a blind eye to the despotism and injustices of colonialism. Since the mid-1900s,

Shonibare has produced sculptural tableaux featuring headless mannequins in poses, costumes, and sets that evoke the wealthy, educated European elite of the colonial era. Shonibare inserts startling, subversive elements into the stereotypical tableaux, in particular by using heavily patterned, colorful batik fabrics for the otherwise historically accurate period costumes. The fabric patterns, associated with traditional African textiles, remind us that English affluence depended on exploiting the resources, labor, and markets of colonies. Ironically, such textiles actually were designed in the former Dutch colony of Indonesia and manufactured in England in the nineteenth century for export to Africa, where they came to stand for authentic African dress. Truth, Shonibare implies, is never self-evident.

Sometimes Shonibare's iconography borrows directly from a specific artwork. In his tableau *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads* (1998), the poses and costumes copy those of a well-known English double portrait painted by William Gainsborough in 1750. A later tableau by Shonibare, *How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)* (2006) [color plate 8], is more of an allegory. The tableau includes two headless female figures who are wearing Victorian dresses made of the ersatz "African" fabric and aiming pistols at each other's heads. Shonibare's work fits readily into a discussion of the theme of identity, as well as historical memory, as the artist explores the instability of national and racial identity in a postcolonial world. Shonibare, who is well acquainted with the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, as well as postcolonial theory, is aware that both history and identity are cultural constructions whose authenticity is always in doubt. By mixing incongruous signifiers, Shonibare suggests that history is a form of fiction no matter how much accurate detail is included in a representation of the past.

Fiction produced for the purpose of entertainment is a key mode by which history is conveyed. Indeed, one can argue that popular understanding of the past is informed more by fictionalized treatments, such as novels, films, and television programs, than it is by objective academic histories. Various artists have explored the intersection of history and fiction. For example, Polish artist Piotr Uklanski's installation *The Nazis* (1998) presents 160 publicity photographs showing the heads and shoulders of famous movie actors in Nazi military uniforms, from Ronald Reagan to Clint Eastwood to Ralph Fiennes. Uklanski's frieze of movie stars portraying Nazi soldiers offers a cynical view of the film industry for fetishizing the representation of Nazis and giving an alluring face to evil.

American Kara Walker is concerned with how the history of the Civil War–era South is distorted and sugarcoated in popular romantic works such as *Gone with the Wind*. Initially trained as a painter, Walker makes cutout black-paper silhouettes, a craft technique previously associated with genteel portraits and sentimental genre scenes. Walker's large wall-mounted works, such as *Camptown Ladies* (1998) [5-13], undermine any nostalgic expectations the silhouette technique might imply. In her dreamlike vignettes, blacks and whites alike enact sadomasochistic behaviors, as figures morph into one another. Her strategy is to inflate and reverse stereotypes so that they unravel into kitsch parodies of racist imagery. The silhouettes suggest the lurid, repressed images of a fantasy version of history residing in the viewer's imagination rather than the historical reality of fully embodied people. Walker's works are controversial among viewers of all races and have provoked debate about how (and how not) to represent the history of slavery and the South in the United States.

5-13 Kara Walker | Detail of *Camptown Ladies*, **1998**
Cut paper and adhesive on wall
9 x 67 feet, Collection: Rubell Family
CREDIT: Courtesy Brent Sikkema NYC

Reframing the Present

History, the systematic study of the past, is a constructed artifice, one that is created over time and maintained by cultural forces at work in the ongoing life of a culture. Although an accurate, direct relationship with the reality of the past is implied, history is not the past. The past was then. History is built on and reflects the framework of present-day systems of belief. As Fernie states, "There is a sense in which all history is contemporary history, that is, that we can only be aware of the past in so far as it has survived into and is experienced in the present."[26]

Underlying the work of Shonibare [color plate 8], Walker [5-13], and other contemporary artists who revisit history is a determination to change how we understand the present. When we revisit history, time collapses; what was once present and is now past becomes vividly present once again. The present appears in a new context, and it becomes possible to see the present more critically through the past. For example, Shonibare's interest in colonial patterns of trade resonates with twenty-first-century concerns about global capitalism. Walker wants viewers to consider how representations of history affect race relations today. Atul Dodiya, a contemporary painter in India, has made paintings on metal roll-up shutters detached from actual shops. In one series, paintings on the closed shutters celebrate India's history by depicting historical

figures such as Gandhi and the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. The shutters roll up to reveal paintings underneath that emphasize the harsh realities of life in India. Critic John Brunetti remarked, "These hidden images are stark portrayals of an India very different from that presented by Gandhi's non-violent resistance."[27] Dodiya shows how celebratory versions of history prevent India from taking a hard look at current problems and anxieties.

Commemorating the Past

Since 1980 there has been a resurgent interest in creating *memorials*, which pay tribute to the dead, and *monuments*, which pay tribute to the past. Artists who create memorials and monuments offer forms that induce viewers to pause and contemplate the meaning and impact of events, in this way counteracting our collective forgetfulness. Eisenman's Holocaust memorial [5-1], described at the beginning of this chapter, is a notable example. The renewed interest in commemoration stems from a number of factors: the need to reassess the past (seen, for example, in monuments dedicated to the civil rights movement in the United States and the Holocaust in Europe), a desire to mark recent tragic events (exemplified by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial), and a desire to legitimize the right of a government or social structure to continue into the future.

Of course, our relationship to the past is never free of emotional baggage, political views, or value-laden ideologies. In designing memorials and monuments, contemporary artists find they are (willingly or not) tiptoeing through minefields of public opinion. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982 on the Mall in Washington, D.C., provoked widespread debate when its design was first announced. Maya Lin, then a senior at Yale University, won the design competition with a plan that proposed a pair of elegant black granite walls dug into the earth and gaining height as the viewer descends to the place where the two walls meet at an open angle of about 125 degrees. Lin proposed carving into the wall surface the names of the more than 55,000 Americans who lost their lives during the conflict or remained missing in action at the war's close. Looking at a section of the wall, viewers would see a dim, ghostlike reflection of themselves, appearing behind the names. Opponents felt the design should be more conventionally heroic, featuring figures in uniform, as is typical of most war memorials.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is now the most visited monument in Washington, D.C. Its focus on memory occurs on several distinct levels. The entire sculpture commemorates U.S. involvement in the war as a chapter in national history. Indeed, the shape of the sculpture seems to echo the shape of a book opening, thereby hinting at additional chapters yet to be written. The individual names of the dead and missing in action are arranged in chronological order, so that the "story" of the war becomes a timeline of death. Memories of individual lives are symbolized on the wall by the names.[28] Remembering is also central to the experience of viewers. As Lin explained, "I think of all my works not as static objects, but strictly in terms of a personal journey or experience of it. A crucial element to this work is my reliance on time."[29] Older visitors bring their own sense of time to the experience as they reflect on what they were doing in the 1960s when all those listed were making the ultimate sacrifice. Other viewers might think of how much time has passed since these deaths occurred. Analyzing the form and meaning of the memorial, philosopher Charles Griswold called the work "fundamentally interrogative": Americans as a whole must ask themselves, Were these deaths worth it?[30] Griswold noted that the

Vietnam Veterans Memorial, like any war memorial, "seeks to instruct posterity about the past... [the memorial is the result of] a decision about what is worth recovering."[31]

One trend in public art today is the production of what James Young, an analyst of Holocaust memorials, called *countermonuments*.[32] For example, American sculptor Chris Burden pursued a challenging alternative vision in creating the *Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991), which symbolically names the three million Vietnamese who died in the war. Thomas Schütte, a German artist, questioned traditional forms of commemoration by making groupings of figures whose scales are mismatched in relation to one another. In a review of his work, Neal Benezra and Olga Viso remarked, "Addressing the significance of public monuments in a post–Cold War world, Schütte questions the ability of traditional forms of commemoration to serve as effective carriers of memory and meaning in our time."[33] Countermonuments deconstruct traditional forms of public monuments or commemorate unexpected events and memories. They often are antiheroic. For instance, American Keith Edmier's *Emil Dobblestein and Henry J. Drope* (2000–01) comprises two bronze figures of men in uniform, three-quarters life size, who represent Edmier's two grandfathers, men who played modest, unheroic roles in World War II.

In contrast to memorials created from a material that will endure permanently, some artists' projects commemorate important events in ephemeral or temporary ways. Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Hiroshima Project* (1999) lasted only two nights. The work consisted of a sequence of large-scale photographic images of Japanese survivors' hands projected along the waterfront in Hiroshima while the survivors' recorded testimonies were amplified. The hand gestures represented anguish and grief. The short-lived and dematerialized nature of the event transformed the survivors into ethereal presences, as if ghosts from the atomic blast had returned to recount their experiences.

In creating a memorial or monument, an artist faces a range of complicated issues. Because the work will be seen in a public setting, the varying emotional and political attitudes of a multitude of viewers must be addressed (or ignored at considerable risk). Additionally, people who live in the future will eventually view the public monuments we erect today; for them, the same symbols may not evoke the same thoughts and feelings. If the memorial is expected to occupy the place where a tragic event took place, the design and content are likely to be contested. One of the poignant debates in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City focused on what kind of monument should be erected on the "Ground Zero" site to commemorate the horrific events that occurred on September 11, 2001. The spectrum of interested parties with competing memories and wishes included the families who had lost loved ones, constituents of the police and firefighters who rushed to the scene, patriotic citizens who wished to commemorate a national tragedy, and some with overt political agendas who wanted to assign blame for the tragedy. After considerable controversy, the selected memorial, *Reflecting Absence*, designed by architect Michael Arad in collaboration with landscape architect Peter Walker, was dedicated on September 12, 2011, exactly one day after the tenth anniversary of the event.

Finally, although we have been discussing memorials and monuments in relation to the theme of memory, they relate as well to the theme of place, the topic of our next chapter, notably when a memorial or monument commemorates an event associated with its site. Wodiczko's *Hiroshima Project* and the World Trade Center Memorial are cases in point. Moreover, memory and place connect in other ways as well, as we further explore.