

FORGETTING

There are two different ways to think about forgetting: to not remember or to succeed to forget

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Besides the countless methods and medications aimed at enhancing the ability to remember, there has been little effort to find an organised way of forgetting. Is it possible to construct a positive theory regarding the vanishing of memories?

My research regarding the issue of *forgetting* as presented here does not follow a straight and coherent line. However, the chosen display describes the process of entering the vast topic of memory and forgetting. It included many conversations, experiences and readings and the text recalls the meandering of my interests regarding the most impressive questions and answers together with connections that I make today when reflecting upon these explorations.

I allow myself to be subjective and provocative, especially to people suffering from an illness that prevents them from remembering that often leads to frustration and loss of control.

Images by Anna Lerchbaumer.



REENACTMENTS OF THE FORGOTTEN

9:10 min, HD, stereo sound



My grandmother suffers from dementia. She inhabits an environment that helps her to find a connection to her past. Her daughters are taking care of her and she is still sitting at the very same table where she used to sit fifty years ago. I experimented with her way of producing sound, which to her may sound like abstract music through her hearing aids. The reenactment as a tool for encounter and alienation.

Watching her over time, I found a great number of Fluxus actions to borrow from her.

rupapapapapapammm
 rapapapabamm
 bababababamm
 und schon eine ins wossa,
 und schon wieder weg schwimmen,
 umme aufe a bisl,
 du suachst ja a amol an freind oder a freindin,
 bist ja a nit immer alleine,
 ich: na eh nit
 eh nit ge
 ich: na gott sei dank nit
 gott sei dank nit
 nochand wenn i amol nit da bin
 werst holt an ondern freind suachn

ha?
 Entweder braucht sie was oder suacht sie was
 Vielleicht suacht sie an partner werd sie suachen
 Nit?
 Ich: wehl
 Wahnst findest kodn partna
 Sie weckt oben wehr scheinlich
 Obm haben an haufen gsegn enten
 is sonst niemand da
 sen lei mia zwoa, dreie
 zwoa, dreie

jojo
 des is a fesche bank geh?
 Nit
 Ich: super
 Schau jetzt kimb si scho wieder,
 de lost koa rua so lang sie uns sieg
 sie schau und scho weg wieder
 jetzt werd sie mal miasn dawischen
 und a mol sogn
 stell da vor sie sollten mal wo anders
 hingehen schwimmen
 alle meine enten schwimmen übern see,
 köpfflein über wossa,
 schwänzle in sie höh,
 haut sie wieder mal z,
 dann werd sie tot kommen
 fyejejejejahh
 schau oien beim wasser sind sie gern
 schau jetzt is sie beim wossa guba
 jetzt werd sie bald wieder an wasser sein
 is sie an wasser wenda da beim uns
 die ente schaut
 die kamm sich go nit bannen den mia zwoa
 oder dreie, sen ma wohl momentan bei dreie,
 ja do eine ins wasser, ja mh



OBSERVED BY THE DUCK

4:03 min, HD, stereo sound



One afternoon in Carinthia, I captured a conversation with my grandfather. The dialogue centred around the duck that was constantly in our view. Through his dementia his personality changed. The harsh and controlled person gave way to an alternately aggressive and very mild, if not childish person. I was happy to catch this mild side of him. Through the constant appearance of the duck, he remembered the nursery rhyme ‘All My Ducklings’ and he sang it to me. He seemed to assume that I was his wife and told me that when he will be gone, I was to look for a new person to love. A moment that made me smile.

This video creates for me a memory of my grandfather in a more positive way than I thought I would remember him.



AN EXPERIMENT OF OBJECTIFIED MEMORIES

12:52 min, 8 channel video-photography, recordings of conversations, HD, stereo sound

In June 2016, people in public space were invited randomly to talk about one object they carry with them and that evokes memories. I documented the object with video-photography and combined it with audio recordings. The relationships between people and objects and the network of memories that was revealed was surprising. Using a physical object as a starting point, they provided access to highly personal memories in great detail. Sunglasses on a sunny day while travelling with friends, a scarf given as a gift by the neighbour, or a shirt made by the best tailor in the hometown. The personal value of things are incommensurable with economic values; it is a matter of memories and stories that are connected with them.

Do we want to surround ourselves with 'good memories' to provide some constancy to a particular aspect of our identity? Are belongings a kind of memory archive?

Hirn mit Ei

Zutaten:

Pro Person:

150 g Schweinshirn

1 kleine Zwiebel

1 EL gehackte Petersilie (oder Schnittlauch)

2 Eier

2 EL Butter

Salz und Pfeffer aus der Mühle

Zubereitung: Hirn reinigen und häuten. Zwei Esslöffel Butter in einer Pfanne zerlassen, Zwiebel darin hellgelb rösten. Ein Ei trennen und einen Dotter aufheben. Das Hirn zusammen mit dem ganzen Ei, dem restlichen Eiweiß und der Petersilie im Zwiebel rösten, bis es weiß und nicht mehr blutig ist. Unmittelbar vor dem Anrichten salzen, pfeffern. Wenn die Hirn-Eiermasse leicht gestockt ist, anrichten und mit dem restlichen Eidotter garniert auftragen. Dazu passen Petersilkartoffeln.

Tipp: Auch eine Prise Muskat oder Cayenepfeffer macht sich hier gut.



COOKING A BRAIN

An installation with pig brain, styrofoam and a circuit board



A traditional recipe of Viennese cuisine is eggs and brains. I ordered a fresh pork brain and cooked it during the studio exhibition. Visitors were invited to eat. In particular one conversation during the meal turned out to be inspiring; it was revolving around eating the self of the pig and about the consequences in case it would merge with our own self. The brain is not seen only as a physical part of our body; it includes the metaphysical idea of a consciousness and a self.

There are two different ways to think about forgetting; to not remember or to succeed to forget.

Forgetting is also freedom and a form of resistance. If you try to be aware of everything that exists, you never invent anything new, because everything is already there.

So forget the past and invent it again.

FORGETTING IS FOCUSING

Forgetting is a process that cannot be consciously executed, and neither does it evoke any physical reaction. We do not shiver or get goose-bumps while a memory fades. For an information to be forgotten, it has to be insignificant in a specific moment within our highly complex system of internally arranging experiences. This process of pushing irrelevant information aside, could also be understood as a way to give greater focus on what is more important to us. Paradoxically then, forgetting is focusing.

The creation of memory, in fact, involves a degree of forgetting. New input from the external world becomes meaningful through its connection with pre-existing concepts and memories. This action necessarily involves a selection of all the received information, and the neglect of those aspects that are unimportant or unassignable.

Every event generates disparate fragments of stimuli and a system within our brain brings those fragments into a seemingly coherent order. Coherence is a subjective term in this case, because the electrical impulses arriving from our neurons need to be interpreted.

Heinz von Foerster, the originator of second-order cybernetics, puts it succinctly thus: 'The environment as we perceive it is our invention.' (Foerster, 2007, p. 212)

Our memories follow a uniquely flexible and idiosyncratic organisation. We cannot recall them within a chronology. A stimulus causes to abruptly travel back and forwards in time. Thoughts have no end and no beginning.

INFORMATION AT OUR FINGERTIPS

The possibility to promptly arrive at filtered information online, through even an awkwardly articulated keyword, alters remembrance. Algorithms will generate results according to the provided keyword as well as the results that it calculates to be most relevant to the user. Being able to find the right information within the inconceivably large mass of it, enhances our freedom to forget information. We only need to find it when we need it. The labour of memory is outsourced.

Why, then, should we even make the effort to remember everything in our brain? The average number of Google searches per day increased from 9,800 in 1998, to 5.7 trillion in 2014 (source: www.statisticbrain.com). Social psychologist Betsy Sparrow and her team conducted experiments that showed that people tend to forget more easily when they assume that information will not disappear but will stay available digitally.

The search engine is changing our way of remembering information. But is it also affecting our memories of experiences and feelings? Is e.g. an online event excluded from becoming part of our memory because we take for granted that it will be saved and thus later accessible?

The notion of 'outsourcing' memory is not new. Writing knowledge down and relaying it through the written notes is a practice that exists since antiquity. The difference is the explosion of the amount of information. In another experiment, Sparrow presented participants' words describing objects together with the folder where the information resides. People were able to remember better where the information was stored than the words themselves.

I think a possible conclusion is that we rely more and more on 'extensions' of our memory.

DISPLACEMENT IN TIME

'The moment of remembering is also an encounter with what was forgotten and had remained unremembered. It is an encounter with the past through an unfamiliar trace that emerges unsolicited and unexpectedly.' (Albano, 2006, p. 2)

Memory is a verb in the present tense. When we remember an event, we live through it again, if not we would have forgotten. However, as we do so we reframe it according to our current state. Memorising then means transforming, altering. There is no past tense for the brain. Even imagining the future is connected to the idea of an action, making memory and future imagination overlap, with the boundaries between them becoming blurry.

'Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depth of my being?' (Proust, 2008, p. 41)

THE SPECTRUM OF FORGOTTEN

The content is broad. There is the forgotten key, the forgotten pain and the boring concert. The hidden, suppressed or out-of-reach.

Recent research indicates that soon it will be common to control our cognitive performance with medication. The interest of a capitalistic environment will be to increase memory-related abilities. Rebellion can thus only take the form of optimised forgetting.

No memories are simply ‘out there’—this sounds like the aim of a new age method—they only exist in the here and the now.

Conversations and observations about memory are often tainted by the assumption that all memories are there, but we sometimes do not have access. This is not the case for dementia. My grandmother speaks more clearly in her sleep than when she is awake. In this case, the ability to forget is a decision by an unknown demon to stow something under the surface.

To push things beneath the threshold of awareness and consciousness is a technique to look forward in time. To repress is a way of overcoming. This comes with the warning that it may well bubble up at a later point in time. A method commonly employed in psychotherapy is *alteration*. This involves revisiting a past experience with the help of hypnosis, as to recontextualise and modify the memories of it in a positive way, allowing for a more comfortable relationship with it.

HEINZ VON FOERSTER

Foerster describes the relationship between the perception of the world inside and outside of our body:

‘If the brain is seen as a sensorium, then this sensorium proves infinitely richer than the sensorium for the

outside world. From outside we hear almost nothing and see almost nothing. From within we hear and see constantly. Essentially we are listening, not to music, but to our own brains, our own heads. Normally we’re interested in the outer casing—ears, eyes, nose. But no: we should concentrate on the brain, which is almost infinitely richer and more diverse. You can imagine it like this: Close your eyes! And then what are all the activities going on inside—bad conscience, good conscience, you are pleased, you are frightened, you imagine something, you don’t imagine anything, an incomparable inner waxwork. The cerebral orchestra turns out to be a gigantic ensemble compared to the little brass band that we see or hear on the outside.’

(Foerster, 2013, p. 101)

How is this ‘cerebral orchestra’ constructed and how are the instruments and musicians chosen? The melodies played by the orchestra inscribes memories, which in turn create our identity. These melodies bring to-

ARCHIVE OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

Progressive dementia makes the process of producing and accessing memories increasingly challenging. Caregivers often do not know about the person’s past and cannot offer the stimuli that can trigger specific memories. In an interview Lucia Straschil, psychologist and poet, explains that facts about a person’s life such as former professions are a common tool to get a record about the history of a person. This knowledge, together with the evocation of sensual experiences by particular smells or tastes, or the appearance of a beloved piece of cloth, can help to trigger memories.

It could be, maybe, advisable to prepare an archive during our lifetimes so that we can improve our quality of life in case of memory loss?

People with dementia frequently show problems with short-term memory. Living in the past is a phenomenon that is commonly observed. This reality can be entered. Artefacts such as photographs, music and familiar items provide an avenue to do so. This is a good way to spend time together and to build trust and reduce anxiety. An archive, in the form of an extended diary, can be seen as a preparation for the future as well as a tool of reflection for today.

gether many different influences. These include biochemical processes and innate structures, biographical events including education and other social factors like norms and values and, of course, the media we consume. Second hand memories mix with our own.

legacy

I ask you today
in case tomorrow
I can't

wrap me in a down duvet
keep my kidneys warm and
caress my vertebrae—again and again

call the cat to my bed
he can sleep next to
or on me

before the farewell give yourself to me
so I can smell you and kiss me three times
three times

lucia straschil

MANIFESTO FOR FORGETTING

Forgetting is silence! Remembering is a sea of pressures, currents and waves.

Forgetting gives freedom to live in the present! To be undefined, light-hearted and guiltless!

Forget theory! Stop the torrential river of massive theoretical knowledge, either for silence or for your own tangible experiments.

Forget history! Forgetting is your tool to select, to contract yourself as you wish. Interpret every moment without the influence of history.

Forget reality! Reality is a self-referential system! There is no reality! We live to forget, to live anew!

Forgetting is resistance!

Forgetting does not mean passive ignorance; it is a gradual awakening of a new form of action in it's purest form!

Read this carefully in order to forget it!