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Sighting Memory
*Edited by Anne Teresa Demo and
Bradford Vivian*

Rhetoric, Remembrance, and Visual Form

Sighting Memory

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**for Noah—
the brightest and most memorable part of our lives**

10 Inherited and New Memories*

Ernesto Pujol

INTRODUCTION: FOUR KINDS . . .

Susan Sontag writes that victims are always interested in the representation of their suffering. Therefore, undocumented memories are the intangible journals of the disempowered, and sighted memories their haunting rare monuments. I am neither a victim nor a hero. But, as an artist, I seek to manifest the unspoken.

VISIBLE MEMORIES

During the late 1950s, my parents supported the Cuban Revolution. But they were not communists. They were Christian socialists pursuing human rights, free education, and health care for all citizens regardless of class, gender, and race. Thus, my mother endured the last month of her pregnancy during the harshest days of the battle for power in Cuba, bravely going to work no matter what, to keep the economy going and her dependents fed. Mom always tells the story of one particularly violent morning, when her office work was interrupted, everyone was sent home, and because public transportation had broken down, she had to run heavy with a nine-month belly through Havana's empty streets, seeking shelter under doorways, while sniper bullets flew by and open trucks carried the smoking corpses of fighting men burned beyond recognition. I have heard the story so many times that *I can see it*, not so much like a film, but as if I were there, across the street, watching a pregnant young woman bravely struggling to get home.

Nevertheless, when the new Cuban government aligned itself with the former Soviet Union, tragically transforming the island into yet another Soviet Republic, a chess piece of Cold War players, and shortly after the Bay of Pigs Invasion, which seemed to mark the beginning of increasing armed conflict between the US and Cuba, my parents, who were conscientious objectors, applied to emigrate in 1961. At that time, it was possible but socially shameful to apply for emigration. You were

publicly subjected to various forms of official humiliation. Among them was the notorious *home inventory of personal belongings*. Thus, my mother had to spend days going through all the contents of her home, listing all its items, counting and describing them, de facto creating an *intimate inventory of embodied memories*; a *personal inventory of visible memories*.

That is one of my first major inherited memories, that stressful inventorying, that painful detailed *taxonomy of memory*. Moreover, once you completed and handed this immoral document over to a government official, it meant that none of those objects belonged to you anymore. Possessions that had been in your family for generations, items like silver spoons, embroidered cloth napkins, porcelain dishes, fine glasses, a mahogany rocking chair, a first-born's crib, a grandmother's quilt; cheap and expensive, old and new things that you were still living with and using, they all now belonged to the government. So, nothing had changed in your immediate surroundings, and everything had changed: your *relationship* to visible memories had changed.

It was as if you had suddenly been given *the task of detaching memory from object*, so that you could take yourself with you, so that your heart did not remain behind, making it impossible to have a new life beyond that moment, those things, that place. You suddenly had to *learn not to depend on visible memories in order to take your past, your identity with you*, in secret, invisibly.

Looking back, this new overnight relationship to visible or embodied memories definitely triggered a life-long process of almost monastic, Zen Buddhist-like detachment; a brutal process which reached its tragic peak at the dramatic moment of exit. My mother had to walk away forever from those treasured things and that sacred space only with the clothing that she was wearing and her son tight in her arms. From that fateful moment she would have to forget the objects but not the memories, because to go on remembering those things and their loss forever would be devastating, paralyzing, death-like, yet she had a life to live and children to take care of. But she simply could no longer take care of *the visible past*.

And so, although the old photographs that she smuggled out of the country increasingly became sacred family relics, during the rest of her life my mother had no desire to own anything, to hold on to anything, because she had learned in one instant that *visible memories are very fragile*. We make the mistake of thinking that they are weighty, more enduring than fragile human bodies of vulnerable flesh and brittle bone. But monuments of all sizes lose their meaning over time, tumble, or are stolen from us, so that we have no access to them, intellectually nor materially.

However, not every woman in my family walked on into the future so clearly.



Figure 10.1 Ernesto Pujol, *Mother of All Souls*, 2010, from the *111 Days in Deseret* series.

BORROWED MEMORIES

My grandmother and her sister, my great aunt, were great *memory machines*. They sat all day long in rocking chairs and remembered the past, hardly using their bodies except to rock, hardly living below their necks. They left their native land as seniors, so they were too old to learn a new language and get jobs. But, more significantly, the weight of the things they left behind, *the weight of their visible memories*, as embodied in objects, houses, streets, neighborhoods, landscape, people, and the graves of people, were all impossibly heavy anchors that did not let their tired ships sail on.

Thus, they were still alive but their lives were over. They spent the next twenty-five years remembering intensely, teaching/telling me incredibly vivid stories of their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, repeatedly going over their autobiographies until I learned/knew their stories as well or better than they did. This was fortunate, because at one point they began to lose their minds, and they could not remember anymore. So, I would tell them their own stories, even correcting them when they were wrong about their own facts.

Of course, when you are a child, no matter how precocious you are, you have few memories, because you are mostly a new vessel. Therefore, if you are constantly handed over other people's memories, there is an effect, a *formative memory-shaping effect*. It was amazing to grow up at the feet of these old women because, at one point, I had m-e-m-o-r-i-z-e-d their memories, and I did not know where their memories ended and where my memories began. We were one collective mind. It was as if I had been there at the turn of the century, with these late Victorians, living in the manor house of a palm plantation in the Caribbean, with all its colors, textures, and smells. I was an urban child of the late twentieth century, but I walked around feeling the hot rain of a nineteenth century monsoon, going out to fields of memory to watch sugar cane grow, ride horses, listen to a piano we did not have, travel daily through a world long gone of which I had absolutely not a single object to anchor me to, but a spider web of inherited memories. Brain cell by brain cell, they constructed a way of remembering by embedding memories so intense that they felt more real than reality, ultimately forming my creative way of relating to lived and appropriated experience as a man and an artist.

Many years later, after they died, I finally traveled to Cuba to work with the Ministry of Culture and the National Union of Artists and Writers in the creation of four site-specific non-profit art projects. I traveled to the island source of all this mythical remembering, like the grandchild of fallen aristocrats who returns to the former czarist Russia, mysterious Atlantis, or the ruins of Troy for a reality check of its former riches against the epic *Iliad*. I tested family memories as best as I could, one by one, and,

to my surprise, I found them lacking. Everything had been altered, idealized; with some extreme exceptions, mostly the best had been remembered. Because memory, wondrous magical memory, is so subjective, selective, fragmented. *Memory is so incomplete a method of harvest, so cracked a vessel for storage.* It was a sad moment, like losing the key to the door of an invisible world. But it was also a freeing, liberating moment, because I got the opportunity to generate my own set of memories about late twentieth century neo-Revolutionary Cuba; ironically, a set of memories probably just as haunting as the ones I carried before. And it was reality, and there is no fantasy greater than the complexity of reality.

So I am now both like my mother and my grandmother: on one hand, like my mom, I personally continue to chose not to own very much; and, on the other hand, like my grandma, I professionally stop the river of time in my durational performances, to pause and make others pause. Cannot envision life without reflection.

MUSCLE MEMORIES

Other than the opposing poles of attachment and detachment, the third variation that has informed my experience of memory has been that of muscle memories. Muscle memory has definitely taken a very long time to surface in me as a dynamic for remembering. I think that it is the mid-



Figure 10.2 Ernesto Pujol, *Lamb 1*, 2010, from the *Baptism* series.

life result of having spent time in a cloistered monastery, combined with Bikram yoga, Five Rhythms dance, and performance art practice.

Several years ago, I began to hear my Bikram yoga teachers speak about muscle memory. And I thought, *how can there be memory outside the brain, outside the mind?* Then, two things happened that began to alter my understanding of memory, as I knew it: first, my body decided to perform in public. And please note that I say my body, not my mind; *my body decided to perform.* I had been performing for photos and video for years, but never live. So I began to do live performances through some sort of below the neck, separate, non-intellectual drive, definitely through a non-mental force that had to do with torso, hips, and appendages needing and seeking to move. It was, literally, as if my body was driving a car while my brain took a back seat. In fact, most of the time my mind was a terrible passenger, nervous, anxious, suffering motion sickness, stomach cramps, wanting to cry and throw up, like some unwilling brat acting out that one wishes we could just leave at the curb. More often than not, my mind was terrified but my body kidnapped it and dragged it along across spaces and places, landscapes it did not want to move through for fear of embarrassment and hurt.

My body had a secret set of memories that it wanted to revisit and exorcise in my pilgrimage toward an integrated consciousness, and it also harbored other people's memories, lending itself to them as a public vessel and triggering tool. For years, as a contemporary installation artist, I created site-specific, ephemeral, full-immersion environments of memory through borrowed furniture and objects, into which people would come to experience their individual and collective memories.

After all those years, *the mind and its products were not enough for remembering*, so my body put itself forward, and also recruited the bodies of others. In a 2003 project titled *Becoming the Land* at the Salina Art Center in Kansas, I intuitively asked the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of farmers to loan me their bodies, to come out with me to the short grass prairie and revisit their horizon while I photographed them. They did not know it, but I was photographing their muscle memories, their secret embedded imprints. In fact, my mind did not fully know what my body was doing. However, my body seemed to know what it was doing managing those people's bodies; there was a memory dialogue between our bodies.

The second thing that began to happen was an increasing awareness of *the subtleties of remembering*. I began to notice when I was *remembering with the mind* and when I was *remembering through the body*. I began to tell the difference, which I had never noticed before. For example, I returned to an acupuncturist that I had not visited for several years. And before I moved, as I thought about my upcoming appointment, my mind remembered the neighborhood, the building, the office, and the old Chinese lady who barely spoke any English. Therefore, I got there just fine. But then, I

suddenly needed to go to the men's room, and my nervous body (about to get pin pricked) got up without thinking about directions, went to the office door, picked up a big set of keys hanging from a hook to the left, went out and turned left into the hallway, walked its length, turned a sharp right, and walked into the men's room. The whole map of bodily need was imprinted in my body and it followed it like wiring. But if you had asked me hours before, the strictly mental I would not have remembered where the men's room was.

That was a rudimentary example, literally. But a more poetic example happened after my 2007 *Memorial Gestures* performance at the Chicago Cultural Center. I choreographed fifteen performers dressed in white for a durational performance mourning the violence of the armed conflict in the Middle East. I used a Civil War *memorial* as the setting if not the excuse to make it politically safe for audiences to challenge our war without being unpatriotic.

The Chicago Cultural Center has a mosaic floor with a checkerboard grid pattern. And without any mental directive, my secular body spontaneously found itself formally walking its memorializing architecture, like many years before when I was a contemplative monk doing walking meditation within a cloister. And my mind embraced it. I intuitively trusted and accepted *the body's non-verbal directive* and I taught the group to imitate my monastic walk. In the end, we performed from 10:00 AM to 10:00 PM. After it was over, after we walked, paused, knelt, stood, walked some



Figure 10.3 Ernesto Pujol, *Memorial Gestures*, 2008, Chicago Cultural Center. Stock photo.

more, sat, got up, and moved on, repeating this for twelve hours, a day into night, embodying both the Civil War memories of a long-gone Victorian generation, and the memories of a new generation of Iraq War widows and orphans, my mind did not know that my body was now *imprinted* with that site-specific choreography.

The day after, when I revisited the site to say goodbye and my body walked unto its checkerboard floor, it began to perform! It refused to walk normally but moved very carefully, walking in slow motion from square to square. So my brain had to order my body stop. *What are you doing? You cannot go back there. It's over. You must resume normalcy.* But my body did not want to obey. And it was only very slowly, with great effort, during minutes that seemed to last for hours in psychic time, that my body finally grudgingly responded, began to walk normally, and was able to say goodbye.

FUTURE MEMORY

I attend a weekly class of Five Rhythms where I try to flow through a dance studio with an empty mind, moving in and out of chaos. But as a Zen Buddhist, the hardest teaching about death is the notion of the total loss of memory, the fact that in the great recycling and reunification of energies in the Great Ocean of Being, most, if not all, of the memories of an entire lifetime are lost. As a humanist, it does not make sense because it would make for a better humanity if we remembered our mistakes and carried on wisdom gained. But then, perhaps human evolution is not the result of a refinement of memory, but a refinement of actions that refine an intangible animating energy. Of course, I do not know, I only try to make peace with my current not-knowing and this future not-knowing. But I stubbornly keep hoping that I remember something next time around, because it took a lifetime to heal the memories of a violent revolution, communism, and stressed and devastated individuals during childhood. It took a lifetime to heal the memories of the AIDS epidemic, and all the illness, dying, death, and mourning I experienced as a young adult. And, more recently, it is taking another lifetime to get over the recent loss of men I love to the depressions and addictions that prey people with *unhealed memories*.

America is undergoing a crisis of memory. Our increasingly sick American economy, which has not hit the bottom yet, is the result of collective Alzheimer's. The American Dream is anti-memory. Its dangerous ignorance of the distant and even recent past, its embarrassment before old age, its denial of death and worship of eternal youth, its cult of entertainment, its addiction to fun, to endless distractions, only makes use of memory as a marketing or political strategy. *American memory has been reduced to slogans, backdrops, or superficial sentimental points of reference for*

marketing product and ideology. It is pure copy. I do not know what is going to force us to remember, to return to being a people who remember where we come from, beyond all Hollywood myth. And yet, this true self-critical remembering is the only way by which we will reach the humbling meditation of what we should become, at home and abroad. I do hope that it does not take a nation in ruins for us to awaken to consciousness.

*This chapter was the opening artist lecture during the 2008 Visible Memories Conference at Syracuse University, written in what Peggy Phelan describes as performative writing.

11 The Diffusion of an Atomic Icon Nuclear Hegemony and Cultural Memory Loss

Ned O'Gorman and Kevin Hamilton

In America, visual imagery related to the "Atomic Age" stands ready for recall as a style, easily appropriated into retro-fashion and nostalgia. But Americans with access to the Atomic Age as style don't necessarily stand ready to recall the era's inaugural event—that of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thus, within Atomic Age aesthetics, understood as the performance of collective memory, there exists a gap. This chapter considers how that gap might not be so much the product of a collective mental block, but the extension of the structure of the Atomic Age archive as it was built in the Cold War. For the horrible imagery of nuclear destruction was not so much forgotten as it was *lost*, and it was lost as it was managed, even displaced, by competing iconography.

To tell this story we begin where any critical visit to a museum or archive typically begins, with a look at taxonomy. Buried within the U.S. Psychological Strategy Board's 1952 archive sits a two-page catalog of "Photo Branch material for psychological [propagandistic] use," which begins:

52-1818P—USN's [Navy's] new F9F-6 "Cougar" jet plane that flies [*sic*] more than 600 mph.

52-1827P—USAAF's C-124 "Globe Master" cargo airplane takes in AF H-19 helicopter into its belly.

52-1399P—USN displays its newest carrier-based bomber, the XA2J-1.

52-1459P—One man helicopter, developed by USN.

51-17498P—Three French agriculturists study plant disease & insect control in U.S.

51-17479P—Four French agricultural economists studying in U.S.

52-1458P—Two technicians at U.S. Atomic Energy Commissions plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.¹

We stop here and make two notes: first, the photo of nuclear technicians was filed alongside those of U.S. air power.