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Workshop: *Memory, Nostalgia, Melancholy. Re-imagining home in a time of mobility.* School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham Trent University. Rovinj, Croatia. September 2015.

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Title of proposal: *Representation of nostalgia and melancholy in contemporary artworks: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois.*

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Cultural Memory, memory, trauma, nostalgia, melancholy, commemoration.

Representation of nostalgia and melancholy in contemporary artworks: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois.

This paper is situated in the context of contemporary art practice and its links with cultural memory. I will deal with the way in which contemporary art has become a medium within which to hold current discussions and debates surrounding issues related to memory, paying particular attention to the relevance and role of nostalgia and melancholy.

Cultural memory has become a central topic in History and Cultural Studies, and has set memory as an exclusive phenomenon of the contemporary. Memory is now understood as the perception of the past and is in continuous transformation due to the fact that it is dependent on and is made in the present.

Such a topic has impacted on cinema, literature and documentary practices, and has become highly significant in the field of contemporary art practice. A range of strategies has been established to deal with memory, all of which have influenced and impacted in art practice.

Memory and the reappraisal of the past have become essential tools to denounce human rights abuses and uncover victims' experiences of traumatic events in history. Visual Art, oral testimony, nostalgia, melancholy and acts of commemoration have been fused together in many contemporary artworks across a wide range of western countries. Artists working in this field and addressing these issues include Christian Boltanski, Miroslaw Balka, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Tacita Dean, Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread, Jane & Louise Wilson or Kara Walker.

These artists share a range of common patterns in their works dealing with memory, such as the representation of absence and void, appropriating discarded objects and historical amateur photographs, or depicting several temporalities within the same artwork. Generally, their works trigger emotions, nostalgia and melancholy to engage viewers' attention and encourage participation in the artwork.

In order to explain such artistic strategies and common patterns, I will focus on two internationally renowned artists: Tacita Dean and Louise Bourgeois. They both have based their work on topics such as memory, nostalgia and melancholy. I have chosen them specifically because they have also dealt with the idea of home, displacements and the processes of memory within the family realm.

Visual Artist **Tacita Dean** was born in Canterbury, UK, in 1965 and belongs to the so-called Young British Artists movement. Her work comprises films, drawings, photography, audio recordings and installations. She investigates the relationships between events that take place in different eras and geographic locations to create narratives that combine past and present, fact and fiction, and personal stories and wider events.

One of her most relevant piece of art is *Floh*, 2001 (Fig. 1-4). It is an art book that contains 163 photographs found in the flea markets of Europe and America over a period of seven years. Each photograph is completely void of any editing or additional touches, with no modification over the image, just the display and layout of the book. Through the amateur photographs, she aims to analyse and examine

the way in which photographic practice is carried out and produced in the realm of the home and mundane.

The images record everyday episodes, many of them banal, such as group or personal portraits, home objects, pets or travel photos. These episodes of the everyday have been rescued from oblivion by the artist, each of which generates stories of overlapping memories. For Tacita Dean, an image or a random encounter with past remnants is a mnemonic palimpsest. *Floh* creates a nostalgic sensation for the viewer, in spite of the fact that such archives of memory are anonymous. As Hal Foster states, "Tacita Dean reminds lost souls in her archivist work, and she does it through diverse mediums –photographs, drawings on blackboards, sound tracks, and short films and videos, often accompanied by narrative parts. Drawn by people, things and places that are stranded, out of fashion or in the side-lines, Dean designs a case as it ramifies in an archive with a random record."¹

But nostalgia is not only found in the stories and characters of the photographs. Dean also utilises analogic techniques that are being replaced by digital media, which is a sign of a nostalgic sensation from past and old techniques for recording images. Her aim is to highlight the features of analogic mediums, because they have different characteristics than the digital ones. That is why she includes low quality, fully blurred, poorly cut and printed photographs. However, her work naturally also contains pictures with strong composition, well-focused and with elegant exposure. Besides preserving analogic mediums from the past, she also quasi-recovers stories and the subjects in the photographs. In Tacita Dean's words, "I want images to keep the silence of the flea market, the silence they had when I found them, the silence of the lost object."²

Photographs also tell us about family customs, as they work as a register for such memories. Tacita Dean demonstrates the diversity of family units when she uses images from different places in Europe and America. She provides evidence of families that underwent relentless mobility and radical displacement due to historic and political events, as well as different notions and representations of the idea of home.

But, what has been the fate of those people in the photographs? Dead or alive, the person in the image is not physically there any more, in that space at that time, which generates an alluring melancholic feeling. Photographs, therefore, work as a *memento mori*, as they confront the death of the person in the image and the unavoidable death of the viewer. In this way, the photographs trigger melancholy in the audience and make them reconsider the importance of both life and one's destiny.

Louise Bourgeois (Paris, France, 1911) is one of the most internationally renowned artists of the second half of the twenty-first century. She is a ground-breaking and innovative artist with a career spanning over 70-years.

Her autobiographical work is generally inspired by memories of her own childhood and traumatic events that occurred whilst growing up. She repeatedly returns to recount past memories in her work; her aim is to control her own fears in the present and find its restatement through the artworks. All her work revolves around the emotions evoked by her memories, particularly from her childhood. She locates these memories in the household, full of objects that can work as a metaphor of memories and melancholy. Her artworks often resemble abstract shapes as she rejects realistic and mimetic representations of reality. However, although abstract, her work still evokes parts of the human body and encompasses topics such as betrayal, anxiety, loneliness, trauma, femininity, sexuality and alienation.

At the beginning of her career, Bourgeois used techniques such as drawing, engraving and painting and her work had surrealist tendencies. *Femme Maison* (Woman house) (Fig. 5 and 6) is probably the most important work of that period, which was made when she relocated to New York with her husband Robert Godlwater in 1938. *Femme Maison* is a woman with her upper body hidden or replaced by a house, a motif that would be repeated throughout her career. These works represent her circumstances and feelings at that very moment, that is, the circumstances of an exiled artist and a feisty mother dreaming of a better future. And also a woman bearing the social and psychological burdens of her status of woman, constrained to her role of mother and housewife. While in exile, Bourgeois created her works and

¹ Foster, Hal, «An Archive Impulse», *October 110*, Autumn 2004, p. 12.

² Godfrey, Mark, «Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's Floh», *Autumn 114*, Fall 2005, p. 92.

sculptures as a replacement for all the things and people that she left in her former country; things she missed from her past. This nostalgic sensation is a running theme in her work.

In her early period, Bourgeois was influenced by Freud's philosophies, specifically the notion of "mourning work" in his essay *Mourning and Melancholy*³. Freud refers to a process that a human being undertakes when mourning a relative or loved person. 'Mourning work' defines not only Bourgeois' early work, but also her subsequent work to date. According to Freud, the process of mourning aims to relate and re-unite the person with their possessions and lost relatives, but also to safeguard the latter so they keep being a part of the person's inner world.

After the 1970s, Bourgeois continued to create work influenced by personal experience, either in abstract shapes or from objects with an iconography inspired by her past, such as her installation series *Cells* (Fig. 7-9). *Cells* are pieces of furniture and other objects placed inside a structure or small room constructed from wire mesh or wood doors. Bourgeois targets to evoke the past and pain embedded in the objects. They produce a sensation of void and absence that recreates a melancholic, uneasy and exciting environment for the onlooker.

Cells recreates small rooms within which memories are linked to objects. They are the physical expressions of Bourgeois' memories, and they communicate both what happened and the emotions of the past, such as melancholy, dreams and thoughts. At the same time, the tight space in the cell and the cramming of objects in it makes them an uncomfortable place to stay in. Each cell is dedicated to a specific feeling, which triggers sensory, visual, audibly and odor memory. The cells become an embodiment of complex and contradictory feelings, and also places that immerse the viewers in the depths of human emotion. Through *Cells*, Bourgeois pursues to activate a memory work that revise the past.

Having explored Tacita Dean's and Louise Bourgeois' work, I will now discuss some key elements in contemporary artworks that enable the transmission of memory and the triggering of nostalgic and melancholic sensations. From my point of view, the most important for consideration are those of the *index* and the *encountered sign*.

By *index* I refer to the linguistic and semiotic notion coined by the philosopher, logician and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce. He uses the term as a mode of significance based on registering physical qualities of elements in reality. According to Peirce, there are three different signs: symbol, icon and index. The symbol makes an abstract relationship with objects, that is, it creates its own code that does not match the physical features of the object. The icon replaces the real image with another and creates analogue feelings in mind. Finally, the index obtains its meaning through a physical relation with its referents⁴. Peirce connects index with photographs mainly because they settle such physical relations with the referents, that is, a mark or trace working as a real representation of an object or an event. In Peirce's words, "photographs are very instructive because we know that, in some way, they are exactly like the object they represent. However, such likeness is due to the circumstances in which the photograph was taken, circumstances that physically establish a point-by-point connection with nature. In this regard, they belong to the second typology of signs [the index], those that respond to a physical connection"⁵.

The idea of **index** is essential when creating artworks from amateur photographs, like the ones evident in Tacita Dean's work. The notion of index gives a documental quality to photography. It makes the viewer get involve in the stories represented and identify the pictures as traces of the past. In other words, the index is considered a trace or imprint of the referent physical presence, a register of the real and of what actually existed. In Rosalind Krauss' words, "what is registered in the photographic emulsion and later in the paper copy is the order of natural world. Such transfer or trace feature gives a documentary role to photography, the irrefutable truthfulness"⁶.

³ Freud, Sigmund, «Aflición y melancolía», in: *Obras completas*, Vol. 1, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 1968, pp. 1075 - 1082. (Own translation).

⁴ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *El hombre, un signo*, Barcelona, Crítica, 1988, p. 145. (Own translation).

⁵ Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs*, Philosophical writings of Peirce, Nueva York, Dover Publications, 1995, p. 106.

⁶ Krauss, Rosalind, *La originalidad de la Vanguardia y otros mitos modernos*, Madrid, Alianza forma, 1996 [1985], p.

We can also consider the idea of index in relation to the discarded objects used by Louise Bourgeois and other contemporary artists. Those objects, full of emotions, work as the materialization and physical trace of memory; the life events embedded in objects and the absence of their owners. I argue that it is the traces and remnants embedded in the materiality of found objects that carry corporal and human features from their former owners. They represent a kind of affect, emotion and feeling that catch the viewers' attention and trigger nostalgic and melancholic feelings.

Artists develop visual strategies to deal with past experiences, recollections and the feeling of trauma. It is an endeavour achieved through affective processes as a result of inducing empathy in the viewer. Writer and curator Jill Bennett has investigated, within Visual Studies, the interactions taking place among artwork, message and the recipient. She focuses in the construction of ways of visual knowledge that are based on not linguistic but corporeal notions and codes.

In order to understand the strategies used by artists to represent and transmit memory and the emotions around it, mention should also be made of the *encountered sign* coined by Deleuze in his work "Proust and Signs"⁷. Deleuze defines it as a type of sign perceived through senses; it is experienced by people and different from signs we identify in other forms of knowledge. In other words, the encountered sign is different from objects that people can directly identify and that would be only noticed and discerned. As Jill Bennett states, Deleuze confirms that such sign is able to stimulate thought and an emotional and psychical engagement in the viewer, urging them to critically revise past. Deleuze argues that, "[t]he importance of this conception of the sign lies in the way it links the affective actions of the image with a thinking process without asserting the primacy of either the affective experience (sense memory) or representation (common memory)".⁸

The challenge of transmitting knowledge and particular memories from specific people through the artwork finds its resolution in the traces and affect embedded in the materials. Therefore, we are dealing with a more emotional kind of memory, that is, a sensorial memory. It refers to corporeal forms of knowledge rather than linguistic ones, and they appear through the senses. It can be understood as a register of emotions and affect that reawakens as a result of specific stimulus in action. According to Jill Bennett, sensory memory in artistic practice is "[r]adically different from timeless or transhistorical expressionism, it aims to constitute a language of subjective process (specifically, of affective and emotional process) to complement history and to work in a dialectical relationship with common memory"⁹.

Tacita Dean's, Louise Bourgeois' and other artists' works don't provide a specific historical record, but rather they demonstrate the persistence of emotions in memory throughout time, especially the ones relating to traumatic historical events. In this regard, as Bennett remind us, "they are not didactical images, mediating a message, but incline toward the expressive in the way they play on a certain affective quality of space and objects to evoke modes of subjective experience, and specifically of loss".¹⁰

Objects and other elements utilised in artworks dealing with memory gain links with human emotions and, thanks to them, they enable the transmission of affect. For this reason, they work as an index of their former owners and they acquire new connotations when they are decontextualized from their usual environment. Spanish curator and writer Miguel Angel Hernández-Navarro explains this thus: "it is eventually a belief in immanent power in objects and images. And that same belief is found in the fondness for old objects used in contemporary art, for the use of anachronic aesthetics and obsolete objects: the certainty in the fact that there is a presence of the real in objects. And the decontextualization of objects facilitates to stimulate such energy."¹¹

227. (Own translation).

⁷ DELEUZE, Gilles, *Proust y los signos*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 1972 [1964].

⁸ BENNETT, Jill, *Emphatic Vision. Affect, trauma and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 37.

⁹ BENNETT, Jill, *Ibid.* p. 26.

¹⁰ BENNETT, Jill, *Idem.* p. 151.

¹¹ HERNÁNDEZ-NAVARRO, Miguel Ángel, *Materializar el pasado. El artista como historiador (benjaminiano)*, Murcia, Micromegas, 2012, p. 127. (Own translation).

Contemporary artworks dealing with memory assert that memory keeps us in contact with the past through affect, empathy, melancholy and nostalgia. Through the notions of *index* and the *encountered sign* we understand the ways in which the viewer feels empathy and affect, which results in a moral engagement with and to the past via memory. On the other hand, representation of memory in art reinforces memory as a continuous and necessary activity in human life and behaviour. Therefore, memory allows us and individuals with no real sense of home or belonging, to situate ourselves in a specific time and place.

Fig. 1-4. Tacita Dean, Floh. Photo-album.

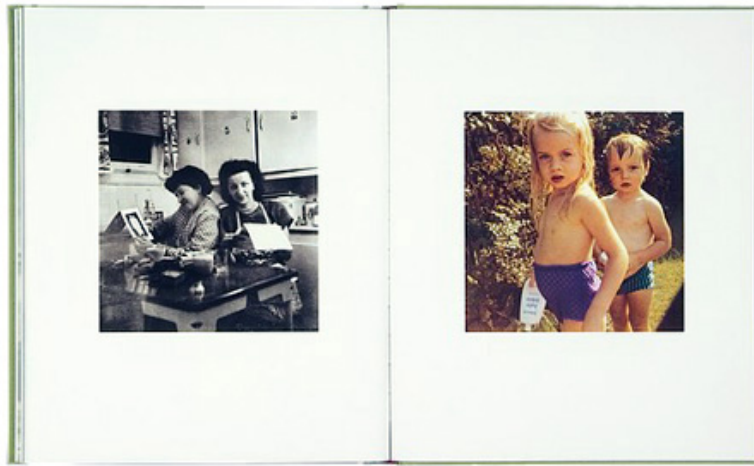


Fig. 5. Louise Bourgeois, Femme Maison (1946-47)

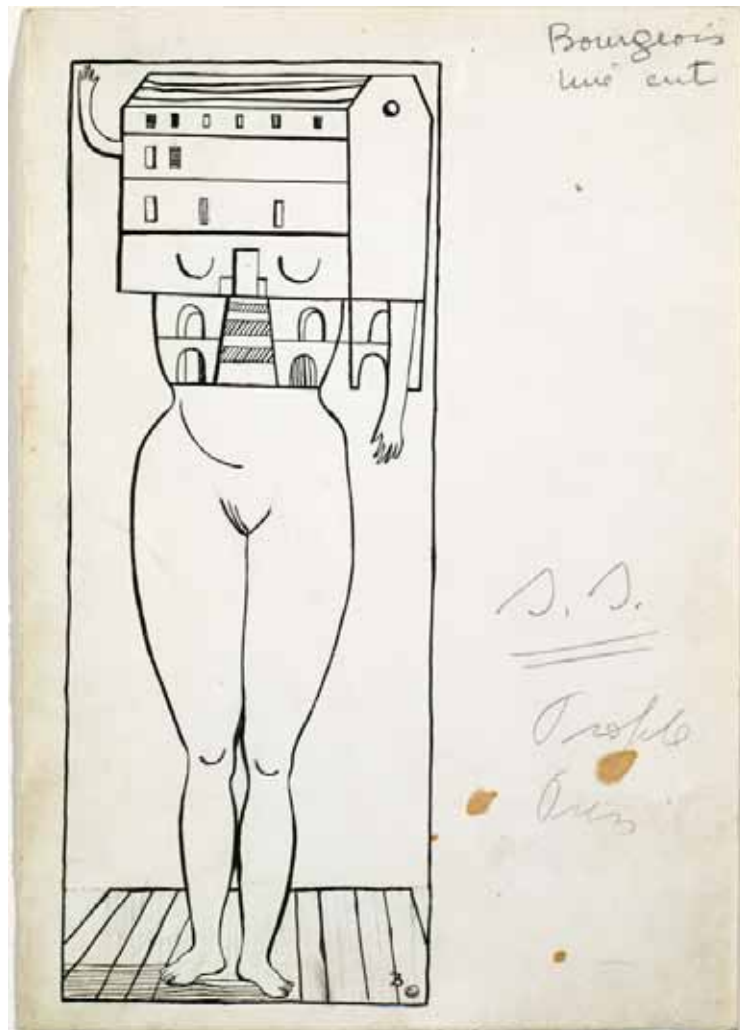


Fig. 6. Louise Bourgeois, Femme Maison (1946-47)



Fig. 7. Louise Bourgeois, Cell, 1989 - 2010.



Fig. 8. Louise Bourgeois, Cell, 1989 - 2010.



Fig. 9. Louise Bourgeois, Cell, 1989 - 2010.

