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The Memory Model Project

An investigation of three-dimensional models as triggers and documents of recall

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Memory: Models as Triggers and Monitors of Recollections

The *Memory Model Project* is as much about modelling as it is about remembering. Thus it is reasonable to consider it within the wide and multidisciplinary field of memory research. Existing investigations of models in this area are scarce and largely confined to historico-cultural studies of how specific model genres contribute to the construction of the past (Puff 2014; Kryder-Reid 2015). The *Memory Model Project* approaches the relation between model and memory from a different perspective. This working paper will present several hypotheses regarding memory models' capacity to *catalyse* and *document* personal memories. It will include a consideration of potential therapeutic applications and deal with possible objections regarding memory models' utility as a medium for sharing mental images. In doing so, the making of memory models is regarded as an autobiographical practice. It is acknowledged that autobiography is usually a narrative practice, that is, dealing primarily with episodic memories and presenting accounts in time-based media with texts leading the way. By contrast, memory models deal especially with spatial memories and unfold in a spatial medium. The implications of this difference are discussed in *Part V: Model Philosophy* and examples of how models can imply, despite their stasis, different time frames are presented in *Part II (b): Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*.

Catalyst: The Memory Model as a Memory Trigger

Autobiographical practices produce *documents* of life stories but the intense occupation with one's past can also become a *catalyst* of further, not instantly available memories. People writing autobiographical stories often discover details only 'as they write'. Author Shirley Lim describes graphically that, after writing down a specific instance from her childhood in her memoirs, she "*felt as if a water blister had been pricked, and the fluid of that life event leaked out*" (Lim 2003, p.443). More prosaically, memoir writing instructor Diane Taylor advises: "[W]rite down one memory, then one related to it, and you will no doubt find that a multitude of memories come bubbling up" (Taylor 2015, p.112).¹ Some details resurface after years since they were last thought about, others appear to

¹ Writing has also been argued to be in fact *the* space where the narrative dynamics of memory take place (Cabillas 2014), or even, as media theorist Belinda Barnet claims, that "*there is no lived memory, no originary, internal experience stored somewhere that corresponds to a certain event in our lives. Memory is entirely reconstructed by the machine of memory, by the process of writing*" (Barnet 2003, para.18). In a similar vein, philosopher Henk Borgdorff describes the constructivist view of art: "*The constructivist perspective holds that*

be reclaimed from oblivion altogether.

The observation of one memory triggering another once it is put into words corresponds to the *'descriptions theory'* of memory (Norman & Bobrow 1979; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000), according to which retrieval is essentially a *"process in which some information about a target item is used to construct a description of the item and this description is used in attempts to recover new fragments of information"* (Williams & Hollan 1981, p.87). It is anticipated that *modelling* aspects of one's past will have a similar effect. Like the writer of an autobiographical story, the maker of a memory model 'replays' aspects of her/his past, externalising the description and thus emphasising the mnemonic effect (Skowronski & Walker 2004). In both cases this is likely to involve narrative, perceptual, and emotional aspects of recall, implying that 'description' must be understood as exceeding the verbal. The decisive difference between making a memory model and word-based autobiographical practices is that the medium manifests visual and tactile aspects of memory. Thus, the newly recovered *'fragments of information'* – regardless their ratio of narrative, perceptual, and emotional content – are informed by the specifically visual and haptic feedback of the emerging model.

Research suggests that tackling one's past 'hands-on' has a powerful impact on recall. For example, anthropologist Jean-Sébastien Marcoux discusses how moving house always means to confront the decision of which belongings still 'matter' and which can be discarded (Marcoux 2001). Similarly, John Horton and Peter Kraftl have shown through auto-ethnographic experiments how *'clearing out a cupboard'* of a person who passed away or moved out can evoke all kinds of home-related memories (Horton & Kraftl 2012). However, considering how artisanal work – laying hands not on the 'real thing' but on its symbolic representation – can elicit memories is less explored. Nevertheless, a conducive effect of making drawings on memory retrieval could already be shown in therapeutic contexts (Minichiello 2012) and there are occasional assessments in design studies that sketching can trigger memories or reveal errors in recollection (Tversky 2002; Scrivener et al. 2000).² The strongest encouragement for investigating memory models' feedback in relation to personal memories comes from practitioners' testimonies such as those by Michael Grothusen and Michael Paul Smith³ as well as my own introspective experience with memory models.

In conclusion, it is hypothesised that making memory models and recalling will frequently be a process of mutual, perpetual feedback (see Fig. 1). The evolving model will function as a *material description* that its maker gradually develops. As such, it will catalyse the retrieval of further details of

objects and events actually become constituted in and through artworks and artistic actions. Only in and through art do we see what landscapes, soundworlds, histories, emotions, relations, interests or movements really are or could be. Here lies the performative and critical power of art. It does not represent things; it presents them, thereby making the world into what it is or could be" (Borgdorff 2010, p.24).

² Jane Grisewood, who explored this phenomenon in an art-practice-based visual art PhD, confirms: *"The moment of making a mark without sight relies on memory, while in the seeing of the actual drawing again one is remembering"* (Grisewood 2012, p.1).

³ See *working paper: Models: Enchantment, Utility, and Art*, section *Practice-based Experience*.

the remembered object. To quote Smith again:

When I start to build ... detail items, the emotional vibes from them start to make themselves known. Sometimes they are just bursts of feeling that last for mere seconds, or they will trigger longer, stream of conscious episodes, both good and bad. It's quite the emotional ride, very much like lucid dreaming; almost hyper real. Or better yet, Life Distilled. (personal communication, 2016)

Such episodic and emotional memories can – to an extent – be documented as ‘spin-offs’ in formats such as written texts or audio recordings.⁴ Recovered memories of a visual or tactile nature can expand right back into the emerging model itself. An additional resource to enforce this relationship can be expected from the cross-fertilisation of spatial and episodic memories (Bachelard 1994; Casey 2000; Malpas 1999; 2013).⁵

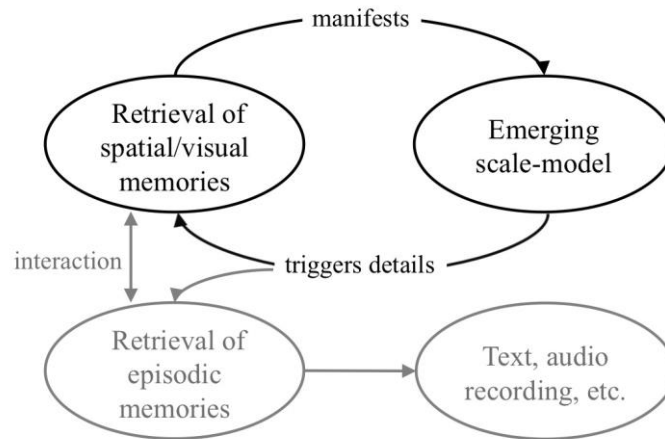


Fig. 1. Memory Models' catalytic effect.

Therapeutic Perspectives

For many, it is expected that working on a memory model will be a self-rewarding activity that fuses the joys of model-making and reminiscence. As a corollary, it can have an effect on their maker similar to autobiographical reports. Telling or writing an autobiographical story demands bringing cohesion to potentially fragmented and incoherent episodic memories and thus adds to the impression of a *self* that follows from a consecutive history (Eakin 1999; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000). Similarly, making a memory model demands re-visualising crucial aspects of one's past as well as creative gap-filling. In effect, it is hypothesised that through this activity, spatial memories can become more complete, coherent and rich in detail.

This anticipated effect encourages considering memory models as potentially therapeutic devices. For

⁴ See working paper *Methodology (to be edited)*. Insights that are nameable can be made available for further scrutiny. With respect to the (re-)experience of a home's 'emotional atmosphere', the model's physical presence may be conclusive.

⁵ This relation will be discussed in *working paper Methodology (to be edited)*.

example, they might be integrated with *reminiscence therapy*, an approach that aims for generally improving memory and reviving interest, self-esteem, and personal relationships (Gerfo 1981).

Traditionally, it involves

the discussion of past activities, events and experiences with another person or group of people, usually with the aid of tangible prompts such as photographs, household and other familiar items from the past, music and archive sound recordings. (Woods et al. 2005, sec.1; see also Bluck & Levine 1998)

Since these prompts are already existing items and not anything produced during the therapy, memory models would introduce a method associated rather with therapies that employ activities of crafting or performing. In an art therapy context, for example, it has been argued that drawing can be useful for facilitating the reprocessing of chronic trauma issues (Glaister & McGuinness 1992) and, much to the same end, that the touching and shaping of clay “*can enable clients to rewrite their emotional history*” (Elbrecht 2013, p.125). It has also been argued that the creation of photographic representations through performative re-enactments can help explore memories (Martin 2009; Lindfors 2009). The production of memory models combines means of visual representation, sensorimotor activity, and re-enactment. Thus it appears worthwhile to examine whether the procedure may be useful in reminiscence therapy as well as trauma treatment.

Private Memorials

In some cases, the memory-catalysing effect might also extend beyond a model’s production period. In a sense, the memory model can function similar to a mnemonic device,⁶ but with the difference that the object to be recalled is not something *encoded now* in order to be retrieved later. It is *retrieved now* to be contemplated later. A model fulfilling this function can be described as a private memorial. Following some ideas of philosopher James Young, *The Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* defines memorials as serving as

a repository of socially constructed and ‘collected’ memory. They are attempts to collect, assign meaning to, and create coherence from plural, contested and chaotic memories of past events. In order to do this, memorials objectify and concretize a certain version of the past, acting as a memory filter. (Tota & Hagen 2015, pp.189–190)

By shifting the emphasis from *collective* to *individual* aspects of recall and from *events* to a particular *place*, the memory model can function similarly in the private realm. The anticipated effect is related to the size difference between most memorials and a model. Discussing notions of ‘*portable memorials*’, artist Shaun Wilson observes in his PhD thesis:

The larger the structure, the more it exteriorises remembrance; we share a memory with

⁶ Mnemonic devices are strategies a person can apply to improve their ability to recall something. For further details, the reader is directed to Frances Bellazza’s essay on *Mnemonic Devices and Memory Schemas* (Bellazza 2012).

others as the self becomes a collective self and a collective memory. Yet, reverse scale from the gigantic to the micro and suddenly we find our memories become interiorised and therefore intimate. (Wilson 2005, p.35)

In both cases something past and absent is replaced with an object to anchor related memories. It may thus be interesting to compare the functions of memory models and memorials.⁷ Again from a therapeutic perspective, the private memorial may also serve as a “*cathedral of reverie*” (Wilson 2005, p.157). Whereas working on the model is expected to be beneficial for coming to terms with a difficult past or yielding joyful reminiscence, the finished model can be symbolically locked away or kept as a reminder of a formative place of one’s identity.

Monitor: The Memory Model as a Document of Personal Memories

If a person casts personal memories in the shape of a model they become more available not only to her/himself but also to others. To infer that models can be treated as a *monitor* of recollection is still a daring proposition. There is a difference between an original experience, the recollection thereof and its utterance. The following section will discuss how to deal with, in theory and practice, the fact that memories may be faulty, badly crafted or deliberately altered for public display. The leading question here is: What, then, can a memory model be a *monitor* of?

Obstacle 1: The ‘Faultiness’ of Memory

The home as a physical fact (architectural structure filled with objects) undergoes a significant transformation as it becomes a personal fact (memory) and another one when it is rendered as a model. What the model-maker sees in her/his inner eye will usually be a (re-)presentation of a place experienced relatively long ago. When recalled, it unfolds in a phenomenological space and time where it will often be incoherent, dizzy, volatile, and speculative. As a natural consequence, psychologist Clark Moustakas notes, “*shadings are clarified; details are added; refinements bring new voices, sounds, and visions*” (cited by Rosenthal 2006, p.7) as we retrieve our memories. Moreover, by the time of retrieval the original experience has already undergone significant modification in memory. What one believes to be ‘genuine’ memories are often infiltrated by what one was told by other people (Zerubavel 1996) and this may include misinformation (Belli & Loftus 1999). Research also suggests that what seems to be the recall of original perceptions can in fact be the result of having seen photographs (Garry & Gerrie 2005; West 2014). What is remembered and forgotten is furthermore influenced by one’s life goals (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000), the

⁷ More remotely, the memory model of a home also shares some conceptual space with buildings in miniature towns and history parks. Museums like [Wimborne Model Town](#) assemble structures typical from a certain time or region and thus conserve their memory. Other such museums, like [France Miniature](#) or [Miniaturk](#) unite landmarks and monuments from a whole country. Both types may be seen as reflecting nostalgic and political notions of home as heritage and national identity. Again, one of the potential functions a memory model may fulfil for its maker could be to perpetuate a similarly idealised notion of home but focus on its more private memories.

emotional valence of the original experience (Ritchie et al. 2006), the frequency of having previously recalled it (Holland 1992, pp.196–201), and having already shared it with others (Skowronski & Walker 2004). Interaction with other people as well as exposure to media and all kinds of commodities are also relevant to one's present image of a place experienced some time ago because memories are aligned with cultural values and social expectations (Nelson & Fivush 2000)⁸. Being constantly modified and updated, autobiographical remembering can be summarised, following psychologist and education scholar Craig Barclay, as “*an improvisational activity*” that gives “*us a sense of needed comfort and a culturally valued sense of personal coherence over time*” (Barclay 1999, p.95).

The list of sources of memory distortions (which does not claim to be complete) grounds the phenomenological definition of memory applied here.⁹ The *Memory Model Project* can thus contribute to memory research only insofar as it focuses on a person's phenomenological reality and not on the reconstruction of objectively or inter-subjectively verifiable ‘facts’.¹⁰ This entails that the image of home that is being expressed will always be its ‘most recent version’.¹¹ The model is a congenial medium for exploring this idiosyncratic, transitory nature of memories. Many have argued that models inherently transcend a specific time and place. A “*model always points beyond its specific geographic and temporal coordinates to a different space and a different time*”, as architect Milica Topalovic says; “[i]n the space of a model, ‘here’ becomes ‘there’, and ‘now’ becomes ‘then’” (Topalovic 2011, p.37; see also Stewart 1984, pp.65–69; Krasny 2009; Cribb 2015). Thus autobiographical memories and model-making converge in their capacity to thematise a dialectic (or conflation) of past and present.

Obstacle 2: Skill and Medium

Most people, artists included, find it difficult to translate mental images into drawings or sculptures¹² and each expressive means has its limitations and intricacies. With respect to modelling, James R. King argues in his book *Remaking the World: Modeling in Human Experience* that nothing is more typical “*than the aggressive response to challenges that the problems provoke, and in one way or another this response influences all the other elements in the set*” (King 1996, p.48). Even if it is granted, as philosopher Max Black posits, that “[t]here is no such thing as a perfectly faithful model” and that “*only by being unfaithful in ‘some’ respects can a model represent its original*” (Black 1962,

⁸ Compare working paper: *Home: Domestic Space through Memory through Model*, section *Model Homes: Social Aspects of Remembering and Modelling*.

⁹ See working paper *Introduction - The Idea*, section *Definitions*.

¹⁰ In that it differs from historical or forensic research's interest in memory as those disciplines aim at reconstructing ‘actual facts’.

¹¹ Philosopher Edmund Husserl elaborates: “[M]emory flows continuously, since the life of consciousness flows continuously and does not merely piece itself together link by link into a chain. Rather, everything new reacts in the old; the forward-directed intention belonging to the old is fulfilled and determined in this way, and that gives a definite coloring to the reproduction” (cited by Rosenthal 2006, p.2).

¹² For an interesting experiment with drawings made from memory, see artist [Gianluca Gimini's exploration of bicycles people reproduced 'by heart'](#).

p.220), failing to produce a model congruent with one's intentions can mean a frustrating experience for the model-maker and a deception for the viewer.

To counter this effect, several measures are taken. First, as a pilot project, only people experienced with related problems (artists, architects and model-makers) are asked to participate.¹³ Second, the model can be treated as a sketch or study rather than a precise facsimile of a mental image. This entails, third, the option to produce the model in tandem with a verbal narrative.¹⁴ There is an ongoing debate about the relationship between the artistic and the discursive in arts-based research and it has been argued that the latter need not be merely a written statement about the former (Dronsfield 2009; Macleod & Holdridge 2010; Borgdorff 2010). The conjoined elaboration of a model and a narrative would be an alternative in line with what philosopher Henk Borgdorff considers a “*more interesting*” option: “*a discursive approach to the research which does not take the place of the artistic ‘reasoning’, but instead ‘imitates’, suggests or alludes to what is being ventured in the artistic research*” (Borgdorff 2010, p.62). In fact, it can even be part of the artistic research, as Catharina Dyrssen argues in the same volume:

[T]he hegemony of written text is challenged by other modes of communication, [but] language also has a performance capacity that can be expanded far beyond scientific conventions, and take on more diverse roles in the modelling process by interacting rather than describing. (Dyrssen 2010, p.228)

In this vein, model-makers may, for example, *tell* the story of their home in parallel to the model and thus create mutually illuminating media by adding, for example, audio or video recordings, written texts or live performances.

Models provide unique and specific visual/haptic information but it is acknowledged that some aspects of memory are better expressed verbally or must remain beyond representation altogether. Moreover, psychological research suggests that forcing perceptual memories into verbal descriptions can impede subsequent access to ineffable aspects of related experiences (Schooler et al. 1997; Lloyd-Jones et al. 2008). This so-called ‘*verbal overshadowing effect*’ yields further support for the use of different media to express different kinds of memory. A physical medium might be the more appropriate means to utter spatial, respectively visual/haptic, elements of memory whilst speech or writing seem more appropriate for capturing its temporal aspects. *Both* are limited by the specificity of their medium and the expressive skills of their author.

Obstacle 3: What one Knows and What one Shows

Another reservation one might have against the thesis that models can be used to share memories is that what appears ‘in front of one’s inner eye’ is not necessarily what one is willing to make public. A

¹³ For a later application in therapeutic or other contexts, the methodology has to be reconsidered.

¹⁴ A curious example of a practice where a model was used as a ‘plug’ for an autobiographical story is ‘*Colleen Moore’s Doll House*’, a publication in which the American actress takes the reader on an imaginary tour through her [giant model of a fairy castle](#) filled with all sorts of memorabilia (Moore & Dapprich 1935).

selective or ‘creative’ interpretation is likely to be the consequence. To an extent, creative decisions inhere all model-making. Even producers of scientific scale-models “*move routinely between the most private sites of discovery and the most public arenas of display*” (Chadarevian & Hopwood 2004, p.12; similar in King 1996, p.4). The intimacy of personal memories, however, entails a specific challenge of deciding what is to become public. Autobiography, like “*any self-representational act is fully burdened by its public charge to disclose a private truth*”, as Leigh Gilmore pointed out in her book on *The Limits of Autobiography* (Gilmore 2001, p.14). Some people find it desirable or therapeutic to share their most intimate joys and horrors through an artistic medium. Iconic examples are Tracy Emin’s *My Bed* (1998) and Louise Bourgeois’ recreation of spaces remembered from her childhood (as in many of her *Cells*).¹⁵ Others will be reluctant to disclose even innocuous details of their private life. Generally speaking, people’s public utterances are guided by what may be called ‘*impression management*’. Erving Goffman, who introduced the term to sociology, likens this phenomenon to a

theatrical performance ... in which the individual in ordinary ... situations presents himself and his activity to others, ... guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them (Goffman 1956, preface, n.p.).

In this vein, an autobiographical narrator is a performative subject and the same will be true for the maker of a memory model. We may accept a person’s phenomenological reality as memory and the limits of representation imposed by skill and medium as negligible, but are we still looking at documents of memories when they are in fact *mise-en-scène for the viewer?*

Again, this is not a problem unique to the memory model; however there are methods to elicit memories (like interviewing subjects) where specific questioning techniques can be applied to mitigate *impression management* effects (Nederhof 1985). By contrast, an artwork can hardly be negotiated during its production. It is a delicate source that requires, like a person’s written memoirs, a critical awareness of potential biases. However, whilst it seems natural to polish a few details in one’s life story, there is much less one can do to that end with a memory model. In fact, it would be premature to approach the medium with the suspicion that its maker may have deliberately manipulated the past. The more pertinent issue here is whether *impression management* already belongs to the way we remember and present the world *to ourselves*. Is it not the own self that one wishes to impress in the first place? *Impression management* would thus have to be located within the processes of remembering and rather be seen as an act of self-deception than other-deception.¹⁶ This is

¹⁵ Bourgeois’ *Cell (Choisy), 1990–93* includes a marble scale model of her childhood home. For a discussion of Emin’s and Bourgeois’ examples see Gibbons (2007, chap.1). For another poignant example see Song Dong’s cataloguing and reconstruction of his parental home in *Waste Not (2005)*.

¹⁶ In his book *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*, Robert Trivers stresses that “[m]emories are continually distorted in self-serving ways” and gives the following brief list of examples: “Men and women both remember having fewer sexual partners, and more sex with each partner, than was

where the social contingency of memory comes to the fore and where the memory model should be assessed – positively – in terms of the cultural values it discloses rather than – negatively – as a potentially deceptive *mise-en-scène*.¹⁷

To summarise and answer the question of what a memory model can be a *monitor* of: The capacity of any medium – textual, two or three-dimensional – to represent a person’s idiosyncratic memories is limited by its specific faculties as well as its user’s skill and honesty. Compared to textual utterances, it is expected that the memory model will be a superior monitor of certain spatial recollections and an inferior one regarding episodic memories. Nevertheless, it is maintained that models can imply episodic events,¹⁸ just as spatial features can be described in reports. In conclusion, the memory model is expected to unfold its full potential as a monitor of personal recollections if it is used in conjunction with verbal media.

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actually true. People likewise remember voting in elections they did not and giving to charity when they did not. If they did vote, they remember supporting the winning candidate rather than the one they actually voted for. They remember their children as being more precocious and talented than they were. And so on” (Trivers 2011, p.143).

¹⁷ Compare *Part IV: Home: Domestic Space through Memory through Model*, section *Model Homes: Social Aspects of Remembering and Modelling*.

¹⁸ For examples see *Part II (b): Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*, section *Time frames*.

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