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The Memory Model Project

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

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Models of Dwellings in Arts-Based Research

The general scarcity of investigations dealing with the phenomenology and personal benefits of model-making and model-appreciation is also reflected in arts-based research. There are some exceptions (such as [José V. M. Martínez' explorations of the diorama in conjunction with optical devices](#) and the [MAKE research cluster](#) at the *University for the Creative Arts* in Canterbury, UK), but the specific focus on models as devices to catalyse or monitor personal memories remains largely unprecedented. However, there are two practice-based PhD projects that have a direct bearing on the concept of the memory model: “XX/XX/XXXX–XX/XX/XXXX” by Anthony Cribb (2015) and “*The Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image*” by Shaun Wilson (2005).

Anthony Cribb: “XX/XX/XXXX–XX/XX/XXXX”

Anthony Cribb examines „*art-making as a test-bed for thinking on the miniature as a sculptural device*“ (Cribb 2015, p.233), putting particular emphasis on temporal aspects of the viewer’s encounter with the work. He argues that the traditional view of the miniature as presenting an apparently ‘frozen moment’ (Susan Stewart’s notion of ‘*tableau*’)¹ becomes obsolete when considering various examples from contemporary art.² Model time, in Cribb’s view, is first and foremost relative to how “*a miniature mise-en-scène is perceived (anticipatory, primordial, archetypal, originary, imminent, before, after, preliminary et al)*” (p.131). This observation lends support to the view that the model’s stasis can, to an extent, be overcome.³ However, Cribb does not emphasise the model’s capacity to imply different time frames but focuses on a particular kind of viewing experience, which he describes as a „*volatile state of reverie*“ (p. 234). It is essential that (among other factors) notions of the past are *dragged* into the present, making the two indiscernible. Viewers often feel transported back in time when looking at miniatures (e.g. because the models evoke childhood memories or nostalgic reminiscences), yet they know to be observers here and now. This notion of reverie connects Cribb’s project to the idea of the memory model. Phenomenologically, remembering entails the same conflation of times: When we perceive the past, we do not behold it as

¹ Poet and critic Susan Stewart elaborates that “[t]he miniature always tends toward *tableau* rather than toward narrative ... Whereas speech unfolds in time, the miniature unfolds in space“ (Stewart 1984, p.66).

² Besides his own practice, Cribb refers to works by Mariele Neudecker, Chris Burden, Jake und Dinos Chapman, and others.

³ See working paper: *Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*, section *Time Frames*.

past but as present.⁴ It can be expected that model-makers – who are in fact also their works' first viewers – undergo similar experiences of reverie⁵ and this effect is amplified as they draw on memories to create their works.

Cribb's interest is in making “*available states of undecidability*” where “‘*affective reverie*’ is positioned as a means for spectatorial access to impenetrable states – raising the possibility of a recuperation, thus repatriation of ... foreclosed spaces” (p.232). Memory models may facilitate related encounters in a particularly forceful way, since by focussing on the ‘home in memory’, they focus on a *foreclosed space* par excellence. However – in a sense complementary to Cribb's viewer-centred approach – the notion of ‘*affective reverie*’ will be examined mainly in connection to the experience of the model-maker's phenomenology of remembering.

Shaun Wilson: “*The Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image*”

As part of his PhD research, Shaun Wilson created a series of scale-models to represent events at the palliative home where his father died. Although presented as [edited video recordings](#) and not as sculptures, Wilson's work includes a profound exploration of the relation between models and personal memory.

He argues that the former's essential feature – the reproduction of an object in a different scale – metaphorically captures the varying perceptions of oneself as being, physically and emotionally, small or big in many situations. This makes the model a unique means to navigate through (e.g. by using a video camera) and express memories, especially as they relate to idiosyncratic perceptions of size.

Wilson summarises:

The concept of smallness has a personal, malleable ability allowing us to bring our memories to objects and structures such as buildings and dwellings. By associating experiences with these forms we can characterise our way of storing and relating to memories that are a reflection and understanding of self (p.156).

Wilson's résumé can be read as a hypothesis to be explored further. His conclusion can be tested as part of the *Memory Model Project*. Like in Wilson's research, individual recall is key to the models; however, having several people work on the same broad topic (home) introduces the possibility of comparison. As one of the options considered to present the models and to explore their interrelation with narratives, the project will likewise pursue the connection between model and recording a narrative unfolding in time. Video, however, will be mainly used to record the modelling process and not the artefact.⁶ In doing so, it seeks to gather further evidence for *how*, as Wilson continues the above statement, “[t]hese types of structures, our memory palaces, allow us to grasp the past and

⁴ For a detailed account see Robin Le Poidevin's article on the *The Experience and Perception of Time* (Le Poidevin 2015).

⁵ Architect Mark English, for example, explains why in his domain ‘*We Still Build Models*’ (as opposed to relying on computer animations exclusively): “*Reverie is as important as technology*” (English 2015, para.1).

⁶ Further discussed in working paper: [Methodology \(to be edited\)](#).

understand ourselves in relation to the past“ (ibid.). This does not mean, however, that the models themselves are neglected in favour of mere process observation. Rather they are considered as embodiments of their makers’ involvement with the past and as media in their own right being *next to*, not instrumental to, the video material and other narrative outcomes.

References

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