Inside the Experience of Making Personal Archive #1 [A Work in Progress]: The Art of Inquiry

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Abstract

This article considers our collaborative process of creating the exhibition ‘Personal Archive #1 [A work in progress]’ and examines our experiences of remembering and misremembering our shared past. It will draw on Tim Ingold’s concept ‘art of inquiry’ to articulate a kind of thinking/doing that places value on lived experience and on alternative archives as sites of knowledge and meaning making.

Keywords: autobiography, memory, coupledom, partial truths, art of inquiry.
Objects accumulate on shelves over time just as events accumulate in memory.\(^1\)

In these artists’ pages\(^2\) we will attempt to unpick and unpack what it was like to be inside the experience of making ‘Personal Archive #1 [A work in progress]’, a collaborative exhibition of 11 panels\(^3\) that juxtaposed our individual memories inspired by objects drawn from our lives together. These collaboratively written artists’ pages offer an opportunity to reflect on the process and realisation of our exhibition, first shown at York St John University as part of the Cultures of Memory Symposium II, 2014. We have included five of the eleven panels from the exhibition in these pages.\(^4\)

‘Personal Archive #1 [A work in progress]’ followed our duet terrorists of the heart; a performance investigating our 30 years together as parents, partners, lovers, collaborators and pedagogues.\(^5\) Our work can be described as thinking from the debris of previous works. The tale we will tell about the making of ‘Personal Archive #1 “A Work in Progress” will be an act of memory about an ‘act of memory’: we will be looking at our lives together to see whether our recollection will spill over into cultural memory of coupledom. We speak for ourselves, but we offer this recollection as a kind of mnemonic space in which viewers and readers...
can bear witness and reflect upon their own process of remembering. We take our cue from Young’s observation about Holocaust memorials as spaces of memory:

*It is not to the Holocaust monuments as such that we turn for remembrance, but to ourselves within the reflective space they both occupy and open up. In effect, there can be no self-critical monuments, but only critical viewers.*

We are inviting our readers to become critical—even self-critical—witnesses as they ponder our story of making our archive. Our making is often ahead of our thinking; or rather our making is our thinking. In his book *Making* Tim Ingold asks the question “What then is the relationship between thinking and making?” He constructs the idea of the “art of inquiry” to consider the position of the artists and the development of thinking through making:

*The way of the craftsman, …, is to allow knowledge to grow from the crucible of our practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around us (Dormer 1994; Adamson 2007). This is to practice what I would like to call an art of inquiry.*

It is this art of inquiry that we are engaged in; our thinking will be a “to-ing and fro-ing” in time and understanding and will encompass individual memories, the process of creating the work, discovering tensions, gaps and mis-rememberings between our accounts, and the receptions that this exhibition provoked. We thus reflect on our learning that resulted from being in the process of making, as opposed to merely studying this process. We don’t need to know what it is we have made until we have made it, otherwise why make it? We are following a line of inquiry, the art of inquiry, of which this writing is but one part.

Two events led us to make ‘Personal Archives #1[A work in progress]’. The first occurred during the Cultures of Memory Symposium I, 2013—when after performing our auto/biographical duet *terrorists of the heart*, which we described as a ‘living will’, Professor Charles Morris III of Syracuse University thanked us for “opening up our personal archive”. His use of the word ‘archive’ to describe our ‘lived experience’ expanded our thinking about how and what our work/life was and could be. We began to look at the creative potential of objects, artefacts, and documents from the ‘archive’ of our embedded lives. As Matthew Reason explains, “archives are by conception and practice intended to preserve traces of the past, making available for future generations to access, study and, more broadly, simply to know”. A principal urge for us in the making of any work is to ‘simply know’. We have often said that we make work to understand the world we live in. However it was not until our second encounter when we visited the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships in October 2013, that we began to see how we might activate our familial objects and stories as an archive. At the museum we witnessed 100 unwanted objects, donated by individuals from across Europe, as evidence of past relationships that were no more. Consider some of the examples from the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships catalogued by Olinka Vištica & Dražen Grubišić:
(99) A wisp of hair (less than two months) Skopje Macedonia.
Well… a relationship very short, but mentally so tough and “crazy” that it brought me to a moment of complete madness… and I cut my hair and I lived without it for a long time and no one loved me… and I was happy.

(53) An iron (?) Stavanger, Norway.
This iron was used to iron my wedding suit. Now it is the only thing left.

(94) A Galatasaray T-shirt (July 1 – September 2, 2002) Zagreb, Croatia.
Short but bitter. “Uzan ama aci”. A summer fling which turned into a two-year agony.14

We were struck by how effectively the fusion of personal story and object contextualised this collection of disparate things that alone might have been viewed as mere junk. Of course past relationships are both the content and source of inspiration for the exhibition. Inspired by Vištica and Dražen’s own relationship dissolution and refusal to see their experience as ‘yet another defeat’, the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships was set up “as a safe place for both tangible and intangible heritage of our past love”.16 The exhibits in the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships are attempting to resist the cultural norms of seeing heartbreak as something to get over, dismiss, forget, and move on from. We began to place ourselves as self-critical viewers as we witnessed the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships and we wondered what a museum of unbroken relationships would look like. We asked ourselves the obvious questions, what objects and stories would we choose to speak of our relationship? And what might such a project have to say about love?
Figure 2. Exhibition image
board. Foetal scan.

On returning to York, influenced by the idea that our lives and possessions could be viewed as archives and by the memory of the exhibit encountered in the Museum of Br( )ken Relationships, we set about creating Personal Archive #1. We also looked to feminist art, which has long placed value on and given voice to lived experience. Scholars and artists such as Annette Kuhn, Bobby Baker, Marianne Hirsch and Joanne Leonard have all emphasised the interrelatedness and complexities of the familial, the private, and the domestic. Feminist analysis and documentation of the practices of everyday private experience suggest that representations of relationships are as ethically and politically consequential as any event played out in the public arena. Our interest in exploring further the personal detritus of our everyday lives acts as a continuation of the feminist project to give voice to alternative archives and partial truths.

We decided on some rules: there would be 28 objects, the number of years we had been a couple. We would take turns choosing an object. At this stage we were remembering the objects, not necessarily looking at them; later they would be assembled and displayed alongside the parallel texts. We would work, as we often do, without any veto over the other’s decisions, so we would write about each object separately. During the process of writing our texts it was important to us to keep our thinking/writing separate from each other, as we didn’t want our recollections or style of writing to influence the other. We would refer to

Lying on the examining table
Jelly cold smeared onto my swollen abdomen
The ultrasound device danced across my skin, heartbeat detected
Holding hands tightly, we focused on the tiny monitor as light and dark gradually became, head, neck, body, arm, hand
Crying now in the presence of our baby she turned her back on us and we laugh through our tears.

We saw this little person floating in space, looking at us, turning away from us - with attitude already. We were described as older parents, in the classes we were 20 years older than quite a few of the families. This child had come to us, later than medicine thought safe. The medical structure began to put its weight onto us, "the child could have Down’s syndrome," "we can’t be certain from the scan," "we need to take fluid from the amniotic," "of course this could cause a spontaneous miscarriage". It took us a while to realise that the only reason to have the amniotic test would be to then decide whether to have an abortion or not. We decided we would not take the test and we would love this little human being whatever it was to be.
each other as ‘she’ and ‘he’ to keep the composition as open as possible in order to leave space for the witness’s self-reflection. We proposed to select an object a week, giving ourselves 28 weeks to complete the writing, and we stuck to this schedule even if one or both of us failed to complete the writing task in any given week. It was not until all 28 objects had been chosen and written about that we began the process of actually gathering together the objects and it was at this point that we shared our parallel texts for the first time.

It was fascinating to discover what we each had to say about the objects and the memories triggered by them. Of course how much, or, invariably, how little we had to say about a particular object was itself revealing. Reading aloud our parallel texts to each other, we realised that sometimes an object had been chosen in order for us to speak about pivotal moments in our relationship — our proposal, wedding, the birth of our daughter and so on — as a way of charting our lives together and the art we made together. These were often favourite stories that we frequently told in the ‘making of ourselves’ as a couple and family. However, in some accounts, glaring factual discrepancies highlighted how little was actually known, cared about, understood and assumed; and perceived value judgements, silences and contestations had an unexpected destabilising effect on our sense of selfhood and coupledom. We had not realised how each of us had truly felt about events in our lives whose memories were manifested by these objects and the stories attached to them. We had thought we were solid, but in actuality we were much more fluid.
We realised that the very gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions — which the parallel texts exposed — held a promise of ‘truth’ that no unified and/or refined account of our past, ‘the past’, could possibly deliver. As the American art critic David Frankel reminds us in reference to the art of the Poiriers, “the human soul is made of memory and forgetfulness; these constitute being”. It was important for the integrity of the work to leave these mis-rememberings unchanged and to acknowledge them in our original artists’ statement accompanying the exhibition. We wrote,

Whilst agreeing with Kuhn when she asserts that, ‘[T]elling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves’, (Kuhn: 1995; p.2) we are aware that this idea is problematised within embedded lives. Lives in which time lived together out-weighs time lived apart. Slippages and gaps of memory provoke doubt, contestation, frustration, and, an unsettling feeling of an unknowable and unstable sense of the past and the present.

We did not edit any of the written texts from the moment we had first written them, one draft full of grammatical and syntactical errors, inconsistencies and complexity. The work relied on us being ‘truthful’ without the benefit of artifice. We had wanted to exhibit our actual objects in vitrines, but unfortunately the gallery did not have access to any and we did not want to use shelving. Inspired
by the works of Kuhn, Hirsch and Leonard, we decided to conceive of our own objects as photographs. The restricted wall space meant that we were limited to what we could exhibit; therefore we made a selection of 11 parallel texts/objects. The purpose of choosing and composing with the 11 parallel texts/objects was to create a series of juxtapositions, as in a collage, as opposed to the creation of a narrative with a subtext. In recognition of this reduced selection that finally formed the show we added *A Work in Progress* to the title of the exhibition and hoped that the process of choosing an object to write from would be a yearly occurrence. All the objects were photographed and made the same size and spatially took up a unified central position on each of the boards, sandwiched between the parallel texts and arranged in a consistent relationship, Jules’ text–object–David’s text (see figures).

The project is not about photography or the objects although it is important that they belong to us and are drawn from our domestic familial lives together, as they provide a stimulus for us to individually reflect and write about our remembered lives together. As Vištica says, “an object enables the fusion between immutable reality, the object itself that can trigger memory, and the very mutable character of a personal story, which has the alternate power to sublimate memory.” And it is this mutability, the shifting points between the here and now, the there and then, the elsewhere and elsewhen, and the partial truths that our failing memories belie that offer us a site from which to consider the gaps, mistakes, and silences.

When we began this project we hoped that our texts would be candid and unselfconscious and that they would resonate with our audience. We were interested to discover what individual narratives would tell us about archives and embedded lives, as at this stage we had not really understood the extent to which they would reveal something about, and to, us. These revelations [re]affirm us as coupled individuals as we bear testimony to each other’s life. Yet they also provoke questions, such as “how could you have not known that”? and what are the implications of not knowing ‘that’ for our sense of coupledom?
Working from inside the experience of being a couple, as “archaeologists” we wanted to find out what makes a relationship ‘unbroken’. We were interested in excavating the memories associated with particular objects — whether debris, clutter, or treasure — in order to remember something about how these objects found a place in our lives and to ponder what our individual memories might tell us collectively about embedded lives, memory, coupledom, and love. By engaging in what Ingold terms the “art of inquiry”, the project offered us the opportunity of knowing from the inside of an experience, to “think through the observation rather than after it…” We are constantly shifting our perspectives from the makers of Personal Archives #1 A Work in Progress, and the writers about the work, in a relentless parallax effect. So reflecting on the work we discovered that our collection of treasured objects was unremarkable and appeared just as tatty and random as the unwanted items donated to the Museum of Broken Relationships.

We also found our objects and parallel texts unequivocally place the viewer/reader in the domestic, familial, mundane, shared, co-embedded lives of a single couple, allowing a sense of who we are as individuals within a relationship to clearly emerge. The juxtaposition of our individual texts provides an expanded auto/biographical narrative and highlights the incongruities of constructing a (shared) life story through inconsistent fragments. A life lived together, in tandem, on top
of each other, over the shoulder, under the thumb, watching each other’s back, eyes in the back of her head, I have my eye on you, he has selective deafness, hand in hand and by the balls. It is in our collected archive of memories that we graphically encounter mis-remembrances, gaps and slippages.

“The archive”, contends Reason, is made from the selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and just ended up there... In the Archive, you cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptiness, at what is not catalogued.

From what was imagined to be a coherent shared life, we had our own “mad fragmentation” of stuff: a foetal scan, a lost letter from a worried father, a world war two helmet, a music box, a painting, a print that was hidden, a family photo, a wedding album, World War II binoculars, and a stuffed toy named ‘rabbit de niro’.
“Feminist studies and memory studies both presuppose that the present is defined by a past that is constructed and contested”.25 By opening up our personal archive through autobiographical stories attached to and ignited by our personal objects, we began to actively participate in the transmission of memory and through this dual act of remembering we clearly drew questions about the reliability of personal narratives. Through the accumulation of our individual juxtaposed accounts of our embedded life experience we exposed the flaws and cracks in both individual personal memory and presumed shared experience, collective memory. When the witness to the work and/or the reader of these pages is offered the opportunity to negotiate the differences in our accounts of our shared history, there is a shifting of perspective. This shifting engenders self-doubt and contestation in equal measure, providing the witness with “alternative ways in which truthfulness might be accessed and used”.26 The gaps, misunderstandings and errors offer the opportunity to the witness/reader to position herself or himself as a self-critical viewer, asking them to remember and to [re]imagine their own lives.

We had many conversations about the discrepancies presented in our accounts and indeed between our accounts; these discrepancies varied from small details to wholesale errors. Despite the urge to tidy up, refine and make complete we realised it was in these very contested spaces in our lives that the project actually situated itself. The objects/texts were merely the device to expose the absences, lacunae and lossness that perhaps speak most eloquently about coupledom and love.

Endnotes

1. Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 76
2. See *Performance Research Journal* for other examples.
3. We are showing 5 here throughout these pages.
4. All photographs were taken by Jen Todman from York St John University.

13. Turkish for — “but the pain goes on”.

14. The pages of the catalogue are not numbered, after the introduction “OBJECT’S TITLE (length and/or dates of broken relationship determined by the object’s donor), place of origin. Donator’s explanation of the relationship and/or object”.


17. Anne and Patrick Poirier — installation artists working as a ‘couple’


20. Jen Todman took all the photographs of the objects for *Personal Archive #1*.


23. Tatty — early 16th century originally Scots, in the sense ‘tangled, matted, shaggy’


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**Biographical Note**

Jules Dorey Richmond (BA, MFA, FHEA) & David Richmond (BA, MA, SFHEA) are both Senior Lecturers in Theatre at York St John University (YSJU) and have been collaborating partners for 30 years. They work together to catalogue documents and to make performance events and critical writings. Their long-term collaboration takes their performance work into new and diverse territory; they have performed in theatres, galleries, clubs, streets, quarries, and rivers throughout the UK, Europe, and parts of the Far East and the USA.

Jules Dorey Richmond is a sculptor who makes books, video installations, and performances. She is fiercely committed to making work drawn from the autobiographical - framing and connecting what impels her fine art practice to a larger field of feminist thinking and wondering. For the past 20 years (at YSJU and prior to that at Royal Conservatoire of Scotland formerly Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama) Jules has been teaching a module on autobiographical solo performance — Performance of the self.

David Richmond is a Senior Teaching Enhancement Fellow at YSJU. He is a founding member of Pants Performance Association (1989–present) which was awarded the Barclays New Stages Award for Experimental Theatre in 1992. His research on memory, place, and performance can be traced in both his solo projects and collaborative practice with Jules Dorey Richmond. For the past 10 years David has been running a module ‘artist as witness’ which begins with a ‘secular pilgrimage’ to Auschwitz and ends with a collaborative ensemble performance.

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