

Abstract

Memory has long been talked of in terms of imprint and impression, terms fundamental to the language of printmaking. The sense of the mind as a receptive surface upon which experience is imprinted is related to classical metaphors of memory, in particular the Platonic account of memory as an impression made in wax. The dominant influence of this model in Western thought has not only informed thinking about memory itself, but has also shaped us culturally. This is evident in the way in which we privilege those objects, such as the photograph, that seem to embody the metaphor of impression.

The problematic nature of this metaphor is apparent when we reflect on the binary it establishes: if memory is deemed the preservation of the past in material form, whether in an object or within the brain, then by extension, forgetting is associated with the decay of that material form. But at the heart of this dichotomy of presence/absence there is a paradox: if forgetting entails a true erasure, how is it that we can be aware that we have forgotten? An alternative view of memory can be found within the work of philosophers Paul Ricoeur and Henri Bergson, and in contemporary neuroscience.

Culturally this metaphor of memory-as-impression has been challenged by artists such as Tacita Dean, Christian Boltanski, and Paul Ogier. Through an often-subversive use of artforms that appear native to this metaphor – print and photo media – they each engage with memory outside of this false binary. Memory is seen as something complex, dynamic and fragmentary, recollected through an active process of putting together, of re-membering. Similarly, forgetting is not singularly destructive, but also a thing of latency, possibility and potential. These artists question the ways in which art is able to relate to and embody the past.

Untying the Knot: Memory and Forgetting in Contemporary Print Work

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In attempting to understand and articulate the complexities of memory, we often turn to metaphorical language. Words such as 'imprint' and 'impression', terms reminiscent of the fundamental language of printmaking, create a sense of the past remaining visible in traces left behind, of experience literally leaving its mark upon us. The pervasiveness of this motif of the impression is not coincidental or recent – it is part of the intellectual inheritance passed to us from the classical world. It has continued to inform and direct thinking on memory to the present day, but its cultural influence extends much further, as is evident in the privileging of those objects, such as the photograph, which appear to embody this metaphor. As seductive as it is, the motif of memory-as-imprint is not unproblematic, but neither is it unchallenged. Tacita Dean, Christian Boltanski and Paul Ogier are three artists who employ print and photographic media – forms with a familial relationship to this metaphor of the impression – to both undermine it and to offer alternative conceptualisations of memory and forgetting.

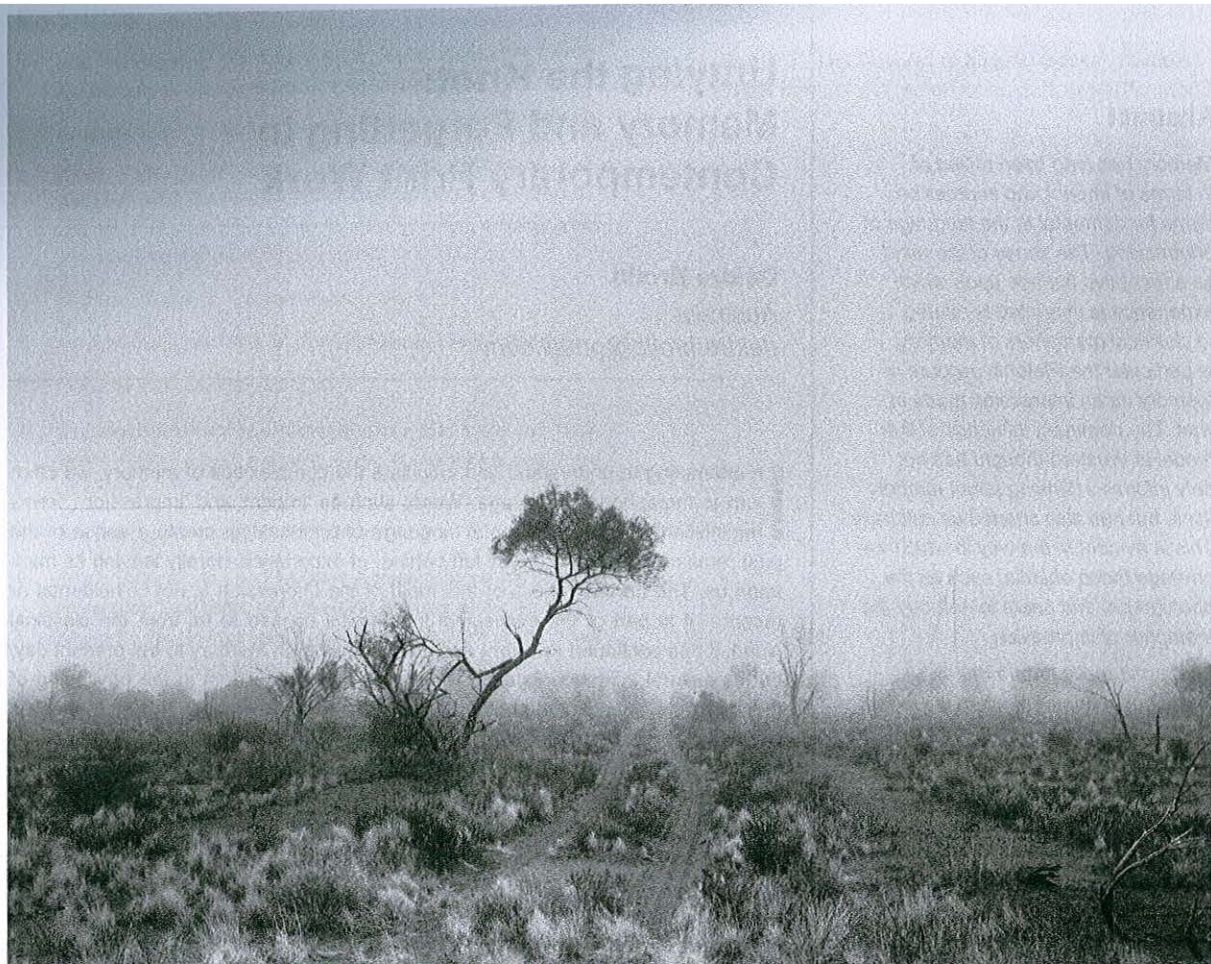
The sense of the mind as a receptive surface upon which experience is imprinted is an expression of early and enduring metaphors of memory that have their roots buried deep in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where memory is conceptualised as a print made upon the soul. Socrates explains:

Now I want you to suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we have in our souls a block of wax... We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember [*mnēmoneusa*] among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints [marks, *sēmeia*] of signet rings (Ricoeur 2004, 9).¹

This metaphor of the wax tablet is varied and persistent; it is revisited by Aristotle in *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, and appears in the *Ad Herennium*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, and in Quintillian among many others.²

In this foundational classical metaphor, the original perception is stamped into memory as a ring into wax, leaving both an imprint or physical mark (or *tupos*), along with an impression (or *eikōn*), which is the recognition of the now absent ring (Ricoeur 2004, 13, 14, 51, 507n). The *tupos* represents the storage of memory, the *eikōn* the recollected memory image – the 'present representation of an absent thing' (7). The implication of this metaphor is that without the imprint, no recollection is possible: 'whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget [*epilelēsthai*] and do not know' (9).³

Imprint and impression, trace and recollection, are deemed inseparable: without the corresponding physical trace, no memory is possible. Paul Ricoeur has noted that 'the entire modern problematic of 'mnemonic traces' is, in fact, heir to this ancient alliance between *eikōn* and *tupos*' (Ricoeur 2004, 51). This defining principle, evident throughout the historical literature on memory, from Hooke and Descartes (Sutton 2003) to Freud (Whitehead 2009, 93–100), continues into contemporary research. Though it takes various forms, John Sutton (2003) writes that 'this idea that a "trace" acquired in past experience somehow "represents" that experience,



▲ Figure 15.1

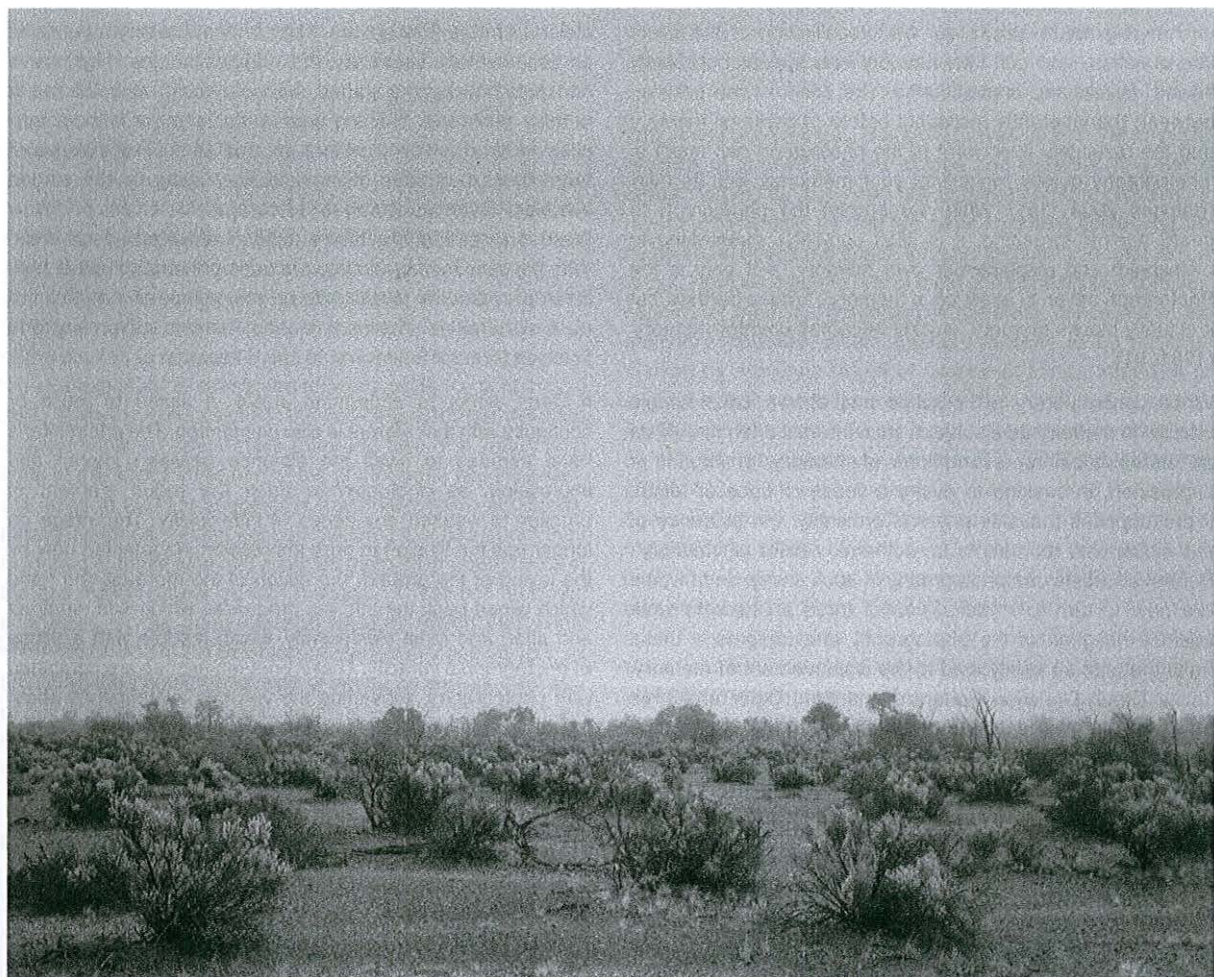
Figure 15.1: Paul Ogier,
One Tree (Emu Field
atomic test site) South
Australia, 2010.
Dimensions variable.
Reproduced courtesy of
Paul Ogier.

Figure 15.2: Paul Ogier,
Kittens (Emu Field
atomic test site) South
Australia, 2010.
Dimensions variable.
Reproduced courtesy of
Paul Ogier.

or carries information about it... has been the dominant view of memory in modern philosophy of mind, and it is assumed in much work on memory in cognitive science.¹⁴

Though theories of memory still tend to favour the notion of some form of engram or memory trace in the brain (Sutton 2003), contemporary research has moved towards dynamic, distributed models which emphasise the plasticity of memory, where traces are neither static nor deterministic, but responsive and flexible (Sutton 2003). Daniel Schacter has argued that these fragments do not constitute memory itself, but rather form 'a new, emergent entity – the recollective experience' when they combine with a memory cue (1996, 69–70; Rose 2003, 104), which suggests that memory is an active process rather than one of passive storage. Indeed, the act of remembering is now seen as a creative not reproductive process (Sutton 2003). Jacques Chevalier has emphasised the incomplete and malleable nature of memory, remarking that 'things we remember and the way we remember them are shaped by evolving frames of cognitive and emotional reference' (2002, 31).

So rather than a static relationship of imprint and impression, we have instead a distributed model of memory, where traces are dispersed and fragmentary, and recollection is literally a re-membering, an active putting-together that weaves manifold threads into a process of remembrance that is inflected too by the habits, needs, perceptions and state of mind of the present. Through our interactions with them, the myriad places and



▲ Figure 15.2

things we encounter also provide us with suggestive cues that further activate and enliven the processes of remembering, as connections are formed and dissolved in response to our interaction with the world. The functioning of memory, then, cannot be considered in isolation from the interaction between body, mind and the world itself.

What then are we to make of those things that we deem to be objects or carriers of memory in the world around us? Just as the metaphor of the wax tablet has informed conceptions of memory within the mind or brain, so to has it influenced the way we memorialise, encouraging us to entrust our memory to objects, assuming that they can carry the past for us, that they will form the architecture of our own personal memory theatres (Forty 1999, 2; Melion and Küchler 1991, 3). More than any other object, it is the photograph which is so prized as an object of memory, appearing as it does to capture and hold fleeting moments of the past for us. It is our safety net, our memory knot, the object which most reassures us that the past is not lost. The alchemical receptiveness of photography relies on the existence of a referent to form its apparition of the real. As Roland Barthes explained, the connection made between the subject, the lens and the photograph goes beyond that of sight; it is of the order of touch (Barthes 1981, 80–1; Sontag 1979, 154; Batchen 2004, 31).

This sense of touch, of an image having been physically imprinted upon the photographic surface by contact with the

subject, defines the photograph as an index (Batchen 2003, 193). The privileged position of the photograph, both as evidence and as memory, is related to this indexical nature (193–4, Batchen 2004, 31; Barthes 1981, 87–89): the photograph becomes a correlate of the world itself, and verifies through this verisimilitude. Blind to the object, we see only the referent, a seemingly direct glimpse of the past generated from the photograph's physical contact with the past moment which inspires a sort of belief in the viewer. We are encouraged to trust photographs: swayed by the evidence, the sense of authenticity which arises from a physical connection, a moment of contiguity with the world they depict.

Though it is seen to be analogous to memory, in fact the photograph is akin not to memory itself, but rather the metaphorical wax tablet of memory, resembling both the recollected memory-image, or impression, and its site of storage, or wax imprint. Unlike the vagaries of personal memory, the photograph, in itself, does not 'forget'. To repeat Barthes: 'in it nothing can be refused or transformed' (1981, 91). It presents a moment permanently 'fixed' and it is precisely this quality of stasis which allows it to perform a preservative function.

It is because of these characteristics of fixity and stasis that the photograph presents such a challenge to the integrity of memory. When confronted with a photograph of our past – an imprint taken of a moment, held captive from time – the exactitude of the copy speaks to its truthfulness, while its

unchanging nature draws our own recollection of the event into question, and our own memory can appear hopelessly flawed, fallible and untrustworthy. The effect of the collision between the inherently malleable nature of personal memory and the resolutely fixed form of the photograph can result in 'photography quietly replac[ing] your memories with its own' (Batchen 2004, 15).⁵ While we entrust the photograph to guard against forgetting, it is itself complicit, threatening to overwhelm and displace our own memory; 'not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory', argues Barthes 'but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes counter-memory' (1981, 91).

While contemporary art practice has shown considerable interest in memory as a subject, such interest often manifests as metaphorical representations of memory, of imprint or impression. In seeking to evoke a sense of trace or touch, it presupposes that this physical proximity, the evidence of this closeness, represents an authentic record or 'memory'. But not all artists use photography in such a way, and I would like now to turn to a discussion of three artists who work against the grain of the photograph, who undermine these traits that can so easily lead to the displacement of memory. Tacita Dean, Christian Boltanski and Paul Ogier are three artists whose work inhabits the interstice between print and photography, who circumvent metaphorical ideas of memory to instead engage with memory as evocation – with all the uncertainty that that entails – and forgetting as more than a mere absence.

In choosing these artists, my intention was to uncover ways in which it is possible to re-imagine a relationship between photography, print and memory that was not bound by this Platonic notion, and to examine how these forms might work to be evocative of memory rather than merely illustrative. In various ways, these artists undermine the troublesome assumption of photography as memory trace, while also discovering new ways to spark personal remembering. In some cases, print processes emerge as a sort of guerilla aspect in the work – a means of infiltrating and undermining the integrity of the photograph. Using various strategies, they cause us to doubt the photograph: its verisimilitude, its claim to truthfulness and its stasis. In doing so, we see the photograph less as a replica of memory, than as a provocation towards it.

Tacita Dean

In her use of the found photograph, British artist Tacita Dean resists the dogmatic nature of these objects as evidence, and instead coaxes out the more unruly, associative qualities they contain. In the 2002 series *The Russian Ending* Dean took a collection of early twentieth-century postcards sourced from flea markets (Dietrich 2002, 49) and re-imagined them as stills from unmade films. Dean has referenced the marketing techniques of early Danish cinema, in which different endings would be added to appeal to various audiences – typically, bleak and catastrophic for Russian audiences, or cheerful for Americans for example (Godfrey 2005, 100; Dietrich 2002, 51–2). To these dramatic depictions of funerals, shipwrecks and disaster, Dean has added a white chalky scrawl of instructions, directions to a non-existent film-maker, which draws attention to the artifice of photography, the choices, framing and individual viewpoint that inflect every instant

stolen from the flow of time. They undermine any naturalistic or documentary sensibility the original images might have had: they now appear staged, and everything within the frame is *mise en scène*. Nothing seems incidental or without purpose within the 'scene' before us, and as such any sense of truthfulness has been dismantled. In playing up the staged qualities, Dean encourages us to look for clues, to follow these directorial interventions to blind alleys and dead ends. With the purposefully ambiguous and open-ended use of text, Dean provides the viewer with an abundance of material, but no firm narrative architecture, and there is never any one finalised form for the viewer to strive towards.

If Dean works to undermine stasis, a sense of touch or contiguity with the referent is also dismantled. The printmaker's hand intrudes to swell the distance between imprint and impression, as photogravure adds the rogue element of process to weaken any sense of indexicality. The image no longer has the illusion of pure impression, augmented now by the laying of the ground, the action of the mordant, the hand which wiped back the ink, the processes which add, subtract and alter; and most significantly, which meddle with a sense of photographic veracity. These print techniques are combined with photography, subverting the viewer's assumptions about the latter's verisimilitude, and undermining the very notion of a truthful impression, which threatens always to overpower the memory work of the individual.⁶

The artist's book *Floh* (German for 'flea') contains the reproductions of 163 photographs Dean collected from flea markets throughout America and Europe (Godfrey 2005, 91). Though carefully reproduced, these photographs maintain the haphazard randomness so much a part of the flea market. They are a mix of colour and black-and-white, images dating from various periods in time and clearly from many different places. They appear to exhibit no narrative ordering, and are not supplemented by any explanatory text – keeping, as Dean has said, 'the silence of the flea market, the silence of when I found them, the silence of the found object' (Godfrey 2005, 92). In her selection of images, Dean provides the viewer with no specific narrative direction: a family playing with a frisbee beside the sea, two nineteenth-century sepia-toned portraits, two identical cars parked side-by-side in the snow, their proud owners posing beside them. There is no didactic path to follow here, but rather an openness to potential, to multiple narratives: they suggest a known ordinariness, a recognisable oddness, a sense of stirring recognition.

Mark Godfrey (2005, 104) has commented that in their random anonymity, these found photographs bring a familiarity that does not challenge the viewer's own fragile recollections. Dean herself says that she has 'always believed that art works best when it responds to the autobiography of the viewer' (115) and Godfrey contends that *Floh*, with its motley assortment of everyday images, works in just such a way: 'found photographs emerge as magical in their appearance and in their fate, as superstitious, as charming – as democratic – because they are cherished like precious objects. Layered with time, they trigger memories not of the people they show, but from the people who look at them' (119).

Like Barthes, Geoffrey Batchen has argued that 'contrary to popular opinion, photography does not enhance memory – involuntary, physically embracing and immediate memory –

but rather replaces it with images – images that are historical, coherent, informational' (2004, 94). However, if we can avoid seeing through the photograph to the referent, ignoring its mimicry of the past, but instead see the materiality of the photograph itself, Batchen argues, there exists the possibility for true involuntary recollection (94). Such a focus on materiality is an intrinsic part of *Flo*. Many of the photographs that Dean has selected reveal their material nature, prising apart the photographic object from the scene it depicts, and giving back to the photograph an existence other than the one it replicates. The moment of taking the photograph, the click of the shutter, is revealed in the blurriness of some images, in the overexposure of others; the possible evidence of chemical spills reveals the processing in the darkness of the lab; the trace of fingerprints on one surface (over the face of a young boy) hints at the affectionate use of the photograph; two scrawled-out faces in another suggests a much less warm encounter. Finally, no longer having enough meaning to those whom they belonged or those who had acquired them, their appearance at the flea market shows us their disposal.⁷ These rich histories, suggested by the many material residues which they show evidence of, add to the mnemonic potential of these objects, by asserting the photographs' way of being, as well as their way of being used. These objects are thus seen to embody traces of their own history and, in revealing their material traces, they thicken their possible resonances.

Christian Boltanski

Imprecision, doubt, distance: these are the strategies Boltanski employs to remove the certainty of the photograph. In doing so Boltanski moves away from a sense of the photograph as a container for holding the specific impression or trace, or as a reliable historical document.⁸ A series of work developed from a found school photograph is representative of his approach.⁹ For the artist's book *Le Lycée Chases: Classe Terminale du Lycée Chases en 1931: Castelgasse, Vienna* (1987), as well as the later portfolio of 24 photogravure prints *Gymnasium Chases* (1991), Boltanski made use of the final year class photograph of the students of a Jewish high school in Vienna in 1931. He isolated and enlarged the image of each student and then deliberately set out to introduce ambiguity into that most valued and treasured marker of identity – the face – by progressively wearing down the image. As with Dean, materiality comes into play. Boltanski has removed any lingering vestiges of indexicality from the photographs by repeatedly re-photographing or copying them. The surface becomes slowly abraded, revealing the cumulative marks of reproduction, often to the point where the faces are reduced to luminous white areas – cheekbones, chins – and the dark hollows of eyes and mouth. We lose the possibility of recognising particular people: they remain specific but the image is no longer identifiable. When they can no longer be viewed as evidence or document, they could be any one of us, anyone we know. The image becomes general enough to allow all of us in.

Susan Tallman (1991, 20) has noted that the transition from photograph to photogravure in the *Gymnasium Chases* portfolio has lent a sense of reverence to these images, but it has also widened further the distance between the image and its original referent. Where the repeated copying of the image

dismantled our ignorance of the intervention of the camera, the press, the photocopier, the medium of photogravure brings to our awareness further processes, further change.

With these worn images, Boltanski leaves us with the physical markers of forgetting, signs of time and distance. It is not a casual forgetting, however, but a potent one; it reactivates memory, reminding us that we have forgotten something. In doing so he opens the space for a reintroduction of that which is lost. Here we come to one of most confounding and complex aspects of memory. Forgetting is generally conceived of as memory's opposite: where memory is seen to be positive, marked by presence (albeit of an absent thing), forgetting is aligned with the negative, with emptiness, with true absence. As Ricoeur has noted: 'forgetting is experienced as an attack on the reliability of memory. An attack, a weakness, a lacuna' (2004, 413). Here we are inevitably drawn back to Plato once again: if memory is deemed the preservation of the past in a material form, whether in an object, or memory trace within the brain, by extension forgetting is associated with the decay of that material form (Forty 1999, 4; Ricoeur 2004, 9, 51). This notion of forgetting, as the decay or erasure of a materially stored memory, inevitably works towards the establishment of a binary in which memory is characterised by presence and forgetting by absence. But there is a paradox at the heart of this dichotomy: if forgetting entails a true erasure, how can we be aware that we have forgotten?

An alternative conception of memory and forgetting may be found within the work of Henri Bergson. The model of recollection which Bergson proposes is one where forgetting is not characterised by erasure, or absence, but rather latency. As Ricoeur explains: 'forgetting then designates the unperceived character of the perseverance of memories, their removal from the vigilance of consciousness' (2004, 440). From this then we can derive a second conceptualisation of forgetting. In addition to the notion of forgetting as the negative or antithesis of memory we can also discern a positive form, a 'reserve of forgetting' that is part of the work of memory (417). It is within this paradox of remembering and forgetting that Boltanski works. In drawing attention to absence, we become aware of the thing forgotten, latent memory is made active, and erasure is made incomplete. Both conceptions of forgetting are also evident within the work of Paul Ogier, who, like Boltanski, uses this conception of forgetting as latent memory to draw attention to and problematise the notion of forgetting as erasure.

Paul Ogier

Paul Ogier¹⁰ displays a somewhat hybrid approach to his work, photographing with vintage lenses on large-format film cameras, and digitally printing the work using carbon-based pigments. For his series *10 Miles* Ogier photographed the residual traces of British atomic tests in Australia. Using historical research and declassified documents, the artist equipped himself with an understanding of the conditions, locations and background of the tests. Underneath the resulting images is an awareness of the fact of colonisation: the hidden knowledge that Australia represented a dark surrogate, offering for the tests an equivalent distance as that from London to the Russian Front, and a wilderness that was, to the colonial mind, isolated, secret and empty.

Both *One Tree* and *Kittens* (named after the esoteric British name given to that series of tests)¹¹ were taken at Emu Field in South Australia in 2010. Knowledge infuses these works, but they are not part of a documentary or historical tradition. They shun the impartial view, steeped in both the then and the now they are thick with after-effects and repercussions. Using early modernist lenses, his images visually quote the season and timing of the original detonations. The photographs reverberate with echoes of the other observers, those charged with documenting the blast on film, all from a 'safe' distance from ground zero: the road visible in *One Tree* was built for the original test photographers.¹² The low horizon and wide sky force our view upwards towards what is no longer there but is still everywhere: the blast and the fallout.

But if we look closer, what do we see? Whatever it is we expect, it is not there. *One Tree* hints at the detonation itself, and the 'black cloud' which subsequently drifted over Aboriginal settlements. The foliage is dispersed upward into the air, a fog is hugging the ground like falling dust, but the land itself seems strangely busy. This is a not a post-apocalyptic wasteland. While the tree itself was probably witness to the event, holding within its fibrous cells a molecular record, there seems to be much that is new clinging to life below it, huddled around a dirt road. Similarly, *Kittens* shows a gently ridged soil dotted abundantly with vegetation, all ballooning outward and upward from their lowly stations. These images raise questions in us. What am I not seeing? What did I expect to see?

It's in asking these questions that we begin to intuit the parts of the story we do not know. Objects and equipment were removed, holes dug to bury things. The land was scoured. Contaminated soil was tilled, topsoil laid over it and sown with seed. Roads and paths were erased or disrupted; there are tracks that now lead nowhere. Ogier draws attention to the systematic and deliberate effacement of traces within the landscape – an erasure that was intended to remove evidence more than toxicity. While they hold knowledge of the event, these images also draw out the bitterness, showing us absence to confirm that we are right to think we are not seeing everything. When we are attuned to the sight of erasure, we sense forgetting as latency, as a potent and compelling knowledge that means the removal of trace, which constitutes a profound forgetting, has failed. This knowledge – this reserve of forgetting outlined by Ricoeur – draws attention towards the acts of erasure, and thereby nullifies them. An act of erasure cannot achieve its end – oblivion – if we are made aware of the act itself. Ogier shows us nothing where we expect something, and something where we expect nothing.

In summary, then, the Platonic metaphor that compares memory to an imprint left in wax is both seductive and enduring, and that metaphor finds an analogue in assumptions about the memory-value of photography. In fact, however, photography resembles the metaphor more than it does memory itself. Subverting such assumptions about photography and memory, Tacita Dean, Christian Boltanski and Paul Ogier work with both print and photographic techniques to engage with memory as evocation – as a re-membering which involves the viewer rather than an imprint which the past leaves upon the work. Further to this, for Boltanski and Ogier, memory as re-membering also involves asking questions about forgetting, a notion that represents not mere erasure (as the metaphor of the wax tablet would imply), but something much more complex, productive and potent.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

- 1 Ricoeur's translation has been used here for its attention to resonances of imprint and impression in the original. See also Plato 1961, 897.
- 2 For more on this metaphor in Aristotle see Draalsma 2000, 25–27; Ricoeur 2004, 16–17, 20; Sorabji 2004, 50–51, 80–82; Whitehead 2009, 29–30. In the *Ad Herennium*, Yates 1992, 20–23; Whitehead 2009, 29. In Cicero, Whitehead 2009, 31; Yates 1992, 34. In Quintillian, Whitehead 2009, 31–32.
- 3 cf. Plato 1961, p. 897.
- 4 For a full discussion of the diversity of views on the subject see Sutton 2003; Senor 2005. For Henri Bergson's refutation of the theory, see Bergson 1991, 117–118.
- 5 See also Barthes 1981, 91; Batchen 2003.
- 6 For a discussion on the mnemonic possibilities of *The Russian Ending*, see Brollo 2007, 161–162.
- 7 cf. Godfrey 2005, 105–110.
- 8 For more on doubt and Boltanski's use of misleading evidence, see Brollo 2007, 133, 140n, 198–203, 205.
- 9 We see the same strategy employed across the related installation pieces *Autel du Lycée Chases* (1986–87) as well as within the artist's book *Kaddish* (1998), for example.
- 10 Based on conversations with the artist (2010–11).
- 11 This series of 'smaller bomb tests' took place at Emu Field, and were continued subsequently at Maralinga.
- 12 Ogier observes that 'safe' distances were (and are) disputed, and that the distances involved varied significantly. His working title '10 Miles' refers to one such measure, but at Emu Field, the observation teams were four miles from ground zero.

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