

Chapter 8

Memories of the Cruel Radiance: The Lost Art of Autopathography

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ABSTRACT

The chapter engages with a specific photograph as well as a computationally based project about the representation of missing childhood memories. Over several years, the author created sensory systems deploying mild electric shocks and feedback loops, which altered an image in ‘real time’. The focus of the work is an exploration of the notion that memory is not an exact replica of events but is pieced together in a dynamic process that is strongly influenced not only by past experiences but by social and political contexts, by photography, and by other media. The practice aims to establish a theoretical framework for embodied autobiography while also creating installations that have communicated auto-biographical content via sensory photography technologies, which the author calls autopathography. It should be emphasised that although the author’s own memories (and one family photograph) are the focus for this work, it is not a discourse on individualism, exorcism, or ahistoricism.

INTRODUCTION

Like many people I have gaps in my memories, and thus in the symbolic narrative of my life. Before the age of nine my childhood memories are largely without detail. By and large those years may therefore be described (at least by convention) as ‘lost’. As a visual artist and critical technologist, the notion of such an aporia or cognitive deficit is particularly problematic. In the absence of representation what, if anything, can be retrieved, and what exactly can be communicated to others? In a wider philosophical sense such questions of representation and stable meaning have a high degree of cultural urgency. Sturken (1998) urges us to examine the “cultural coding of forgetting as a loss or negation of experience” (Sturken, 1998, p. 105). Sturken’s question “what is an experience that is not remembered?” (Sturken, 1998, p. 107) is one of the fundamental riddles of my own childhood. Sturken asks us to question the

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presumption that unmemorised experiences should be framed as a “loss of self”, and a “loss of subjectivity” (Sturken, 1998, p. 119). These are critical questions in the context of my own research into amnesia and photographic representation and performativity.

In pursuing this work, which deploys self-electrocution and sensor technologies, I have arguably set up a double bind in which Sontag’s (1966) critique of photography as an act of potential violence confronts Linfield’s claims for the immanent solidarity and agency of photography which confronts trauma. These ideas resonate in some ways with the investigative practices of Schuppli (2020) and Weizman et al’s *Forensic Architecture* (2017), positioning photography as politically and materially agential. In light of these tensions the following chapter engages with two specific photographs as well as a computationally based project about the representation of ‘missing’ childhood memories. The focus of the work is an exploration of the idea that memory is not an exact replica of events but is pieced together in a dynamic process that is strongly influenced not only by past experiences but by social contexts, including photography and co-embodied responses. This may seem like stating the obvious, but the idea of stable representation arguably underpins the project of Big Data and constructs such as ‘emotion detection’, not to mention the myriad forms of *a priori* categorisation implicated in machine learning and its associated technologies such as facial recognition. Nail’s (2019) *Theory of the Image* is a refutation of stability, which still needs to be asserted, but such counter constructs, of affect, embodiment and new materialism are also subject to critique, for example, Weheliye (2014) and Mbembe (2019), who I will also draw into this discussion. Over the next several pages I would like to explain how my work (which might be called arts-based research) attempts to establish a theoretical framework for embodied autobiography while also creating installations that have communicated auto-biographical content via sensory photography technologies, which I call *autopathography*.

It is important to emphasise that although my own memories (and one family photograph) are the focus for this work, it is not a discourse on individualism, exorcism or ahistoricism. A core conceptual focus of this chapter is the idea that memory is not located in individuals, objects, or social systems alone, but is spread across intricate social, technological, cognitive, and biological processes. The chapter therefore aims to develop an intra-disciplinary practice-based focus for the exploration of memory and photography, while also addressing the fallibility of realist correspondence. As McQuillan writes: “a central weakness in scientific thinking is the understanding of objectivity. Prevailing standards for objectivity are too weak to identify culture-wide assumptions that shape selection of specific scientific procedures as good ones in the first place” (McQuillan, 2018, p. 264). The objective of this chapter is to explain how and why my photographic practices are not concerned with realist correspondence or unsituated knowledge, but rather a collection of processes which illuminate the entanglement of technologies and technological structures with the politics of subjectivity and representation. Such an entanglement is a rejection of the cruel radiance introduced in the next section.

Background

The term “Cruel Radiance” is a quote from James Agee and Walker Evans (1960), for whom it seems to valorise a humanist neutrality of vision while also evoking the punctum (or puncturing wound) of loss which Barthes also associates with photographs. For Linfield (2012), it is a reaction against Sontag’s critique of the implied voyeur, cruelly observing the violence and misogyny of certain photographic traditions (1966). While acknowledging that many of Sontag’s insights ‘remain sharp and true’, it is Sontag, Linfield writes:

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