

## Reveries; Selves

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*Sipping his tea in the Canvas Gallery, Dorsey explained that we exist primarily in the stories we tell of ourselves and that others tell of us. Sometimes we hear these stories directly. Sometimes they are overheard. And sometimes they are unspoken but narrated through the movements, expressions and gestures of those around us.*

Existence is social and identity is relational. We exist in relation to others, and in relation to our past and to our imagined future selves. There is a difference between the seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, sensational body that remembers the past, and the past that is actively constructed in conscious thought, in words. Body memory is more than muscle memory. It is the physical and psychical viscera that are the substrate of *lived* memory, distinct from, but essential to, *told* memory. It is a tricky, elusive, slippery thing to capture, to evoke or to provoke. Our active, chattering, categorizing conscious minds quickly turn visiting and revisiting sensations into stories.

The most banal examples of this wisp memory often go unnoticed, taken for granted. But sometimes they force their way into consciousness. It happened to me last night; I heard Dave Brubeck's "Take Five". Slight muscle tightening. Attention focus shift. Then the "aha" moment as I remembered a night decades ago. A night that until those first notes traveled along my auditory nerve had been far from my conscious mind. Now it was right smack bang in the center. It was like being visited by a ghost of myself, and of those who were with me that night. Dorsey's installations set the stage for this kind of visitation, and thus question the dichotomies of now and then, self and other, experience and event.

Narcissus was the beginning. Ideas explored in Narcissus are glimpsed in many of the pieces described in this catalogue. An ambitious project conceived on a long plane flight, Narcissus places a lone person in a room with soft walls projected with processed images, initially of themselves and later of other visitors. Viewers outside the room see blurred visual and auditory impressions of the interior space. Playing with ideas of identity, reflection, privacy and voyeurism, Narcissus underscores that time is experienced as continuous, but is remembered as stories relating discrete events. Like the eponymous Narcissus' reflection, this piece and the others in the catalogue are alluring yet disturbing provocations that force us to look in the distorted mirror of our memories. In Narcissus, people see themselves as perhaps they have not seen themselves before. They are invited to reach into the uneven reflections they see there. Bystanders see the resultant ripples of that reaching out.

That Autumn with our tea, we talked of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology – of Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Halwachs, Edward Casey and Wilhelm Dilthey. I was excited. An emphasis on quiet, unstructured, unscripted, visual/acoustic provocations of this kind were strikingly different from popular visual media that take the experiencer on a journey of explicit consumption, scripted carefully by the artist. There is something soft,

ephemeral, evocative, intangible, essentially limbic and not frontal lobe in the work. Something disturbing yet familiar, like the moment before you realize the reflection in a shop window is you.

Fast forward to the Spring of 2006, and this catalogue. Aptly named “Art Memorative”, the pieces in the catalogue point to the swirling, non-linearity of remembrance as it is experienced before the story is formed and told. We also are reminded that stories we tell are only a small part of our selves. In that spirit, I will make a short digression into identity and confession. I am not trained in installation art; I am a psychologist by background. My orientation to these pieces comes from a lifelong fascination with memory and with exploration of the boundaries of my skin-encapsulated ego. Experiences that force reflection beyond, that play with the figure/ground of consciousness fascinate me – from the loss of self in the “flow” of activities like snowboarding and dancing, to moments of stillness like sitting on a beach when a thousand me’s and you’s in a million places are all present and gently wandering in the celluloid screen of my mind. But we are seldom given the space to relish these enchantments. In these works we are. The installations are clever, no doubt, but they are not self-conscious, not pretentious, not attention-seeking. They have impact whether you consider yourself an aficionado of “high-brow” art or of “low-brow” culture, whether you are an artist, an enthusiast or just passing by. That is because they are essentially about you and your memory-making.

I want to go from my confession to a piece in the catalogue, a piece that bridges cultural (as well as personal) history and ritual in the form of Catholic confession. Inspired by the rise in blogging, Confessional is a commentary on the forms of self-revelation that are now commonplace in our contemporary socio-digital, disembodied, internet culture. For many bloggers their daily diaries are a form of confessional. However, a more traditional confession requires a listener, someone who can speak the path to absolution. In a confessional booth the movement and breath of the priest can be heard beyond the screen. In the landscape of bits and bytes, maybe there’s no one beyond the screen. And if there is, you cannot hear them and they may never respond. And as the number of typed confessions rise, each one risks being lost in the clamour, the cacophony, of those wishing to be heard. But then, does it matter? Is this more about the writing than the being read? Unnervingly, in Confessional it is your own voice, your own presence, mixed and remixed that comes bouncing back at you.

In Confessional, the transformation of an oral form of revelation with prescribed roles for speaker and listener is transformed via analogy to textual internet confessional. Many of the pieces in the catalogue explore transformations of this kind of offering, a kind of analogy-based visual, auditory, space-based synesthesia.

As the name suggests, Inflection Loss explores distortions in place memory when recordings are transformed so that inflections are removed. Inflections are markers on words that specify gender, tense, or person. Some Eastern Asian languages are not inflected, or show very little inflection on the word; they are called analytic or isolating languages. Stress, pitch and tone are also inflections; here no sounds are added or

changed to the root word, but the intonation and relative strength of each sound is altered regularly to convey meaning. Inflection Loss explores what happens when transformations in the sound center on removal of these inflections. It is well known in psychology that removal of stress, pitch and tone creates disturbing and sometimes incomprehensible speech. In this installation we are asked to contemplate whether erasure of inflection in recorded sounds translates to context loss. Offering a sonic folding of time by playing sounds previously recorded in the space back into the space with removed inflection, we are made aware of our own processual, psychic folding of time. We are also reminded that we leave our traces wherever we go. Usually these are physical, visual traces; it is unusual for sonic traces to come back to us. We are invited to wonder whether the sounds we are hearing have their root in an earlier experience we were part of. Or are these sounds from a different time? With inflection transformed or removed are the sounds ghostly presences from before, shadows of themselves or are they entirely new entities? The point is we cannot fully recognize the sounds as having been made by us, but there are familiar traces that niggle. We are invited to contemplate what the inflections that reflect the time and space of initial experiencing were like and in that to consider what it is to capture “reality”. In these days of obsessive collecting and recording, this is a good question to ask.

Staying with the theme of translation, Paraphrase addresses the translation of the visual into the auditory, and FE transforms revelations in a private conversation into public performance. Hearing the sampled fragments from a conversation between friends jumbled and mixed feels like auditory voyeurism. The fragments are not about getting a “sense” of the conversation, what matters is the feeling of the conversation. The intimate nature of the content reminds you of your place in the act of listening. The speakers do not know you are overhearing them. For me, listening to the voices reminded me of childhood. The undulating voices and tones reminded me of falling asleep to the sound of adult voices in the next room. They reminded me of the liminal space between dreaming and waking when I hovered away from my body and floated around the edges of the conscious and unconscious. Who am I in this space, and whose are the voices? What is their relationship to me at the centre of this soundscape? Should I be listening?

Resonances brings up journeys to previously visited places. This is not just the aide memoire, the reveries of Proust, but also a sense in which these sounds and images are us outside ourselves — experiences coming back to remind us that we are not just in our heads but that at every moment we are embodied existence and that the world is an active part of that.

Transubstantiation – a means of confirming and recovering memories, passions, lives, and even the sounds and images and experiences of others around us, [together in this world with us but in their own memory worlds becomes something transporting]not sure what you mean. Sound that is left etched on a space. Perhaps Resonances most clearly steps into the space of forgetting. Sometimes forgetting is a protection, sometimes it is good to forget, sometimes our minds and bodies, as in amnesic incidents, erase that which is difficult. Resonances explores decay, takes us to a sonic twilight of fading memories. Perhaps that is why I found Resonances the saddest piece, the most

uncomfortable. My own prejudice for remembering elides that I forget. When reminded of this, when a name from the past floats into my mind, there is a twinge of sadness that they had not been consciously with me. As they step into the psychic space, I immediately notice that they had not been there. One can see easily how rituals of everyday remembering are constructed to actively keep the absent present, because left on their own memories will be like the sounds in Resonances, they will loop and fade and then only infrequently burp back in.

It is apt that the catalogue ends with a quote from W.G. Sebald that offers a haunting comment on loss. Sebald, a vociferous critic of official cultures of mourning and remembering, eschewed false intimacies. His work points to literary forms within which to approach memory and remembering, forms that allow an oblique evocation of memory, of feelings - noting that when remembered directly, as facts, often memories lose their essence and what makes them essential to us. They become dry, dead accounts. Sebald's work allows us to go along the journey with others of what those memories mean and do. They are active in the stories of now.

As I close I reflect that Dorsey's pieces have reminded me that people construct their identities actively – these installations point to, give us space to rediscover what might have been neglected, left to the side in that identity construction. They make us look more closely; they remind us of who we were, who we are and who we thought we could have been. They are meditations on the phenomenology of existence. They are about recovering something of what happened... and recovering something of the rememberer in the process. In these fuzzy recognitions, it is one's own inner life with its fluidity of past and present that is unearthed and recognized. The pieces are not simple sonic, they are architectural. The direction of the sounds matter; your body has a place in the soundscape. As I contemplate these pieces, I have been struck by a resonance myself. A number of the pieces have triggered for me memories of Japan, and especially the way in which the Japanese domestic and public built environment reflects past and present moral orders. Japan has long been thought of in the West as a highly ritualized culture, where ritual is equated to observation of carefully crafted social routines. Body movement, gesture, behaviour are all considered to reflect one's place in the moral order. Taking off your shoes at the entrance to a house symbolizes a move from outside to inside, symbolizes a move into a new space of honoring past and present and your place in it. It is not simply about not dragging the dirt on your shoes inside, although it certainly has that result. The tea ceremony is not just about making and serving tea; it symbolizes the past in the present and the relationship between us. When interacting there, the obvious translations are verbal – sound – but the body also translates, and bodily behaviors are signaled by the place and the people.

Contesting the images of the environment as a static fixed and passive background this idea of emplacement emphasises the process of the environment's "becoming" and stands in opposition to the notion of space prevalent and scientific discourses – as a quantifiable, abstract and objectified environment external to human existence and independent of people's subjective experiences. The metaphor of the mind as a place needs a similar dusting off – and this is where Paraphrase takes us. These translations are commonplace

although disregarded by our consciousness, the leakiness of the boundaries between me in here and all that out there is brought into focus. The leakiness of this model is explored, the boundary dissolved – like a sugar cube in a cup of coffee. Here, in our world where the visual gets all the credit, we see the importance of sound.

When pondering these thoughts, I recounted to Dorsey that his work reminded me of the awareness I experienced when I was in Japan. That somehow, in following a chain of random (perhaps free) associations, his work evoked for me a reminder of what I had learned about my enculturated body and mind. About how I felt my social and physical movements needed a new choreography. About how I felt that there everything is about remembering the past in the present, about acknowledging others past and present in our movement in space, about contradictions to the highly individualized self we are more familiar with in the West. He responded, a little surprised. “You know I grew up in Japan, don’t you?” I did not. But without inserting Dorsey completely into his work, or seeing his work as a pure reflection of him, it somehow makes more sense to me now.