

Ways of Perceiving
Imagined Exhibition
Vestiges: Echoes of Memory

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Word count:1,499

“Vestige” is described as a trace of something that no longer exists. (Oxford University Press, n.d.) In this context, it explores the relationship between presence and absence through the remnants of the deceased. When someone passes, their possessions hold new meanings, whereby, these everyday objects evolve into Souvenirs bound by emotional weight. Through the medium of art, Vestiges will delve into the transformation of personal belongings. In today’s fast-paced world, we often overlook the importance of each other's presence, so Vestiges will aim to challenge the audience to reflect on how their absence shapes our perception of grief and identity.

The foundation of this exhibition is rooted in the concept that objects act as a vessel for memory. The exhibition will delve into artworks from artists such as Petra Creffield, Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Doris Salcedo and Simon Ward; whose pieces explore the themes of grief, absence, and memory. While referencing theories such as Archival theory, Psychoanalysis and Material Culture to strengthen the analysis this exhibition.

““In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” (Freud, 1917, p. 246). Freud’s (1917) view on grief explains that mourning is a process of slowly detaching from the deceased, whereas melancholia is about how the loss is internalised leading to unresolved grief. Freud argues that this exhibition reflects the melancholic process because it preserves the absence of the deceased by holding onto the trace’s left behind. Moreover, Kristeva’s theory (1982) states that belongings of the deceased exist in a ‘limital space,’ between presence and absence, suggesting that this space disrupts the grieving process.

Material culture theory suggests memory is shaped by larger cultural systems rather than an individual experience. Halbwach (1992) states that memory is social constructure created by rituals and commemorative practices. *Lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) suggests it is inevitable that traditional rituals will fade overtime, but memories will always be held in objects and spaces. This exhibition touches upon how objects do not just hold personal memories but also link to larger social stories. In reference to the new digital era, *Vestiges* explore how physical possessions hold onto memories and moments that may get forgotten in today's fast-paced world.

Objects in this exhibition are strong reminders of the past. Buchli (2002, quoted in Morton, 2011, p. 1) states, "Memory requires a certain degree of iterability both material and discursive in order to sustain it," showing that personal belongings do not just hold memories, they are also an important element in accepting grief.

Material culture theory believes that objects are not just reminders of the past but key elements in the process of making memories. Gell (1998) and Buchli (2002) argue that objects endure over time, whereby they exceed their materialistic purpose and become traces of memory. This suggests that objects can shape emotions and social relationships long after their owners have passed. The artworks in this exhibition explain that objects will continue to hold deep emotional meaning even after their owners have passed. Baudrillard (1981) suggests that objects do not just hold memories of the past but also help create it, stating that belongings of the deceased have much deeper meaning than just being traces of the deceased. Baudrillard argues that despite objects shaping the way we process memories; they also distort our memories rather than fully preserving their original form. *Vestiges* explores this concept by questioning whether personal belongings truly connect us to the past or just create a symbolic version of it.

The Archival theory explores the society's urge to collect and preserve historical traces. Foster (2004) suggests artists keep traces of history to remember the past. Traditional ways of gather objects would aim for consistency, while archives for artworks embrace imperfection. In reference to *Vestiges*, it aims to embrace memory's erratic behaviour when collecting traces of personal belongings. Buchloh (1999) states that postmodern archives embrace chaos including the unstable nature of memory itself.



Fig 1. Petra Creffield, *Going Home* (1997-98).



Fig 3. Petra Creffield, *Going Home* (1997-98).



Fig 3. Petra Creffield, *Going Home* (1997-98).



Fig 4. Petra Creffield, *Going Home* (1997-98).



Fig 5. Petra Creffield, *Going Home* (1997-98).

Dimensions: 15.24cm x 10.16cm each

Material: Gelatine Sliver Print

Petra Creffield's work *Going Home* consist of five images, whereby old photographs are projected around her childhood home (Riley, 2015). Creffield has creates memorial for her mother that challenges tradition rituals.

Freud (1917) argues that her ghostly projections create a space between presence and absence helping to keep the memory of her mother alive. This shows how Creffield is refusing to fully let go of the deceased which will lead to unresolved grief. However, Foster (2004) challenges Freud's views by explaining how projections are a personal way of carrying memories, helping Creffield come to terms with the loss. Gell's (1998) views state that memories are attached to objects, suggesting that Creffield uses photography to understand her grief because it helps create spaces that allow for the past and present to exist together.



Fig 6. Sophie Calle, *Couldn't Capture Death* (2007).

Dimensions: Television (50 inches)

Material: Video Projection

Sophie Calle's *Couldn't Capture Death* consists of a deeply personal video that captures the last moments of her mother's life (Forthomme, 2014). The title acknowledges that death can never be fully captured, suggesting that although physical objects hold deep memories, they cannot fully reflect those deceased.

Freud's melancholia (1917) suggests Calle's piece mirrors the struggle around maintaining the memories of the deceased and the failure to keep them alive in our minds. In melancholia, we do not completely let go of those passed from our minds and this explains why many experience unresolved grief. Baudrillard (1994) furthers this by stating that images can never fully replace the absence left by those lost, highlighting how there are limits to preserving memories. However, some argue that Calle's use of images helps her accept the loss because it allows her to feel connected to the deceased. This is supported by Halbwachs' Cultural Memory Theory (1992), which suggests that objects are a key element in the way we mourn the loss, and society heavily relies on images to remember the deceased.

in cultural memory. However, it is suggested this does not always create clarity. Instead, it puts an emphasis on the inconsistent nature of memory itself (Buchloh, 1999).

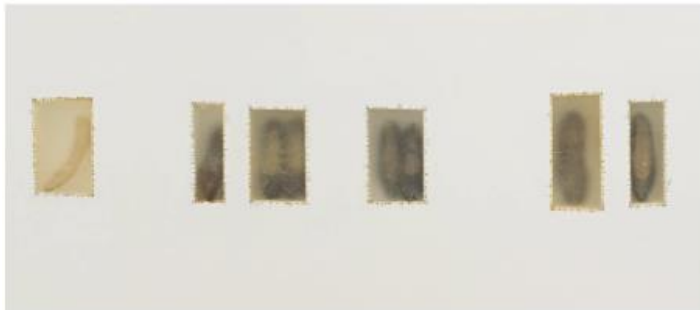


Fig 8. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004).

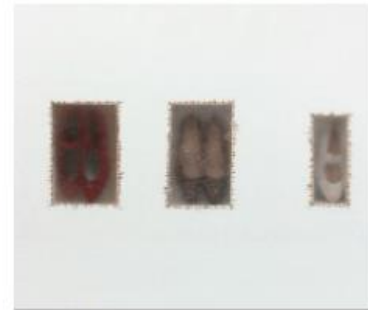


Fig 9. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004).



Fig 10. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004).



Fig 11. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* (1992-2004).

Dimensions: overall size is 119.4 x 211 cm

Material: Drywall, shoes, cow bladder, and surgical thread.

Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* consists of shoes belonging to missing persons from Columbia, that have been enclosed into gallery walls and cover with translucent animal skin (Pérez Art Museum Miami (n.d.). Reflecting views of Freud's melancholia (1917), the shoes are left to fill the void of those missing. Whereby the absence of those lost is felt within the objects despite them not being physically present. This installation documents the transformation from traces to meaningful possessions.

The Material Culture Theory (Gell, 1998) explains how belongings take on a new meaning after the loss of their owner. "I view art as a system of action, intended to

change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.” (Gell, 1998, p. 6). In reference to this, the shoes act as a symbol of the trauma they've faced without directly showing the circumstances they faced. The concept of *Atrabiliarios* connects to Foster's archival impulse (2004), as Salcedo's work creates an archive that refuses to forget those lost. This archive uses objects to keep memories of the missing person's alive in our minds, ensuring they do not get forgotten.



Fig 12. Simon Ward, *Guardians*.



Fig 13. Simon Ward, *Guardians*.



Fig 14. Simon Ward, *Guardians*.

Dimensions: not available

Material: Gelatine Silver Print

Simon Ward's *Guardians* consists of document objects placed on graves using a flatbed scanner, exploring how objects become symbols of the deceased (Ward, 2018). *Guardians* captures how objects act as relics of those deceased, demonstrating the relationship between presence and absence. Ward demonstrates our societies instinct to preserve the presence of the deceased using their possessions. This shows that even everyday objects can carry strong emotions connected to those who have passed. Gell (1998) expanded on this by stating objects that hold deeply personal meaning and become key elements in how we remember and process loss. Furthermore, Halbwachs' Cultural Memory Theory

(1992) suggests objects used in memorials help to strengthen mourning as a collective.

In conclusion, Vestiges explores the complexities around how objects contribute to both preserving and transforming memory. Vestiges reveal how objects transcend their material form and become vessels of memory, grief, and identity. The selected artists show an understanding of how absence shapes the present. The theories explored within this essay both support and challenge the views this exhibition is expressing. Overall, vestiges challenge the audience to reconsider the significance of material possessions and encourages a deeper reflection into how historical traces shape our grieving process and identity.

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