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Embodied Memory:

Tracing the Past in the Works of

Casper David Friedrich,

Kyffin Williams, William Kentridge

and Marina Abramović.

Abstract

This writing will examine the underlying theme of memory in the work of four artists across canvas, shadow and body: Casper David Friedrich, Kyffin Williams, William Kentridge, and Marina Abramović. By building a profile of the artist's family, cultural circumstances and personal life, it may be possible to identify the memories that have influenced their artwork. What the memories may be, how they affected the artist, how the artist then processes them, how they manifest in their work and how each artist deals with them differently.

Introduction

This essay examines the underlying influence memory has on shaping the motivation and choices an artist makes when creating their work, often without their realisation. This writing will explore the practices of four artists, two historical artists, Kasper Friedrich and Kyffin Williams, alongside two contemporary artists, Marina Abramović and William Kentridge. Through comparing these artists, it will be evident that memories influence their work. They will be looked at and compared to identify their differences in style from traditional painting to a more contemporary practice involving animation and performative practices and the similarities that occur. Through comparing these artists, the influence of memory on their work will become evident.

Memory plays a key role in how artists see the world and develop their work. Familial, personal memories and cultural experiences shape an artist's life. These memories draw from countless sources and have both positive and negative influences. What an artist creates is often deeply rooted in their memory and collective cultural experiences, a nostalgia for life's early experiences, and an exposure to aspects of life that are frequently violent, disturbing and not experienced by others in society.

It is these influences from past experiences that subconsciously shape an artist's thought process, often weaving themselves into an underlying theme in the artist's current work. These influences do not have to be related to art; they help form a person's character and way of thinking. Even experiences that seem unrelated to art can add to the mix of ideas that shape an artist's work. It is these echoes of self-memory that appear in every artist's work, whether in performance, on canvas, or film based.

What is Memory?

Oscar Wilde wrote in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), “Memory is the diary we all carry with us” (Wilde, no date)

Wilde describes memory as a vast storehouse or warehouse where memories can be stored as objects in the mental space, either in short- or long-term storage. These memories may be organised according to a personal plan or schema, much as personal possessions would be arranged in the home. Like spaces, minds can be narrow and shallow, wide and broad. Memories contained in this intellectual space may be concealed in the dark corners or dim recesses, while others come to the forefront. Accessing these memories involves a retrieval of psychological objects from our mental space. People speak of searching for or locating memories, recollecting them, and retrieving them after they have been stored. Memories can be lost, like an object, but someone can also find them (Kahana and Wagner, 2024).

Learning and Memory are challenging to precisely define. Problematically, memory is used in many ways due to the variety of thoughts. Finding a single, broad definition that covers them all may be hopeless; if such a definition exists, it may be vacuous. A broad definition suggested by Endel Tulving (1983), the Estonian Canadian cognitive psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist (Craik and Moscovitch, 2024), was that "Memory has to do with the after-effects at one time that manifest themselves subsequently at a later time" (Kahana and Wagner, 2024, p.24). These definitions mean that artists are products of their personal experiences, which shape their individuality.

Artists and Memory

Artists have engaged with memory in many ways; these influences manifest themselves in various forms and may contain a mix of personal and cultural experiences that shape the artist's work. Artistic production also employs cultural memory formats that do not exclude cultural traditions in their materialisations (Asavei, 2021). It is the mixing of these deeply personal memories that produces the individuality in artists.

The creation of artwork is a dynamic, complex process that involves the balancing of multiple intentions on behalf of the artist. One of these goals is to create an impactful work that lasts in the viewer's memory, so they engage with it even after it is out of sight. However, not all art that is seen will last in a person's memory; the likelihood of remembering a piece is surprisingly similar across viewers and predictable from the piece itself (Davis & Bainbridge, 2023).

To uncover why some artworks are remembered but not others, we can explore the experience of viewing work as reflective of style preference, personal judgments, or even how one emotionally connects to a piece. When navigating an art museum and storing the experience in memory, many subjective factors can influence what the viewer remembers, including their level of attention or fatigue, their social interactions with others, their previous experiences with a piece, and how they navigate the exhibit. However, one's memory of a work of art may have less to do with the observer than is expected, and instead, the properties of the artwork itself (Davis & Bainbridge, 2023). The memory buried within the artist’s work may connect with a viewer on a level that also triggers memories of a similar experience.

The First Memory

The earliest examples of the use of memory in art would be the drawings of animals in cave art. Discovered by Australian and Indonesian scientists, the painting of a wild pig and three human-like figures (see fig 1) is at least 51,200 years old, more than 5,000 years older than previously recorded cave art. This discovery pushes back the time that modern humans first showed the capacity for creative thought (Ghosh, 2025). There are examples of impressions made by fingers tracing a variety of shapes on soft clay walls, found in the caves at La Roche-Cotard, France. These impressions were made over 50,000 years ago and created Neanderthals, who predate Homo Sapiens (Ashworth, 2023).

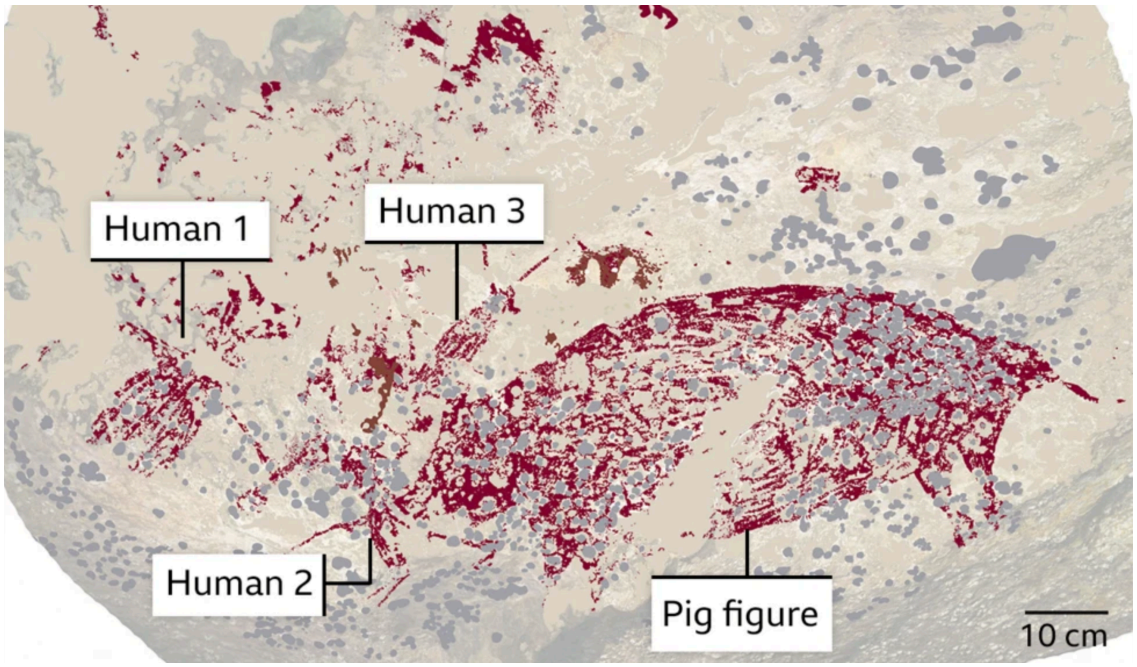


Fig. 1: *Sulawesi Cave Art* (Brin Google, 2024).

The painting was discovered in a limestone cave in Leang Karampuang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia and depicts an abstract representation of the world around the person or people who painted it, representing an evolution in thought processes in our species that gave rise to art and science (Ghosh, 2025).

This is the first evidence of an artist using memory to depict the animals that the tribe hunted, as no technical devices or the notion of drawing ‘en plein air’ (Plein air refers to the practice of creating art outdoors, directly engaging with the natural environment as the subject of the work (Zinchenko, 2021)) was not evident at this time. It was the artist's memory, possibly combined with the memories of others, the first art critics, that would later reintroduce the events through representations on cave walls, allowing the rest of the tribe to learn from them and teach hunting. This use of memory has been repeated time and time again, with artists progressing to using models to recreate past events. In the Renaissance period, Michelangelo used his figurative drawing practice as a key to his development by applying the techniques he learned in drawing the human figure to generate multi-figure compositions (Van Eck, 2009).

The practice of making naturalistic pictures of animals on rock was one way that hunter-gatherers transformed natural landscapes into places charged with human meaning, identity and history, as was the creation of works with hand stencils in many locations. The fact that these modes of depiction persisted for tens of thousands of years across various parts of the world attests to their adaptive value, regardless of the specific indigenous meanings they once held (Tacon et al., 2014).

Cave art was not only created by someone's memory of an event but persists as one of the oldest collective memories there is. The study of rock art can provide a great deal of information about the ancient cultures, their spirituality, history and relationships to the land. The art also informs us about past periods of environmental change, what long-extinct animals looked like, reactions to the arrival of outsiders from various places and many other things. Rock art sites are museums and art galleries embedded in natural landscapes with ongoing cultural connections for contemporary people. In Australia and Indonesia, new ways need to be found to preserve rock art before it is gone (O'Connor, Bulbeck, Meyer, 2018).

Caspar David Friedrich

Caspar David Friedrich's work engages with nature, existential themes, and the cultural context of his time. His paintings often explore the relationship between humanity and the natural world, emphasising a deep and almost mystical connection with his subjects (Stermin, 2025). Frequently, he seems to be looking back into his memory and offering a practically romanticised view of an event or location.

The artist delves into his memory, offering a romanticised view of an event or location. The first painting that comes to mind, when exploring the context of the

essay, is the *Traveller Looking Over the Sea and Fog* (See Fig. 2), or as it is sometimes referred to, ‘the wanderer above the sea mist’ (Ithaka, 2020-25). This painting evidences his use of vast, open landscapes and figures depicted with their backs to the viewer, creating a context in which the observer experiences a dissolution of self and identification with nature. Such techniques evoke a sensation of living in the present moment and activate what can be described as an experiential self, linking Friedrich’s art to existentialist ideas and prefiguring immersive art forms that generate profound experiences of nature (Stermin, 2025). The moment may be captured in the image, but this present moment at the time of painting becomes a cherished memory to share with an audience.



Fig. 2: *Traveller Looking Over the Sea and Fog* (Friedrich, 1818)

In this painting, the traveller has left the fog-shrouded depths behind him and has climbing to the mountain’s summit. The mountain peaks he sees jutting out of the fog possibly represent the figure's search for God (Börsch-Supan, 1990). But it also symbolises something different. It is a painting of a man remembering. It is a man who has the experience of years who has climbed a physical mountain and is now looking back through the mists of time into their past and memories held there, contemplating their existence alone and in silence. This painting has a visual meaning alongside a deeper narrative, which may have been in the mind of its painter.

Friedrich draws on his memory, what he sees within him, of a place or feeling in time and portrays it in his painting. It would be hard to imagine this scene if the artist had not experienced it himself. It is Friedrich's personal memory that fuels this painting, along with his artistic vision, giving the work its power of presence. The viewer does not need to see the traveller’s expression; they are instantly transported to the mountain. Even though their view is obscured by the man standing in front of them, they are sharing his emotions about the grand scene. If the artist fails to make this connection, the painting fails in its objective of conveying that atmosphere and connecting with the viewer.

It is evident that Friedrich repeated this compositional style several times, such as in *Moonrise over the Sea* (1822) (See Fig. 3), *Evening Landscape with Two Men* (1830-35) and *Sisters on the Harbour View Terrace* (1820), to mention just a few (Rewald, Monard, MET, 2001). This method of placing figures centrally, with their backs to the observer, in a large landscape evokes romantic nostalgia, a memory of a time and place not to be forgotten.



Fig. 3: *Moonrise over the Sea* (Friedrich, 1822)

Friedrich's experience of art is the expression of those experiences that link the self and the external world. He wrote,

> The artist. Should paint not only what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however, he sees nothing within him, then he should also refrain from painting that which he sees before him. Otherwise, his pictures will be like those folding screens behind which one expects to find only the sick or the dead (Börsch-Supan, 1990, p.10)

The inspiration for this reflective moment may have come from tragic, life-changing family events he experienced early in his life. Caspar David Friedrich was born the sixth of ten children in Greifswald, Sweden. He grew up under the strict Lutheran creed of his father, Adolf Gottlieb, a prosperous candle-maker and soap boiler. Friedrich had an early familiarity with death: his mother, Sophie Dorothea Bechly, died in 1781 when Caspar David was just seven. At the age of thirteen, Caspar David witnessed his brother, Johann Christoffer, fall through the ice of a frozen lake and drown. Some accounts suggest that Johann Christoffer succumbed while trying to rescue Caspar David, who was also in danger on the ice. His sister Elisabeth died in 1782, while a second sister, Maria, succumbed to typhus in 1791 (Casper David Friedrich org, 2025). He also suffered from depression and strokes (Koch, 1988).

These personal life experiences inspired his artwork and his view of the world. The deep memories of his tragic family events may have led him to pursue themes such as existentialism, a sense of humanity, the natural world, and mysticism as a form of therapy to come to terms with the memories of these events (Stermin, 2025). This type of long-term personal memory experience is not evident in Sulawesi cave art, which deals with a simpler recording and reporting of a memory of an event. Friedrich is allowing us into his psyche as he constructs these images, as his memories are encoded in his paintings.

Kyffin Williams

In his autobiography *Across the Straits*, he traces his ancestral roots back to Lludd ap Beli Mawr (King Lud), of Anglesey in the second century BC, dating back on his father's side by way of 59 generations and on his mother's 62. He also provides accounts of the characters that he met, their lives and past times, such as fox hunting in rural Wales (Williams, 1993).

This shared memory of family history and account of rural life was essential to Williams, providing a sense of grounding in Welsh history and pre-history, which is echoed in his work. Although a renowned portrait artist, he is best known for landscape painting. His pictures emphasise the continual importance of landscape in Welsh visual culture, so much so that his mountain landscapes have an almost symbolic quality, indicating Wales and Welshness (Roderick, 2014).



Fig. 4: *Ffermwyr Ar Y Glyder Fach* (Williams, 1970-91)

The painting *Ffermwyr Ar Y Glyder Fach* (See Fig 4) captures an image of Welsh life which is disappearing. It shows working Shepherds and their dogs looking for sheep in the winter snow. The subject matter is typical of Welsh culture and of Williams. This is a scene that can only come from being in the Welsh hills and witnessing the events as they happen. The palette for this painting also features the cold harshness of the Welsh countryside in winter. Williams would have witnessed this scene many times in his life.

Seminal to William's development as an artist was foxhunting and the Ynysfor pack. The country they had hunted in included some of the most glorious mountain scenery in Britain and was undoubtedly the roughest upland hunting covering Yr Eryri, Crib Coch and Tryfan (Skidmore, 2008).

The importance of Ynysfor Hunt and its members in William's life cannot be overstated. It could be argued that nobody painted the mountains better than William; their panoramic beauty enchanted him. Everything he knew about them he learned whilst out hunting with the hounds, although he never actually painted them. It was in February 1947 when the hounds were meeting at Pen y Gwryddd that he started painting at nine o'clock in the morning. In that moment, he realised that creativity had taken preference over destruction and that painting had taken first place (Skidmore, 2008).

Educated at Shrewsbury School before working as a land agent, Williams joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, receiving his commission as a lieutenant in 1937 and serving in Northern Ireland. He was invalided out of the Army in 1941 on account of epilepsy, the condition causing him persistent seizures (Williams, 1993). His doctor advised him to take up painting, an occupation that would not tax his brain (Skidmore, 2008). After the army, he attended Slade Academy to pursue a career in art (Williams, 1993).

In 1970, William decided to leave London and return to Wales. In Wales, he had looked to the mountains and felt terrific. He knew exactly what he wanted to paint. “When I got back to London, like most Welshmen, I became possessed by a fatal Cymric nostalgia which blotted out what I wanted in my pictures” (Williams, 1993, p.107).

The power of William’s paintings lies in his memories and knowledge of growing up and roaming the countryside of rural Wales. He knew these areas better than most and took us to locations rarely seen in landscape paintings, such as the *Cottages at Gwalchai* (See Fig. 5). This is an honest view of rural life in Anglesey at the end of the 1950s. The image has been pulled from his memory of the area and depicts the Welsh countryside with harsh acidic greens, browns and blacks, not in a paintbox style with bright colours, but with a rawness that comes across in his scenes and colour choices. He knows this life is harsh and paints it as it is, warts and all.



Fig. 5: *Cottages at Gwalchai* (Williams, 1959)

Williams has similar life experiences to Friedrich's, although not as tragic, that influence the work he produces. They are both dealing with life-changing events which shape their views of the world and how they create art. They both use their memories as underlying themes in their narratives, drawing on their pasts. Friedrich, with his romantic composition, the figures hinting at a forgotten past and Williams, with his use of memory combined with nostalgia to depict Welsh Life. This way of dealing with memory is very reserved and personal to both Friedrich and Williams. In contrast to the way memory is dealt with by the following contemporary artists, William Kentridge and Marina Abramović.

William Kentridge

William Kentridge is a contemporary South African artist whose work reflects his nation’s traumatic history of racial oppression, drawing on the country's collective memory and personal experiences as artistic inspiration. His charcoal drawn animated films document a recurring cast of characters in the final moments of apartheid and its aftermath, from European Jewish exile to independent black subject (Saltzman, 2006).

To understand Kentridge's approach to art, it is necessary to understand the political sphere of South Africa in which he grew up and lived. In 1948, the ruling party of South Africa had adopted the policy of apartheid, which classified the population by race to segregate blacks and whites. The African National Congress (ANC), led by Nelson Mandela, responded with a campaign of civil disobedience and public disorder. The government eventually banned the ANC and imprisoned Mandela for his role in the troubles. This led to civil unrest between white and black communities (BBC, 2025). By 1990, the political landscape had changed; the ANC had reestablished itself, and after 27 years in prison, Mandela achieved freedom. Later, he would become the President of South Africa (Habershon, 2025). However, the damage had been done, with there being a disparity between the lifestyle of white South Africans and that of the slums, which are the homes of the black community.

Kentridge's work is rooted in the provincial city of Johannesburg, which was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world (BBC, 2025). The apartheid system imprisoned each South African in a prescribed role: to be living in misery, a victim of violence: to be maintaining and perpetuating this state of affairs: to be observing: or to be ignoring the fact of apartheid. He describes a moral and religious aspect, not to say that one hopes to make the world a better place, but instead works from the perspective of redemption, rather than working for redemption (Kentridge, 2009).

Kentridge’s work is based not only on his personal memories and experiences of living in South Africa but also on the collective memory of a nation coming to terms with its history of apartheid. This collective examination of society explores how countries reflect on their past. In South Africa, there was a consensus to interrogate what happened during apartheid to move forward, to make the transition to democracy. This narrative involves reckoning the past, so that the country can move forward on a National, regional, and personal level (BBC, 2003).

It was the experiences of these times that shaped Kentridge's art and the narratives it provides. His charcoal drawings were a process of making, reworking, and questioning his own and the country's memory, as well as the decimated South African landscape and cities. Its human inhabitants and inheritors had all been in a constant state of flux, a state that continues to this day (Saltzman, 2006).

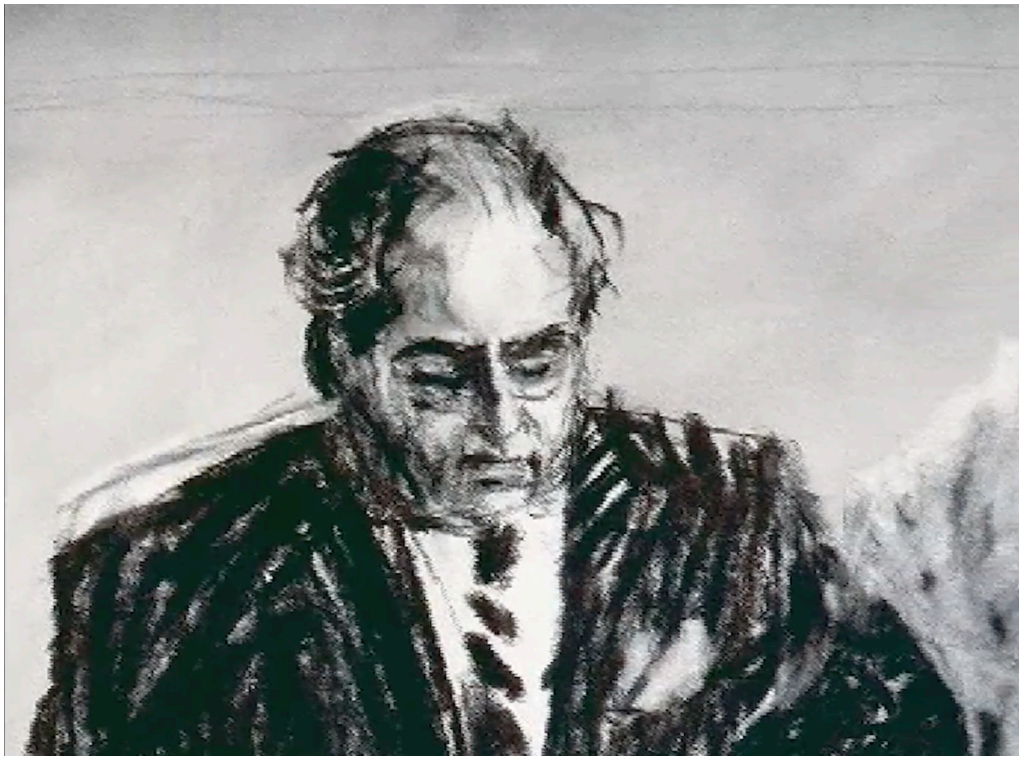


Fig. 6: *Soho Eckstein*

(Adapted from William Kentridge and his alter Egos, 2025).

There are two William Kentridges: the artist, hesitant, fallible yet irrepressible, and the other, a witness to the events of apartheid (Kentridge, 2016). Kentridge charts the belated development of democracy in South Africa, through the figures of Soho Eckstein (See Fig. 6) and Felix Teitelbaum (See Fig. 7). One of two alter egos, Soho the dark-suited industrialist, whose image has been said to be based on a linocut Kentridge made in his youth from a photograph of his grandfather in a three-piece pinstripe suit. The second, Felix Teitelbaum, the nude alter ego who was not based on anyone particularly, is a visual mode for addressing his nation's traumatic history (Saltzman, 2006).



Fig. 7: *Felix Teitelbaum*

(Adapted from William Kentridge and his alter Egos, 2025).

Kentridge's body of film works such as *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989), *Monument* (1990), *Mine* (1991), *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991) and *Felix in Exile* (1994) are just a few of the animations that not only stage the personal struggles of their recurrent characters, but also represent the struggles of a nation as it moves from a system of apartheid to a system of democracy (Saltzman, 2006).



Fig. 8: *Felix in Exile*
(Adapted from William Kentridge and his alter Egos, 2025).

In *Felix in Exile*, there is no dialogue, just nostalgic or sentimental musical phrases. At first, it appears to be a love story between Felix Teitelbaum, Kentridge's alter ego, and Nandi, who draws the landscape. She surveys and records the evidence of violence and massacre that is part of South Africa's deep-rooted recent history. Felix and Nandi witness the devastation wrought on the masses of African men being shot or bleeding, some disappearing into the earth or space. Felix and Nandi look on from the outside at the events as they unfold, but she, too, ends up being shot, and his room becomes flooded (Harrow, 2020).

On closer inspection, the piece unfolds in a devastated landscape south of Johannesburg, where derelict mines and factories, mine dumps, and slime dams have created a terrain of nostalgia and loss. Kentridge's repeated process of erasure and redrawing, leaves echoes of marks without completely transforming the image; together with the jerky movement of the animation, they operate in parallel with his depiction of human process, both physical and political, enacted on the landscape (Harrow, 2020). The work deals not only with personal memory but also with the collective memory of a nation. Apartheid is echoed in the voyeuristic separation of Felix and Nandi due to the absence of any other explanation.

Kentridge has similarities with both Friedrich and Williams in that his work appears to be influenced by personal and cultural trauma. In the case of Kentridge, this is the personal and cultural trauma of living during and post-apartheid years. It is this memory that moulds Kentridge's art and manifests itself on film in a number of ways, as an acceptance, a request for forgiveness, and a plea for redemption for the events that occurred in the country.

Marina Abramović

In contemporary art, memory is represented through various approaches. Artists may address shared cultural experiences, such as those related to colonialism, racial or political oppression, or focus on personal experiences involving identity, beauty, or violence against women, amongst other topics (Asavei, 2021).

Contemporary artists often reject traditional media, such as painting and sculpture. One such artist is Marina Abramović. They prefer to express their ideas in conceptual, dematerialised, performative formats; the quest for memory remains prevalent, and many art pieces reveal topics that pertain to memory events and reparative commemoration. In many places, contemporary protest and social injustice (Asavei, 2021). This rejection of the traditional forms and the use of technology is what confirms contemporary art as new, challenging what came before it. However, the subject matter remains unchanged mainly; there is simply a new perspective on it. In contemporary art, there has been a shift toward archives and collective memory, as well as the re-staging and repetition of past artworks (Asavei, 2021).

Abramović researched and reperformed five relatively well-known pieces by other artists from the history of Western art, specifically those who were canonical at the time within developing studies of Euro-American performance and body art (Jones, 2020). Abramovic's re-performances of her art piece *Seven Easy Pieces* testify to art's exploration of memory, as well as the process of active forgetting and its effects over time (Asavei, 2021).



Fig. 9: *Lips of Thomas* (Abramović, 1975).

Performed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* appropriated five other artists' performances from the 1960s and 1970s and included two of her own works, one old, one new (Uidhir, 2013). Each night, Abramović reenacted a different work for seven hours, from 5 pm to midnight (Jones, 2020). During which Abramovic recreated performances by five other artists: Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974): Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972): Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969): Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973): Joseph Beuys's, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965): her own *Lips of Thomas* (1975) (See Fig. 9) and *Entering the Other Side* (1975) (Uidhir, 2013).

On the seventh night, Marina Abramovic performed the *Seventh Easy Piece,* featuring her newly commissioned *Entering the Other Side*, in which she inhabited a gargantuan blue dress, occupying the vortex-like centre of the Guggenheim atrium (Jones, 2020). In doing so, she provided a compelling case study of the complex interrelations between performance and art institutions in the twenty-first century. Abramović's placement front and centre with this work asserted her authority as the main attraction (Jones, 2020).

The project was notable for its focus on the photographic documentation of performance art. Abramović chose to reenact pieces she had not witnessed initially, basing her performances entirely on existing documentary records. This approach was intended to serve as a model for documenting performance art, addressing the perceived scarcity and poor quality of photographic records from the 1960s and 1970s (Gagliardi, 2009).

This demonstrates that even contemporary performance art depends on being documented in some tangible form. Unlike looking at a painting or sculpture, Abramović relied solely on memories of the original performances and written eyewitness accounts. Once a performance concludes without visual documentation, it immediately becomes a memory, subject to its constraints of interpretation and forgetfulness. Written records are limited by the observer's perspective and opinions of an event, which cannot capture all the nuances of a live event. Thus, a performance reenacted cannot be repeated, as each reenactment changes the performance and the memory.

Consequently, the memory of a performance is shaped not only by written records but also by the inevitable loss of forgotten details. Significant information, such as the time of day, location, and the artist's demeanour, may be irretrievably lost. Abramović's reenactments did not replicate the original events exactly; instead, they are her reinterpretations that transformed them into new, distinct occurrences. While the original events persist only as memories, the reenactments are now preserved through photographic documentation, as illustrated in Figure 9.



Fig.10: Marina Abramović: *Seven Easy Pieces* (Carr, 2005).

Her performance of *Lips of Thomas* in *Seven Easy Pieces* (See Fig. 10) contains a complex scenario of symbols. The naked artist consumed a kilo of honey using a silver spoon, drank a litre of red wine, flagellated herself, incised a five pointed star on her stomach with a razor blade, lay on a cross made of blocks of ice with a heater directed onto bleeding cut from above and was finally saved by the intervention of the audience (Archey *Et al.,* 2023).

The artist became a metaphorical and almost literal victim. On the other hand, the fallen idol, the five-pointed star, was transformed into a pentagram, a powerful symbol of regeneration, an ice altar on which the shaman lies in a rite of passage. Her body's powers channelled individual and collective purification. With the fall of idols and the dissolution of symbols, the revived body of the artist conquered the arena of art history (Archey et al*.,* 2023). The symbols that Abramović refers to are drawn from Balkan myths and characters she evokes, and may not be entirely accurate representations. These symbols and memories are of a country that broke up when she was 30, one that no longer exists, leaving her stateless; they may live on in her afterlife of memory, where Yugoslavia is an unmappable space that stands in for her own family (Archey, et al., 2023). This violent performance may hold deeper significance within the overall piece and can be explained by examining her background, the memories passed down through her family, and those she experienced.

Her family history is interlinked with the Yugoslavian Church and the Communist state. Her mother and father were communist partisan heroes who had fought German and Italian occupying forces in Yugoslavia in 1941 during World War II and later, they went on to hold positions in the Yugoslavian post-war government (Archey et al., 2023). The nation's history, in other words, was encapsulated at home with what Abramović has described as a very Balkan passion for heroism, sacrifice and dramatic extremes.

Her conception of performance art has gradually shifted from a medium of expression to a means of transformation (Archey et al., 2023). In these works, there appears to be a search to recapture the original identity of the pieces, a commitment to ensuring that they are not forgotten and do not disappear from the world. This draws a parallel with her own background and the breakup and brutal civil war that raged in the region of the world she called home.

Abramović's approach to creativity differs from that of Friedrich, Williams and Kentridge in that she does not appear to be dealing with events and memories of her past as a healing process in the same way. She is angry; there is no acceptance or request for redemption; her approach is more confrontational. It seeks to address the subject matter head-on and elicit the viewer's discomfort with the situation.

Conclusion

All the artists mentioned share the theme of memory to some degree in their practice or have been influenced by memories of the past. The early cave paintings show that this is an age-old theme, though their context is much simpler. They look at the memories of events that were important to them at the time and may have been recorded for teaching or to commemorate great victories. We can only speculate about their actual purpose, as the intentions remain unknown with no verbal or written record of their symbolic code. They persist as images on a wall.

It is the individual's life and experiences that create the memories of that artist, shaping the way they use this reference bank in their work. This is where artists obtain their originality, and no two artists will ever be the same. As evidenced, different events in a person's life, such as death, love and tragedy, can affect a person not only as they happen but also in the decades to come through their memories. They are stored in long-term memory, sometimes forgotten but not entirely gone; they lie dormant and suppressed only to resurface years later when triggered by some event.

It would not be easy to compare these artists through their work, as their practices cross between performance, film and canvas and on the surface are very different. However, we can compare them by examining their experiences and use of memory. They are all shaped by their early personal memories and by the cultures of the

different countries and circumstances in which they grew up. Both Friedrich and Williams' memories relate to more personal family influences, whilst Abramović and Kentridge are affected by personal and cultural memories of the places and times in which they lived. They are affected by the violence they saw in their home countries and carry this memory through to their artwork in one form or another.

This manifests in different ways; Friedrich's and William's artwork appear calmer, more like therapy for what they have seen and experienced in their lives. Friedrich's with the loss of family and Williams with illness. It is a way to ease the mind and find that state that allows them to relax and deal with the memories without being haunted by them.

Kentridge's work seeks to expose the violence of the apartheid years through animation, whilst Abramović makes herself centre stage and appears to abuse herself in front of others as a spectacle of violence. In both acts, there seems to be a reckoning and a sense of shame as a witness to these events. They not only try to make us confront these issues so that we do not forget, but also to request forgiveness.

This raises a question as to whether the artists are dealing with their traumatic memories through art, as an art therapy or are using their memories as a protest to the injustices that they have witnessed. Friedrich and Williams appear to be using their art as a therapy and don't seem concerned about protesting any social injustice in their causes. This may be a sign of the times they lived in, as these topics, such as epilepsy, would not have been championed by artists with the thought of bringing about some social change. It was a route not yet explored by artists.

Friedrich and Williams's approach contrasts with Kentridge and Abramović, who use their memories in their art to highlight the social injustice that they have encountered in their lives. Artists no longer felt the need to produce pretty pictures, but to include the memory of injustice in their work, making political or personal comments to draw attention to the critical issues that are their individual causes. As to what each artist encountered or how they used memories to deal with the trauma as therapy, because each person is different, the answers could also be a combination of the two.

This raises the question as to whether memories, such as traumatic events in an artist's life, make them a better artist. Much of the information written here highlights the negative aspects that affect a person's life, but to provide a proper balance, one should also include the positive events and memories that shape our development. By looking at the profile of an artist's life and understanding their struggles and achievements, it may be possible to have a better understanding of their work. If you look back in history, many great artists have battled some personal trauma or had some outstanding achievement in their life, which made them look or react differently in the way they produced work compared to their peers at the time.

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