

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module: Graphic Design**Name: Dafydd Rhys Wilson****Student number: 2203382****Word Count: 4368**

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Question 4. Time, Memory and the Archive: In what ways do contemporary artists and designers reimagine time, memory, and archival practice, whether through repetition, rupture, slowness, or non-linear temporality? How do these temporal aesthetics intersect with cultural, technological, or historical concerns?

Melting Memory

Abstract

This essay examines how the environment can affect memory, focusing on artists Ólafur Elíasson and Andy Goldsworthy. It uses the concept of memory and nostalgia presented by key thinkers such as Marcel Proust, and Pickering & Keightley and uses this as a framework for analysing art installations that show the memories left behind from a changing environment. The theorists offer different perspectives of memory, such as Proust's preference for organic memory triggers, and Pickering & Keightley's argument that photography is a powerful way to recall a memory. The essay draws on contrasting evidence that photography can also change how we remember. This is key to understanding that memory is not always reliable and can change with time. The art material that forms the essence of this essay is frozen water. Water represents nature and the changing form of the material environment. Through installations of ice and snow, Elíasson and Goldsworthy present the changing nature of the environment and the trace it leaves behind when it is melted. Elíasson focuses on the melting glaciers and uses his art to draw attention to this, whereas Goldsworthy centers his work on the passing of time moving from one century into the next. The conclusion argues that both artists use their artwork to show something that is forever gone, leaving only the memory of it through the stains they leave behind, the impression they left on onlookers and the photographs of the installations in their various stages.

Introduction

According to Weinschenk (2011), the most vivid memories are wrong. We reconstruct and reshape our visions of past events, filling in the blanks with invented details.

Memories can change every time we remember them. Knowing this, can memory ever really be trusted? Memories can be triggered by the senses and captured by technology such as film and photography. Proust argues that memories that occur organically are more trustworthy than those captured by technology. But what happens to memory when the environment changes? The environment is constantly changing around us, due to natural occurrences such as flowing water, erosion and seasonal changes, as well as the human impact on the environment such as pollution, built structures and arguably climate change. As the environment changes, we make new memories, keeping some memories of older experiences of the environment, and replacing others. People often feel a sense of nostalgia for the environments we used to live in, and experience solastalgia, which is the distress caused by environmental change affecting the home environment, even while you are still there.

This essay will examine memory and nostalgia from the point of view of the changing environment. It will attempt to answer the question; how does frozen water as an art material connect to memory of the environment?

The first section will analyse theories of various forms of memory including repressed memory, focusing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, and memory triggers primarily from the thoughts of Marcel Proust. It will also pay close attention to photography as a

way of capturing memorable moments using contemporary thinkers such as Pickering & Keightley. The focus will then shift to two artists who have both expressed interest in the natural environment and use materials from nature in their art. This essay will argue that using ephemeral materials such as ice and snow expresses the passing of time and creates a memory in what it leaves behind.

The first artist is Olafur Eliasson, an Icelandic–Danish artist known for his sculptural work and large installations. His installations often utilise light and other elemental materials to enhance the experience of the viewers. (Tate, 2026) Eliasson is heavily involved in environmental politics and was appointed Goodwill Ambassador for renewable energy and climate action in 2019 (Eliasson, 2025). While some of his works are permanent structures, Eliasson also does a lot of work with the natural environment, such as ‘Green River’ (1998-2001) and ‘The New York City Waterfalls’ (2008), which both use water in outdoor spaces.

The next section will pay attention to Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy is an artist who works with what is available in nature. This often includes leaves, sand, snow, stones, and twigs. His work is ephemeral due to the natural materials he uses and the location of his exhibitions, which are usually outdoors in nature and are intended to naturally wear away over time. One of his prominent pieces was a Holocaust memorial called ‘Garden of Stones’ set up in New York, 2003. Using rocks and trees, Goldsworthy anticipated that the trees would die, and new trees would grow from the fallen acorns. Goldsworthy designed the space to be ambiguous enough so that people who “inhabit

the space can imbue the forms with their own memory” (Eisenman, 2004 p.116). This shows a strong connection to memory within Goldsworthy’s work.

Theory

“Memory is malleable, though not infinitely so. We strive to retain some claim on its accuracy, or at least lack of distortion, and maintain belief in its relative fidelity to previous experience” (Pickering & Keightley, 2015 p.8).

Memory can be unreliable. Proust recognised this and suggested that we should blame the memory rather than what is being remembered (De Botton, 1998). As well as often being unreliable, memory can be repressed completely. This usually happens as a result of a traumatic event where the brain inhibits the recall of the memory as a way of protection and coping. According to Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, repressed memories can be recovered. However, his theory has been critiqued as many recalled memories are illusions created by the person’s unconscious mind (Oxford Reference, 2026). Freud also theorised about the concept of *Deckerinnerung*, which means screen memory or flashbulb memory. This refers to memories that are vivid but mundane. As there is no obvious reason for these banal memories to be preserved, Freud speculated that the memories are distorted or created memories to help repress a more traumatic memory. (Oxford Reference, 2026) . Although his theories are often held in high regard, Sprengnether (2012) argues that Freud’s theory of screen memory becomes autobiographical, suggesting that there may not be any scientific backing to it, drawing only his own experience. (Sprengnether, 2012)

Photography is one of the most significant technologies for triggering memory (Pickering & Keightley, 2015). It can act as a conduit for memory and a way to configure memory. The image triggers the memory of the occasion, but it also helps build and confirm the memory. Phone cameras have extended photography into everyday life. Each year, people take more photos than ever before. In 2014 there were around 1.5 trillion photos shared on social media. The latest data comes from 2015 when it was estimated that up to 3 trillion photos would be handled by social media. In comparison, an estimated 2.5 to 3.5 trillion photos were taken with film cameras in the 150 years before phone cameras and digital photography. (MACFILOS, 2015)

This technology allows us to capture more moments and build up more memory triggers when looking back at the photographs, but it also means a reduction in physical photographs. According to one study, “just 2 per cent of photos make it off our mobile phones and onto our walls, and over a third of people also admitted to not having any printed pictures of family or friends” (Epson, 2025) However, the tangible experience of holding a printed photograph is a bigger trigger for memory than photos on a digital device. The sentimental value of printed photographs can also create a more meaningful memory.

Another issue with digital photography compared to analogue is the ability to revise and change details using editing software. Whilst photo editing has always existed by cutting, and painting onto the image, digital technology makes the process easier and undetectable if done well. Edwards (2006) states that photo editors can “reach into the

guts of the image and manipulate it" (p.131). Changing a photograph in this way can potentially rewrite the memory of the person viewing it, remembering not what happened but what the photographs depicts.

While more photographs can mean capturing more moments, Magnus (2025) argues that the constant use of photography can complicate how the brain creates memories. When people are more concerned with photographing a moment than experiencing it, they lose the function of consolidating new experiences and organising experiences into coherent life narratives. The overreliance on using photographic material can limit the brain's ability to recall memories without this visual aid. Memories are also becoming constructed through what photographs exist and forgetting the moments that are not photographed. This is further complicated by the notion of our devices carrying memories for us, so we no longer need to hold the memory. Another argument is that forgetting is an essential part of the function of memory, but photographing things we might otherwise forget can interfere with the brain's natural ability to remember and forget. Magnus' core argument about photography is that it is not only preserving memory but is also helping construct it. (Magnus, 2025)

Even before the emergence of digital photography, Marcel Proust was a critic of photography as a tool for triggering memory. Farr (2012) explains that Proust felt it relied too heavily on visuals. He had a strong belief that memory should come unexpectedly and as an involuntary reaction to multiple senses. Proust argued that the only true memory comes from involuntarily remembering as a result of a memory

trigger, not by habitually remembering something. Proust offered an example of this in his 1913 novel 'In Search of Lost Time', in which the protagonist struggles to remember his past until he tastes madeleine cake dunked in tea. This taste combination brings back memories of his childhood and the small town he had once visited (Han, 2017). In 'The Scent of Time' (2017), Han discusses Proust's text in relation to people's encounters with time, memory and the present. "...suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine... The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it" (Proust cited in Han, 2009).

Han explains that this occurs when the parts of the brain that are connected to taste and smell are stimulated. Smell and taste can create an early scaffold of memory, so re-experiencing these can help recall these memories. This is because the part of the brain that processes smells sends the signal to where we process emotions. As such, we have a strong emotional reaction to a smell (Weinschenk, 2011). Taste is closely linked to smell, so it can create a similar trigger for memory. In line with Proust's theory, the madeleine experience depended on both the internal state and the external surroundings. The weather outside in the present, combined with the taste of the madeleine transported him back to his earlier self in Combray (Elkins, 2022).

By deliberately trying to remember something, Proust argues that we tend to eliminate some of the essence of the memory, such as time of day or weather conditions, whereas involuntary memory brings back more of those elements (Elkins, 2022). Although Proust felt that photography only captures a moment, it can be argued that a

photograph, like other objects, can be a memory trigger to recall the memory of a long-forgotten event.

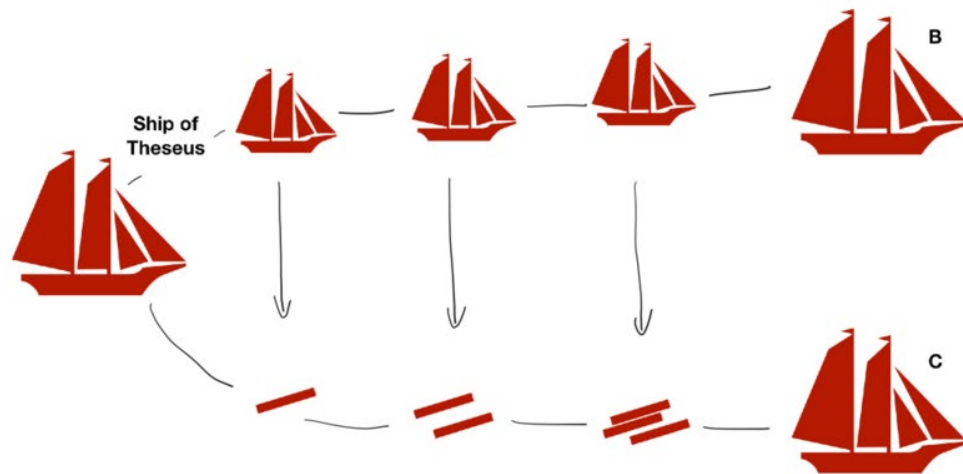


Figure 1 Ship of Theseus paradox

Memory can also allow the past to persist into the present. An example of this is the Ship of Theseus paradox which asks us to consider if it is still the same ship if every part of it has been replaced. It can be argued that the physicality changes, but the memory of ship remains the same. This links to the theory hauntology, which is the persistent presence of the past in the present, haunting our culture with remnants of what has been lost or what might have been. Theoretically, the Ship of Theseus is the same ship because we remember it, including the lost parts and the pieces that once were.

The theories on memory discussed have shown how memory can be triggered, recalled, constructed or repressed. The following artists show how memory can be frozen in time by using ice and snow as their materials, utilising the fact that water in all its forms is constantly changing with time, meaning that each moment with water is unique.

Olafur Eliasson

“Vanishing ice has become a cultural meme symbolizing both anthropogenic climate change and an uncertain and threatening future for the planet” (Hancox, 2014 p. 54).

Several artists including Olafur Eliasson use ice in their work to highlight the human co-dependency of the earth and the damage done to the environment by humans (Hancox, 2014). Eliasson created The Glacier Melt Series; a photographic series that not only documented environmental damage but showed how glaciers are becoming a memory of the past, as they have an uncertain future. In a short documentary interview, Eliasson explained that he had been taking photographs of water for 30 years, documenting it and archiving it. He photographed rivers, trying to match their speed when photographing from the riverbank to capture the flow. He took photographs of the same rivers from above this work with documenting water began his glacier projects. (SEO.TV, 2019)



Figure 2 The Glacier Melt Series 1999/2000

Eliasson's glacier melt photo series began in 1999 when he photographed several dozen Icelandic glaciers. This was part of a larger project of surveying and documenting his native country. He returned in 2019 after 20 years to document the same glaciers. The two different photo series were displayed side by side in a new work called 'The Glacier Melt Series 1999/2019'. The project consists of 30 pairs of images that clearly show the impact of global warming (TBA21, 2023). The photographs were arranged in a grid formation marking out the terrain. Each series has a single focus, such as caves, islands or land-ice. Individual photographs document certain sites at specific moments, but when experienced as a series, it shows the environment change of the same location over a certain time period. "Shifting patterns of light, shape, and color emerge when pictures hang side-by-side, and the specifics of a single image give way to an overall subtlety and abstraction" (Olafur Eliasson, 2025). Eliasson's photo series provided a complex visual experience of memory, nostalgia for a time past and solastalgia for the lost glaciers.

When he went back to the glacier that he photographed 20 years previously, he said that the environmental impact was not his main reason for documenting it but he had recognised that the glacier was vulnerable. When he compared the glacier he was seeing to his photographs, he thought it was the wrong glacier because it looked so different. When he realised how much it had changed, he regretted not documenting it every year to track the changes. This regret could be seen as solastalgia as opposed to nostalgia, as he was mourning the loss of the old environment more than fondly remembering it. Eliasson comments that he was "struck at the time by the difference

between the human scale and the scale of geo-history. For me a glacier or a rock seem solid, but on the geological scale, rocks and glaciers are constantly in motion” (Eliasson cited in TBA21, 2023). Through documenting the change in 20 years, Eliasson made the invisible, visible. By comparing photographs, he showed would not normally be seen (SEO.TV, 2019)

He went to the funeral of a different glacier, Okjökull, after it had gone. It was the first glacier in Iceland to completely vanish due to human impact, so a commemoration was held at the site. Eliasson describes this as a humbling experience. “Every glacier lost reflects our inaction. Every glacier saved will be a testament to the action taken in the face of the climate emergency. One day, instead of mourning the loss of more glaciers, we must be able to celebrate their survival” (TBA21, 2023). A plaque was placed to say that we know what causes this and what to do about it to prevent further environmental harm and global warming. He said that he wants to take photographs in another 20 years, which will be in 2039, to see if we did something about it. (SEO.TV, 2019)



Figure 3 The Ice Watch - Tate Modern 2014

Between Eliasson's first glacier melt photo series and the second one 20 years later, he produced another art project using ice called 'Ice Watch' (2014), this time using blocks of ice from Greenland. To create this project, Eliasson, in collaboration with geologist Minik Rosing, first took 12 blocks of ice from a fjord near Nuuk, and transported them to three different cities in Europe. The first installation took place in Copenhagen in 2014, as part of the UN IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change. People were encouraged to interact with it; "put your hands on the ice, listen to it, smell it, look at it – and witness the ecological changes our world is undergoing" (Eliasson cited in Tate, 2026). The aim of the project was to raise awareness of climate change by giving people a tangible experience of melting arctic ice, allowing them to see the reality of its loss. The second installation was in Paris in 2015 and coincided with the UN Climate Conference COP21. As with the first installation, people engaged with the ice, noticing

how it melted into nothing but puddles of water that would later evaporate and disappear completely. The wet ground and trails of water from the melted ice is a memory of the larger ice forms that were once there. The melted ice not only serves as memory but as a symbol of the passing of time, from solid ice to water.

The final installation was in two different parts of London in late 2018 into early 2019. By doing these installations, Eliasson and Rosing explain that they hope “many more people will understand the reality of climate change by experiencing Ice Watch. Although we may have seen photographs of the melting ice caps, we rarely have a physical experience of these conditions”. (Tate, 2026). This shows how powerful the tangible experience can be for showing the changes in the environment over time and the memories of how the glaciers and frozen fjords used to be.

Artist 2: Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy is famous for his site-specific sculptures and land art using natural items like pebbles and leaves. His goal is to “create ways of ephemeral coexistence with the nonhuman world” (Triggs, 2024 p.760). When talking about his work, he mentions that “perfection in every work is not the aim. I prefer works that are fashioned by the compromises forced upon me by nature...” (Goldsworthy, 2000 p.7). Goldsworthy also claims that he is interested in how working with nature allows his work to change and decay. It could be argued that this creates a memory of his work, as it is never permanent.

He first began working with snow in January 1977, which was the first time snow fell and became available to him in his career as an artist (Goldsworthy 2001). Working with snow as a material, he made snowballs and took them to different environments to put them out of context and make them stand out in a non-snowy environment. When putting a snowball on top of a snow-covered pond, he made a contrast by covering the snowball with dark mud to contrast with the white snowy landscape. Throughout his career, Goldsworthy has worked with snow from Northern England, Scotland, the Canadian Arctic, Russia, Japan.

Goldsworthy continued working with snow whenever he had access to it. He changed his way of working with snow in 1981-82 to delay its disappearance to him as a material, by storing snowballs in a deep freezer to take out later. This allowed him to continue placing snowballs out of context, including seasonal context. In summer 1982, he displayed a deep-frozen snowball at his ‘Sculpture for a Garden’ exhibition. This

was the first time he exhibited snow in summer, creating a memory of winter (Goldsworthy 2001).

In 1989, Goldsworthy did another exhibition with snow, called 'Snowballs in Summer'. He displayed 18 large snowballs that had embedded within them, natural materials that could be revealed as the snow melted. This was to imitate the natural occurrence of organic objects getting caught up in snow, but in a more controlled and curated way. He filled each snowball with a different material and allowed them to reveal themselves at different stages of snowmelt. He mixed snowballs with berries and earth, and allowed them to melt onto paper. When observing the snowball that was filled with chalk, Goldsworthy noted that when the snow melted, the chalk left behind a stain. Seeing this, he realised he could draw with the contents left behind from the melted snow. As a result of this observation, in 1990, he mixed seeds with snow to make more drawings from the melted combination. He called these 'landscape paintings' (Goldsworthy, 2001). In 1999, Goldsworthy did some experimental work snowballs in Utrecht, staining them with dye extracted from beech tree seeds and placing them on paper sheets. The snowballs were approximately the same size, stained with the same material and melted in the same room at the same time. The only difference was that each snowball was stained with seeds from different beech trees. The result was a series of interesting traces on the paper that were of a similar quality to each other (Goldsworthy, 2000).



Figure 4 Midsummer Snowball with Sticks

A key exhibition for Goldsworthy using snow as a way to portray time and memory, was an installation called 'Midsomer Snowballs'. Goldsworthy brought snowballs into the city from a refrigerated truck, similarly to what Eliasson would later for his 'Ice Watch' project. As with his previous work with snow, Goldsworthy added natural objects such as sticks, pebbles, pine needles, stones and soil, to be revealed and left behind as the snow melted. There were also other objects like barbed wire, and collections of old rusty metal, and organic materials like cow hair and sheep's wool. All these objects came from his home county of Galloway and Dumfries. He chose to allow them to melt outside because he claims that by comparison, a gallery is a "dead, somewhat timeless, space. People who work in the city will see them over period of time and really get a feel for the changes that will happen. I am not a performer, but occasionally I deliberately work in a public context" (Goldsworthy, 2001 p.34).

The snow for this project was collected in 1998-99 and unwrapped in 2000. The timing was important as Goldsworthy intended it to melt was to allow it to melt in another century, playing around with the notion of time and remembering a previous era. He described it as “the memories of one century released into the next” (Goldsworthy 2001, back cover). Because Goldsworthy knew his life would belong to two centuries, he wanted his work to represent the passing of time. He wanted to work with the heightened awareness of time that is provoked by moving into a new century. As well as his ‘Midsomer Snowballs’, Goldsworthy was working on three other sculptures in 1999, that were half built, ready to be finished in the new millennium. “Between the two halves will be a thin gap – the passage of time...” (Goldsworthy, 2000 p.11).

For his ‘Midsomer Snowballs’ Goldsworthy collected a total of 14 snowballs in 1998 and 1999, displaying 13 of them in various locations around London in 2000. He kept the 14th snowball to display in an exhibition called ‘Time’ at the Curve Gallery in London (Goldsworthy, 2001).



Figure 5 Midsummer Snowball Process

Photographs were taken of the 13 snowballs at various stages of melting and labelled with the date and the part of the day, such as morning, late afternoon, or night. People seeing the snowballs will have a different memory of the installation depending on when they saw it. When seeing the snowballs later on in the exhibition's timeframe when more snow was melting and the internal items were revealed, it will have be a different point of view from those seeing it earlier, when they were still large snowballs. Everyone will have a different memory of the exhibition depending on when they saw it. This shows how time changes things and leaves a trace memory of what was once there. As well as the trace of the art, Goldsworthy argues that “people also leave presence in a place even when they are no longer there”. He explains that he felt this during a sightseeing walk in the city. “Bunhill Fields graveyard for example, represents the absence of people but also the presence of their memory”. During this visit,

Goldsworthy decide to lie down in the rain. After he got up, his presence was left as a dry patch on the pavement. "It's the same with snowballs – they will arrive then disappear, leaving only intangible memories" (Goldsworthy, 2001 p.35).

Like the 13 snowballs displayed outside, the 14th snowball that was exhibited for the 'Time' exhibition was allowed to melt to reveal what was inside. In this case, it was filled with red stone ground into a fine powder. Goldsworthy stated that "I have worked with this red all over the world – in Japan, California, France, Britain, Australia – a vein running around the earth" (Goldsworthy, 2001 p.29). Due to health and safety, Curve Gallery could not allow the snow to melt publicly. Goldsworthy did not want to restrict the flow of water by placing the snowball in a tray, so he melted the snow ahead of the opening and exhibited the stain on the floor, the memory of the snowball. "The red stone snowball that will melt inside the gallery will connect the inside to the outside. The snowball will leave a red stain on the gallery floor, its shadow. Even when those outside have melted and gone, their presence will remain as memories in the places where they stood" (Goldsworthy 2001 p.35). Goldsworthy claimed that melting the snowball made the idea stronger as it made people think of its presence by its absence and the tangible stains it left behind and that would stay on the floor for years to come.

Conclusion

This essay has evaluated theories of memory to apply the concept of memory and nostalgia of the changing environment into the artworks of two artists. The artists used in this essay have managed to capture environmental memory by using different forms of frozen water. Both artists allow snowballs and ice to melt, providing onlookers with a memory of what once was and forever gone. Goldsworthy's snowballs leave a memory from the stain made by the materials used in the snowball, such as the red stain left behind in the Curve Gallery. Eliasson's snowballs leave a memory for a smaller amount of time, as the only memory is the water left behind. Once that dries up, the trace is gone, effectively representing what happens to the glaciers. Both artists show the passing of time through their work with melting ice and snow. Both works constantly change as it melts, but while Eliasson's work gets smaller, Goldsworthy work changes in a different way as it reveals other materials in different positions, depending on the melt stage.

An essential difference between the two artists is that Eliasson uses his art to make a message about nature, whereas Goldsworthy uses nature to make art. Eliasson shows ice unaltered, whereas Goldsworthy's work is highly curated. What connects them is that they both have a high level of respect for nature, and their work highlights the environmental problem of glaciers disappearing and becoming just a memory.

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