CURATING MEMORY EXCHANGE AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Lise Aagaard Knudsen

Abstract: ‘The archive’ is a contested concept and has been widely discussed, challenged and interrogated through performance in recent decades. Dance scholar André Lepecki, discussing the phenomenon as a ‘will to archive’ (Lepecki, 2010: p.29), further defines it as a part of contemporaneity. While the archive thus has been, and continues to be, approached from a number of angles, I work with appropriating the memories of others by curating Memory Exchanges with participants both on- and off-line. I do this through *I remember*… – a cross-disciplinary memory project that interfaces with living archives. The memories shared are appropriated through re-telling and re-enactment, as well as through copying physical positions and transforming them into choreography.

Key Words: *I remember; Memory Exchanges; body-archive; archive-body; curation; archival knowledge; performance*

*I remember*… began in Bergen, Norway, as the first collaboration between dance artist Karen Eide Bøen and myself, theatre practitioner Lise Aagaard Knudsen, in the fall of 2014. The title came from reading American author Siri Hustvedt’s book *The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves* (2010). Here she writes that in her work with psychiatric patients, she often uses the autobiographical method developed by poet and visual artist Joe Brainard, which involves starting every sentence you write with ‘I remember’:

> The very act of inscribing the words *I remember* generates memories, usually highly specific images or events from the past, often ones we hadn’t thought about for many years. (Hustvedt, 2010: 62-63).

In order to achieve access to our personal inner archives of memory, and later as a mental ‘warm up’ in our workshops, my collaborator and
I started practicing writing ‘I remember…’, and it became a writing exercise we would use to get into the ‘memory zone’. Like Hustvedt, we found that we remembered more than we knew, and that the process excavated forgotten memories. It seemed to work as a tool to ease ourselves, and others, into the demarcated period in time that we wanted to focus on: memories from childhood.

I remember my mother and my stepfather acting in a play. Or actually I don’t remember them acting at all. I just remember it being outside on a small hill. I think there was a forest or at least some trees on the side. I remember one of the actors. He was really tall or maybe it was me who was small. I was three years old I think. (Memory Archive, 2014).

What felt like long lost memories and images re-appeared – sometimes with an underlying suspicion that maybe they were not ‘real’. Within I remember… it is memories as such, and not their credibility, that interest us. They hold a value for the one who remembers them, regardless of being either ‘real’ or ‘constructed’, and we focus rather on the exchange and transfer of memories. Our main interest has been childhood memories, as they exist in a bubble already labelled ‘past’. The quotidian ‘everyday’ has been another focus: our grandparents’ kitchen, our childhood bedroom, our route to school, our breakfast, our collection of napkins, rocks, erasers, stickers, stamps, souvenirs, dolls, Donald Duck magazines, precious stones, mugs, teddy bears…. As artist and academic Ollivier Dyens suggests:

Without memories, a being cannot learn and adapt to the demands of the environment. Without memories, a being cannot evaluate the condition of his or her body (since this evaluation depends upon an interaction between before and now), and is thereby unable to emerge as a conscious being. (Dyens, 2001: 78).

As Dyens suggests, memories are a universal human ‘condition,’ which is one of the reasons for our focus on the quotidian; an attempt to turn the attention towards what we share, with a potential for mirroring and universality. The work of I remember… raises a number of ethical questions and questions of ‘ownership,’ in terms of the appropriation and use of text, stories, drawings, photos, video and voices of others. We continue to discuss and revise best practice in terms of ethics when receiving, appropriating and sharing the memories of others², but our main focus is how we can use remembering and performance to ‘preserve’ and ‘save’

[…] the past not by capturing it and keeping it safe, stable, and the same, but by re-making it in repetitions, performing it forward and outward into the lives, experiences, memories, and bodies of others. (Sola in Eisner, 2013: 141).

Our overall artistic focus in I remember… has been the exploration of the following three questions: 1) How can we, through sharing and performing memories, trigger memories in others? 2) How can we create an archive of memories? and 3) How can the exchange of memories create an artistic method/(in)form our artistic practice?³ Our Memory Exchanges consist of sharing photos from our childhood albums, and triggering images and fragments of stories through the moving body and/or through the use of senses.

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² Our current practice is an oral agreement where we inform our participants that parts of what they share will be recorded, and by the end of the workshop/online exchange we ask them whether they wish to donate those recordings, alongside any drawings or written text, to our archive. We inform them that if they decide to do so, their material might be appropriated, performed and/or exhibited at a later stage in the project. If permitted, we also document their photograph, and let them know that they can retract their permission of use at any time by emailing us. We are considering written consents, but find it a challenge to marry contracts with creating an open and sharing environment.

³ These are the questions, Karen and I formulated in collaboration with our facilitator Myriam Mazzoni in preparation for our time as Experiment Leaders at the Research in Artistic Practice Programme 2015 (RAPP 2015) at Laboratoriet in Aarhus. See webpage in References for further details.
Within these exchanges, we transform – and ask our participants to transform – the singular shared memory into an artistic expression through sound, drawing, installation or performance.

For my MA thesis Body Archive // Archive Body – Memory Exchange as Artistic Practice (2015) I conducted my research through I remember…: I analysed our exercises, some of the exchanges and a number of performances, and asked how an exchange of memories can work as a performative tool that triggers memories on both sides of the exchange – both in the giver and the receiver. I also investigated whether our method had potential to shift existing memories through what Exe Christofferen has referred to as the act of re-collection, re-enactment and re-archiving (Exe Christoffersen, 2010). Furthermore, I looked at what kind of performative meeting the method offers, and whether the body can be defined as an archive – and if so, how we can transfer memories from one archive to another.

**Body-archive // Archive-body**

While working on my MA thesis, two terms were predominant in my investigations of our work, and they helped conceptualise the relationship between body, world and archive. The first, ‘body-archive’, refers to the tangible and physical body, containing and carrying the memory archive: memories that crystallise into (embodied) experiences. It is an archive of memories, sensual experiences and traces of practices, faith and embodied knowledge. An archive that we recognise from the experience of dancers, here expressed by dance sociologist Helen Thomas:

> It is almost always taken for granted that the dancers’ experiential knowledge of the dances, which is contained in their movement memories, is potentially recoverable […]. That is, even though they can no longer do it, the knowledge of how it was done is contained within them and can be brought out. (Thomas, 2003: 137).

The body-archive is and *carries* the archival material (experience), and this is what is being accessed when we attempt to reach certain memories – we go back and ‘search’ through our embodied archive.

The second term, the ‘archive-body’, I appropriated from Vietnamese dance artist Ea Sola. She conceives of the body as being a historical body, and therefore a political one; a memory body and an archive-body. In Sola’s understanding, the archive-body “…is the place where pasts and practices converge, and where they are continually questioned, re-performed, and re-made within the ever-emerging present” (Sola in Eisner, 2013: 132). The differentiation I am making here, is between the stable – though over time slightly shifting – memory content (the body-archive) and the relational, interactive interface of these experiences (the archive-body). The archive-body is the behaviour that links the experienced body to the world. Meaning that the archive-body interacts with the world *through* the experiences from the

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4 This is of course a generalisation of the process of remembering, but has proven accurate with some of the memory work we have conducted.
body-archive, and therefore can be perceived as a practice: It is the behavioural link that connects the experience we contain in our archives with how we meet the world. A relational archive that affects and is affected by its surroundings, and furthermore works as the gate-way between world and body-archive. Whatever gets archived passes through and by the archive-body.

Performance scholar Diana Taylor separates archive practice into ‘the archive’ and ‘the repertoire’ (Taylor, 2003: 19), where the archive is characterized by permanence (e.g. documents, buildings or bones) and the repertoire is the ephemeral (e.g. embodied knowledge, rituals or oral history). In relation to Taylor’s definitions, the body-archive is part of both archive and repertoire, and therefore exists somewhere in-between – it is bones and mass, embodied knowledge and movement – and as such it transgresses the demarcation between the ephemeral and the stable, the archive and the repertoire. In our work so far, we have focused on the archive as connected to the individual and the singular body, but as seen through Taylor’s repertoire it can encompass both the individual body-archive as well as the collective of body-archives and their content.

Whilst most objects in Taylor’s notion of the archive transgress the live, the body-archive can transgress both the live and life through memory work like that of I remember… Here, archival material from the body-archive is engaged and changes form, sometimes through ‘regular’ archival formats such as sound and video recordings, drawings and written text, sometimes through the embodied repertoire of participants, facilitators and performers, as embodied experience or echoes of past voices. The content of the body-archive can thereby survive the singular body through retelling, transformation and acts of transfer – the transfer happening from body to body through performance (Taylor, 2003: 2) – and simultaneously change form through the mirroring of memories. As anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup expressed after experiencing her autobiographical material presented on stage in the performance Talabot by Odin Teatret: “Through the selected fiction of the not-me, my reality became more focused.” (Hastrup in Thomas, 2003: 76). In contrast to the body-archive, the archive-body cannot transgress live/life, as it is constituted by being live, and thus acts as link between body-archive and world. A link that ceases if the living body is no longer (a) live. Both archive and repertoire, body-archive and archive-body exist simultaneously in past, present and future. The content is past, it is remembered, recalled and evaluated from the present, and it affects how one deals with the future.

These ideas and concepts of living archives helped me understand and discuss the material that we work with in I remember… The body-archive offers the material and the archive-body absorbs it and re-presents it in performance and in life. The interesting part is the transfer from one archive to another; the transfer of memories from your body-archive to my archive-body, and then through my archive-body to my body-archive.

Our archive-body – due to the content of the body-archive – recognises, remembers and reacts when encountering certain smells, a touch, a physical position or the familiar feeling of an object. Ea Sola, recalling her return to Vietnam, where she grew up, says: “I had forgotten this happiness, even the smells, the sounds, … that memory. It seemed that these times of my childhood, when I was still living in the forest, were etched inside me” (Sola in Eisner, 2013: 127). The approach and understanding of the body and its relationship with the world in use in I remember… correspond with philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories, where body and world are not separate entities; they constitute and therefore potentially change each other: “there is a ramification of my body […] and a correspondence between [the world’s] inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 136). The body is the surface to something deeper, the texture of something larger (Ibid.), and we are conditioned by our embodied knowledge, which influences, and is influenced by, personal, collective and cultural factors. The phenomenological body

5 Talabot was performed from 1988 to 1991, and was partly based on Kirsten Hastrup’s autobiographical material. See webpage in References
is comprised of stored experiences that generate knowledge, the repertoire of inherited practices and embodied knowledge that is not limited to our own experience, but rather transferred to us from other body-archives through their archive-bodies. It is a body that is through its archive.

Curating Memory Exchange

I remember... has up until now been a mix of workshops, online exchanges and performances. The online exchange is always between two people, most often unknown to each other, while the workshops have been in groups of two to eight people. As remembering can be a sensitive experience, we have developed the work to be conducted in small intimate groups. The performing of the memories has only been executed by my collaborator and I so far.

The curation of memory exchanges begins when we ask our participants to choose a photograph from their childhood album to share in pairs at our workshops, or via email for the online exchanges. This is the one element that has been consistent in every exchange, and this is where the remembering starts: flicking through albums and reminiscing on previous birthdays, holidays and homes, while choosing the photograph you want to bring, which may be the one that is you or equally the one that does not reveal too much about you. In addition to the photograph, we ask the participant to pose a question about their exchange partner’s childhood, or bring an object that reminds them of their own childhood. Our exchanges are orchestrated to be between strangers, or at least people who are less familiar with one another. An exception was the initial exchange between my collaborator Karen and I: We tested the online exchange from our resident cities of London and Bergen by sending physical envelopes with photos and questions, and responding via email/dropbox.

For our model of exchange the important part is the feedback-loop: the giving – receiving – giving back of memories. It is a premise for the Memory Exchanges of I remember... that you do not give without receiving, you do not share without others sharing with you. Part of the sharing is the receiver responding to the photograph and the question/object in any format they would like: text, movement, image, sound. Whatever the photo/question/object triggers in them, be that a memory, a feeling or an idea. Thus, we accumulate artistic responses to memories, and attempt to make chains of Memory Triggers by curating the following exchange structure between two individuals:

**Giving** 1 photograph + 1 question/object.  
**Receiving** 1 response to photograph + 1 response to question/object. **Giving back** 1 final response to whatever you received in response to your photograph/question/object.

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6 I am not suggesting that my terms should replace work by Taylor or Merleau-Ponty; I am merely presenting ideas for concepts that operate within already existing terms. Concepts I have used in my own research

7 Examples have been prayer beads, a cake tin, a knitted mouse, a piggy bank, elderflowers...
Our intention is to create one unbroken chain of triggers, so the remembering never stops with us creating something ‘artistic’ that spills over to create more memories in whomsoever we might share with and perform for.

There are many black holes in my childhood memories from growing up during a time of war [...] I get reminded of me taking dance lessons as a kid in Iran – (during the war) – It was not a dance class or a studio but a basement of my mom’s friend’s friend’s house – who taught me Persian dance. Thank you for this process – this reminds me of both lovely & gloomy times – my love for dancing as a child went beyond losing myself in my body – it was freedom. (Memory Archive, 2015).

The Performing Body’s Potential for Transferring Archival Knowledge

During our first explorations of performances initiated by memories, I was asked by my collaborator ‘What were you afraid of when you were a child?’. The question triggered a couple of different memories, and I developed and performed a text which Karen appropriated for a further performative articulation. Here, she embodied my memory, but placed it in a new context.

Karen has my words written on yellow post-its. She places them like wings on the edges of a yellow chair, while speaking the words out loud. She then takes them one by one, placing them on her own body, and moves; dances around with the words. She has the word ‘wings’ on her neck and my mother (‘her’) on her arm. (Memory Archive, 2015).

My notes from that day read “A dance with words. My words and memories. My mother on Karen’s body. Yellow wings on Karen’s hands and neck. My words in her mouth.” (Ibid.). The balance between recognition (of the words and the memory) and alienation in the remediation created a noticeable resonance in my body – both as an audience member and as the original archive-body/archive of the memory. Karen seemed to exceed the confines of her own subjectivity; and with the engagement of her archive-body and my body-archive, she hovered somewhere between my body, my mother’s and her own, as she was dancing, wearing my memory, my words, on yellow post-it notes. It did not trigger more memories, but it evoked more detail from the memory in question. In presenting my transferred memory back to me, it was transposed to an aesthetic dimension wherein the validity of the original memory became irrelevant and I experienced an emotional reaction to the exposure of my archive.

The remediation and re-enactment allows the receiver to experience the memory with a difference or in difference (Schneider, 2001: 105), and thereby mirror themselves in someone else’s understanding, interpretation or elaboration of a memory that originally was personal. As the Pil and Galia Kollectiv suggest “… it is the gap between the reproduction and its point of origin that cuts through the mediation to reveal the real” (Pil & Galia Kollectiv in Farr (ed.), 2012: 158). The re-enactment created space to reflect on the memory and its place in my archive, giving rise to the possibility of re-archival. The remediation process also created potential for acts of transfer between archive-bodies and body-archives. Furthermore, the performance suggested that the uncertainty of the relationship between memory, reality and fantasy on one side, and ownership on the other side, can work as a performative strength. It can create a resonance in the original ‘owner’ of the memory, meanwhile the blurring of the lines in terms of fantasy/reality and ownership opens up for a universality of memory. The memory could belong to you as well as to me.

How to Perform Every-Body’s Archive

In our work, we started out by investigating the triggers through which we remember and recover memories. Currently, we are exploring appropriation and how to perform the archive with our bodies, our voices using archival remains from exchanges and workshops. We have been scratching the surface with performances in
Malmö for Living Archives’ Archival Re-Enactment Symposium and in Copenhagen during CPH Stage 2016. As a warmup prior to our performance in Malmö, my collaborator and I met on Skype and bounced our memories and those of others back and forth, working towards creating what we called a Memory Flow: a free flow of memories from the expanding archive.

I remember the smell of my mother’s skin. It was very sweet but also kind of... kind of... I don't know... earthy. [...] It's the kind of smell that sticks in your nose for all your life [...] It was the smell of me being a child and her being a young mother. It's kind of beautiful and a bit sad too, because it's something like... I know, it's never going to be repeated, it was that moment in time, when I was a very young kid and we had this connection. (Memory Archive, 2015).

We remembered how our mothers smelled: earthy, perfumed, of coffee, comfort, rosemary, fresh air, safety... And recalled our fathers’ voices, the aroma of burned toast, canned food, big knives, parsley, piles of paper, and his hand on our head. We found clusters of themes, common denominators or differences in our experiences of the water in our lives while growing up – the ocean, the swimming pool... We performed the echo – our translation, appropriation and transformation of the ‘original’ memory – and asked how we could start to embody someone else’s truth. Like Diana Taylor we pondered how:

[…] one [does] come to inhabit and envision one's body as coextensive with one's environment and one's past, emphasizing the porous nature of skin rather than its boundedness? [...] Cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection. (Taylor, 2003: 160).

For our performance in Malmö, we decided to test a new format starting off with an improvised choreography layered with our speaking a mix of memories; our own and those shared with us, mixing pronouns, ‘I remember’, ‘you remember’, ‘s/he remembers’, ‘they remember’. Furthermore, we used the recorded voices of others, together with a piece of music composed by an online exchange participant, as the opening music score. Our audience arrived as the score began and we started moving in improvised unison. The space was decorated with archival material; drawings, pictures and text on the black walls and on the floor, providing us with a square performance space in the middle of the room. We performed the entirety of the memories as our own; appropriating the stories and sensory fragments and claiming them as parts of our archives; our memories, our truth. We had set a timer to 20 minutes and once the time was up, we stopped and addressed our audience directly, asking them to join us for a short writing exercise of ‘I remember’. The hope being that our performative remembering would have triggered memories in them, preparing them to join in. Afterwards the audience shared their memories in pairs or smaller groups, and finally had the option to donate their memories to the archive in the form of their writing.

Karen Eide Bøen (right) and I remembering during Research in Artistic Practice Programme Conference 2015

Wee remembered how our mothers smelled: earthy, perfumed, of coffee, comfort, rosemary, fresh air, safety... And recalled our fathers’ voices, the aroma of burned toast, canned food, big knives, parsley, piles of paper, and his hand on
Here we found that our audience did not feel ready to participate, as that was not the performative ‘contract’ presented in the opening part. We also found that the calm, flowing movement language that we had developed to be able to move in unison while improvising and speaking, contradicted and prohibited the inhabiting of the memories we shared. A discussion that was therefore opened during this symposium was whether it is necessary to embody the emotion of a memory to embody it at all. Can the transfer from one body-archive to another happen without the complete emotional experience? I would argue that memories can be appropriated, but not in their original form or with similar emotional implications.

The findings from Malmö were taken into consideration for the work later conducted in Copenhagen during CPH Stage 2016; here we returned to our initial format of conducting small participatory exchange workshops (two to four people), using the triggered memories to create short performances. Every day of the festival, Karen and I created a performance with ‘new’ memories, and worked specifically with assembling Memory Clusters, and remembering through positions that we then transformed into choreography. In our work, we do not attempt to recreate emotions; we perform memories with recognisable themes, and through re-enactment, repetition and interactive game structures, we involve our participating audience in remembering with us and through the sharing we aim at performing the aforementioned interconnection of cultural memory.

CPH Stage 2016 also marked our first collaboration with scenographer Mie Dinesen, who worked with us to create a living, growing archival landscape. This landscape consisted of the shared memories that we received, and have received over recent years, and was built for us to conduct our Memory Exchanges and performances in while at the festival. Together we explored possibilities for the use of the Memory Archive, considering different options for presenting and engaging with the archival material.

We have found that through our method we can preserve the ephemeral – the memories – through the ephemeral – the body – by sharing the memories and re-archiving them through several archive-bodies. We found that the sharing of archives allows a restructuring, which is activated through re-archiving. We trigger the past, and perform it for the present, whereby we preserve it for the future. Our exchanges suggest a potentiality in the mutual/the relational; the intersubjective meetings between archives, where the participants can mirror themselves in their past self and in the similarities and differences they share with each other. Our methodology takes as its starting point the body and its archive in sensing and feeling the connection between body, memory and identity. Thus, we reach out to the individual through the other, and facilitate encounters around a past we ‘share’ – our childhood – while reminding us of who we were, are, and potentially want to become.

References

Eisner, R S. (2013) Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola’s Forgotten Fields. In Borggreen, G. & Gade, R. (eds.) Performance Archives – Archives of

14 One hope is that a future development of the project will include a collaboration with a sound artist, as the archive contains hours of memories, and fragments of stories, shared by voices in English (as both first and second language), Danish and Norwegian.
Performance, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press. p.127-145

Webpages


Other

Memory Archive (2014-). I remember...