


VISUAL ESSAY

To measure the straight distance, by travelling the winding way

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Abstract

This text accompanies the performance *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars*, which premiered at the Lapworth Museum of Geology in the United Kingdom on 18 March 2023, as part of the Flatpack film festival. It includes both the text and a film version, developed during a residency at the museum. Over 18 months, I had full access to the collection and archives, selecting objects that served as prompts for stories about time and memory. A central theme of the work is slippage – misremembering and misunderstanding – as a generative methodology for exploring the connection between the collection, our past, and possible futures.

A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars combines analogue media and digital technologies to examine our understanding of remembering and forgetting. I used a live digital feed and two analogue slide projectors to explore the relationships between image and memory. This article does not serve as a guide to the performance but instead reflects on the process and the ideas behind the work. My goal is to share my practice of rethinking memory through direct engagement with materials. In line with the performance's tangential narrative, this text weaves together diverse references, locations, thoughts, and ideas, offering a deeper look into the conceptual framework of the work.

Keywords: visual art; photography; narrative; memory; analogue materials

Tick, tack, tick, tack, tick

A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars (Figure 1) has the relationship between photography and memory at its heart, with the genesis of this being a visit to Edward James' Las Pozas, a wild, surrealist sculpture garden in the town of Xilitla, in the state of San Luis Potosí in Mexico. I first learnt of it in Adrian Forty's book *Concrete and Culture* although there were no photographs and just this one short sentence to describe it: '...but a more recent and even more eccentric work, the English surrealist Edward James' 'Garden of Eden' at Las Pozas in Mexico, with its 36 concrete follies, built between 1949 and 1984, does use reinforced concrete.' (Forty 2016) (Figures 2–3)

Although the description was brief, I was compelled to visit and made the pilgrimage in April 2012. At the time, I was preoccupied with the relationships between photography and sculpture, which in the form of objects that are cast, and photographs produced on film, are

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Figure 1. 'A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars' Lapworth Museum of Geology, 2023 © Katja Ogrin.



Figure 2. 'Las Pozas Mould 006' Medium Format Slide.
Dimensions Variable 2012 © Stuart Whipps.



Figure 3. 'Las Pozas 011' Medium Format Slide.
Dimensions Variable 2012 © Stuart Whipps.

made in the first instance in the negative. Often, this negative trace remains and lives alongside the *real* object as an ever-present memory of its gestation (Figures 2 and 3). As an introduction to Edward James, it's an odd place to start, thousands of miles away and with the efforts that would occupy the last decades of his life, like reading a book from the back to the front. In the spirit of learning more about James, I started to research his life and work, and on reading the autobiography by James, edited by George Melly, *Swans Reflecting Elephants*, I was stopped in my tracks by the following quote:

One time I was so impressed, so enthralled by the beauty of colour and form that I wanted to perpetuate it for ever. Long before I knew about movies, I tried to imitate the camera and say tick when I was moved by something, feeling that I was recording this particular scene for ever, and then I would say tack when it was over. My mental film clips lasted longer and longer. First they would be just a few seconds and then, after about a year, several minutes. I would say tick and then something ugly would spoil the scene or something boring would happen and I would say tack. When I was about eight, I said tick one day, and forgot to say tack and it has been running ever since, this interior camera. (James and Melly, 1982)

This equation of the body with the camera, and with objects in the world, and the images and projections in our brain; and the Voice, say tick, say tack, speaks of the longing to hold

and to fix transient and fleeting experiences, in the same way that an analogue photograph requires a chemical fixative. But the camera and the brain are not the same. ‘...we do not record our experiences the way a camera records them. Our memories work differently. We extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event.’ (Schacter, 1997)

A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars sits in the space and the tensions between James’ whimsical, poetic ideas and Schacter’s rational, scientific position.

‘Yea, from the table of my memory’ (Shakespeare 2020)

In *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars* the first thing, in fact the only thing the viewer sees, is a projection of a thickly varnished and heavily scratched oak tabletop (Figure 4). The choice of this specific table came about through a conversation with Jonathan Clatworthy, the director of the Lapworth Museum who, in his ever-obliging way, offered multiple options for use in the performance. Knowing it would be of interest Jon mentioned that the museum had inadvertently acquired a tabletop that had belonged to the scientist and prominent industrialist, William Murdoch when his collection of minerals was donated to the museum in 1932. Murdoch was known for several innovations but mostly as the inventor of gas lighting. Murdoch’s desk, and its chance accession to the museum, can represent the intertwined histories of industry, collecting, knowledge and power, but as I reflect on my choice of this surface, it is the signs of wear and tear that I’m interested in. Scratches and scuffs on furniture can speak of all kinds of memory marks: of boredom and frustration, but



Figure 4. ‘A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars’ Video Still.
2023 © Stuart Whipps.

also of value and worth. Associative memory is at the heart of my practice, with the recall of information and ideas within *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars*, mirrored in the recall of subjective memories in the minds of people experiencing it.

Broader research into the nature and function of memory led me to the idea of ‘episodic recombination processes’ which I encountered in Daniel Schacter’s interview with the co-editor of this journal, Andrew Hoskins (Schacter & Hoskins 2021). Schacter describes episodic recombination processes as the taking of bits and pieces of different experiences and recombining them to simulate novel future events and has described it as a form of mental time travel. In *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars* there is no clairvoyant intent. I’m recombining episodic and disparate memories to understand our present condition; in particular, how the encounter with a tarnished 19th century desk can stimulate the recall of contemporaneous surfaces and stories.

I wrote this text in my studio, which is also in Birmingham, with my computer sitting on a table made of chunky aluminium legs, a black melamine top, and varnished English Oak edging. These tables used to be in Birmingham Central Library and were designed and made for that building by its architect, John Madin, for what was once the largest civic library in Europe. It lived a short and contentious life, opening in 1974 only to be demolished 42 years later in 2016. I realise as I write those dates that the library spent less time on Earth than I have. I managed to acquire the desks through a bit of good fortune. In early 2014, I convinced two friends, the artist Andrew Lacon and fabricator Matt Foster to help me remove around 900 decorative brick tiles from Birmingham Central Library for a proposal I was making to have them reinstated in the new Library of Birmingham, and by chance, the tables were being removed on the same day. I was certain my proposal would fail, but I wanted to draw an equivalence between objects that *had* been saved during the demolition of previous libraries. This can get confusing because Birmingham has had a lot of central libraries in a relatively short time (Figure 5).

The first central library opened on 6 September 1865 but was tragically destroyed by fire in 1872.

In 1882, Birmingham’s 2nd Central Library opened, and if we use longevity as our measure, it remains the city’s most successful iteration. At the very least, it was around long enough for people to become affectionate about it, and when its closure and demolition was planned for 1974, several architectural features were deemed significant enough to warrant preservation and relocation in Birmingham’s 3rd Central Library, the aforementioned building that was designed by John Madin. These features included plaques, busts and artworks, a wrought iron spiral staircase, and most significantly, The Shakespeare Memorial Library, an ornate oak panelled room which was carefully dismantled and rebuilt, only to be dismantled and rebuilt again with the demolition of that building. What memories might be bound up in these materials and how might we access them? The Shakespeare Memorial Library now sits on top of the 4th central library, known as The Library of Birmingham, and is home to the second largest Shakespeare collection in the world (Figure 6).

In April 1998, the writer Jorge Luis Borges published a short story in the *New Yorker* about a man who is gifted the memory of William Shakespeare ‘from his youngest boyhood days to early April, 1616’ (Borges, 1998). In *Shakespeare’s Memory* Hermann Sörgel, our protagonist, swiftly arrives at the realisation that the acquisition of a memory is not the same as the accumulation of knowledge (Figure 7). ‘The man who acquires an encyclopaedia does not thereby acquire every line, every paragraph, every page, and every illustration; he acquires the possibility of becoming familiar with one and another of those things...A man’s memory is not a summation; it is a chaos of vague possibilities.’ (Borges, 1998)

The marks on John Madin’s desks in my studio represent the chaotic evidence of their 39 years of use in the form of scratches, gouges, and the discoloration of general wear. Now, in my own studio, the narrative of the desks continues, from place to place. As I run my hand across the desk, the undulating surfaces can take me in several directions. There’s the



Figure 5. 'Birmingham Central Library' C-Print, 150 cm x 119.8 cm.
2012 © Stuart Whipps.

impulse to consider the people who made them and to speculate on the activities that might have produced the various blemishes. 'Now comes the act of attention'. (Nabokov, 2017).

In his 1972 novella *Transparent Things*, Vladimir Nabokov sinks into the narrative potential of a plain, round, cheap pencil. Nabokov takes us from its discovery in the middle drawer of an old desk through to the carpenter who discarded it and the schoolchild who whittled it. We travel back in time, (though not as far back to the year of Shakespeare's birth when also, pencil lead was discovered) to the tree that provided the wood to produce it. 'Thus the entire little drama, from crystallized carbon and felled pine to this humble implement, to this transparent thing, unfolds in a twinkle.' (Nabokov, 2017).

In *Navigating by Mind and by Body*, professor of psychology Barbara Tversky sets out the dichotomy between two research communities as a contemporary, though minor, mind-body problem in her research on spatial cognition: 'To caricature the approaches, for the mind group, being human is fundamentally about limitations in processing, in capacity and in computation... For the body group, being human is fundamentally about evolution and learning, about selection and adaptation, pressures toward perfection.' (Tversky and Hall, 2003) *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars* makes a virtue of this dichotomy between the human limitation to process information, and a surefooted (handed?) physical interaction with objects and the world they are drawn from.



Figure 6. 'Shakespeare Memorial Library during deconstruction' C-Print, 150 cm × 119.8 cm 2012 © Stuart Whipps.

F is for fingers

My hands are the protagonists of *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars*, handling a broad range of objects from the museum collection (Figure 8). As I present a mineral sample that is suffering from pyrite decay, my hands are stiff and formal, operating as they believe a geologist's hands might.

A photograph of my parents on their wedding day is positioned with care as I gently identify my mother, Pat, my father, Jeff (and my grandfather's white Vauxhall Viva car). A black and white photograph of the andromeda nebula that follows is brushed aside whilst I talk about images being 'out of time'. (Whipps, 2023).

'The hand makes many didactic assumptions; it wields what it understands to be weapons; it cradles what it believes to be votives; it emphasises the important details of inscrutable objects. I think the gesture of handling an object in public is the most immediate form of exhibition.' (Langdon, 2016).

Hands have formal potential too. The disparate narratives, characters, and materials in this work are drawn from a much larger and even more disparate universe of narratives, characters, and materials (Figure 9). It could be a chaotic place, so I order everything alphabetically and I use a primitive sign language that was developed by the architect and polymath Sir Christopher Wren.

The sign language creates letters rather than words using digits on the left and right hands. Here's how it works: The digits of the left hand contain 25 letters of the alphabet, for example the thumb represents A, B, C, D, or E. The index finger represents F, G, H, I or J. The



Figure 7. 'A photograph of one of the tabletops in my studio in Birmingham' iPhone Photograph 2024 © Stuart Whipps.



Figure 8. 'A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars' Lapworth Museum of Geology, 2023 © Katja Ogrin.

On entering the RIBA Study Room, the familiar archival conventions of signing in, depositing my bag in a locker, and retrieving a pencil were observed and I was placed at a table that is not dissimilar to the previously mentioned desks in my studio. They were larger, and the melamine was grey. The marks and scratches were light and subtle and were certainly acquired incidentally rather than aggressively carved and imposed. To the side of me was an older man who was earnestly studying some very large and very old architectural drawings. A plump grey cushion was brought to me, and a piece of acid-free tissue was placed onto it. Wren's *Parentalia* was positioned in the divot of the cushion, and I observed the full title of the book (Figure 10):

'Parentalia: or Memoirs of the Family of The Wrens; Viz of Mathew Bishop of Ely, Christopher Dean of Windsor, but Chiefly of Sir Christopher Wren, Late Surveyor-General of The Royal Buildings, President of The Royal Society, in Which is Contained, besides his works, A Great Number of Original Papers and Records; on Religion, Politicks, Anatomy, Mathematicks, Architecture, Antiquities; and most branches of Polite Literature. Compiled by his son Christopher. Now published by his grandson, Stephen Wren' (Wren, 1750).

There was little more to learn of the sign language beyond what I knew from the earlier copy. I did find a previous, more primitive version but as with most research, it is the things you did not know you were looking for that become the more interesting finds. The structure itself being one of them. The *Parentalia* embeds generational memory in the very structure of the book. 'A respect for the memory of worthy ancestors and a desire of communicating useful knowledge to the public' (Wren, 1750).

A few pages along, I found further evidence of Wren the polymath in: 'A catalogue of new theories, inventions, experiments, and mechanic[sic] improvements, exhibited by Mr Wren



Figure 10. Wren's *Parentalia* at the V&A' iPhone Photograph 2024 © Stuart Whipps.

at the first assemblies of at Wadham College in Oxford.’ This is a very small sample taken from the list:

- New Ways of Printing
- Strainer of Breath
- To Write in the Dark
- Many curious and new Ways of turning
- A Speaking Organ, articulating sounds.
- To Pierce a Rock in Mining
- To Measure the Straight Distance, by traveling the winding way’ (Wren, 1750)

It is the last of these theories, inventions and experiments that lends itself as the title of this article owing to the tangential and meandering nature of *A Foot, A Mouth, A Hundred Billion Stars* and of this writing. The relationship between the straight distance and the winding way is also reminiscent of the other protagonists in the performance, the Hasselblad PCP80 slide projectors which wind through their circular carousels of photographic slides.

The decision to use redundant technologies will always have a bearing on the way an audience might understand an artwork. It’s a perilous business with ideas of the work being ‘retro’ a dangerous pitfall. I am interested in an idea of fidelity between capturing an image with a camera and viewing and sharing it with a projector. If we consider a camera in its simplest terms as a box with a hole in the front and light-sensitive material in the back, then a projector is a direct inversion of this. Light enters the camera through the lens and exposes the film within. Later this film is developed and fixed, placed into a slide mount, and dropped into the body of the projector to have light passed back through it and out of the lens to show an image. This process is an expression of maximum efficiency and minimal mediation.

There is also the opportunity to reenforce the connection between images and objects. Each photographic image is also a singular object, stored in the circular carousel of the projector. Whilst it functions as an index of the scene or thing that was placed in front of the lens at the time of its inception, the recall of this visual information is only part of the process of constructing the larger story. The sound is important too with each drop and lift of the slide into the projector producing its own tick and tack, evoking the earlier discussion of an imaginary mind-based ‘camera’ deployed by Edward James.

H.M.

In conclusion, I come back to the relationship between cameras, film, and human memory. These materials and tools can speak to James’ poetic understanding of the brain as a camera and Schacter’s writings around the construction and creation of memory with feelings, beliefs, and knowledge. While I was making this work, and later as I have been writing this text, I have been thinking about where this work goes next. While I would comfortably talk about my work in relation to memory, there is a large part of my practice that would more accurately be associated with forgetting. In the aforementioned interview between Schacter and Hoskins (Schacter & Hoskins 2021), there is an exchange about the neglect of forgetting as a distinct field of study, with Schacter proposing a journal of forgetting as the flipside to the plethora of works around memory and remembering.

I am ending this article with a rigorous example of the relationship between storytelling, memory and materials that comes from the practice of the American artist Kerry Tribe. In her artwork ‘H.M.’ (Tribe, 2009), forgetting rather than recall is at the centre of her filmic portrait of Henry Molaison, known in scientific literature as H.M. In 1953, Molaison underwent brain surgery to treat epilepsy with the procedure leaving him with a radical

form of amnesia. Molaison was unable to formulate new long-term memories, while both his short-term memory and his memory of events before 1953 were left intact. To be specific, his short-term memory was restricted to 20 seconds of recall. Tribe's work uses a single, 16-mm roll of film which is threaded through two synchronized projectors; through a modified looping system, two parts of the film (20 seconds apart) are projected simultaneously, creating a dissonance evocative of what Molaison might have experienced.

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