

Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

I have battled memory loss since I was a child; details of my life shift and slide into oblivion. My creative project explores this issue in depth. After extensive research, I modelled my project after our current understanding of memory processing. Museums function much like the brain's system of encoding, storage, and retrieval, so I used the term as a metaphor. The installation consists of multiple ways of viewing the same material, because repetition aids the formation of new neural pathways in the brain. The goal of this project was to preserve memories as I made them, to help contextualize my identity. However, I found it equally important to acknowledge mistakes and failures along the way. Thinking about the concept of inaccessible information, I drew comparisons between the malfunctioning of a camera and the human brain.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jacinda Russell for advising me in this project. Throughout my college career she has imparted invaluable information and guidance.

I would also like to thank Chet Geiselman for babysitting me in the woodshop.

Process Analysis Statement

My senior project began with two simple concepts from which the rest developed. Every day I kept a diary, recording events, thoughts, and observations. For the most part, I did this in the evening. I did not want to interrupt life's natural flow. At the same time, I took photographs for visual documentation. I shot with a Holga, which is a plastic, toy-like film camera known for light leaks, vignette, and blur. These defects are symbolic of the way my mind works and relate to the project's overall theme of missing and flawed information.



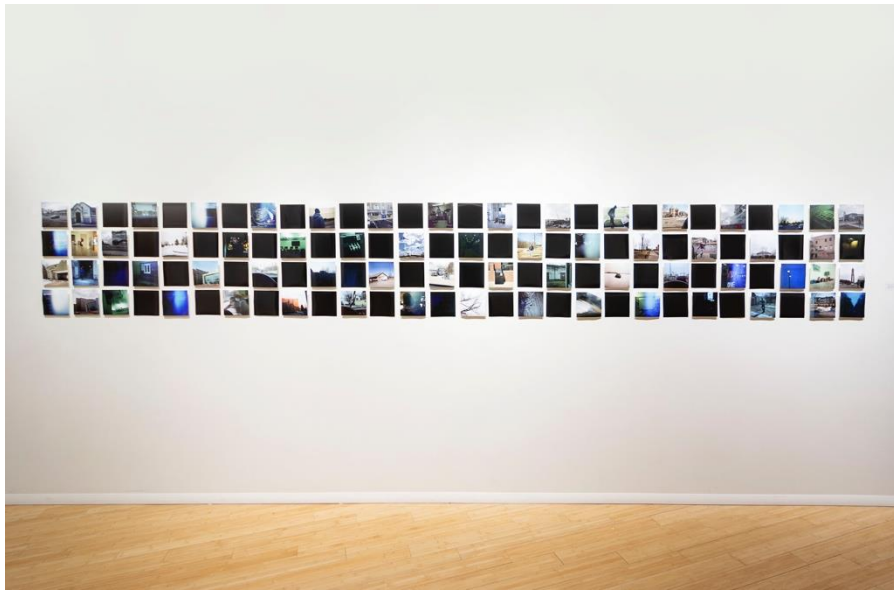
Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 1: Diary*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

I then investigated multiple ways of viewing. The large-scale wall print (14.5"x15") is an enlarged scan of an entire roll of film. To make the images blend into one another, I removed the rectangular part inside the camera that separates the film into frames, and then manually advanced the film at irregular intervals. I only did this for this one roll of film. Twenty-four 0.5" white Neodymium magnets held the print to the wall, which were camouflaged against its white border.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 116: The Days Run Together*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

Next, instead of tossing them, I decided to use the blank sections from the other rolls of film where images failed to develop. I took one hundred twelve photographs total, but almost half of them did not turn out. I cropped them 6"x6" and hung them in a grid on the wall. The correctly-exposed photographs were mounted to 0.5" foam board and the blanks to thin matboard, creating a push-pull dynamic symbolic of certain memories receding into obscurity.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 2-113: Gaps*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

Another portion of my installation was inspired by Bracken Library's Archives and Special Collections room. I organized my photographs and negatives into a white storage box with filing folders and set them on a plain wooden table. The comfortable chairs invited visitors to stay awhile and sift through the contents of the box. I cropped the photographs 4"x6" to see what information was lost in the process. The negatives were protected in archival plastic storage sheets; I provided gloves as an added precaution. A sign on the table informed guests that they could walk the negatives over to the lightbox for improved viewing. I also placed a scanned copy of my diary in the middle of the table. This copy was necessary so that nobody felt rushed reading the original version.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 115: Special Collection*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

I handmade a lightbox to better display the negatives and View-Master reels. A loupe, which is a small magnifying glass, was available for use as well. To make the box, I cut wood planks to size (22"x45.5") and used a nail gun to piece them together, with a plywood base. I

also sanded the wood and painted it with white gallery paint to match the pedestal on which it rested. I lined the inside of the box with aluminum foil for increased brightness, and then attached the adhesive-backed daylight-white LED lights. I drilled a hole in the side for the power adapter cord. Lastly, I drilled holes along the perimeter of a 0.030” sheet of polypropylene plastic and nailed it to the top of the box. This was the perfect material for the proper diffusion of light, creating a soft glow.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 114: Childhood Relic*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

While making this project, I learned about new ways of viewing and displaying artwork. I pushed the limits of my creative expression and learned more about myself in the process. The installation of my gallery show made me feel better equipped to display my work in professional settings. Moving forward, I would like to continue this project but steer it in a new direction. I want to keep archiving memories, but I will leave the film undeveloped, stored somewhere for my descendants to find. It will be up to them whether or not such memories deserve to see the light of day, further pushing the interactive aspect of this project.

Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind

Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind is a body of work studying the frailty of memory. I believe that a combination of chronic childhood stress and clinical depression have inhibited my memory retention. In severe cases, stress and depression can physically alter the brain, shrinking and weakening the hippocampus, the brain's filing cabinet.¹ This would explain why the days run together and soon fade away, leaving me scrambling to define myself without context. In my project I made comparisons between these psychological processes and photography. The brain is a piece of hardware susceptible to wear and tear just like a camera.

My research centered mainly on three areas: encoding, storage, and retrieval. While psychologists in the previous century believed memories stay the same each time we revisit them, modern studies show that memories change during retrieval.² Daniela Schiller, a neuroscientist at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, says that, "We don't really remember the original; we remember the revised version."³ This would mean that memory works like a game of telephone. When asked how we can know the reality of a memory, Schiller replied, "Look to art. Art has a very intimate relationship with memory. The only way to keep memories as they are... is to carve them into a story or art form that captures the original emotion."⁴ Essentially, this is what my project aims to do.

¹ Bruce McEwen, "Stress, Depression and Brain Structure," Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, 2003, accessed March 23, 2019, https://secure2.convio.net/dabsa/site/SPageServer/PageServer?pagename=education_anxiety_stress_brain_structure.





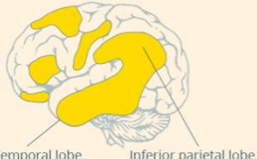



² Susan Rojahn, "Memory Is Inherently Fallible, and That's a Good Thing," MIT Technology Review, October 9, 2013, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/520156/memory-is-inherently-fallible-and-thats-a-good-thing/>.


³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

I was inspired by Schiller’s words to synthesize science and art. My installation visualized these psychological processes. For example, I learned that I struggle specifically with episodic memory, a subset of explicit memory, which is stored in the hippocampus.⁵ Latching onto the term “filing cabinet,” I made the installation into a museum, collecting and archiving my memories as artifacts.

How Trauma Impacts Four Different Types of Memory

EXPLICIT MEMORY		IMPLICIT MEMORY	
SEMANTIC MEMORY	EPISODIC MEMORY	EMOTIONAL MEMORY	PROCEDURAL MEMORY
<p>What It Is The memory of general knowledge and facts.</p> <p>Example You remember what a bicycle is.</p> 	<p>What It Is The autobiographical memory of an event or experience – including the who, what, and where.</p> <p>Example You remember who was there and what street you were on when you fell off your bicycle in front of a crowd.</p> 	<p>What It Is The memory of the emotions you felt during an experience.</p> <p>Example When a wave of shame or anxiety grabs you the next time you see your bicycle after the big fall.</p> 	<p>What It Is The memory of how to perform a common task without actively thinking</p> <p>Example You can ride a bicycle automatically, without having to stop and recall how it's done.</p> 
<p>How Trauma Can Affect It Trauma can prevent information (like words, images, sounds, etc.) from different parts of the brain from combining to make a semantic memory.</p>	<p>How Trauma Can Affect It Trauma can shutdown episodic memory and fragment the sequence of events.</p>	<p>How Trauma Can Affect It After trauma, a person may get triggered and experience painful emotions, often without context.</p>	<p>How Trauma Can Affect It Trauma can change patterns of procedural memory. For example, a person might tense up and unconsciously alter their posture, which could lead to pain or even numbness.</p>
<p>Related Brain Area The temporal lobe and inferior parietal cortex collect information from different brain areas to create semantic memory.</p>  <p>Temporal lobe Inferior parietal lobe</p>	<p>Related Brain Area The hippocampus is responsible for creating and recalling episodic memory.</p>  <p>Hippocampus</p>	<p>Related Brain Area The amygdala plays a key role in supporting memory for emotionally charged experiences.</p>  <p>Amygdala</p>	<p>Related Brain Area The striatum is associated with producing procedural memory and creating new habits.</p>  <p>Striatum</p>


© 2017 The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine

Infographic taken from the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine (NICABM), <https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-trauma-can-impact-4-types-of-memory-infographic/>

⁵ National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, “How Trauma Impacts Four Different Types of Memory” [Infographic], NICABM, <https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-trauma-can-impact-4-types-of-memory-infographic/>.

In studying the process of retrieval, making copies became important to me and I displayed the same information several different ways. Repetition assists the process of forming new neural pathways in the brain and therefore strengthens memories.⁶ This relates to the process of encoding. I thought that if I displayed my memories in different ways, one of them would stick.

Despite my sincere efforts in preservation, the fact that nearly half of my photographs turned out blank threw a huge wrench in my plans. I knew that choosing a Holga meant that some images would be gone, but I did not expect so many to disappear. My project then became about documenting memories both captured and lost. Creating the 15' long print was me embracing failure. The details overlap and several areas of the print are quite confusing, putting the viewer in my shoes.

My decision to incorporate the View-Master was spontaneous. I remembered playing with one as a child when I would visit my grandparents, and I realized it was the missing link in my project. Until this point I had not succeeded in visually representing the role my childhood played in memory problems. Furthermore, the View-Master matched the aesthetic of the toy-like Holga, both adding an atmosphere of nostalgia. Since the Holga was also important as an art object, I decided to display it under plexiglass as an artifact.

⁶ Victoria Lorient-Faibish, "Neural Pathways: The Biology of Change," Visualization Works, August 8, 2010, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://visualizationworks.com/neural-pathways-the-biology-of-change/>.

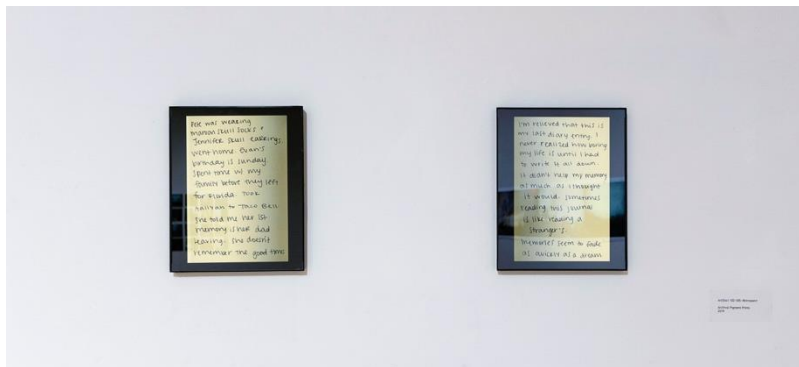


Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 117: Brain*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

The heart of my project was the diary. I thought that if nothing else, I had a written record of events to fall back on. However, upon rereading the journal, at times it was like reading the words of a stranger. I knew on a factual level that certain events had transpired, but in a dissociative way I did not relive the experiences emotionally. As one could imagine, this was quite alarming. For this reason, I put parentheses around the word “my” in *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, to call into question the ownership of my own mind. This technique was inspired by Roxanne Gay’s book *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*.

My project is a reflection of my generation. In general, we try to ground our worldview in scientific fact more so than generations before us. Science has also vastly changed in a short amount of time. As I mentioned before, earlier models of memory function depicted retrieval as static. Psychologists now believe in a constantly-changing state of memory wherein the retrieval process is also an editing process. On another note, my generation has a healthier outlook on mental health than ever before. The stigma surrounding mental illness is continually getting smaller.

If memory is mutable, and therefore unreliable, truth as we perceive it is subjective. Our entire human experience and identity are grounded in memories. Since many of mine are inaccessible, I cannot properly contextualize myself in the world. I have been thinking a lot about what it means to have to curate a museum of my own mind while I am still alive. I created a reactionary piece titled *Retrospect* towards the end of this project, four diary entries that I feel encapsulate these general feelings.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 120-121: Retrospect* (two examples), from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

My struggle is part of a larger conversation concerning memory and trauma. I am only just beginning to understand how childhood events shaped my brain physiologically. Likewise, society still does not quite understand how trauma and memory are related, or how to navigate legal issues that arise. For example, the Ford-Kavanaugh hearings thrust this debate into the national spotlight. While Dr. Ford was one-hundred-percent certain that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her, the peripheral details of that night faded away. Many questioned her reliability as a witness. More research needs to be done regarding this topic, and I hope that my project furthers this progress.

The four artists who have influenced my work the most are Stephen Shore, Hiromix, Richard Billingham, and Corinne Day. The photography of *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*

falls under the category of “intimate life,” a popular genre of contemporary photography to which all of these artists belong. Intimate life photography does not always have an amateur appearance, but often it does. My art was inspired by the family snapshot and its off-kilter framing, uneven lighting, motion blur, and thumb-over-the-lens mistakes. Typically, the purpose of a snapshot is to capture significant moments in time, such as weddings or birthdays. In my art, however, the snapshot takes on a different subject: “the non-events of daily life: sleeping, talking on the phone, travelling by car, being bored and uncommunicative.”⁷

Stephen Shore is an American photographer well-known for banal scenery. His travel diary, *American Surfaces*, reveals “almost every meal [he] ate, every person [he] met... every bed [he] slept in, every toilet [het] used.”⁸ He used a very basic camera for this project, just like I did for mine. Shortly after completing *American Surfaces*, Shore created the series *Stereographs* using 3-D images and View-Master toys. Although my photographs were not captured in 3-D, it was helpful to find an artist working with much the same concepts and materials.



Stephen Shore, *Stereographs: New York, 1974*,
<http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/3982/ten-things-you-might-not-know-about-stephen-shore>

⁷ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 3rd edition, (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2014), 138.

⁸ Tish Wrigley, “Ten Things You Might Not Know About Stephen Shore,” *Another*, October 10, 2014, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/3982/ten-things-you-might-not-know-about-stephen-shore>.

Japanese artist Hiromix, born Toshikawa Hiromi, was made famous for her series *Seventeen Girl Days* in 1995.⁹ Her work consists of raw, diary-like photographs. I was drawn to the spontaneity of the images, the way she manages to tell a story, unstaged. Our works share the snapshot aesthetic, as well as depicting friends, travels, and domestic life.



Hiromix, from *Seventeen Girl Days*, 1995,
<https://global.canon/en/newcosmos/gallery/grandprix/1995-hiromix/index.html>

Richard Billingham is a British artist who set out to create a memorable record of his daily life. His family photographs, which reveal the messy and disparaging moments of domestic spaces, were painting references—never intended for the walls of a gallery.¹⁰ They are awkward, yet compelling. The preservation of his work proves that sometimes, concept is more important than technical flaws and beauty.

⁹ Cotton, *The Photograph*, 153-55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.



Richard Billingham, *Untitled (NRAL 13)*, 1996,
https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard_billingham.htm

The last artist, Corrine Day, is also a British photographer, and one of my favorites. Day started out in the fashion industry, but made an effortless transition to the art world with documentary work. In the process, she seemingly abandoned all commercial ambition for her photographs. I admire her aggressively artless style, which Cotton calls “almost a prerequisite for photographers of intimate life.”¹¹ One of Day’s most memorable works is her book *Diary*, which contains a raw honesty I hope to emulate in my own art.



Corinne Day, from *Diary*, 2000,
<https://www.coeval-magazine.com/coeval/corinne-day>

¹¹ Ibid., 146-148.

The two most successful aspects of my installation were the 15' print and the View-Master reels. The panorama expressed my struggles with time and memory in the best way, showing how moments begin to tangle together. This overlap created interesting compositions. My favorite is an area towards the middle of the print where the sunset over the road becomes a building, which becomes a tree. The images blend together so seamlessly that it is impossible to tell where one ends and another begins.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 116: The Days Run Together*, from *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*, 2019

The lightbox drew people in like moths to a flame; it was easily one of the most eye-catching parts of the installation. This was the most unique viewing experience I created, since View-Masters are a relic of the past, mostly forgotten. I am proud of the effort and research that went into building the lightbox, and it was an incredibly effective way to display the translucent viewing reels and photo negatives. This immersive environment allowed visitors a more intimate look into my personal life, as they were able to view one moment at a time through the View-Masters.



Callie Zimmerman, *Artifact 114: Childhood Relic* (detail)

Although this project revolved around my life, the viewer was also extremely important to me. The observer effect states that the simple act of observation influences what is observed. While this is a physics concept, it also relates to the idea of perception and memories changing during the process of retrieval. Furthermore, memories die when a person dies, unless they live on in the minds of others. My project was a balancing act of preservation and sharing: I made visitors wear gloves, but only so that they could safely interact with the materials. This is an important duality that actual museums play a role in. What is left, after physical evidence inevitably disintegrates, but a memory of a memory?



Callie Zimmerman, *Museum of (My) Ephemeral Mind*

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