RENDEZVOUS: A COLLABORATION BETWEEN ART, RESEARCH AND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Through the evolution of digital technology, social networks and Internet, cultural memory has been transformed, both in relation to how memories are represented, and how they may be engaged with or re-experienced.

Exploring these transformations, this paper will introduce *Rendezvous*, a practice-based research project developed in collaboration with communities of individuals aged over 65 – communities for whom reminiscence has become central; here, achieved through art as a social practice in contributing to their quality of life.

I will consider how digitally materialised micro-narratives in media art practice transition between one medium to another and locate within the field of cultural memory. This will question how the narrated self is materialised and mediated as a renewed experience in digital media art practice.

I will also ask how digital media art can be a transitional location experience for collective remembering and, ultimately, how digital media art can intervene in the changing practice of memory. Digital interactive installations can offer possibilities for physical engagement that might be used by artists to create distinctive prosthetic environments for reminiscence, re-sensitising and debate within culture memory as a social practice.

Fabrica & GOA

Rendezvous is a collaborative project with Black & Minority Ethnic Elders and WRVS (charities concerned with both social inclusion, and the wellbeing of elderly community members). It is also one of nine projects, commissioned by Fabrica for the 'Growing an Older Audience' programme (GOA) and funded by the Arts Council, South East. Fabrica is a contemporary visual arts charity, housed in a Grade 2-listed church in the centre of Brighton.

GOA's aim is to increase the engagement of such communities with contemporary art and Fabrica as a social space, whilst creating a role and a voice for its participants. GOA is also offering various sustainable roles to outreach and bridge communities through dialogue and engagement with contemporary art. It is at the core of both programme and projects to offer its participants opportunities to enhance their quality of life through social engagement, intellectual stimulation and self-esteem. Most of the commissioned projects lie in the art sector, offering various forms of engagement and perception in current contemporary

art work; from a multi-sensory perspective (*Second Sight* 2012), to a digitally mediated experience (*Rendezvous* 2012), and from a critical discussion (*Conversation Piece* 2012), to a cultural dialogue (*Going to See Culture Together* 2012). Central to these projects is the focus on community outreach from community halls, as well as via the Internet or the gallery space itself. Most GOA projects are brought together at Fabrica as a Special Day Event, bringing the general public, the participants and their communities together in the engagement, perception and experience of contemporary art practice.

My own role in *Rendezvous* is foremost as a digital artist and project leader while being part of the GOA creative team.

Rendezvous' concept is based on the defragmentation and reconstruction of life-narratives through art practice as an experience.

I therefore collaborated with over 65 year old individuals, as cognitive and memory research suggest that older individuals return to formative memories more frequently. Rubin, Wetzler & Nebes' Lifespan Retrieval Curve (1986: 202-221) demonstrates that formative memories from between the ages of 10 to 30 are more often recollected when subjects reach their 50s and beyond. This study involved showing various images to participants who would, in return, recall their memories, placing them on a timeline once the exercise was completed. Although I have cited this study because of its focus on the age group I am working with, I am also aware that the memories recalled in these exercises may not be the only ones remembered, but are more likely to be the most fond or traumatic, since these memories help individuals construct their values, aspirations, and identities.

Rendezvous

At its core, *Rendezvous* (Fig. 1) is a collection of fragmented life narratives, mediated through creative processes and digital technologies (software, script code, QR technology). These were gathered during sessions with three separate community groups over the age of 65 (WRVS Coldean, WRVS Portslade and BME Elders, Brighton) at their respective and local community halls, where they would regularly socialise. The groups varied from 8 to 30 members.
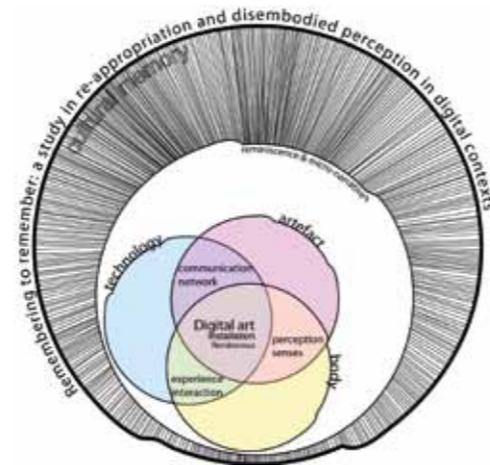

Fig. 1. *Rendezvous* research project overview.

In this social process, where the narrated self is mediated from one object to another, *Rendezvous* highlights the authorship and ownership of the narrated self, from the storyteller, to the artist, to the audience and users.

Caroline Bassett discusses life narrative, via Ricoeur, as a continuous process of narration (Bassett 2007 : 112), reflecting the mediation and the experience of the micro-narratives through the digital art work, the re-appropriation of narrative through the re-experienced and re-narrated. *Rendezvous* as a whole encapsulates Bassett's 'tale at its fullest', 'transfigured' and 'described' (ibid.) but in this case, the story is framed within three key stages, which I describe as the 'ethnoscopy', the 'creative bioscopy', and the 'embodied experience'.

The 'ethnoscopy' stage.

I chose the term of 'ethnoscopy', as ethnography did not quite capture the method used to gather visual records and materials. This term has been previously defined by Morris B.Holbrook, describing 'ethno' as a reference for 'the intended focus on a society's culture' (Stern 2004: 232); and 'scopy' for 'the researcher's ability to see or to visualise the key phenomena of interest in pictorial form' (ibid.), which, in the context of *Rendezvous*, is relevant as one of its foci is of visual collective narrated selves.

The 'ethnoscopy' stage of the project saw a series of social activities organised. It was arranged to meet each group where they would regularly socialise in a local community hall (Fig. 2). Participants were asked to share fragments of their life stories through the use of personal objects, or relics that they would have tried to remember to bring to the meeting. If these objects were forgotten, then participants were asked to think of an object at home and the personal narrative they attached to it.

Nicola Benge, the workshops coordinator, was familiar with all the groups through a previous, 3-year funded WRVS and English Heritage project and consequently all participants were at ease with sharing their personal stories. Each group was asked to complete questionnaires so that I could reflect on the running of the activity and whether the participants enjoyed the social and cultural experience.

The social activity was about sharing a self, generational, transgenerational or locative narrative. While the workshop coordinator would facilitate the activity, my role, as a digital artist, was to photograph the experience, scan or photograph the objects

Fig. 2. Workshop participants from WRVS & BME Elders sharing personal narratives in local community halls.

and make audio recordings of the narratives. The data and materials were then categorised by theme of discussion (audio, Fig. 3) and by individual group (photograph) as well as by answers (questionnaires, Fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Key themes discussed by WRVS and BME Elders participants.

This process was key in three respects: the first to gather materials to create a collection of visual narratives; the second was data analysis to understand where those narratives were placed, what kind of narratives were present, and finally, as to whether the ethical values of the project were met. The 'ethnoscopy' process could be seen as having little connection to creative practice, however on reflection, when one is making a film, the filmmaker will have to research location, characters, props, and shoot more than is required; this stage is still part of the creative process, as is the 'ethnoscopy' approach. One can observe and analyse society and culture, and begin to materialise its concept through a collection of micro-narratives that objects may hold. Micro-narratives are considered as day-to-day narratives, as an ensemble of beliefs, values and aspiration, forming the self. These narratives would most often be collected and become part of an historical or heritage narrative within cinema or literature, and therefore within cultural memory. Micro-narratives, in this case, are located as part of the process of creative digital art practice, digital relics and cultural memory.

The workshop coordinator's roles concluded with the end of the 'ethnoscopy' stage, while the participants saw their role paused until the 'embodied experience' stage.
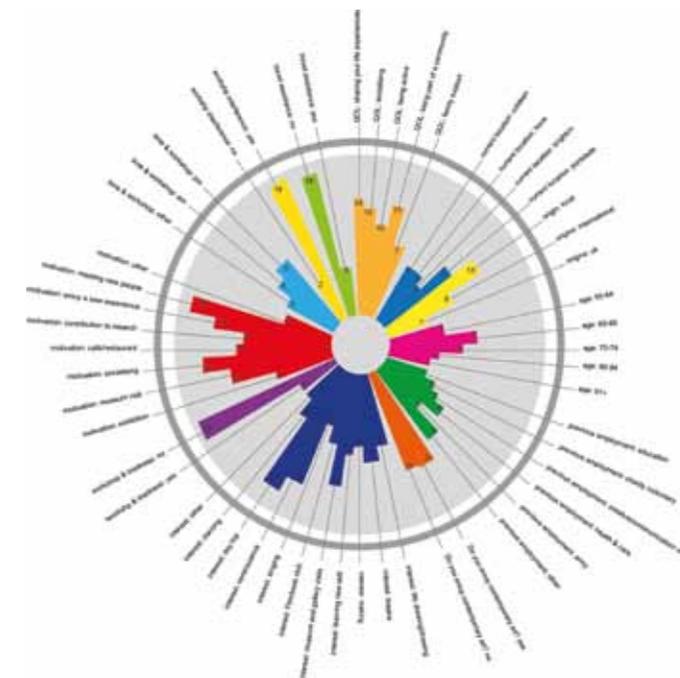

Fig. 4. Data collecting: feedback from WRVS and BME Elders participants.

The 'material bioscopy'.

During the 'material bioscopy' stage, I was required, as a digital artist, to start editing the data and materials. Bioscopy has been defined as a 'medical examination of a body to determine the presence or absence of life.' (Webster's New World College Dictionary 2010). In the context of *Rendezvous*, I have chosen this term 'material bioscopy' as the process of dissecting what material is 'alive' or 'dead'. What materials have traces of the original narrative? I am not discussing the value of the digital relic, but its index (Peirce 1955) once digitalised. In this context the index refers to a past experience that the object holds, for example the representation of a torn or burnt photograph that Joachim Schmid (Fontcuberta 2007) so often uses in his work, not only bringing aesthetics but also a human interaction with the object and its narrative – the index.

After a number of experiments in image and film editing software, it became clear that most of the digitally scanned relics were 'alive' with narratives (Fig. 5). The portrait or group photographs failed to relate to the original told memory, but instead demonstrated the attachment and ownership that some individuals had with their personal object (Fig. 6). Although informative, it could not have worked as a shared authorship.

The next part of the 'material bioscopy' was to create a dialogue between medium and narrated-representation. The digital relics still carry traces of a past life; each representation of the original deterioration is an index of its micro-narrative and time, leading my practice to experiment with how the pixel, the medium of the digital relic, could also be altered from its original order (Fig. 7). Consequently creating a visual glitch that would also refer to time and the digital texture as well as the digital fragility itself.

Pushing through the corruption (i.e. errors, glitch) of the digital image, allows to reveal the materiality of the digital. José Van Dijck discussed how 'memory is not mediated by media, but media and memory transform each other' (Van Dijck 2007: 21). However, to choose to represent memory through digital re-enactment, or as a digital archive, to use the digital as it is prescribed, still silences the true dialogue between medium and the represented object or narrative, as they simply conform. For example, when Frank Auerbach (Feaver 2009) painted a portrait, he selected his palette knives, the paint itself, though when he began painting, he did not allow the paint to simply sit and represent. He worked the medium, and in the process conveyed narrative, human intervention and a continuous dialogue between the represented and the medium. The same, I believe, can be applied to digital art practice.

To understand digital media as a creative medium, the artist must create a 'bioscopy' to discover where the resistance, parameters, and therefore life of the medium itself lie. In this process the original narrative and its authorship is transformed and transplanted by both the digital artist and the technology itself. Consequently creating a platform for *Rendezvous*' participants, audience and users to have a 'live' dialogue with the digital object, whilst shaping new perspectives through their simultaneous private and collective narratives.

The 'embodied experience'

The last stage is one of narration and experience. By now, I have edited the mediated and scanned relics as a collection of short experimental moving images, posted on Vimeo and network by QR (Quick Response Code) technology to a material object, located in the gallery space (Fig. 8).

In the 1970s Ernest Edmonds and Stroud Cornock defined a new dynamic 'art system' in response to computer-based-technology as 'the matrix'. The artist, the audience and the artefact are elements of the matrix, the dynamic, the exchange and interaction between these elements allows for meanings to be interpreted – the process becoming the medium itself (Muller & Edmonds 2006). *Rendezvous* includes an added element to its existing dynamic between the audience, the material relic, the digital relic, and my orchestrating of these elements; the element of participants sharing personal narratives and the element of location.

Rendezvous' matrix is one that invites the audience to experience the art work by selecting and placing a QR tagged object (a magic lantern slide) over a camera in an under-lit stand (Fig. 9), allowing the slide to reveal its content, a 2D representation of a relic initially shared by the members of both WRVS and BME Elders. Placing a single slide on the under-lit stand triggers an online moving image, which displays an abstract form of the original narrative offered during the 'ethnoscopy stage' (Fig. 10). The system allows for the material object to be connected to both a visual narrative and online communities, such as the Growing Older Audience's blog, my research blog, and Vimeo. The 'matrix'
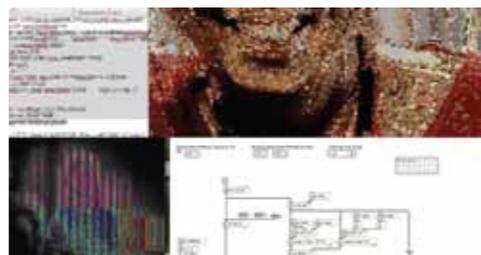
Fig. 5. 'Material bioscopy'. Selection of objects brought by the participants.
Fig. 6. WRVS & BME Elders participants sharing narratives around objects and relics.
Fig. 7 'Material bioscopy'. Data bending.

and medium therefore become the dialogue between the digital medium and the shared collective narrated selves (between participants, myself as the digital artist, relics and audience-user) within the art gallery space and the home environment.

The 'ethnoscopy', the 'material bioscopy' and the 'embodied experience' stages were not only central to *Rendezvous* as a digital art practice but also central in clarifying *Rendezvous* as a transitional location for collective remembering. However, in this context, questions of transformation of the digital relic and of narrated selves within cultural memory are raised. How does the digital art process mediate the self, and therefore the production of cultural identity, values and beliefs? How does it change the way we remember or experience our past and therefore our aspirations?

Before locating digital media art practice within cultural memory it is important to define what it is meant by cultural memory within practices related to *Rendezvous*.

Cultural memory

Cultural Memory is a field that invites multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary practice – from psychology to history, art and media, bringing various perceptions to how it may be defined, as each discipline has its own individual perception and objectives. Astrid Erll and Ansgard Nunning (2008) brought together some of the various definitions and extensions of definitions from history, philosophy and psychology and politics, clarifying that cultural memory is an umbrella term that can only be understood in conjunction with other fields. *Rendezvous* considers cultural memory

Fig. 8. 'Embodied experience'. *Rendezvous* installation at Fabrica, Brighton.
Fig. 9. Detail of *Rendezvous* installation, QR tagged 'magic lantern slide'.
Fig. 10. Detail of *Rendezvous* installation, glitch moving image.

within media studies, cultural studies and digital art practice. Each of these studies is a collaborative study, making any considered concept malleable. In this context, cultural memory has been considered within both Aleida Assmann's memory format (Goodin & Tilly 2006: 210-223) and Jan Assmann's (2011) interpretation of Halbwachs collective memory.

Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist, raised the concept of collective remembering as a process of individual memory and how, through social engagement, it can be shared with two or more individuals, becoming collective memory (Halbwachs 1967: 36). This concept was further considered by Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist (2011). He described collective memory as two distinct concepts: 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory': 'communicative memory' comprises the narrated-self, shared on the day-to-day (Assmann 2011: 34) and limited to 3 generations of for example, 80-100 years; 'cultural memory' is a mediation of societal experiences and is culturally placed (Assmann 2011).

While cultural memory is not part of formal historical discourse, it is 'imbued with cultural meaning' (Sturken 1999: 178) within its process of mediation and the artefact or relic, allowing future generations to re-experience their cultural identity.

Aleida Assmann took Halbwachs' reflection on social memory in *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoires* further by formatting the memory system in four categories: individual memories (the narrated-self on the day-to-day), social memories (the narrated in cultural/societal group), political memories (the focus on the group identity and political voice) and cultural memories (the focus on the individual within a cultural group).

However it is clear that these systems of categorisation are dependent on one another. Cultural memory cannot be without communicative memory, nor can cultural memory be without individual and social memories, hence to reflect on the idea of cultural memory, is to also reflect on the individual and the social experience.

For instance, within the context of *Rendezvous*, communicative memory, or individual and social memories, formed the foundation of the initial collective workshop activities where participants would share their individual narrative through a show-and-tell activity – each person would recall anecdotes, stories and collective memories (generational or locative). However, once the social activity ended, the visual and sound recordings collected and remembered, these micro-narrated selves would enter a stage of mediation and mediatisation within creative art practice. These would then be experienced by the general public and the various community groups, affirming the artworks position within cultural memory, therefore allowing a new experiential dialogue between self and society, and therefore cultural identity.

Cultural memory, according to Aleida Assmann (2006), is formed of mediated individual and/or social memories. This mediation takes the form of 'material representation' dependent on environments such as museums, monuments and art galleries where collective engagement is made possible. In this context, how does digital media art practice relate to cultural memory?

Dislocation & Third Memory

Rendezvous invites the narrated self to be explored from different perspectives, experiences and interactivities. Initially participants shared their stories through interacting with a relic; then, through the digital art installation work as a whole, and finally via the Internet, as a home-user. Online video delivery offers the possibility for the work to be re-experienced, however this can only be as a recall, not as a primary experience. Placing the interactive element within the limits of screen culture and familiarity (e.g. surfing the Internet), to transform the role of the active audience to a witness and user, limits the home-users self-investment and therefore experience. The interactive digital work acts as a form of mirror, where one can identify with what he or she is seeing, therefore contributing to identity production and cultural identity construction through digital narration.

I consider *Rendezvous* as a re-enactment, as a 'third-memory' or 'post-memory' depending on the ownership of the initial narrative. Pierre Huyghe produced *Third Memory* (2000), a re-enactment of an individual memory, experienced and re-experienced over time through mediatisation and cinema. 'Third-memory', in this case, refers to re-enacted memory based on the original experience and the experience of its screen re-enactment, while post-memory is the experience of 'passed-on' memory, only experienced through someone else's recall *and* over time. *Rendezvous* invites its audience and users to leave with the conceptual artefact of a 'third-memory' or post-memory, 'negotiating the relationship between self and society, between personal and cultural memory' (Van Dijck 2007: 21).

Conclusion

Interactive digital art practice offers an engaging perspective upon cultural memory. *Rendezvous*'s art matrix, referred to earlier as a process and medium, allows cultural memory to focus on individuals forming a community, and on single relics forming a collection of digital indexes and human interventions. With *Rendezvous*, digital art practice remembers to question the materiality of its mediums: the digital process, the digital artefact, digital selves. It also questions the transformed engagement of remembering a past through individual and collective re-enactment, consequently creating a personal or collective experiential dialogue between self and society.

An objective of art practice is to question our being in the world, so when Alex Potts discussed Donald Judd's work as an 'art concerned with […] being embedded in the network of relations between self and [physical] world and self and others' (Plate & Smelik 2009: 43), he highlights how the selves (the participants, the digital artist and the art work) mediate with the world (e.g. the gallery space, the Internet) and with the other (the audience/user), to then reveal that 'as such, his sense of place is also a sense of time and space' (ibid.).

Therefore to question location within digital art media practice is to question a continued progress of existence of the digital relic, of the many narratives that the digital artwork represents, but also to question a continued progress of survival and therefore loss and desire. Bassett, also discussing interactive art and questions of memory, adds to Cavarero's argument that 'narrative belongs to lived human existence not to post-mortem fame' (Cavarero 2000: 33) and adds 'narratability is not only how history interpreted a life, it is an ongoing relation of the self to the world' (Bassett 2007: 113). This, again allows us to consider how the past is an experience waiting to be re-experienced and re-shaped, making digital art practice the ideal, and even necessary, platform to live the experience of individual and collective remembering.

Radstone (2000: 9) argues that 'in the contemporary remembrance boom, memory is aligned with issues of subjectivity and representation, privileging invention and fabrication over authenticity and lived experience' (Plate & Smelik 2009: 16). Our aspirations (as a digital artist, audience or users) are not factual, they are what allow us to move towards the future. *Rendezvous* recalls narrated values and beliefs as a re-enactment of life, as a 'thirdmemory' or postmemory, hence 'rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity.' (Rodriguez 2007).

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