

*The Art of Forgetting and The Presence of Absence:
An Anti-Memorial Investigation in Catalonia*

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Memory exists in an instant. In every breath. In every touch. History exists like a ghost in every conscious and unconscious action and reaction, a thread that weaves us together into the present...

There are these moments. Brief and fleeting, sometimes unperceivable moments that gather no words. Moments where, in an instant, all that ever was and all that ever will be is reflected and echoes as loud in its weight as an explosion. We drift through this life, moment to moment, entirely disconnected. But it is all a lie. The only undeniable truth in this life is connectedness. With ourselves, with each other, with a collective experience. We are connected eternally to birth / life / the perceivable beginning, and likewise to death / nothingness / the perceivable ending. Light and dark, black and white, birth and death. We know too, without question, that there is an infinite spectrum of experience between these two perceivably finite points. That infinite spectrum connects the two, like a piece of string with undefined and unlimited dimension. It is not flat or one directional, you can move within, without, around, above and below and so can it. And it is there, imperceptible and silent filling in the space between, filling in the cracks. And it is this singular condition, *the trace* as referred to by Benjamin, that allows us to represent the world to ourselves (B, Walter and Underwood, J.A, 2008). It is the gap or the moment between everything. Between thought and word and thing, between breaths, between lust and love. It is the narrative that ties each memory to the next, perceivable only through its differentially and infinite repeatability (Phillips, J.).

The first time I can remember recognising or being aware of the presence of absence, was after my grandfather died when I was a young girl of seven or eight. Though technically, from then on, he was no longer in my grandparents home, his not being there hung so heavy within the space that it almost became a physicality in itself. As time has gone by, I have felt ever less able and comfortable to spend time within their home for my own perception of the sizable weight of his absence there has grown suffocating. This perceivable absence, according to Derrida, is only made possible by its own mediation of our experience of presence, making the absence itself that which we can never truly experience for ourselves (Derrida, J. 1968) (Phillips, J.).

Part One: The Art of Forgetting

I left for Barcelona on the 28th of November, 2016, full of excitement and naivety. I was filled with this desire to expose the past, to exploit that, which in hindsight, wasn't mine to exploit. I was blinded by my own curiosity and set forth on a purposeful journey to learn about a society whose relatively recent political past is, in all honesty, nothing short of horrific. But even still, there is a sensitivity present in the walls of Barcelona...in each stone, touched over and over and over again for hundreds of years. Each stone that has seen love and war, destruction and rebuilding, revolution and anarchy, and the promise of something more. It is a city of paradox. A city whose citizens are so awake, yet the recent historical memory weighted upon them is filled with the biggest sadness. I began my journey with two questions hanging. Does

silencing historical memory do more harm than good? And how do we reconcile what exists now as separate to what happened in the past?

After the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975, the *Pacto del Olvido* (Pact of Forgetting) pulled a blanket over the traumatic events and outright cultural suppression experienced by Spain and Catalonia under the Franco dictatorship (Lloyd, N. 2016). Barcelona itself played a different role to anywhere else in Spain during the time of the Civil War and the regime that followed. Barcelona was the site of revolution and anarchy, and that strength and revolutionary fervor still shines strong today. Writer and activist George Orwell found himself there fighting with the left and his text *Homage to Catalonia* locates us within the political landscape of the time. A time of uprising and a time to stand together. A time to take control of the city, of the people, by the people and for the people. A time of true, working, organised Anarchy (Orwell, G. 1952). But to walk around Barcelona now, it is hard to believe that any of this ever happened.

It seems absurd (yet oddly fitting) that the giant Apple store facing the Plaça de Catalunya was once the Communist Party headquarters, draped in the portraits of Stalin and Lenin. That here in the Plaça, surrounded by Christmas markets, is where the first shots were fired that fueled the beginning of the Spanish Civil War on July 19, 1936 (Lloyd, N. 2016). And there I was, in a city filled with museums and galleries, shockingly aware that not one of them contained memorial or commemoration of the tragedies and triumphs of the Spanish Civil War and the years that followed. The few places of significance and memorabilia that do exist are incredibly subtle and well hidden in Barcelona, a characteristic I was certainly very drawn to and inspired by.

So how does one counter this apparent lack of remembering? Young refers us to the idea that in order for that which we wish to memorialise to stay vivid and present within our collective consciousness, there is a necessity for constant reaffirmation and renewal (Young, J.E. 1999). Artist and scholar Sue-Anne Ware puts into working practice the Anti-Memorial. Her work *The Anti-memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* was driven by the desire to humanize those who would otherwise become just vacant names, conveniently forgotten. Ware states of her work, “Anti-memorials aim not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passers-by but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite their own violation and not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to drop it at the public’s feet.” (Ware, S. 2008).

My initial intention for this project became an intervention. An Anti-Memorial installation of historical memories, intended to be completely temporal and to invite repeated interaction and involvement that would hopefully result in the evolution of the project into something new. My intention was that, through the re-remembering of memory through touch, gesture and the space interacted with, new relevance would be made to the remembering of and the celebration of the past.

I had argued at the beginning of my journey that forgetting is just a blockage. Like a large, stone statue erected in a square as a site of memorial for lives lost, only that the memorial statue itself gives permission to forget without guilt, to only remember when the time is convenient (Chapman, T. 2016) (Young, J.E. 1992). But through all of this, I

had neglected one simple thing. I had forgotten that we all have the fundamental right (and often the need) to forget.

Led entirely by chance, a desire to collect objects of historical memory took to the forefront of my research. Flea markets, antique and second hand stores helped me to obtain the majority of objects I chose for the initial project. I found myself most attracted to and fascinated by old postcards, letters and photographs ranging from the 1830's to the 1970's, the period of time pre-revolution to post-Franco. Included with these 2D objects were some well lived dolls, silver coins, bullet casings and pieces of ceramic ware once used in metal work. All of these were objects with no defined meaning but that I felt held the weight of time and experiences within them. I had begun collecting thinking that I would contribute to the objects myself with surface rubbings and drawings, however, intuitively my contributions became solely photography based. I included collected images I had taken of significant places of memory and land marks, a task more challenging than it sounds.

And from here began the undeniable need to weave. To weave all these memories together somehow to create a dialogue. Weaving took two forms. There was a more intimate binding and cross stitching of individual images followed by a larger process of weaving a web like connection to bind the pieces together into one.

Every image still had an aura present and a narrative waiting to be told. By creating or accentuating those present narratives through the act of binding and cross stitching into the images, I supposed I hoped to bring into the present the memory of those on the losing side of history. The forgotten and the misplaced paired alongside the significant and representative.



Figure 1. Creating Narratives

The weaving process became increasingly important as the project wore on. The repetition of a menial task and the labor involved seemed essential and in the end, over fifty hours of weaving were involved in the final product.



Figure 2. Weaving Process

Installation of the final work took place on the morning of December 13, 2016 at 8am. The work was hung on a stone wall at the intersection of two small streets within the El Borne precinct. The wall itself was chosen for its' reconstructed nature, evidence that perhaps it was partially destroyed during the Civil War and then rebuilt in the following years. I felt that the added juxtaposition this provided worked well with the artwork, to help bring the past forward into the present.



Figure 3. Installation

What remained of the work twenty-four hours later was nothing more than a long strand of red thread and two notes left behind by strangers. The work had been removed. However, the most important piece of the puzzle remained...the woven red thread. The thread is everything. It is that moment in between everything. Between thought and word and thing, between breaths, between lust and love. It is the narrative that ties each memory to the next.



Figure 4. The thread that remains.

Post exhibition, I joined a fellow student at Montjuic Cemetery for a day trip. The instant overwhelming sense of grief that hit me was difficult to handle and I found myself overwhelmed to tears. The same repeated thought kept circling around my mind that day and has stuck with me ever since; Why do we save, collect and display our grief, while at the same time bury it away in a place where we are able to forget about it and not feel any guilt? (Much like the war monument concept I discussed earlier). In hindsight, I wonder now if this is why the work was removed completely and so quickly. Was I too insensitive to every persons fundamental need and right to forget?

And so I came back to the remaining piece of thread and its' absolute weight, and how heavy I felt it in the lump in my throat. Leonard Cohen summed it all up best for me when he said;

“Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack in everything,
That is how the light gets in.”

And the red thread...That is what this work is all about. That split second moment, the essence, the crack in everything...

Part Two: The Presence of Absence

I arrived home from Barcelona on the 22nd of December, 2016, tired, confused, conflicted and nervous. I could now see the enormity of the project and felt quite overwhelmed by the challenge of setting things right. I was suddenly so acutely aware that what I was exploring here was, in reality, a deeply reflective self-portrait which would traverse universal language and experience.

New questions had risen to the surface through the creative and investigative process of the previous work. Was this actually an investigation into grief rather than memory as a

whole? How does one represent the imperceivable? And what does it take to unravel the past?

We are the sum of all of our experiences, past and present and into the future. We hold onto moments, fragments of time, recreating them a new in infinite repeatability though the act of remembering. And with each remembrance the original moment is experienced again for the first time, because we, the experiencer, are simply not the same person as when we first created the memory of said moment (Phillips, J). So we see that the “string” that connects us to the perceivable beginning and the perceivable ending is infinite in ever more ways that we were initially aware, each possibility as real as any other. An atmospheric web of possibility is formed.

Again enter undeniable need to weave. To commit to the act of this menial labour with the same understanding and devotion as the man who tills the soil with his plough, day in and day out. That this act will bring me closer to “God”, or put less religiously, to a universal truth and understanding. That which is woven will be imbued with all that has ever been, simply by the act of creation. Historical memory, the blueprint of the past, courses through my veins as thick and fast as it does all of us, because we are all connected. Connected to what we perceive as present and just as strongly, to that which is absent. To life, to death, to ourselves and everything else. Connected to that something that fills the spaces in between.

If we study the appearance of colour in languages we see that across cultures, red is the first colour to appear after black and white (Morton, J.). It can be said too I suppose, that we see white as “life” and black as “death”, the absolute and the nothingness, light and dark. So if white is life and black is death, then red is everything in between. Red fills that infinite space between the perceivable beginning and the perceivable end. Red is the web and simultaneously the vessel that contains it. Red is everything. It is blood, thought, violence, birth, war, love, hatred, dream, fire, warmth, creation. And so the significance of the red thread is ever more important than I could have ever imagined.

Eighty-six balls of woven red thread, meticulously pulled back and forth across my body, back and forth like the steady rock of a ship on the sea. And I meditate on what it could all possibly mean. With each and every stitch a part of me is released. Long hours of contemplation go by and the shifting tide of emotions has come and gone, memories too, forgiveness for moments and regrets of others, the ebb and flow of this cathartic process. This woven mess has become my own vessel in which to carry the weight of my psychological baggage, to carry my re-memberings. And how fitting it is that I, a woman, have by weaving completed a task historically belonging to womankind, and that I as a woman, am myself a part of the ultimate vessel of creation (Raffa, J. 2014).

Ninety-eight hours of deeply contemplative construction and participation and it was, not complete, but perfectly sufficient. This work can never be complete, not as long as there is life and death, love and war, the story will always go on. Ultimately I suppose the work has become a tale of survival as much as it is remembrance, one that can no longer be defined by finite boundaries.

Installation of the final work took place at 11am on the 6th of February, 2017. The work was hung in the Southern Cross University gallery space, with ends woven together

once in situ and lights repositioned to create as much shadow play as possible. And the shadows interwoven bounced back and forth across the space, filtering onto my own flesh. There in front of me stood overwhelming and suffocating, the vessel of my own making. Filled to the brim with a missing something. A weight, atmospheric and real, a presence of absence.



Figure 5. Installation of work.

The shadows themselves leap forth, almost oblivious to their own importance. They form the overspill, the trace, the aura, the baggage that we shed and imprint onto others. They, layered and distorted, are the infinite alternate possibilities in each moment of the past, present and future.

It is here I must refer to two artists that have been integral to the creative process. The first is installation artist Cornelia Parker, who if not for her impressive work *War Room*, I may have never made it to the end point with my own work. Parker makes use of the spaces and gaps in between to represent the loss of lives and memories, and as a sign of commemoration. I too recognise within the (approximate) 184,000 spaces present within the weave, the echo and weight of memory through that which is represented by absence. I refer not only to the historical memory of Barcelona, but to the world as a whole connectedness. The second is installation and performance artist Chiharu Shiota, who through the creation of temporary monumental woven spaces, cocoons that disorient and envelope, integrates ideas of dreaming, remembrance, traces between moments and the relationship between the waking life and our memories. It is through her work that I find the confidence and understanding to explore these same themes with more humility in my heart.

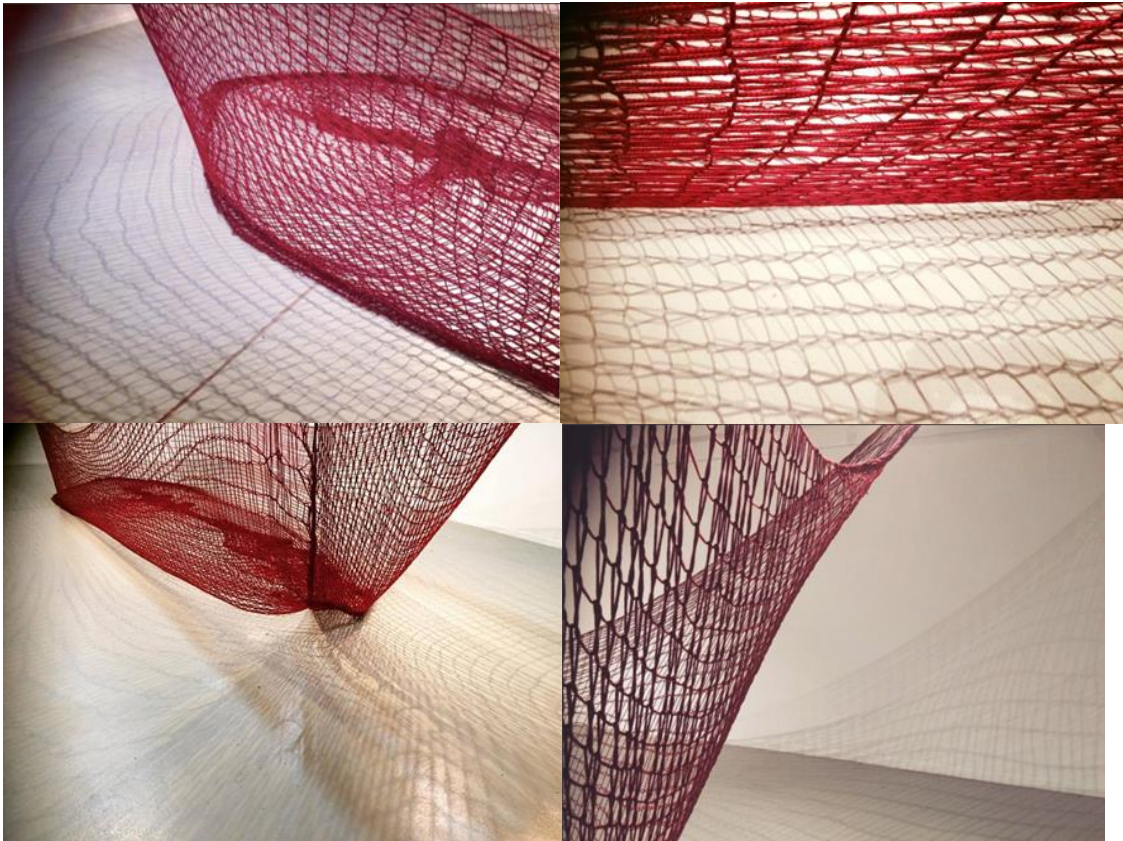


Figure 6. Shadows at play.

So here I stand, at the perceivable end point of this great journey and I ask, what has become of the work? This project has evolved with the shifting tide of my own emotions, I am elated yet exhausted. Within the first few small steps, I rushed forth into something I knew little about and was vastly under prepared for the depth of feeling that would come to exist as a part of me because of it. Barcelona seems now like a dream and I know in all certainty that it is not my dream to claim ownership of, nor begin even for a second to attempt to explain. Instead, this project has become, like Barcelona, a paradox. On the one hand, I stand in front of a much more personal reflection of my own self, memory, baggage and all. On the other, I present here the anti-memorial, designed not for one place or situation, but as an all-encompassing commemoration of loss, grief and memory itself. To that which exists between moments, between cracks. That which connects us all. And so there remains one last question, what has become of me? Because inevitably, there will always exist a moment in the past, undestroyable and unbanishable to a forgetfulness or absence... and that moment is me. I will still remain, surrounded always by the spaces between...by the presence of absence.

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Rosanna Pimm (rosannapimm@gmail.com) is a third-year Creative Arts Undergraduate student at Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales, Australia. This article is her final assessment from a project that she completed as part of the Barcelona Scholarship Program 2016, a student exchange program between Southern Cross University and the University of Barcelona. This article aims to create a discourse around the suppression of historical memory and culture, while exploring notions of memory, loss and grief. Pimm's work allows her to explore and entwine her own personal narrative with universal language and experience, often based within a political landscape. Her works take the form of temporal installation pieces utilising fabrics and woven materials, with a great focus on the importance of the innate qualities of the material form and the value of menial labor.