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Archiving Praxis: Dilemmas of documenting installation art in interdisciplinary creative arts praxis

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Introduction: **the dilemma of documenting multi-media ephemeral art**

The term 'installation art' can be defined as a hybrid art embodying characteristics of site-specificity and ephemerality (Geczy and Genocchio, 2001; McTighe, 2012). This definition however, does not encompass the full complexity of installation art. Nicholas Zurbrugg (as cited in Geczy and Genocchio, 2001) argues that 'the common factor of all installations is their use of three-dimensional space [where] . . . installation art comes into existence as the artist's attempt to redefine a particular exhibition space' (p. 25). In Kate Mondloch's (2010) view, the term 'installation' can be evaluated on criteria such as 'considerations of space, materials, embodiment, duration, site and participation' (p. 3). Ephemerality, site-specificity and the participatory nature of installation art are the characteristics that introduce dilemmas in terms of documentation (Mondloch, 2010; McTighe, 2012). On one hand, the archive seeks to be a permanent record to preserve and validate the installation's existence. On the other, installation art is inherently ephemeral and measured by its physicality in a three-dimensional space.

Monica McTighe (2012) states, when a viewer walks into an installation they are confronted with a 'direct, bodily or phenomenological experience of the site' (p.19). Documentation can only be supplementary to an installation because it redefines the viewer's visual senses, bodily engagement and tactile experience (McTighe, 2012). The viewer is no longer immersed within the physical space but is mediated through two-dimensional representations subject to technology including media, screen resolution or size and Internet speed. It can be said, therefore, that the decisions made whilst archiving, ultimately determine the visual record that remains. McTighe (2012) argues installation art is 'often solidified or distorted by the documentation that is published alongside the work' (p. 2). One approach to resolve the conservation of technology-based installation art, suggested by William Real (2001) is to think about it 'more like a performance than an object' (p. 210). Real (2001) argues this approach defines a more 'fluid interpretation of exactly what is to be preserved in an

installation in terms of its expressive medium and its material components' (p. 211). After an installation is de-installed it is rarely reassembled in the same manner—the exhibition space, lighting or technology will be different and therefore to reproduce it in its original format is unlikely. No overarching protocols can govern the documentation of installation art—selecting the most appropriate processes, media and methods are based on a case-by-case assessment (Real, 2001). Some questions that may determine archiving decisions are:

- Have these works been sold?
- Will they be re-assembled in future exhibitions?
- Are they work-in-progress?
- Do their material components allow them to be reassembled in future works?
- Is the documentation all that remains?
- What contribution does the artist need on the re-installation of the artwork?
- What technologies are used and how important are these 'original' technologies in the likely event they become obsolete? (Real, 2001)

The challenge for installation artists is to extend into the realm of an archivist whilst conveying and representing the artistic intentions of the installation. By doing so, ephemeral media-art is presented with the best opportunity to be re-installed in the future (with or without the artists contribution) and for the artist to reflexively engage and develop their arts practice.
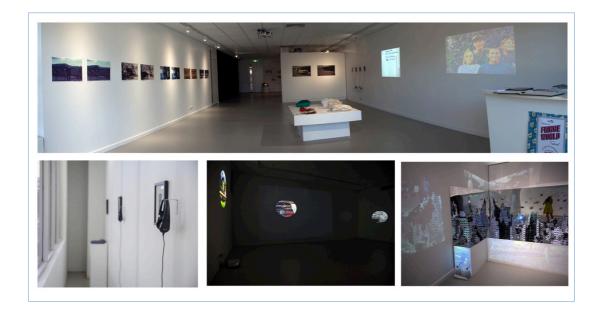

Figure 1. Emily Hornum, 2015, *The Substance of Memory*, installation, photography, video, photo media (installation view). Photographer: Emily Hornum

Documenting Installation Art: 'container', 'content' and 'context'

My Masters by Research comprises two solo exhibitions *The Substance of Memory* and *Object Data Memory* exhibited respectively at Spectrum Project Space (January 2015) and Free Range Gallery (May 2015). These exhibitions combine photography, video art, new media, projections, audio, sound and family artefacts. This paper uses examples from these exhibitions to demonstrate firstly, documenting ephemeral media art requires a multi-layered approach and secondly, documentation is imperative to reflexively engage with studio practices.

For two weeks prior to *The Substance of Memory* (Figure 1), Spectrum Project Space was used as an open studio artist residency. This residency demonstrates that an open studio inquiry is essential to my creative arts praxis, whereby documentation is an essential ingredient to the composition of the 'final' outcome— that is, *if* there is ever is a 'final' outcome. Mondloch (2010) argues installation art can be defined as 'participatory sculptural environments in which the viewer's spatial and temporal experience with the exhibition space and various objects within it forms part of the work itself'' (p.xiii). It can be said that, reflexive analysis of installation art is impossible until the works are constructed in their exhibition spaces and viewers are interacting and participating with them (Mondloch, 2010; McTighe, 2012). This concept applies to the installations in *The Substance of Memory* (2015), which do not reveal themselves all at once—the viewer's experience *within* the space forms part of the work itself (Mondloch, 2010). The installations invite bodily engagement implicitly by the audience moving *through* the installation, and more explicitly such as physically participating *with* the installation.

Figure 2. Emily Hornum, 2015, *Online Archives of Family Objects,* 2015. Objects, new media (installation view). Photographer: Emily Hornum

This is illustrated in *Online Archive of Family Objects* (2015), an installation using family artefacts, photography and new media (Figure 2). Arranged on a large white plinth in the middle of the gallery are personal items from members of my family. Their tangible status is evident—they have been carefully folded or placed evoking their status as valuable artefacts and objects for remembrance. Adjacent to each item is an item description, accession number and QR code. When the audience scan this QR code on a smartphone or tablet using the appropriate app, it directs the audience to an online gallery (Figure 3). To view this work the audience are restricted and mediated by external devices and technological factors including software, Internet speed and screen resolution. Audience engagement and interaction becomes an intrinsic part of this work and poses challenges for documentation. The audience no longer scans a QR code to gain 'access' to this gallery but has arrived there themselves or through a hyperlink[1]. The documentation that remains of *Online Archives of Family Objects* (2015) on my website is devoid of context—it cannot be viewed under the same conditions as physically being in the installation.

Figure 3. Screenshot of *Online Archives of Family Objects* (2015)

Traditional approaches to documentation cannot be applied to multi-media ephemeral art (Real, 2001; MacDonald, 2009; Jones & Muller, 2008). As Caitlin Jones and Lizzie Muller (2008) emphasise, archives that constitute multi-media ephemeral art are a 'collection of documentation that provides multiple perspectives of the work' (p. 419). Rather than ascertaining a fixed identity for the work, Jones and Muller (2008) suggest the principle of archiving installation art lies in the ability to 'capture its mutability and contingency through the dialogue between its experimental, conceptual and technical aspects' (p. 419). These multi-layered archives are essential for the artist's own archives, researchers and future exhibitions

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[1] http://www.emilyhornum.com/#!doreen-fields-outfit/c8ix.

or restaging of the work from curators and/or the artist (Jones & Muller, 2008; Real, 2001). Corina MacDonald (2009) asserts the documentation of

> variable media art must comprehensively consider the facets of container (infrastructure), content (experience) and context (tacit knowledge). It must be responsive to the evolution of a work and its networks of production. The documentation must reflect the form of the work itself (p. 62).
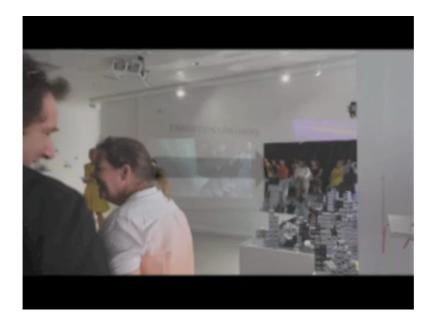
This distinction between 'container, 'content' and 'context' illustrates key components the documentation of installation art should address without stipulating any specific media or processes (MacDonald, 2009). MacDonald's (2009) concept is useful to critical analyse my own documentation process and to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses for future documentation. The term 'container' is the most simplest to define and refers to the infrastructure of the work, including physical components and 'the interaction between space and sound or the movement of listeners through the space' (MacDonald, 2009, p. 61). In MacDonald's view, 'content' is 'embodied in the experience…[whereas]…context exists in the cultural and social constructions brought to the work by all participants as well as the roles and practices involved in instantiating the work' (p.61). 'Context' is, therefore, the most challenging to document—referring to 'the range of conceptual and sensory information that cannot be expressed in words but which provides the backdrop to our understanding of a thing (MacDonald, 2009, p. 61).

MacDonald's (2009) distintinction between these key components provides a platform for this paper to navigate archiving practices in multi-media ephermal art. In Figure 4, I briefly analyse *I Forget Now* (2009) according to MacDonald's (2009) concept of 'container', 'content' and 'context'.

I Forget Now, 2015 Audio Installation, variable dimensions	
Container	5 x headphones; 5 x Micro SD cards; - Mp3 audio file spliced from audio transcript between Sue Simon and Doreen Field; 5 x (10 in x 10)black frames with original photographs ; - Extension cords, female USB connectors, power bank 5 x brackets for headphones to hang on wall - Audience walk down a narrow corridor and use headphones to listen to the audio pieces adjacent to a framed photograph - Ambient lighting from large windows down corridor and gallery
Content	- To view audio and postcards: http://www.emilyhornum.com/#!audio-postcards/c1dtt - Audio fragments taken from an interview between my grandmother and mother in 2012—my grandmother has Alzheimer's and this was an attempt to record her life and prompt her memories before they disappeared
Context	- Exegesis - Artist talk video recording – provides artist intentions and background knowledge - Website: http://www.emilyhornum.com/#!thesubstanceofmemory/cz2k

Figure 4. I Forget Now according to MacDonalds (2009) 'container', 'context' and 'content'

This summary exemplifies that 'container' and 'content' relate to the physical infrastructure that comprises the installation, which are essential records for the artist and for future reinstallation of the work. However, it is 'context' that enriches the multi-layered dimension to the archives that Jones and Miller (2009) emphasise are essential to multi-media ephemeral art. Video 1 is a short excerpt from my Artist Talk from *The Substance of Memory* (2015) to illustrate how 'context' is represented through one component of the documentation of *I Forget Now* (2015).

Video 1. *I Forget Now*, The Substance of Memory Artist Talk, 2015, Emily Hornum

Producing a harmonious link between infrasctructure, experience and tatic knowledge in an installation's archive assists to re-install the work in the future. For example, if media used in the original installation is now obsolete, the artist or curator needs to consider the 'conceptual role that is critical to the viewer's experience and understanding of the piece' (Real, 2010, p. 209). This is where context is particulary important—it sets parameters around the artists intentions in order to reconstruct this work in future exhibitions. As further demonstrated in the documentation of my creative arts practice on my Website, Vimeo account and YouTube account[2]. These online environments embed a range of visual media, including photography, video, hyperlinks and text within a participatory environment, which document the 'final' exhibition, studio practice, associated media coverage and artist talks[3].

Documenting Reflexivity in Creative Arts Praxis
Creative arts praxis establishes dialogues between artistic, cultural and scholarly concerns, whereby the artist's studio practice becomes an integral and vital component of research and artistic outcomes (Stewart, 2006; Etherington, 2004; Crouch, 2007). Robyn Stewart (2006) perceives the studio as an 'experimental area for creative interactions, a space for critical analysis and renewal that enables understanding of artist's work processes' (p.1). Kim Etherington (2004) suggests reflexivity 'opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity …(whilst)…adding

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[2] www.emilyhornum.com
[3] https://vimeo.com/126018184

validity and rigor in research by providing information about the contexts in which data are located' (p. 37). As further supported by Christopher Crouch (2007), reflexivity reveals the 'dynamic relationship between the context, construction and the articulation of the act' (p. 108). By introducing a hybrid approach to documentation it constitutes to the 'knowledge of how the work manifests over time' (Jones & Muller, 2008, p. 418). Reflexivity relies on documentation to negotiate between the decisions made when immersed in studio practice, the final outcome of studio practice and the theoretical concerns of the research.

Documentation is vital to a reflexive methodology within creative arts praxis. For example, *Slide Nights* (2015) is a photomedia installation created from over 3000 35mm slides that developed through extensive studio experimentation and over the course of *The Substance of Memory* at Spectrum Project Space and *Object Data Memory* at Free Range Gallery in 2015.

Figure 5. Emily Hornum, 2015, *Slide Nights* (2015). Photo media, projectors, acrylic mirrors. Photographer: Emily Hornum

Slide Nights (2015) in *The Substance of Memory* (2015) primarily was used to experiment and document my studio practices and processes in a gallery setting.

The photographs in Figure 6 are taken from a time lapse made throughout my residency at Spectrum Project Space. As Real (2010) states, 'an artist often creates an installation at the outset of an exhibition, starting with an incomplete plan that evolves and shifts as the artist works within the site' (p. 208). This is true for *Slide Nights* (2015), where elements were introduced in response to working within the gallery space. For example, when installing I was confronted with a space that required audience access to a corridor on one side, and access to a projection room on the other side. The installation layout was particularly important to encourage the audience to move *through* the space and explicitly highlight their bodily engagement *in* the space. In response to this requirement, I introduced a live feed of the room through a web camera, resulting in the audience appearing on the wall as they moved through the space. Yet, due to gallery limitations such as lighting, equipment and layout, the desired intimacy and immersion was lost.

Figure 6. Emily Hornum, 2015, *Slide Nights* (installation view). Photographer Emily Hornum

Slide Nights (2015) developed further in *Object Data Memory* at Free Range Gallery in May 2015 (Figure 6). Free Range Gallery is significantly smaller in size and *Slide Nights* (2015) was installed as an enclosed projection room. This successfully developed the desired sense of intimacy, immersion and embodiment that was not as successfully achieved in *The Substance of Memory* (2015). In addition, the acrylic mirrors hung on opposite walls of the gallery created an infinite illusion of multiplicity

in the room and enhanced the reflections from the projectors and bodily engagement from the audience. Documentation of *Slide Nights* is fundamental to my creative praxis by providing evidence of how this work manifested. Without documentation, the backdrop or context that enriches the understanding and reading of the installation becomes diluted and one-dimensional.

Conclusion

This paper uses examples from my own creative praxis to demonstrate that documenting installation art poses challenges to represent its evocative and immersive nature. The ephemeral, site specific and participatory nature of installation art contradicts traditional conservation practices (McTighe, 2002). As suggested by Real (2001), multi-media ephemeral art should be viewed as a performance rather than static objects…[which]…predicts a more fluid interpretation of exactly what is to be preserved' (p. 211). The archives that remain of *Online Archives of Family Objects* (2015) and *I Forget Now* (2015) can only be supplementary to the installations themselves. This paper summarises *I Forget Now* (2015) using MacDonald's (2009) concept of 'container', 'content' and 'context'. This approach establishes a holistic representation of the work from multiple dimensions. These multi-layered archives of installation art include, but are not limited to, video, photography, artists interviews, artists talks, media coverage, exhibition reviews, floor plans and online accounts.

Documenting work-in-progress and studio inquiry is an essential ingredient in my Masters of Visual Arts by Research creative arts praxis. The complexities and richness of arts practice emerges through studio inquiry and fostered through documentation of our work-in-progress. As illustrated through *Slide Nights* (2015), without reflexively engaging with how the work arrived at these artistic outcomes— the exegesis that accompanies this creative arts praxis lacks integrity, richness and context (Etherington, 2004; Stewart 2006). The challenge for artists working within arts-based research is to capture the complexities of studio inquiry and to use documentation as a productive and essential element to validate and develop artistic practices, process and outcomes.

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