Mapping Autotopographies

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Biography
Born, raised and educated in the United States, I emigrated to Australia in 2012. In 2015, I began my current role as a PhD student at the ANU within the School of Art, pursuing the question of how furniture might support memory and identity. Before commencing practice-led research, I was a furniture maker, but my prior educational background was in architecture, and biology. I currently live in Canberra, with my six-year-old son and forty-something spouse.

Abstract
The notion of an autotopography (Gonzalez, 1995), an environment of possessions tied to the owner's sense of self, provides us with a valuable insight into the phenomena of personal accumulation of both material goods and information. The practice of cultivating personal identity, an important outgrowth of Enlightenment ideals, has merged with the economic abundance of Western economies to produce cultures of acquisition, whole populations tasked with the opportunity for selfdetermination, personal expression and the construction of a material self. Even as material expression through actual objects loses ground to new digital modes of expression, the growth of "lifelogging" software tools, and the pursuit of new methods for digital archiving are evidence that abundance, accumulation and managing of the self continue to both entice and challenge many.

Creative practice, including that of bespoke makers, industrial designers, artists of both traditional and digital media, writers, musicians—in short, anyone involved in creative production—contributes to the landscape of autotopographies. Objects, real or virtual, are produced, disseminated, collected, used, preserved or buried, displayed or archived. This paper will articulate some of the philosophical and cultural developments that contribute to the perceived need of individuals to reveal through materials and information who they are; in other words, why do we feel compelled to create autotopographies? I will argue that improving our understanding of what drives desire for creative artifacts positions the designer / maker to critically reflect on how their practice operates not just within their immediate economy, but also gives us a more sophisticated and informed view of what it means to be a producer of culture.

Keywords: Possessions, Personal Identity, Consumption, Autotopography, Abundance

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What is an autotopography? In her essay titled 'Autotopographies,' Jennifer González defines it as 'this private-yet-material memory landscape . . . made up of the more intimate expressions of values and beliefs, emotions and desires that are found in the domestic collection and arrangement of objects' (1995, 133) González coins the term "autotopography" to signify that set of intimate possessions linked to personal identity. Whether carefully arranged and displayed or simply stored in a dusty box, the gathering together of such cherished objects forms a 'visible and tactile map of the subjectivity' (134). González calls the autotopography a prosthesis, but we could also consider it an adaptation.

Autotopographies contain an essential triad: an individual, possessions, and identity. What I propose is that this phenomenon, the material expression of self-identity through possessions, is a creative adaptation by individuals to a core Enlightenment inheritance: the modern condition of an open-ended self, and the experience of progress achieved through science and technology (Giddens, 1991). These ideological pillars of modernity manifest in Western societies as perennial debates about the boundaries of self-identity and expression, and in the perpetual redeveloping of cities along with their technological and connective infrastructure. In addition, the objects enveloping us are products of industries and national policies driven by a political ethos privileging material abundance as a social goal (Garon, 2011; Currarino, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Potter, 1954). So autotopographies address at least two primary challenges: one subject-related (destabilisation of the self), the other posed by the turnover of cityscapes and manufactured objects (the flux of the material world).
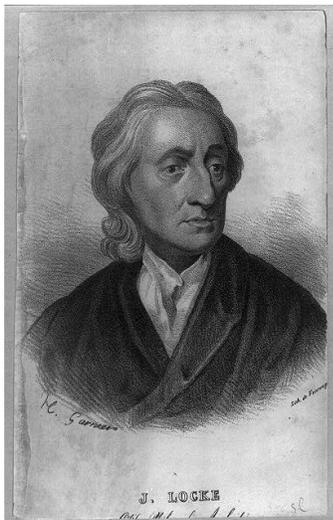
Mapping autotopographies means correlating moments in our cultural past with current notions of individual identity, acquisition, and production of things. Toward this end, I'll trace our contemporary Western personhood back to John Locke's theory of identity from the late 1600s. Next, I will provide two examples of contemporary artists whose work links identity with treasured possessions. From there I will transition to an account of how what we own, and thus autotopography, is shaped by national policies in the West. Following World War II, America sought to lead Western governments toward the elimination of scarcity, toward what some call *cultures of abundance* (Garrett, 2004; Cohen, 2001). The twentieth century history of American industry and state policy affords insight into the quantity and materiality of what we possess;

hence, this essay will also probe how the modern proclivity toward "more" effects the practice of creating autotopographies.

Designers and artists play a key interpretive role as they shape materials into possessions for individuals. This paper aims to inform creative practice by highlighting some critical societal inflection points which still effect how we relate to our things. Recognising how current modes of production and consumption are contingent upon particular political and philosophical precedents gives a perspective from which to critique and adapt one's practice as a creative mediator.

John Locke on Identity

To anyone concerned with hybrid practice John Locke is worth studying; he helped define an age when intellectuals pursued humanities and sciences in vigorous simultaneity. As scientist, Locke searched for laws governing the natural world, and as political philosopher he sought to enable the potential of rational thinking. In what follows, we'll trace his contribution to current beliefs about individual identity. Locke opposed the power of the Church in civic life, calling religion a voluntary belief, and he argued against longstanding models of aristocracy, believing that individuals could establish new forms of social life through reason and rational action. Central to his philosophy, then, is the definition of what constitutes an individual.

Figure 2 *John Locke (Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004672071/)*

A core tenet for Locke is that individuals are born as *tabula rasa*, as blank sheets or slates. Individual character is thus something to be constructed freely over time, not something inherited, or granted by Pope or King. In 1694, he published the second edition of *An Essay on Human Understanding* which included a pioneering argument concerning the concept of "personhood." Philosopher Henry Allison resurveyed Locke's ideas on identity, and he claims, 'John Locke provided the earliest systematic treatment of the problem of personal identity in the history of modern philosophy' (1966, 41). Locke argued that personhood was not to be found in material substance (the human body) but in the ability of consciousness *to remember*. Allison cites this excerpt from Locke's essay:

> For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a

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rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done (Locke and Fraser, 1959).

Allison assesses Locke's detractors, concurring that Locke's position on identity is not entirely consistent or defensible. Notwithstanding the flaws in Locke's arguments, Allison and others continue to regard him as the primary influence on our current notions of personal identity. Artists engaged in practices that explore themes of personal identity are indebted to Locke for opening this creative territory several hundred years ago.

What Locke set in motion was the belief that personal identity is primarily a function of consciousness and memory; hence, the self is invisible and not contingent on one's body. Fernando Vidal holds that the West still maintains this immaterial seat of personal identity, claiming: 'We "have" bodies only in the perspective of the post-Lockean possessive individualism that makes us their owners; objectified and distanced from our "selves," our bodies are for us things we own, not entities we are' (2002, 935-6). Stephen Katz concurs with this view in his observations about dementia patients, writing:

> The concept of personhood which the Enlightenment engendered, based again on a cerebral 'brainhood' figure, also meant that memory and memory loss became essential measures of individual status and human worthiness. It became possible not only to isolate and disembody memory, but also possible to isolate the person who became a victim of faulty memory (2013, 310).

Both Vidal and Katz note how little weight is accorded to the substance of the body once identity was assigned to immaterial consciousness; it is this belief that allows modern doctors to assert that a head transplant is a viable way to preserve a particular life, and thus an identity. Extending such views, if our identity is constructed through the reflective practice of memory, then it remains essentially invisible except to oneself, and even then only to the 'mind's eye.'

In contrast, the research of anthropologist Daniel Miller suggests the Western view of self as invisible is not a universally held belief. Living as a researcher in Trinidad, Miller observed how much effort the people put into their presentation when dressing themselves, noting that for Trinidadians one's true self is what is external and seen by others. Hence, getting dressed is how one gives an account of oneself. Miller articulates our Western perspective as follows:

> . . . [W]e presume a certain relationship between the interior and the exterior. We possess what could be called a *depth ontology.* The assumption is that *being* --

what we truly are -- is located deep inside ourselves and is in direct opposition to the surface. A clothes shopper is shallow because a philosopher or a saint is deep. The true core to the self is relatively constant and unchanging and also unresponsive to mere circumstance. We have to look deep inside ourselves to find ourselves. . . . [T]here is absolutely no reason on earth why another population should see things this same way. No reason at all why they should consider our real being to be deep inside and falsity on the outside. The argument here is that Trinidadians by and large don't (2010, 16-17).

It may be that for us the autotopography, instead of daily dress, is a more originary and durable means to represent notions of self-identity, especially when it is composed of long-held objects linked to family history.

This contrast between the ephemerality of daily dress in Trinidad and our Western belief that personal identity lies within some deeper psychic bedrock is an essential difference that helps clarify how we formulate self-narratives. I believe that the turn away from the body as carrier of identity and the Enlightenment faith in continual progress (and thus the effacement of all that is past) amplifies the value of carrying things through time as material links to who we are. To support this claim, I turn now to two contemporary Western artists whose work ties personal identity to artefacts from their past.

Figures 3 and 4 pura curiosità! (2007) A cabinet with personal artefacts by Stefan Furrer. Steel, glass, halogen lights and wooden models. (Images courtesy of the artist.)

Autotopography and Art

In 2007, Stefan Furrer created a cabinet to house a collection of miniature wooden buildings made by his grandfather, a teacher, for classroom use; Stefan remembers playing with them as a child. After inheriting the set, Furrer became a teacher as well and used the wooden buildings in his own classroom (2008, 72-79). Here is an example of objects as temporal companions, linking the owner not just to one moment in time but across several generations. When Furrer left Switzerland, he sent the miniature village overseas to America in a shipping trunk. The cabinet, *pura curiosita!*, is designed only for the set of buildings, indicating that Furrer means to preserve it as a moment now crystalized, raised to the level of an adult's eyes and illuminated to enable close inspection.

What Furrer experiences when observing the miniature village may include his childhood experiences, but now that memory is one layer within strata that include his grandfather, his migration, his work as a teacher, his career as furniture-maker, etc. By revisiting an indelible image from childhood that connects also at other points to his life, Furrer may be aiming to discover something about his identity; these wooden objects from his past could function as part of an emotional and temporal map of himself which serves to orient future action. Less than five years after completing this piece, Furrer retired to his hometown near Zurich after living several decades in California.

Figure 5 *It'story Table (2016) by Simon Ramsey. London Plane, toughened glass, domestic artefacts. (Image courtesy of the artist.)*

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Another piece of furniture incorporating autotopography is the *it's story table* by Simon Ramsey from 2016. The table was part of the Witness Tree Project, made with timber from trees obtained around Canberra, Australia, with artists commissioned to make objects inspired by what the trees may have "witnessed" while rooted in one place. Ramsey's table configures layers of objects he has collected over the course of his life. Like Furrer's piece, Ramsey employs furniture to display artefacts from his past, composing a personal tableau in which memory and objects coalesce into an experience of his own subjectivity. In both works we see the personal past as significant to the point of inspiring purpose-built works of furniture to house an autotopography, joining memory with materiality to create an open sense of self that can evolve and engender new narratives over time.

Possessions, Policy, and Modern Materiality

Both Ramsey and Furrer are highly selective as to which possessions they present to the viewer. One challenge to persons in the modern West is disentangling the personally significant possessions from the mass of acquisitions that fill our homes. The grand narrative underlying the current abundance of personal possessions can be sketched quickly: advances in science and technology fed the Industrial Revolution, which vastly increased the rate of production for many things. Simultaneously, population shifts toward cities and away from self-sufficient farmsteads meant greater numbers of people earned wages with which they could buy ready-made goods.

The significance of this shift to urban living and the mass production of commodities is twofold: first, the ever evolving metropolis may present as a destabilized environment, and second, possessions are no longer made within the home but shift to authorless manufactured goods. My claim here is that migration into cities coupled with the continuous redevelopment of urban environments creates the impetus for building stable autotopographies—a locus for the self against a shifting and potentially disorienting cityscape.

Likewise, the world of possessions is now also in continuous flux. In 'The Politics of "More"' historian Rosanne Currarino writes:

> . . .[T]he late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion of mass-produced consumer goods, from canned food to upholstered furniture, along with increasingly efficient distribution networks and national marketing efforts. As growing numbers of Americans purchased the new consumer goods, participation in

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the reality of plenty and the "aesthetic of abundance" physically and psychically changed the landscapes of daily lives (2006, 20-21).

Alongside changes in manufacturing, a study of urban building cycles in England from the 1850s to the late 1980s revealed that every 25-30 years construction of new buildings and transport infrastructure surged, coinciding with emerging technical needs (Barras, 1987). Furthermore, the fact that fewer people continue to make household goods signals a fundamental change in how we relate to the objects around us. Here sociologist Tim Dant quotes Georg Simmel's view from the year 1900 of industry's effect on our relationship to objects:

> The sheer volume of objects, their increasing autonomy and their specialization changed the relationship between social subject and the object, reducing the personal involvement with them and increasing social distance. As Simmel put it: 'Objects and people have become separated from one another' (Simmel, 1990, 460, quoted in Dant, 2005, 19).

Such increases in speed of production forced the question of how to sell so much product. The expense of all the machinery meant businesses could not simply manufacture more slowly if they wanted to profit from their capital investment.

Figure 6 Herbert Roese, US War Production Board. 1942. (Northwestern University Library)

Figure 7 Design: Jean Carlu, Washington D.C. 1942. (UNT Digital Library)

Figure 8 Robert Riggs, US War Production Board. 1942. (Northwestern University Library)

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As consumers saw a flood of goods from unseen producers, so too did manufacturers see a rising pool of anonymous buyers accessible through new distribution infrastructure. The effort to expand transportation for trade through transcontinental railroads, shipping canals, ports, and highway building, was (and is) perhaps the most instrumental nation-wide endeavor altering the nature of household goods by opening new outlets for mass production.

American industry undertook the most pronounced shift in production capacity during the 1940's when World War II devastated much of Europe's infrastructure and the US became a key supplier of goods to the Allied war effort (Garon, 2011). Following the war, this production capacity was turned toward the domestic market to exploit the manufacturing gains, while simultaneously proving that the American capitalist model could out-produce any socialist alternatives (Garrett, 2004). Historian Lizabeth Cohen argues that American housing policy was pivotal for fostering the required ethos of consumption:

> The United States came out of the Second World War faced with an enormous housing crisis. The remedy was mass housing construction of single-family homes . . . in new suburban areas, a solution intended . . . to stimulate the demand economy undergirding the *Consumers' Republic*. By turning 'home' into an expensive commodity for purchase by many more consumers than ever before and by increasing demand for related commodities such as cars, appliances and furnishings, new house construction became the bedrock of the *Consumers' Republic* (2001, 218).

Cohen and others reveal how the federal policies around suburban development mostly benefitted the white middle and upper classes. Society became more racially segmented as a result of federally subsidized "white flight" to the suburbs, leaving the inner cities to be redeveloped with the poor and racial minorities concentrated in government housing projects (Cohen, 2001; Groth, 1994; Wright, 1981).

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'When a person gets a certain age, moving, uprooting is a big deal. . . . And every time I move, I've lost stuff that is intangible, that I can't replace.' Cecil Stovall

(Kunichoff, 22 October, 2013)

(Photo: Michelle Kanaar for Chicago Reporter.)

Figure 9 *Mr. Stovall at the 'single room occupancy' Rosemoor Hotel, Chicago.*

The inequitable distribution of wealth in postwar America is not this paper's focus, but we can note here the consequences for producing autotopographies. In sum, if you were white and middle class in mid- to late-twentieth century America you could likely acquire a house, which provided ample space for new possessions. As historian Sheldon Garon notes: 'The average size of a new single-family home in the United States more than doubled after the early postwar years— from a cramped 983 square feet in 1950 to 2,349 sq. ft. in 2004' (2011, 339). For designers and producers, the aim was to further define home owners (and suburbs) within a status hierarchy; each discrete market segment occupied a rung on a prestige ladder which one climbed by buying into another suburb, and purchasing new things (Garon, 2011; Cohen, 2001).

For those excluded from the suburban model, the poor or elderly on limited income, or the racial minorities who were denied financing or could not find non-racist suburbs, there was not the secure space to acquire what singer Tracy Chapman describes in her song 'Mountains O' Things' (1987):

> The life I've always wanted
> I guess I'll never have
> I'll be working for somebody else
> Until I'm in my grave
> I'll be dreaming of a life of ease
> And mountains Oh mountains o' things

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Chapman builds the song on an inverted autotopography, mapping the well of want, showing how underclass identities include the outlines of those material things they covet but never own.

Conclusion

To summarise, autotopographies provide a lens through which to view individuals and their relationships to possessions. For those in Western societies, liberation from forms of identity bound by medieval custom and religion expanded the possibilities for self-expression. John Locke established our view of personhood as something capable of developing over time, and linked to one's capacity to remember. The autotopography, I have argued, represents an adaptation to this modern challenge of open identity; possessions serve both as durable aids to memory and as loci to which flexible self-narratives can be attached. Furthermore, the periodic redevelopment of urban environments, tantamount to the erasing of material history, combined with policies gearing societies toward mass production and consumption, generate conditions of flux and instability which, I assert, stimulate the countervailing impulse to secure the near environment; autotopographies address this impulse to some extent. And while the goal of material abundance seems immune to criticism, America's rising tide of consumer goods did not raise all boats equally. To end on a reflexive note, policy-makers institutionalize bias and beliefs in structural ways that have tremendous consequences for persons within and without the circle of favour, and for the environment. As designers, makers, and educators, we share the opportunity and responsibility to critically adapt our practices toward re-interpreting, not simply re-producing, our culture.

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