

by Amish Morrell

This issue is about memory—how culture, technology and narratives shape our relationship to the past, and the material forms and media that hold memories. It's also about the entropy, erasure and forgetting that erodes and overcomes memory, allowing new ideas, stories and cultures to materialize. Now is a particularly interesting time to consider this topic, as the material objects and spaces housing our memories, such as books, libraries, non-reproducible artifacts and physical exchanges, continue to give way to digital and virtual technologies that make information and memory increasingly immaterial, ephemeral and mobile, but also more widely and freely available. As we adopt the use of such technologies, there is an undeniable shift in our relationships to physical places and objects, to others around us, and to our sense of being bounded by time; this shift warrants serious consideration.

To understand the relationship between memory and space, it is useful to refer to an oft-cited text on memory: *Ad Herennium* by an unknown Roman teacher of rhetoric and compiled around 86–82 BCE. Expounding on the work of 5th-century BCE Greek thinkers, *Ad Herennium* describes memory-training techniques employed as means of memorizing long texts or formulae and essential to the teaching of rhetoric. Training one's memory using these techniques involved establishing a physical or architectural space in one's imagination that would function like a wax tablet upon which to impress associative images and mnemonic devices. This space could be a building, a city, or for some, the zodiac, filled with rooms or sites where one would place what needed to be remembered, and in the sequence the memories would be recollected. By replacing existing images and associations with new ones, the same space could be used continually to memorize new information.¹ For this technique to work well, these spaces—often described as “memory palaces”—were ideally based on real places, and one moved through them at an optimal pace for effective recollection. As a result, vast amounts of information could be organized and stored using the brain's innate capacity for spatial memory. This system also reflects a distinction Classical thinkers made between natural and artificial memory. Natural memory, according to *Ad Herennium*, consisted of events implanted automatically in the mind as they were thought or experienced, and which could also be located in a lived

space and time. Artificial memory, on the other hand, had to be developed through training and the formation of structures for memorization, such as those described above. One could walk through these imagined physical spaces, recalling much more abstract information, just like competitors in contemporary memory competitions recalling the order of cards when presented with several decks of randomly shuffled cards—or recalling, as one competitor in the US Memory Competition did, the entire 57,000-word Oxford English-Chinese dictionary.² Today, such memory training is largely an anachronism; with instant forms of access and retrieval, and endlessly expanding digital storage, space as a locus of memory has become a ruin.

However, our modern-day technologies for reproducing and disseminating information—print, photography, film, the Web, museum displays, gallery exhibitions, and so on—create new structures for remembering. Thanks to the myriad platforms and projects of Google, sites like Wikipedia, the incredible power of carefully chosen search terms, and actual libraries containing real books, one no longer needs to construct a memory palace or develop a complex system of mnemonic devices. Instead, memories can be externalized, accessed when needed, extracted and transported from their places of origin, archived and forgotten, or given life elsewhere. Such ways of communicating and incorporating collectively encountered representations gives rise to what cultural theorists Alison Landsberg and Celia Lury describe as “prosthetic” memories, where the actual and fictional accounts of others are assumed as one's own and lead to shared understandings of particular events and histories.³ Prosthetic memories thus mediate and direct how one is situated in relation to collective histories. The positive aspect of this is that we can readily identify with and empathize with the experiences of others, giving rise to political allegiances that are not based on common histories or circumstances. The difficulty, though, as suggested in Carol Zemel's discussion of Yael Bartana's video trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned...*, is that this requires a critical grasp of the complex cultural and political forces by which memory is mediated, and also an understanding of the consequences of our participation.

The Internet and social media platforms incorporate and arguably eclipse prosthetic memory, collapsing distances of space

and time that cannot be bridged in real life into a virtual, often banal, and overly commercialized present. In her essay in this issue, Michelle Kasprzak looks at artists who use social media as a platform for their work, how it shapes users' identities, and how it elicits participation. Many of the works she discusses experiment with the distinctions between the public and the private; individual production and group collaboration; and the representational and the real. When online, it's often impossible to differentiate between what is real and what is not, what is past and what is present, and what is dead or alive—not to mention differentiating between experiencing it in real life and experiencing it on the Internet. On Facebook, scorned friends and deceased friends remain knowable and accessible, if not somewhat uncommunicative, long after they are gone from our real lives. Just as there can be no real death on the Internet, the sense of their loss is diminished, partially, at least.

In her essay, “When Social Networks Memorialize,” Chloé Roubert discusses Michael Arad's *Reflecting Absence* memorial at the site of the former World Trade Center in New York, and how it employs social media as a way of memorializing the lives of those lost. Roubert considers what it means to infinitely archive and make information available, and what might happen if we allow ourselves to forget. In a different way, for the artist project that appears in this issue, Toronto-based collective CN Tower Liquidation addressed the idea of erasure and forgetting. For the centrefold, they digitally removed the text and images from pages of the first issue of *C Magazine*, published in Winter 1983/84, and physically “dematerialized” the issue, preserving the remaining paper fibres and dissolved ink in a resin cube. As more publications move to online publishing, this work can be read as a commentary on the future of magazines, but it is also suggestive of the utopian potential of memory as the ruins upon which new ideas and forms are built.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
- 2 Joshua Foer, “Secrets of a Mind-Gamer: How I Trained my Brain and Became a World-Class Memory Athlete” in *The New York Times Magazine* (February 20, 2011).
- 3 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998).