

Correction, addition and deletion: Memory and its function in creating “visual narratives” (and identity) in photographic art.



A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters in Fine Art at Rhodes University

by

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Abstract

With this dissertation I propose to investigate critical theories dealing with memory and its role in photography. The function of memory is a well discussed and analysed topic within the ambit of historical research. Drawing from theoretical texts by critical theorists, namely, Roland Barthes, Annette Kuhn and Marianne Hirsch, I will critically address the function of memory in the understanding of photography; particularly how photographs have the ability to construct our identity in terms of history and narrative. I will study the content of memory in relation to visual images, focusing on what is remembered, what is suppressed, and finally, what is transformed when viewing an image. By doing so, I will consider whether or not still photographs have the ability to construct the past in a narrative form that is intrinsic to its medium. This consideration will be undertaken with specific reference to the works of contemporary South African artist Lien Botha. Special attention will be directed to her series of work entitled *Amendment* (2006), a series which permits me in turn, to deal with issues pertaining to memory and “visual narrative” which I have explored in my own professional art practice namely, *Memory Boxes*, *Back Stories*, *Faces of You and Me*, *Memories Re-layered* and *Ghostly Remnants*.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Master of Fine Art degree at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

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Introduction

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations... (Hirsch 2002:22).

The stories that dominate an individual's life most often originate from a context in which that individual has had little or no involvement. We are told who we are, by our parents or grandparents, by our peers, by the books that we read, by the images we see, by the countries in which we are born and by both our personal and political contexts. In this dissertation, attention to this process leads me to question the idea of the 'truthfulness' or 'honesty' of memory¹ as well as the 'essential' nature of any identity. I have drawn on and cited many sources exploring ideas surrounding the content of memory; mainly utilizing the writings of Annette Kuhn, Marianne Hirsch and Roland Barthes as a basis upon which to predicate a discussion on memory and its relation to photography.

I pay particular attention to the role that the photographic image plays in both constructing and reinforcing personal narratives when viewing family photographs. This particular use of the photograph would by extension, imply that it too is rooted in narrative. Despite its original claims photography is no less artificial and subjective than any other representative medium. It is because of this narrative play that memory, identity and the image enter into a dance with each other. They move backwards and forwards, they converse, they are at loggerheads, they blend into one another, they become difficult to separate and ultimately, they change each other. I explore this dynamic narrative relationship between memory, identity and the image in chapter

¹ Memories are in fact, entirely subjective and there are numerous aspects and ways in which one remembers, hence I refer to memory as a generic umbrella term.

one. I find that the best way to understand the concept of History² is to examine one's own relationship to history, or simply one's own memories as they "uncover linked sequences and patterns in past events."²

The practical component of this dissertation has entailed a process of piecing together various stories or narratives through the re-examination and interpretation of old family photographs, in order to assemble my own reflections on memory. Whilst looking through old family albums I have always felt as though I was attempting to understand myself through the photographs. I find myself constructing a story about a particular photograph, I recreate events that have occurred in a past which I was never a part of. My only knowledge of the people represented in the photograph stems from my parents' and grandparents' story-telling. It is only through their recollection of events that I am able to reconstruct a (somewhat imaginative) narrative based on their process of remembering, which then undoubtedly becomes my own subjective, perhaps fictitious version of a memory. This process of remembering mirrors Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." My memories are thus constituted by thought processes of previous generations. This testifies to the fact that memory is indeed constructed, because it depends on the manner in which it is represented to imbue it with meaning, and it falls within the realm of representation. In other words memories are indirect, fragmented, ambivalent, partial and limited, hence, there cannot possibly be a single 'truth' in memory; in effect, it is always a copy of a copy, a story retold with a different focus, depending on the teller. By definition, 'truth' or

² History - "in its broadest sense, is the story of humanity's past. It also refers to the recording of that past. The diverse sources of history include books, newspapers, printed documents, personal papers, and other archival records, artifacts, and oral accounts. Historians use this material to form coherent narratives and uncover linked sequences and patterns in past events. Most histories are concerned with causality, that is, why certain outcomes happened as they did, and how they are linked to earlier events." Retrieved August 14, 2009 from Encyclopedia.com *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition (2008): <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/history.aspx>.

fact implies that something is fixed, static and unchanging. Logic would decree that if memory defies fact – if it lies within the realm of representation – it is subject to interpretation and is thus something changeable. The family narratives I discover through old photographs have been passed down from one generation to another and are inevitably altered with each telling. Memories are often produced when viewing a photograph and thus appear to exist in the photographic image. In the process of my own remembering³ I, too alter the narrative by projecting my own thoughts and emotions onto a memory or a photograph. Thus in the act of remembering lies a process prone to particular biases and interpretations often rendering it untrustworthy. Geoffrey Batchen (2004:16) introduces his book, *Forget Me Not*, with the claim that memory is, “selective, fuzzy in outline... often incoherent and invariably changes over time – a conveniently malleable form of fiction.” Annette Kuhn (1995:13) also asserts that, “memories may change with time, be mutually contradictory, may even be an occasion for, or an expression of, conflict.” Memory is thus the unstable result of a dialogue across a void of unknowing. As I have outlined, when an idea is passed from one to another across a chasm – be it generational and/or cultural – elements are lost and new dimensions added. As we re-interpret what already exists into our own subjective realities the ‘essence’ of the ‘original’ transforms. This is true of memory, of language and of identity. If identity is inseparable from memory and memory itself is mutable, then so is identity.

We imagine ourselves to be whole, to be complete, to have a full identity and certainly not to be open or fragmented; we imagine ourselves to be the author, rather than the object, of the narratives that constitute our lives (Chambers 1994:25).

³ I use the word “remembering” here as used by the Oxford English Dictionary (2009) which defines “remembering” as, “have in or be able to bring to one’s mind (someone or something from the past). Retrieved 14 August 2009 from AskOxford.com: http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/colour?view=uk

Understood from this point of view, identity, like memory, falls within the realm of representation, with images creating and contributing to a fabricated 'reality' involving a complex transformation of the *self* into the *other*. As Ian Chambers (1994:30) explains:

The construction of the 'other' has been fundamental to the historical, cultural and moral reproduction of our 'selves' and our particular sense of the world, of its centre, of knowledge, of power.

Hence, we find ourselves in the *other*. Whilst this *othering* process has taken many forms and been related to various phenomena, in the context of this argument the *self* - *other* dichotomy takes the form of the "here now" and "there then." Our memories are therefore displaced between a space of being "here now" and "there then", conveying a distance in which one becomes aware of a point of separation between the past and the present. If "here" stands for my present environment then "there" is a point which I have not yet been and am unable to reach. Memories subsequently become a social activity in order to understand ourselves. Furthermore, it is in the *othering* of oneself in reconstructing the past that memories become a crucial element in the placement and displacement of one's identity.

As Chambers explains (1994:25), "identity is formed at the unstable point where... stories of subjectivity meet the narrative of history and culture." These dynamics have allowed me to discuss and critically analyse work created by contemporary South African artist Lien Botha, paying particular attention to her body of work entitled *Amendment* (2006) which I have explored extensively in the second chapter. Botha's *Amendment* (2006) series conceptually engages with a self-reflexive process which in turn allows the viewer to engage with the work and to independently create meaning. This process involves, the creation of a complex network

of narratives constructed and projected onto the works, allowing the viewer to independently add meaning to the images with relevance to their own life. This idea is central not only to Botha's work but to my own, creating art that links the past to the present, and allowing the present to disturb the past in a fractured moment of interpretation.

In terms of my practical work I have explored the past by viewing and re-representing⁴ old family photographs which I have critically analysed and explored in chapter three. I have produced numerous bodies of work that have allowed an explorative process to occur in reconstructing my own history in terms of investigating memories as products of "visual narratives." These "visual narratives" have not only allowed me to 'access' the images represented in my exhibition but have allowed the viewer to 'access' and interpret the images as open-ended stories, which they too can identify with. The very specific yet ambiguous nature of these family photographs as "visual narratives" has thus permitted my work to explore issues surrounding the content of memory, identity, history and photography as representations that can only emerge and exist through the interpretations to which they give rise.

⁴ I use the term re-representing as to explain a process whereby I have re-photographed old family photographs that already exist as a mode of representation.

Chapter One: Memory and Photographs as Narrative

In this chapter, I discuss issues surrounding the content of memory, primarily regarding what is remembered, what is suppressed and finally what is transformed when viewing a photograph. The history of memory has become a well discussed and analysed topic within the ambit of historical research. It is my undertaking, in terms of my professional art practice, to critically analyse and investigate the nature of memory, specifically in the genre of photography, i.e. that is how photographs have the ability to construct our identity in terms of history and narrative. I have principally drawn on Annette Kuhn, Marianne Hirsch and Roland Barthes, whose writings serve as a basis upon which to predicate this discussion on memory and its relation to photography.

Cognitive psychologist John Sutton describes memory in the *Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy* (2003:1) as:

the cognitive capacity by which humans... retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes. Our particular abilities to conjure up long-gone episodes of our lives are both familiar and puzzling.

In light of my own memories I remember experiences and events that are not happening now, and are not necessarily my own, in order to experience a time that has been, a time past... a time lost. I am sensitive to the act of recall being complicated, owing to the fact that context and details are often lost to the past and re-interpreted in the present by the individual or individuals remembering. In psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett's (1932) book, *Remembering: A study of experimental and social psychology*: one can deduce that the act of remembering is not a

completely self-governing function entirely divided from perceiving, imagining, or even from constructive thinking but in fact has close relations with them all. In other words, one's memory of scenarios from the past reflects a mix of information enclosed in encoded traces at the time it occurred. Memories are thus based on information, expectations, beliefs and attitudes that are in fact derived from numerous former sources.

Memories are therefore structured within the individual's historical and cultural frames of reference, in which the process of remembering is a complex and multitudinous process wherein details from the past are often altered and changed over a period of time by the subjective viewpoint of the individual remembering. The act of remembering thus involves a multifaceted process that allows the individual to reconfigure the past as a collective process, in order to make sense of it at present. It can therefore be deduced from this perspective, that memories are indeed malleable in nature. In other words, memories are subjective and thus subject to reconstruction; they are influenced by, and interact with numerous external forces – allowing transformation of information to occur at the time of recollection. Hence one's memory is not so much a passive tool of retrieval, but an active reconfiguration of the past into the present, coercing the past to oblige and conform to present configurations. It is thus evident that memory is an active and complex process involving the intricate interaction between multiple instances, allowing a narrative like process of reformation to occur in the present. For the most part, memories are relived in the present by the images we see and the stories we are told. In his book *Narrative Fiction*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002:2) defines a story as: a “succession of events, text that is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling.” Rimmon-Kenan (2002:2) further suggests and implies that narration is:

a communication process in which the narrative as a message is transmitted by the addresser to addressee and the verbal nature of the medium is used to transmit the message that someone who speaks or writes it. The possibility of abstracting a story-form probably corresponds with the intuitive skill of the users in procession stories: being able to identify the same in another medium and so on.

I would therefore suggest that the stories we tell in the present about the past are abstractions of one's personal history, mediated by numerous external sources that are inevitably co-reproduced and formed in the present as a memory. According to Sutton (2003:4),

When I remember an episode of my personal history, I come into contact with events and experiences which are no longer present, and my conception of my own life involves narratives in which such experiences are inter-related.

Our memories are thus shaped into narratives not only by our own remembered episodes but by a joint social process of reminiscing. This assigns memory to the public sphere, beyond that of the private, making it a social rather than an individual process. The remembered thus contains multi-sided perspectives of events, issues and personalities – multiple subjective instances concretised socially to form memory. Consequently, memories never wholly belong to an individual alone: they are co-produced and transformed at the time of recollection. I would therefore suggest that one's memories are continuously restructured and assembled through a process of narrative exchange from one individual to another i.e. through the stories we tell. In Jan and Aleidia Assmann's (1999:3-10) study of the transmission of memory, we read:

Once memories are verbalized the individual's memories are fused with the inter-subjective system of language and are strictly speaking no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property... they can be exchanged, shared corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed – and not least written down. Even individual memory includes much more than we, as individuals have experienced. In other words, individuals are part of social groups with shared belief systems that frame memories into narratives and scenarios.

Marianne Hirsch (2002:22) describes this complex, verbalized, and shared act of remembrance as “postmemory.”⁵ “Postmemory” characterizes the narrative element implicit in all histories in which the transmission of “postmemory” is crucial to the understanding of one’s own personal history. As Hirsch (2002:22) explains, “postmemory” is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by a deep personal connection.” This “deep personal connection” that Hirsch refers to may be interpreted as familial. According to Jan Assmann (1999:3), “the family is a privileged site of memorial transmission.” In terms of Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” familial narratives are exchanged and transferred as a group memory from one generation to the next, and are often employed and verbally narrativized and exchanged when engaging with family photographs.

In my own experience, when viewing old family photographs, I find myself constructing a combination of stories that are not my own and have been passed down from one generation to another. For example,... these stories, told when viewing a photograph, bear witness to a time of those who came before me; a time I myself did not experience directly. This interactive process has made me aware of Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” in the manner in which I alter and re-create post-generational stories as my own, often interpreting them as pieces of my own memory. In other words, my re-constructed version of a memory may be interpreted as that which I perceive to be a memory of what happened or may have happened in the past. These events and experiences are characterized by previous knowledge generated by the stories I am told in association with the photographs I view. According to Hirsch (2002:3) the stories created when viewing images may be viewed as, “visual narratives” relative to W.J.T Mitchell’s (1994)

⁵ “Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations...” (Hirsch 2002:22).

concept of the “image text”, explained by Hirsch (2002:4) as: “text and image, intricately entangled in a narrative web or in collaboration used to tell a complicated story...”.

Recently, when viewing a family album I came across a photograph of a man sitting on a chair. I did not know who this man was or what he was supposed to mean to me. It was only once my grandmother told me that it was my great grandfather that I could place a familial connection to the man sitting on the chair. It is interesting to note that when viewing this image it is not only my grandmother that recognizes my great grandfather but my father as well. As Hirsch (2002:22) explains, “images and narratives thus constitute its instruments and it’s very medium by extending well into subsequent generations.” Arguably, I could only recognize my great grandfather in a photograph, through multiple post-generational, verbalized perspectives of recognition. In the photograph, my great grandfather is sitting on a chair outside in front of a clump of shrubs, eating a slice of a large melon. Upon analysing the photograph, his posture



(fig. 1)

is particularly interesting as it may seem that his bodily features are dynamically fragmented, as his upper torso may be viewed as sectioned off from his lower limbs. Furthermore, the manner in which he is clutching the horizontal section of fruit and his open-legged, relaxed stance seem to confront the viewer in a rather bold, confident and head on manner. Applying critical theory, what is particularly striking in this photograph of my great grandfather is the manner in which his face appears to be cut off and merged with the piece of fruit that he is eating. The melon may be interpreted as a substitute for his mouth, bringing to mind a fake, almost grotesque smile. According to Roland Barthes this aspect of the photograph may be read as the photograph's *punctum*; as this fragmented detail, conflated and cut off by a piece of melon is what leaps out and affects me, the viewer.

According to Barthes (1980:65), "recognition occurs through fragmentation when viewing a photograph." Barthes addresses this concept when viewing photographs of his mother in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980). The essential question that Barthes (1980:65) asks is; "did I recognize her?" and he responds by saying; "I never recognized her except in fragments." Barthes (1980:66) further explains that, "he recognized her differentially, not essentially, in fact he missed her *being* and therefore he missed her all together." According to Barthes (1980:65), *History*⁶ is what separates him from the photographs of his mother, "as in order to look at *History* one must be excluded from it." In other words, an attempt to find the 'essence' of someone in an historical image (such as a photograph) is thus misleading as their *being* has preceded ours and hence we can only ever find our own history⁷ in an image, a history that is

⁶ *History* with a capital "H" in italics represents a broad notion of *History*.

⁷ history with a lower case "h" and without the use of italic refers to a personal history.

fragmented and incomplete. The photographs that Barthes views of his mother are but a representation of her, a piece of her, a fragment. Essentially the 'true' nature of her *being* can never be captured in an image as it is lost to a representational *History* that can never 'truthfully' be regained. Arguably the "fragmentation" that Barthes experiences when viewing photographs of his mother is in light of his own memories of her. Due to this historical separation, I would therefore suggest that Barthes in fact "missed her *being*" as his memories of her could never find her 'true essence' in an image. In other words all Barthes could essentially find was a part of himself, a part of his own history in his memories of her.

According to Paula Rabinowitz (1992:166) the *self* is recognized through a narrative, "the story that seeks to 'know' through what it can 'see' of the *other* finds, not the other but itself." I would therefore suggest that it is only once we recognize the *self* in a photograph does the image become meaningful. Like oral and written narratives, photographs are a means through which we seek to find ourselves or others. However, it is important to note that when viewing a photograph multiple selves come into play. These multiple selves are structured around multiple narratives and the subjective viewpoints of individuals when viewing a particular image. Arguably, no 'true' *self* can be found in an image. An attempt to discover the *self* when viewing a photograph is thus misleading, as a photograph is in fact a mode of representation embedded with numerous narratives, perceptions and perspectives that can only ever generate multiple selves. It is however important to note, that these multiple selves are not multiple personalities but multiple viewpoints entangled and shaped by the viewer into "visual narratives" that emerge when viewing an image.

According to Annette Kuhn (1995:15), “the photograph sets a scene for telling... in which every individual tells a different story or changes their story at every retelling.” These “retellings” that Kuhn refers to are often interpreted as partly fictitious: “a memory that is posited as both artifice and reality, something perceived, invented and projected all at once” (Batchen 2004:97). As Lawrence E. Cahoon (1996:15) explains, “the human self is not a simple unity rather it is a multiplicity of forces...”. In consequence, the only way some sort of ‘truth’ can exist at all is within a network of human selves, a community. It would thus be more accurate to say that I have selves, as opposed to an ultimate *self* (Cahoon 1996:15). The autonomous sense of the *self* is therefore lost through multiple modes of representation often constituted in contemporary society through the images we see and the stories we tell. This suggests that the *self* is in fact fluid, multiple, portable and transient.

On a personal level, I have gained ‘access’ to these multiple selves by viewing and interpreting family photographs as “visual narratives”, a process which has allowed me to incorporate a network of narratives, associated with an image in order to make sense of what I am seeing. These narratives are created and emerge from multiple ways of seeing and interpreting an image by numerous individuals (in this case, family members). Inevitably the story not only belongs to one individual but multiple individuals who exchange stories and interpretations about an image among themselves. An image thus often allows for an extended network of narratives to emerge through an interactive process of storytelling. However, it is important to note that in order for the image to manifest these stories, the image has to have meaning to the viewer (be it personal, cultural or historical) and by having meaning, the image allows the viewer to see and recognize something in the image that is relevant to the *self*.

According to James Elkins (1996:19), “seeing means a self looking out at the world.” However, in order to find myself in a family photograph I need to be looking into a world that is personal. As Elkins explains (1996:22), “looking is not just a way of seeing but a means of searching – a desire to possess the *self*, whereby we repossess, fix, appropriate, remember, commemorate, borrow and steal in order to find ourselves.” When viewing a family photograph my desire to claim a part of myself from the image is strong. I feel the need to know the past as represented in a photograph in order to reclaim a sense of myself in the present. In order to do so, I need to see and interpret the photograph as a trace of past lives lived in which stories as memories are generated and inherently become my own. In other words, I can only interpret the past of others as my own by restructuring my way of looking when viewing a photograph. However, when viewing a photograph my vision is reduced to a limited way of looking, as I can only see what is in front of me; that which is represented in the photograph. The surface image of the photograph thus very often triggers and articulates a moment in space and time, be it historical or cultural. As Kuhn (1995:11) explains, “a photograph offers a self-evident relationship between itself and what it shows...”. Therefore it is not so much what the photograph shows, but that which is evoked by it that matters. Photographs shape a sense of identity. Hence, we extrapolate what we want from them in order to find a piece of our own personal history.

I would, therefore, suggest that the invention of photography has allowed the human race to acquire a new means of expression more closely connected with memory than any other. Photographs for the most part are synonymous with memory, but they provide only partial and incomplete versions of the past and, are more often a memory-trigger. The reliability of the photographic image as being a ‘true’ representation of not only ourselves, but our past is

undermined by the misleading nature of the memories it evokes. According to Hirsch (2002:23), “imagery and material forms shift, fade and disappear over time underlining the intangible nature of visuality.” As Annette Kuhn (1995:11) explains, “a photograph may simply be viewed as material for interpretation.” Arguably photographs are inadequate objects of remembrance, for what we see in a photograph is not necessarily directly linked to what we remember. Thus there can be no ‘real truth’ in a photograph, as an image lies within the realm of representation – it is subject to interpretation and is thus something variable. As a result, it is always a copy of a copy, a representation of our subjective ‘realities’ where our sense of ‘reality’ is always reproduced. Society has replaced ‘reality’, with forms of representation which include signs and symbols such as images, text and narratives that create a perceived ‘reality.’ Jean Baudrillard speaks of the *simulacrum*⁸, arguing that images/photographs are not a copy of the ‘real’ as there can be no ‘reality’ due to representation (1983:11). The *simulacrum* is thus a re-representation that becomes a dissimulated ‘truth’ in its own right. Thus our memories are simulated by forms of representation (such as language and photographs) for what we perceive as ‘real’ becomes our ‘truth.’ The fallibility of memory is thus inevitable as an one constructs and interprets one’s memories through the images we see and the stories we are told, hence the multifaceted nature of remembering undermines the reliability of the photographic image as being a ‘true’ representation of the past and hence ourselves. Memories are thus arguably produced and re-produced as “visual narratives” that are constructed, altered, shared and exchanged in order to make sense of our past and by extension ourselves.

⁸A *simulacrum* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2009) as, “an image or representation of someone or something or an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute.” Retrieved August 14, 2009 from AskOxford.com: http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/colour?view=uk

Chapter Two: Lien Botha: *Amendment* (2006)

I have interpreted memories as “visual narratives” in chapter one and reiterated that they are products of the images we see and the stories we are told. I have established that if one interprets a memory as a “visual narrative” then it is constructed, co-reproduced and exchanged from one individual to another. This argument has allowed me to further my discussion on the content of memory by critically analysing and investigating the work of contemporary South African artist Lien Botha.

Botha is a photo-based media artist who extends conventional boundaries of the photographic image, combining it with other mediums, surfaces and sculptural forms. By piecing together seemingly random events, archives and images Botha adopts an archaeological approach to her work. She makes use of the photographic medium in what Annette Kuhn (1995:11) explains as, “material for interpretation.” In other words, the conception and placement of her images attempts to initiate a response from the viewer that would uncover stories⁹ and traces of stories. The manner in which a viewer reconstructs, rearranges and manipulates an image as to allow a personalized narrative to emerge is the ‘essence’ of Botha’s work, as well as my own.

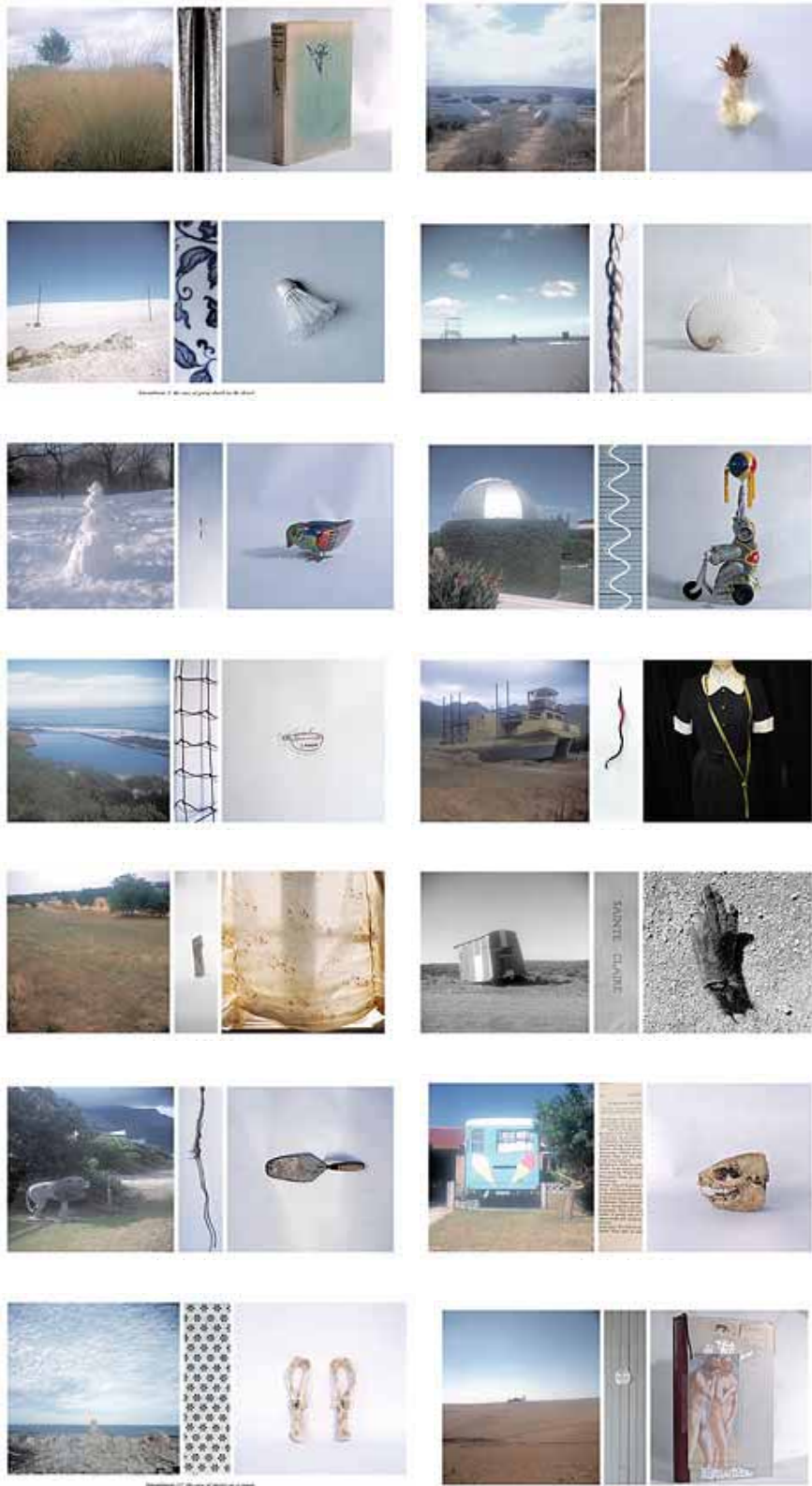
As social beings we construct our identities by piecing together various stories or narratives about who we are or want to be, and we assimilate into the *self* the stories we read, the images we see and the objects we hold, in order to create meaning for ourselves. Visually, Botha allows the viewer to interactively interpret her works by decoding an invisible network of personal and historical narratives embedded in her photographs. According to Kuhn (1995:11-12) “the

⁹ These stories are created by an individual when viewing an image as to allow a “visual narrative” to emerge.

photograph may be interpreted as evidence: to be solved like a riddle: read and decoded like clues...”. From this perspective, Botha provides the viewer the moment in which to pick out and decode her works as visual clues, a process that is apparent in her body of work entitled *Amendment* (2006). I would therefore suggest that Botha adopts a forensic approach in her *Amendment* series whereby she directs the viewer to investigate, analyse and deconstruct her works as visual clues presented within a scene of a crime. Arguably, Botha’s use of the photographic medium in this series allows her to employ the medium as a form of documenting ‘reality’ thus setting the viewer up as a detective. According to Peter Wollen (1997:34) in his article, *Vectors of Melancholy*, “if a scene of a crime cannot be narrativized, it can never be restored to the world of meaning and comprehension...”. In light of Wollen’s observation it is in the stories we imagine, construct and project onto the images viewed in Botha’s *Amendment* series, that an investigative process occurs, thus allowing meanings to emerge. It is, however, important to note that Botha’s art has been characterized by numerous art writers as puzzling and enigmatic. For example Mary Corrigan, Chris Roper, Andrew Lamprecht and Sean O’Toole describe her work as mysterious, impenetrable, opaque and cryptic, often comparing her art to a layered poem over which to puzzle. Botha refers to her work as an “enigmatic expression” by describing her *Amendment* series as follows:

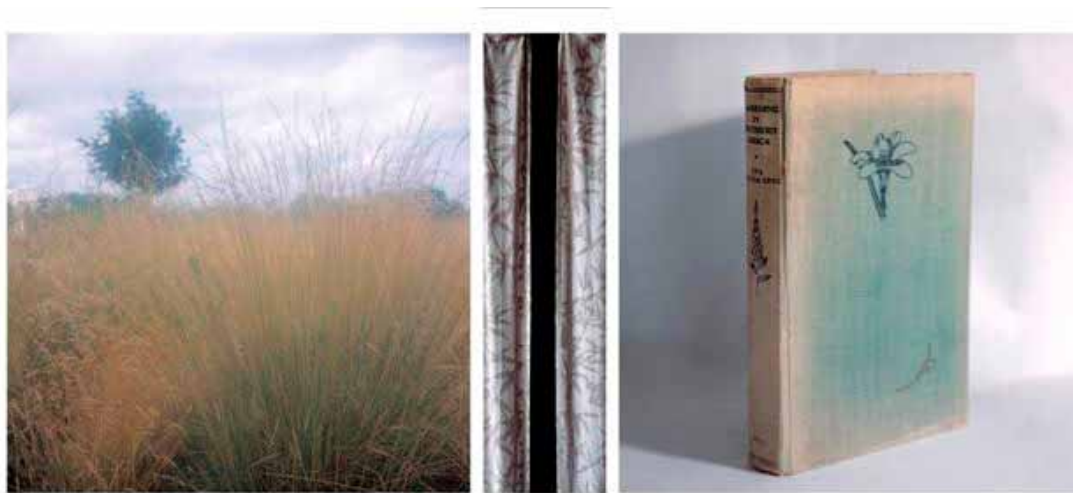
...Hovering as invisible codes on a building site, falling through a fishing net, disappearing with the waning moon, small words in an obituary, love lost in another language, a drastic change in habitat and three journeys later (Interview:2009).

Botha’s poetic use of language in describing *Amendment* allows her to further explain the work as a “visual poem” that represents an elegant narrative journey that stretches across fourteen sets of triptychs. When viewing the *Amendment* series, each work provides a trio of images: one of a



Amendment (fig. 2)

natural environment, one of a close up view of an object, and sandwiched in between those is a photo of a man-made product. It is also important to note that the subtitle of each triptych in *Amendment* is referred to as the “case of”, which further suggests the crime-scene analogy where the artist has embedded clues in the images. *Amendment 1: the case of the beginning at the end* features a section of a grassy veld on the left. In the centre, a photograph of a slightly open curtain or fabric that reproduces the plant motif that either enfolds or releases an abyss of darkness, and on the right is a photograph of an old gardening book with a graphic motif of a flower imprinted on the cover. I think that the clue that Botha directs the viewer to find in this



Amendment 1: the case of beginning at the end

(fig. 3)

work is very simply that all three images are connected to nature. Botha provides the viewer with an image of a gardening book. The gardening book is used as a manual by humans to occupy and restructure an untamed landscape for domestic or commercial purposes. If this is so then the triptych of images may be interpreted as man’s desire to occupy unknown territory. However, the subtitle that Botha provides in this work: *the case of the beginning at the end* complicates the image. The beginning of what end? If it is the end, then where is the beginning? Furthermore,

does this title not also suggest the futility of man's control over untamed nature? Certainly, the slash of black at the core of the triptych suggests this.

According to Mary Corrigan (2009:27) in her article, "Botha's insightful techniques", "the formal structure of Botha's artwork alludes to a sense that all three images in the *Amendment* series are loosely connected to each other." This "loose connection" that Corrigan refers to may suggest that the images represented in *Amendment* are open to interpretation. Thus allowing the viewer to construct and reconstruct the images as they wish. By separating the objects and textures from their original contexts, Corrigan (2009:27) explains that, "Botha implores the viewer not only to reflect on them separately but on how they relate to each other." If one interprets all three images as pieces of a collage then one can understand that each individual image in *Amendment* contains various levels of meaning. From this perspective we can assume that the images represented in Botha's *Amendment* series contain motifs that appear in the works as a whole. However, I would argue that the motifs in *Amendment* are sometimes difficult to find as the artist complicates her works by making use of particular images, objects, textures and text that have no apparent connection or meaning but emerge out of arbitrary connections that the viewer might place on them. This supports Ashraf Jamal's reading of Botha's techniques as surreal, a collage-based approach which forges a new unified thought. For example, when viewing *Amendment 7: the case of the boatless fishermen*, I become aware of my own process in assembling, constructing and interpreting the trio of images as visual pieces of a story. By projecting my own subjective thoughts and emotions onto the work I attempt to make sense of what I am seeing. In *Amendment 7: the case of the boatless fishermen*, I see a coastal landscape on the left, a fishing net in the centre and a sketch of a quarter measuring cup on my right.



Amendment 7: the case of the boatless fishermen

(fig. 4)

The coastal landscape on my left is interrupted by what seems to be a wave pool. By further interpreting this image, the wave pool is a man-made product developed to confine a section of water brought in by the sea. If considering the two juxtaposed images – one of the wave pool and the other of the measuring cup – then both images inevitably speak of measuring, fulfilling and containment. However, in opposition to these two images is the narrow central piece depicting a fishing net. The fishing net may allude to associations of being “caught in” and “entrapment.” Nevertheless, the fishing net never fulfils its purpose as the net’s open ended strands evoke feelings of slippage and loss, thus denying anything from being caught in it. Furthermore, the net is sectioned and cut off and thus fails to exist in its entirety and therefore loses its ability to capture and contain: hence the enigma of *the boatless fishermen*, an evocation of the inutile, stranded, or dysfunctional.

By providing the images with text, Botha allows the viewer to narrate a personal story, specific to every viewer. It is however interesting to note that the “image text” dynamic is an ongoing concern in Botha’s work. As she (Interview:2009) explains, her use of text allows her images to

take shape. Thus the text allows the viewer to place the trio of images into some sort of context which, as I have noted does not always make sense. It does, however, allow the viewer to construct a basic narrative of their own, by reading and relating the images and text to their own personal experiences. The viewer therefore participates in the production of “visual narratives” and allows the text to shape the image according to an individual’s interpretation of both the image and the text. In other words, the image may be interpreted as a “visual narrative” integral to the text and represents an assimilation of data, permitting an interactive process to occur between the artist, viewer, image and text. One can therefore deduce that Botha is interested in exploring the manner in which the viewer simulates experiences and the way in which an individual may interpret and associate her work as pieces of a visual story. It is however important to note that each viewer’s perception and interpretation of the images in *Amendment* may differ substantially according to each individual’s subjective interpretation of the works. Thus the stories created by the viewer narrate themselves accordingly. By associating the images and text represented in *Amendment* with one’s own personal knowledge and experiences, Botha allows an individual to construct an open-ended narrative that can only be understood from a personal point of view. Arguably these personal associations and interpretations created when viewing an image as narrative may be relative to what Annette Kuhn (1995:3) terms as, “memory work.”¹⁰ i.e. how images make meaning.

According to Kuhn (1995:3), “memory work makes the telling of stories possible.” It is thus in re-enacting a memory as a verbalized narrative that one is able to associate the images viewed in

¹⁰ Kuhn (2002:153) is concerned with how images make meaning. She addresses her own memory material in her book *Family Secrets* to encourage the viewer to acknowledge the nature of remembering and to encourage the viewer to produce new stories about the past from their own memories. Kuhn refers to this process as “memory work.”

Amendment with one's own life. This is, however, assuming that Botha makes use of the suggestibility of memory in order to allow the viewer a desire to narrativize her work. According to psychoanalyst Donald Spence (1982:21), "memories are characterized as a visual process of translating images into words through narrative construction." Spence (1982:21) further explains that, "the power of narrative allows for the power of interpretation to occur, not because the evidential value of an image fits, but because of their rhetorical appeal: this conviction emerges because the fit is good not because we have necessarily made contact with the past." Arguably, it is in the rhetorical appeal of interpretation that the images viewed in Botha's *Amendment* series allows the viewer to take and use the trio of images in each individual work in order to create their own story. Viewed along the continuum of memory, a process of narrative construction allows narratives to morph into new forms and new stories. This points towards how the images in *Amendment* have the potential to be expanded (through suggestion) and displaced (through interpretation) in the same way in which we expand and displace our memories by projecting our own subjective thoughts and emotions onto an image to make it conform to our own process of remembering. I would therefore suggest that Botha's works seem to touch on memory. Botha (Interview:2009) refers to memory as a "site." She further substantiates this view by explaining that her fascination with forensics and archaeology allows her to dissect what she remembers.

If Botha refers to memory as pathological and an archaeological process, then her images in *Amendment* may be characterized by, "fragmentary, quality moments recalled out of time" (Kuhn 1995:5). These, "fragmentary, non-linear moments" used to characterize a memory by Kuhn, may be interpreted in *Amendment* as visual fragments created by the artist in the manner in which she provides visual clues as images, objects and textures which have the potential to

evoke a memory. Interpreting the trio of images in Botha's *Amendment* series as fragments of a memory entails a process of removing and extracting details in order to piece together a somewhat concise narrative. This process alludes to the title of the series of work *Amendment*, defined by Botha (Interview:2009) as the act of, correction, addition and deletion. I would, therefore, suggest that details in the works are often lost and reinterpreted according to what the viewer chooses to see in the images and how an individual would interpret the works in light of his or her own memories. As Kuhn explains (1995:39), "images are representations to make sense of ourselves, in a way that we construct our own histories through memory and even how we position ourselves within wider, more public, histories." Botha draws upon the intersection of personal and collective memory to allude to a layering of meaning whereby one needs to peel away at both private and public histories in order to try and find 'truth' in a situation.

However, the power of construction in Botha's *Amendment* series oppresses the notion of 'truth' in her images. The manner in which one interprets and perceives the works in relation to one's own personal experiences may seem so disjointed at times that one inevitably makes use of one's imagination. I would suggest that the imaginary is a realm of illusion and fantasy belonging to an aesthetic world of perception. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1992:455) explains, for the imaginary process to occur it requires the use of an *analogon*. According to Sartre (1992:552), the *analogon* is equivalent to perception. The *analogon* can be a photograph, an object, a sketch, or even the mental image that one may use in order to remind oneself of someone or something. For example a photograph of my grandmother ceases being a mere image of a person on a piece of paper but rather stands in for my absent grandmother. In other words, the photograph loses its sense of *self* and takes on what it represents, namely feelings and emotions I attribute towards the image when

thinking of my grandmother. In the process of reminiscing about my grandmother when viewing a photograph of her, the *analogon* (the photograph) loses its value as an object and takes on the sense of the subject it represents. The *analogon* therefore takes on new qualities based upon the intention an individual has towards it. In light of this, when viewing the images represented in Botha's *Amendment* series, perceptions differ from one individual to another. In other words, it is through each individual's way of understanding and interpreting the works that the images allow meanings to emerge. The *Amendment* series radiates a network of associations, reflections and interpretations allowing the works to have particular meaning or significance to one's own life. Arguably, Botha is not the sole owner or narrator of her images: her images characterize modes of aesthetic and "enigmatic expressions" allowing the viewer to construct and interpret her *Amendment* series as they wish. Thus, all images and texts are collective in nature in the way in which we alter and use them in order to make meaning of them for ourselves. The images viewed in *Amendment* are 'accessible' to the viewer solely through their interpretive value.

Personally, when viewing the images represented in *Amendment*, the central image is the key element to which my interpretations are directed. Debatably, Botha makes use of the central image as a boundary line which disrupts the trio of images as a whole. Botha (Interview:2009) notes, that metaphorically the central image is a "binding agent" that links the two images on either side of it, thereby allowing the viewer to symbolically associate the landscapes on the right with the juxtaposed images of objects on your left. For example, when viewing *Amendment 3: the case of going dutch in the desert*, the central image may be associated with old Victorian motifs imprinted on domestic objects such as crockery and furniture. The Victorian motif is embellished with slender stems of trailing leaves that intertwine and curl themselves on a flat

surface. Furthermore, the central image of a plant motif is in fact fake and is used to imitate living flora for décor purposes. To the right is an image of a shuttlecock which is decontextualised on a white surface and seems to be missing its crucial apparatus which it is usually associated with i.e. the racket. To the left is an image of an abandoned desolate area of land with no vegetation, where two poles rise out of nowhere and allude to associations with an old, unused badminton net. It would therefore seem that the two juxtaposed images of the desert-like landscape and the shuttlecock are unable to fully function in the context in which they have been placed and evoke feelings of being useless and dysfunctional. However, when viewing all three images as a whole, evocative feelings of colonization may arise, as the trio of images call



Amendment 3: the case of going dutch in the desert

(fig. 5)

to mind the bringing of civilization to an untouched world, a world which in turn engulfs that civilization, leaving only a ghostly whisper of its existence. According to Ashraf Jamal (2002:2), “Botha’s artwork is modified and informed at every turn by an abiding sense of unease and displacement – which in its turn underscores a longing for unity. The two moments – one a sense of brokenness, the other hankering for wholeness coexist and shape each other.” The central image in Botha’s *Amendment* is a sign of aesthetic resolution governing the possibility of gaining

a sense of “wholeness” when making connections with the trio of images as a whole. I would further suggest, that the central images in *Amendment* may be viewed with Roland Barthes’s concept of the *punctum* in mind. Barthes (1982:32) explains the *punctum* as, a detail, physical object, or element that leaps out of the picture and pierces the viewer on an emotional level. When viewing *Amendment*, I experience the *punctum* as being the central image in the trio of images represented. *Amendment 5: the case of the mute praise singer* depicts photographs of a snowman, a pin and a mechanical wooden bird. The pin appears to either be broken in half or threaded through the background of the image. The pin is arbitrary in contrast to the two images on either side of it and thus draws my attention, for this reason it symbolizes the



Amendment 5: the case of a mute praise-singer

(fig. 6)

punctum for me. While the snowman is transitory, it is inevitably reliant on the elements of nature to sustain itself, nevertheless it appears as whole in the image. The snowman may be interpreted as an effigy of a person, yet it is made out of a substance of nature and consequently may be seen as transient, as it will inevitably melt and cease to exist. In contrast the mechanical wooden bird appears fake. Placed out of context it almost looks like an art object on display. In between these images the pin is shown to be imperfect and therefore grabs my attention. By interpreting the pin as the *punctum*, I further associate it as a metaphorical representation of

identity whereby the pin has the impossible task of pinpointing identity as something fixed and stable. By referring to the pin as human identity I infer the transient and unstable nature of identity, which (like memory) is subject to reconstruction. I would therefore suggest that the broken appearance of the pin represents my identity; human identity which is subject to transformation. The ambiguous and contradictory nature of the trio of images as a whole represented in this particular work may thus be related to the process through which one constructs one's own personal history. Botha celebrates these ambiguities and contradictions in her *Amendment* series as a way of affirming dissimilarity and the importance of multiple perspectives seems to be an ongoing concern in her work.

According to Charles Hue Puttergill (2008:29), "identity is seen in part, as an attempt to make sense of ourselves and others and therefore as being negotiated. Identity then, is formed and transformed in the process of representation" (Castells 1997; Noval 1996; Sapsford & Dallos 1998). Using Puttergill's observation on identity, the identity of the pin may be interpreted as broken, unstable and transient, like the melting snow on the left and fake-like mechanical wooden bird on the right. When viewing all three images – the pin in relation to the melting snowman and the pin in relation to the fake mechanical wooden bird – all appear to deny identity as being a fixed construct. However, if we view the pin as not broken but indeed threaded then the pin may be interpreted as constructing and reconstructing seemingly random images by threading them together. In other words, the arbitrary and contradictory nature of the trio of images confronts the viewer with the artist's intent of opening up personal histories to other perspectives and meanings.

The *Amendment* series, with its embedded clues and investigative approach is a complex body of work designed for interpretation. Botha has allowed the viewer to investigate and analyse the works as an attempt to discover the *self* in her images. The works are negotiated by the artist and the viewer through personal associations connected with the images that allow meanings to emerge. Arguably the images that Botha has chosen to present in *Amendment* are both familiar and puzzling and by no means 'original.' Botha's enigmatic use of images, objects, textures and text creates a visual language that can only be understood by the viewer when imposing arbitrary connections on the works, that can either have intense meanings for the viewer or no meaning at all.

Chapter Three: *Vergenoeg*: Photographic stories of a farm

Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to this past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present (Kuhn 1995:1).

For Annette Kuhn, our memories are prompted by the stories we tell (1995:2). As she explains, the telling of stories about our past is a key moment in the making of ourselves (Kuhn 1995:2). Memories provide us with narratives of identity that shape who we are at present. In my professional art practice I have focused on the role that family photographs play in the process of identity construction, and – more specifically – the role of the way in which memory features in such a process. In this chapter I have focused on and analysed my work in terms of my reflection on memory when viewing family photographs.

According to Kuhn (1995:19), “family photographs are about memory and memories: that is, they are about stories of a past shared by a group of people.” When viewing old family photographs I become aware of my absence in the images. The absence of my *being* in the photographs has initiated a process of storytelling between myself and family members, thereby enabling me to access a part of the past in which I was not directly involved. This interactive process informs me about the experiences and events that occurred in a particular photograph and the people represented in the images. In other words, the stories I am told by family members when viewing a particular family photograph are products of *their* recollections of the past rather than mine.

According to Kuhn (1995:43), “stories shift back and forth across contexts – from the cultural to the familial to the individual – constantly re-emerging in different shapes and forms.” These “shapes and forms” that Kuhn refers to may be interpreted as a process of producing narratives by piecing together experiences from the past into the present through various means of remembering. Arguably, stories shift and change over a prolonged period of time between different viewpoints after each retelling. Thus, when viewing an old family photograph, numerous versions of stories can be remembered and retold in light of a personal memory associated with the image. In the reworking and re-reproducing¹¹ of old family photographs in my practical work, I have attempted to understand how stories are reproduced as products of a memory when viewing a specific photograph. This process has led me to discover myself, my history and my identity through exploring the narrative and fictional aspects of memory.

The photographs I have chosen to deal with in my practical work are images of family members of Afrikaner heritage that lived on a farm called *Vergenoeg*¹² (also the title of my exhibition) in the 1930’s. For the most part, these images portray a farming life-style set in a distinct period in history. In gaining ‘access’ to this period, farm stories seem to emerge as memories after each viewing of a specific family photograph. These stories behold the lives of the people that lived on *Vergenoeg*. Translated in English, *Vergenoeg* means “far enough”, which is interesting in terms of relating the word to a process of remembering: as memories may be interpreted as being just “far enough” for one to be able to ‘access.’ In other words, the title *Vergenoeg* is evocative of a distant past, a distant memory to be interpreted as being just “far enough” or “close enough” to be retrieved and remembered. It is important to note that I have made use of family

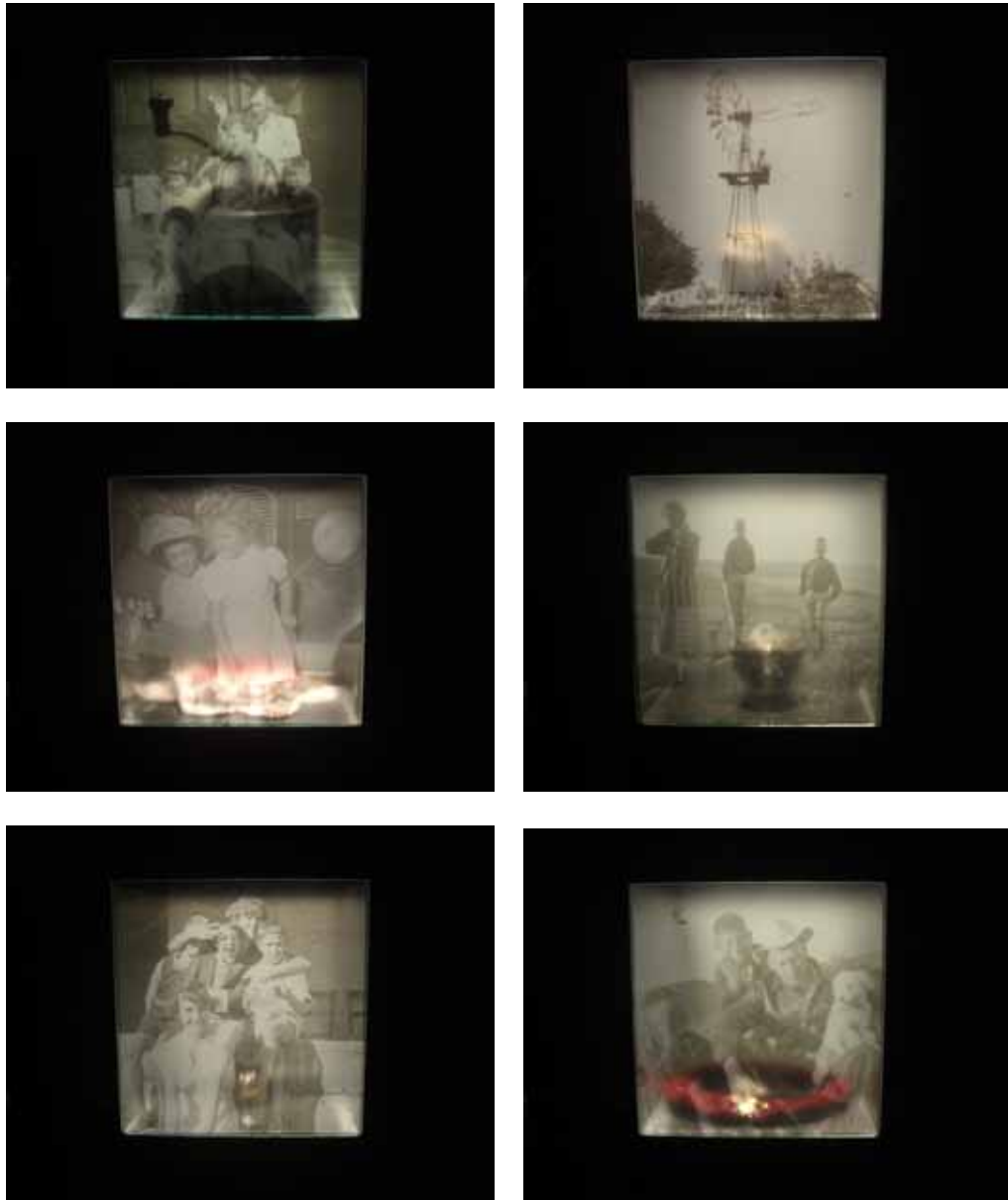
¹¹ By using the term re-reproducing I reiterate the process in which I have re-photographed old family photographs.

¹² *Vergenoeg* - According to my understanding of the word it means “far enough.”

photographs as a “material representation” of personal histories. The familial photograph has thus become a form of conversation, of personalized narratives between myself and family members that are recognized by their subjective qualities. In other words, I have extended the subjectivity of these familial photographs, of lives lived on *Vergenoeg*, as not only to have meaning to me, but also to the viewer in light of their own histories. This is done by allowing the viewer to project their personal familial experiences onto the images. By viewing family photographs as analytical material of a case history, visual images come to represent familial relations, even for outsiders. The family photograph has an emotional quality that speaks to everyone, because inevitably everyone has a family; whether present, remembered, or imagined.

The result is a series of work entitled *Memory Boxes* (fig. 7), which consists of glass boxes that re-represent images – on the front surface of each individual box – of family members that lived on *Vergenoeg*. The glass boxes may be representative of a display box in a museum. The photographic representations of family members on the front surface of the boxes are organized into a narrative sequence, in order to reconstruct and reinvent past personal histories linked together in sequence. Collectively, the glass boxes may be interpreted as precious objects that metaphorically capture and contain memories as narratives. The narratives that emerge and materialize from the images are open-ended and constructed in a manner in which the viewer may attempt to project their own familial connections onto the images. This happens because they associate these very specific generic familial photographs with their own personal histories. Furthermore, I have inserted particular familial objects into the glass boxes. These objects such as a butter mixer, an inkpot and a sugar bowl have been kept by family members as reminders of the individual or individuals that are represented on the front surface of each separate *Memory*

box. The objects inside the boxes form an elusive, shadowy, ghost-like appearance. This spectral view of the objects contained in *Memory Boxes* may be associated with the manner in which one may experience a memory.



(fig. 7)

Memory Box I, (fig. 8) re-represents an old family photograph that depicts an elderly lady sitting on top of the windmill, looking out into the distance. Initially when viewing the photograph I had no idea who was represented in the image and what the old lady was doing on top of the windmill. It was only once I was told by relatives who she was and why she climbed the windmill that the image made any sense to me at all. When asking my grandmother about this particular image, she told me that my great grandmother, on occasions, would climb the windmill in order to fix it. However, when asking my grandfather about the image he told me that my great grandmother would climb the windmill because it was a place where she could



(fig. 8)

think. The stories I was told about why my great grandmother would climb the windmill did not correlate with each other. The retelling of this particular story associated with the image altered and changed according to each individual family member's recollection or perception of the event that had occurred in the photograph. This active process of storytelling that occurred between myself, my grandmother and my grandfather seemed to allow memories to emerge. The use of the photograph would by extension imply that it, too is rooted in narrative. The stories that emerge as a memory demonstrates a process that involves multiple subjective viewpoints. These

viewpoints depend on each individual's recollection of a particular person or time in history, as represented in this particular photograph.

This active process of storytelling, when viewing old family photographs has allowed me to employ Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." According to Hirsch (2002:22), "postmemory characterizes the relationship of second generation memory, experiences that preceded their births and were transmitted to them through a process of storytelling", to constitute memories in their own right. In light of Hirsch's concept of "postmemory", I have become aware of how inherited memories inevitably become my own. These memories are mediated not by personally remembering the past but by creating and constructing an imaginative narrative which I create based on the stories I am told, and inevitably project onto the photographs I view. As Kuhn (1995:1) explains, "it is we who by imagining them bring them into being." *Memory Boxes* as a series is therefore constructed in a manner that metaphorically captures not only my creation of a memory but the memories of a viewer. I have attempted to allow the viewer to construct an imaginative story of their own, in order to associate with the images in their own right. According to Annette Kuhn (2002:158),

it is not merely a question of what we choose to keep in our 'memory boxes' – which particular traces of our pasts we lovingly or not so lovingly preserve - but of what we do with them how we use these relics to make memories, and how we the make use of the stories they generate to give deeper meaning to, and if necessary to change, our lives today.

In other words, one chooses to construct the past in a manner that allows one to shape and form one's memories in the present in order to make meaning of and for one's *self*. When viewing *Memory Box II*, (fig 9) there is a woman, two little boys and their dog standing in the veld

looking outwards into the distance. The farm lies on a wide lonely open plain, the source and reason for the name *Vergenoeg*. When viewing the image more closely I wonder what they were doing, or why they were there in the middle of nowhere. Maybe they were just taking a walk in the veld or maybe they were looking for someone. However, I can never be sure as no one in my family can actually remember what the people represented in the photograph were doing that day or why the photograph was taken at all. The story I generate when viewing this particular image is a family day out on a farm, as I was told that taking a walk in the veld was a regular family activity back in those days. However, a viewer might generate a completely different story when viewing this particular image, interpreting it entirely differently – the viewer might be able to associate with the image or not at all. Certainly, the composition is striking. We see a woman and a young man gazing at the viewer, while the dog and the other man have their gazes turned away.



(fig. 9)

This contrast in point of view and viewpoint gives the image a tension which, while it fails to yield a coherent meaning, nevertheless gives us the opportunity to imagine ourselves in a story that can only be imagined. This point's towards the collective yet fictive nature of remembering, which I explore in my second series of work entitled *Faces of You and Me*, and represents

portraits of individuals who are all supposed relatives¹³ of mine. The portraits originate from a group family photograph that I found in my grandmother's storage room. The photograph clearly had no purpose or meaning to anyone as it was packed away and forgotten. When enquiring about the photograph, my grandmother told me that no one could remember who the people in the photograph were or why it was taken. The only thing that she could assume is that the people represented in the photograph must have been relatives of ours. The photograph thus speaks of absence, of a past that is gone forever, a history that can never be reclaimed due to a progression of forgetting. As Kuhn (1995:3) explains, "the past is gone forever. We cannot return to it, nor can we reclaim it now as it was. But that does not mean it is lost to us." In rediscovering this photograph, I felt as if I had reclaimed a piece of familial history which while lost and forgotten, remained compelling and crucial to the project of piecing together memory as evocative, fragmented and mysterious.



(fig. 10)

¹³ I say "supposed relatives" because no one in my family recognises the people depicted in the images, but have assumed that they are relatives.

In the process of making *Faces of You and Me* I have selected particular individuals from a group family photograph (fig. 10) which I found of particular interest to me. It is vital to note that the individuals I have chosen to represent resemble immediate family members that are present in my life today. By choosing these particular people I hope to point towards an element of ambiguity in the images. The old man with the top hat (fig. 11), the lady scratching her head (fig. 12), and the little boy with the norty grin (fig. 13) all represent people from the past that no longer exist both physically and mentally – they do not even exist in people’s memories anymore. Arguably, the ambiguous anonymity of these particular individuals could allow the



(fig. 11)



(fig. 12)



(fig. 13)

viewer to associate with any one of the people represented in the photograph as they have become nameless faces. In other words, the anonymity of the people represented in these images could have as much meaning to me as they can to an indifferent viewer. I would therefore suggest that our personal histories are thus all somehow connected through our basic humanity. The old man could be someone’s grandfather, the lady scratching her head could be someone’s aunt and the little boy with the norty grin could be some else’s little brother.

As Annette Kuhn explains (1995:8),

family photographs may be read as case studies of personal histories, whereby the photographs have the ability of being read in a number of ways: for the stories they tell about a particular life speak with a strange urgency to the readers in whom they elicit recognition of a shared history.

Inevitably, each of us has a distanced connection to faces which we can connect with yet never know. *Faces of You and Me* addresses this matter. However, the ambiguity in these images points towards their lack of context due to a process of forgetting as the progression of time inevitably erases one's memory. Furthermore, in the process of enlarging the portraits in *Face of You and Me*, I have attempted to bring the image closer to the viewer so as to substantiate and reveal the existence of individuals represented in the images. However, in doing so I have ultimately failed as the portraits represented in this series of work may be viewed as "locket photographs", the more I try and reveal the image of the individual the more the image conceals itself.

This has led me to produce my third body of work, *Back Stories* (fig. 14). *Back Stories* is a series of work that represent the *back* parts of family photographs. The *backs* of these photographs contain text that tells us who is represented in the images and a little bit about what had happened in photograph. According to Geoffrey Batchen (2004:41), "the addition of text to photographs was a common strategy used by those who wished to enhance the memorial power of the image." In *Back Stories*, I have deliberately chosen not to show the front of the photograph to allow the viewer to construct an imaginary image based on what is read in the text. The text

unavoidably shapes an imagined image. This is contrasted to my previous body of work *Faces of You and Me*, where the viewer had access to the image but not to who the people actually were.



(fig. 14)

Here, the viewer has access to the names of people, but not to their faces. When viewing *Back Stories I* (fig. 15) the text reads: “Ek en Deon en Bennie op Hartenbos. Deon was mos saam met ons. Moenie na my gevreet kyk nie ek het snaaks gekom”, which in English translates as “Me and Deon and Bennie at Harentbos. Deon was with us. Don’t look at my face, as I look funny.” This explains to the viewer that there was a woman and two men sitting on top of what we can assume to be a mountain. Personally, I can only assume that a woman is the writer of the text as she further explains the image by saying we should not look at her face as she looks funny, possibly unattractive. It is interesting to note how the *front* and the *back* of the photograph both reveal very little of the event that had occurred on that particular day in the past. Arguably, the narrative without the image is as limiting as the image without the narrative. In other words, the

two depend on each other in the construction of “postmemory”, and without one the other is left to the vagaries of the imagination. A written product of a memory.



(fig. 15)

Batchen (2004:41) explains that, “the inscription of text is a unique trace of a person’s hand, a proof of identity, an unequivocal statement that “I was there, and here is my mark.” It is interesting to note that when viewing *Back Stories I*, we do not know who wrote the text or the gender, age or familial position of that person, we can only assume who the author is. The anonymity of the author of the writing, like the anonymity of the nameless faces, then adds to the mystery of the ‘imagined image.’ The anonymity of the author thus creates a mystery surrounding the image. One wonders whose memory this belongs to, as well as why that person chose to mark the image with these specific words. It is interesting to note that whoever did the writing on the *back* part of this particular photograph must have believed that she would forget the circumstances surrounding the event (I refer to the fact that she reminds herself that she looked funny). Perhaps she believed that she would forget what had happened, and that the text would be of more value to her memory than the image itself or maybe it indicates self

consciousness since the writer believes herself to be un-photogenic/unattractive in this particular photograph.

In light of my third series of work, *Memories Re-layered* (fig. 16) I have re-photographed old family photographs and sentimental objects to re-represent the dynamic relationship between images and objects and their connections to the past. I then continued to reconstruct the image by



(fig. 16)

photographing sentimental objects¹⁴ that family members held dear to the people represented in selected family photographs. For example, when viewing *Memories Re-layered I* (fig. 17), the newly constructed image represents a photograph of my great grandmother and my grandfather sitting next to each other somewhere outside the farm. Overlaying this image is my great grandmother's ink pot which she made use of on a weekly basis to write letters to keep in touch with distant loved ones. The ink pot as a proclaimed sentimental object has been kept by my

¹⁴ The sentimental objects in the photographs are real objects that have not been re-presented but presented in their tangible form and only become a represented image once I had photographed them.

mother to physically remind her of my great grandmother. According to Geoffrey Batchen (2004:31), “the physicality of an object enhances the object’s capacity to provoke remembrance.” The ink pot as a sentimental object may therefore be interpreted as an object that physically manifests a memory associated with the person that the object belonged to. The object therefore becomes an extension of its owner, or the owner the extension of the object: where the person represented in the image is now absent, the object now stands in for them. Equally,



(fig. 17)

however the photograph of my great grandmother and grandfather may also be viewed in *itself* as a sentimental object. In other words, the photograph has become sentimental as it depicts both people and a time that is now lost and yearned for. By placing the photograph of the sentimental object onto the re-photographed image of an old family photograph I have constructed an entirely new image. Arguably, these images and objects provoke acts of remembrance in the manner in which they are connected to the past and their continued existence into the present. Interestingly, the dynamic relationship between images and objects in *Memories Re-layered* may

be read in relation to my series of work entitled *Memory Boxes*. In the process of layering and constructing images and objects in these two series of work, I attempt to point towards the layering and constructed nature of memories and how we physically project our memories through the objects we behold. By layering a re-represented family photograph with a re-presented photograph of a sentimental object in *Memories Re-layered*, I point towards Jean Baudrillard's contention that nothing is 'real' and that everything is in fact a representation of a representation, thus everything is a simulation of what we perceive to be 'real.' Our memories are therefore nothing but simulations of representations of the past captured in the present through the objects we behold, the images we see and the stories we are told. Thus the imaginative sentiments we project onto the past creates a simulated 'reality' that one can only perceive as 'real.'

I have extended Baudrillard's concept of the "real - simulated" dichotomy by creating a series of work entitled *Ghostly Remnants* (fig. 18). The works depict "snapshot" photographs of family members that lived on *Vergenoeg*. The images are re-represented through a process of exploring an old photographic technique, the salt print. Imprinted on fabric, the images appear ghostly in appearance and may be evocative of the way in which one would experience a memory. Consequently, the viewer may question whether these images pertain to 'true' personal histories of a particular period of time, or whether they are nothing but re-representations of a simulated 'reality', of an imaginative creation. This is symptomatic to the 'true' yet fictive nature of the images represented in *Ghostly Remnants*, since one's subjective account of 'reality' is always subject to fictitious embellishments or deletions, an interpretation of the 'truth.' Hence the

concepts of ‘truth’ and fiction, which stand in binary opposition to one another, and are blurred through what one may perceive to be ‘real’ when remembering the past.



(fig. 18)

Finally, I have installed a video piece (*Untitled*) that captures a horse galloping in the veld. The galloping of the horse is directly related to the title of the exhibition *Vergenoeg* which speaks of distance, a far ride that pertains to how family members created the boundaries of the farm. The haphazard nature of the filmed piece is evocative of to the way in which one might experience a memory; a visual glimpse into a past of a personal history. Accompanying the video piece is a sound component of the horse galloping in the veld, this sound fills the exhibition space in its entirety. The sound component is produced within the exhibition space and permits the viewer entrance to a constructed space that reverberates like a ‘time capsule’, a space containing memories of a time that has passed and is once again captured through echoes of a horse galloping, recalling a time that once was. This allows the viewer to ‘access’ and experience a realm where the past and present are interlaced and are indeed integral to one another.

In the process of exploring my family-heritage and in the reworking of family photographs, I have recognized how memories have been passed down from one generation to another through an active process of storytelling. This points towards the past being continuously modified and re-described by other voices and gazes. The fragmentary and contradictory nature in which these stories are told when viewing an image, is an illustration of the fallibility of memory in the way that we haphazardly construct the past in order to make meaning of ourselves in the present.

Conclusion

In my own process of exploring my history through memory I have paid particular attention to the role that the photographic image plays in both constructing and reinforcing personal narratives when viewing an image (i.e. the family photograph). For this thesis, I have argued that memory, history and identity are dynamically linked by the stories we tell and the images we view. In light of this, I have deduced that memory is a complex process that involves an intricate interaction between multiple instances which often emerge as a narrative. I have therefore suggested that memories are moulded into narratives not only by one's personal remembered episodes of the past but by a co-operative collective social process of reminiscing. In other words one's memories are influenced by external forces that involve multi-sided perspectives of events, issues and personalities which include multiple subjective instances which are incorporated to produce a memory. Memories are thus constructed, re-constructed and co-produced by individuals remembering the past. I have thus established that memories are produced as "visual narratives" which are used to tell a complicated story about the past.

Through my work I have made use of the family photograph as a medium to recreate the past through post-generational stories. By doing so, I have deduced that in re-enacting the past when viewing an image, memories emerge and are created as visual stories that are often inconsistent, interpretive and even imaginative, at times. A photograph may thus be viewed as a memory-trigger that invariably allows an individual to interpret and construct a "visual narrative" as a piece of the past – a combined visual and verbal construct of a memory.

In the course of my research I have found that the photograph and the remembered both depend upon the passing of time in which moments are preserved and isolated, proposing their own form of existence in which all images can coexist. In other words, photography has identified and frozen life into a series of recorded moments, “snapshots” of a history which I would suggest have gradually become “visual narratives” of *self*-recognition. Memory may thus be viewed as entirely subjective – a *self*-reflexive process occurs in trying to find oneself in the past, particularly when viewing a photograph. I have therefore deduced that memories and photographs can be synonymous with each other. But given that a photograph is simpler than most memories and its range and ambit is somewhat limited it is more often the key to unlocking more complex memories. It is thus important to note that the photographic medium is indeed a form of representation that is *always already* subject to a memory that transforms and reinterprets the ‘original’ according to one’s subjective ‘reality’ in the present.

I would therefore like to stress that I have applied many of these ideas on memory and photography to my own personal practice. I have explored my familial heritage by re-representing and reconstructing old family photographs as “visual narratives” that not only I can identify with but also an outsider, the viewer. The familiar yet ambiguous nature of these photographs has opened the images up to the viewer, allowing the works to have relevance to their own lives and hence the finding of *self* in the images. I have extended this contention by arguing that numerous voices and gazes emerge from the narratives created when viewing an image. Memories thus consist of multiple selves rather than an independent autonomous *self*. The *self* thus consists of a network of narratives that render the *self* fluid, momentary, always open to new combinations of *being* and meaning, depending on the viewer.

By analysing and exploring Lien Botha's series *Amendment* (2006), I have focused on her works as open-ended narratives that allow the viewer to reconstruct, re-arrange and manipulate her works to allow a personalized narrative to emerge. I have found that these "visual narratives" that emerge when viewing Botha's *Amendment* series are influenced and created by a complex layering of both personal and social histories that eventually become mutable and transient, something forever changeable. The dynamic relationship between images and stories in *Amendment* has allowed me to associate this particular series of work with my own with emphasis on the open-ended interpretive value to which they give rise.

The process of exploring memory as a visual interpretation of the *self* has thus allowed me to argue that memory is indeed fallible in all respects, as it is an entirely subjective and compelling system of representation – be it visual or verbal, that buckles and warps under the heat on the horizon. I have therefore come to realize that memories are partial, a mix of detail and image, a trigger for a lost moment in time to which one can never return, and, must therefore reinvent. One can never find ultimate 'truth' in a memory, as the fragmentary and contradictory nature of remembering is limited to modes of representation in which memories as photographs, as narrative and as identity can only ever exist and emerge as multiple interpretations of the *self* in a given instant.

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