

How We Remember: Images Found and Made

Creative Renewal Fellowship
Solo exhibition at Big Car Gallery, August 1, 2008

Judith G. Levy

The past is never dead, it's not even past. – William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun

When I was a child, I'd happily sit and watch reels of family movies, trying to see what I looked like as a baby and learn about the kinds of parties that occurred on special occasions. I listened intently to family stories and asked questions to try to elicit more elaborate answers. Sometimes I got them and sometimes I didn't. As I matured my interests began to include more than the private, personal realm. I began a lifelong habit of scouring shops and yard sales to examine other people's photo albums, their souvenirs and their old family letters. I wanted to know them. Learning public history became studying photos of the last Czar of Russia and his family before they were abducted and killed or sitting by myself and pouring over a book of photos of "old" New York. The place was as important to me as the person. While these images weren't examples of my own personal memories, they became part of the stock of imagery in my head. And they did belong to someone.

Experts say human memory consists of a series of interconnected systems that serve different functions. It is a complex and layered process that allows us to recover encoded information from storage and bring it into consciousness. I'm not an expert on this process, but I appreciate the nuances of remembering, how the littlest thing can trigger an association to prompt us to remember something. How exact that memory is, is anybody's guess. The whole business of remembering is mutable, and there is considerable research on both personal and public memory. Memories, via photos, oral and written narratives, drawings, letters, memoirs, movies, film and ephemera, play a significant part in creating personal identity, cultural heritage, and historical preservation.

In 2008, I was awarded a Lilly Endowment Creative Renewal Fellowship by the Arts Council of Indianapolis. My fellowship proposal described my interest in traveling to Germany and Poland to visit the birthplaces of my maternal grandparents to learn more about my own past. Prior to receiving this grant, I had been working on a body of work, *The Girls Brigade*, which addresses the way in which history is created and shared. I was interested in omissions, inclusions and origins of culture. I thought a lot about how history is told, and I created a convincing narrative that viewers at the exhibition of the work thought was real. As I contemplated my trip in the fall of 2007, I thought about Marcel Proust's words from *In Search of Lost Time*: "When we have passed a certain age, the soul of the child we were and the souls of the dead from whom we have sprung come to lavish on us their riches and their spells." I'd recently read this sentence again in *The Lost, A Search for Six of Six Million*, by Daniel Mendelsohn, an extraordinary book that, among many things, describes the complexity of remembering and the meaning of identity. Mendelsohn's work also made me think about the role of progress and its impact on remembrance, but, we'll get to the digital world and tourism in a bit.

During the time I was working on my *Girls Brigade* project I'd started taking photographs of what I described as, "people taking pictures of people". I was interested in how memories are created and in how moments of signification are captured. I believed that by including both the photographer and his/her subjects in my photographs, I would document their act of remembrance and make one for myself. Memories can't be stolen, but moments can be shared. This certainly occurred to me, when my grandmother was still alive and would tell me bits and pieces about her early life. She'd describe what she remembered about working in a butter shop in Leipzig as a young woman. I imagined what she looked like then, churning ingredients by hand and filling tubs for sale. Her memories became mine, existing as translations of her actual experiences. In Germany and Poland I wanted to create new remembrances for myself that would emerge from the scant sharing of her memories. In Leipzig, my goal was to find the street where my maternal grandmother and her siblings were raised in a prosperous Lutheran household and baptized at a local church that had been rebuilt after it was burned down by Napoleon. Some of her siblings later became National Socialists and supporters of the Nazi regime. My maternal grandfather, a Jew, came from Tarnow, Poland where I found the decrepit, sad remains of a Jewish synagogue and a well-preserved town square that still hosted many buildings that existed when my grandfather was a boy. His brother Jacob was "lost in Krakow", which means he was killed by the Nazis, and a sister died while fleeing to Holland. I presume his parents perished along with other siblings and extended family

in the Holocaust. I'm still researching this part of my legacy. Very little was said in my own family about this subject. During the time I was growing up, my Lutheran grandmother and my Jewish grandfather's background and subsequent marriage was not discussed, except by my grandmother during a partial and unusual disclosure to me, when I was in my early twenties.

This current show, in my mind, is one installation made up of various parts. Some of the parts were prompted by both my visits to Leipzig/Berlin and Krakow/Tarnow and by the bus trip I took to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Primo Levi suggested that the Nazis declared "a war on memory" and truly hoped to not only annihilate the Jews but also their history. In the fight **for** memory, tours, memorials, archives, recordings, and documentaries have more recently been created to try to preserve the past. Since there really isn't a way to recast "experience into imagery", (Imprinting Memory: Art and the Holocaust by Sidra Kranz Moshinsky) I made a video of the tour bus trip I took to the concentration camps. Like the other passengers, I was confined on the bus, restricted on the tour, and not allowed to wander around to explore the sites. I decided to use only footage from the bus ride and from the guided tour and not add additional sound or imagery from other sources, in order to create a tourist video about the trip. Since the pictures in my head were already sufficiently horrible, any hope of trying to capture the evil that occurred in the camps was futile. And the getting there was, in my mind, a metaphor for an effort to bolster remembrance.

In another work about my family, I created a chart-like poster that describes significant similarities of my German and Polish relatives. I imagine that there really weren't very many fundamental differences, except one that changed everything. A third work is a flash animation called, *Witness*, and depicts two girls from the *Girls Brigade* who are observing something that is very frightening.

The other parts of my multi-faceted work focus primarily upon the everydayness that Harry Harootunian writes about in his essay, "Shadowing the Story", (Cultural Studies, 2004). It is these very everyday occasions, as captured in the repetitive photos of school graduations, birthday parties, football games and giant Sequoias that give meaning and contribute to our collective memory. Photography fostered what Harootunian describes as "the coupling of history and everyday", and documents the trivial, the banal and the untidiness of daily life. The largest piece in this show consists of 300 found transparencies, each housed in their own little souvenir-like viewer and hung from the ceiling to form an amorphous shape. I combed through thousands of old "slide" transparencies that had once been important to two different families, both unknown to me. But I got to know them fairly well after examining so many pictures of family cookouts, new kitchen cabinets and snapshots of newly purchased cars. The process of looking at all of the material was taxing but also exhilarating and very moving. Of course these images prompted considerable feelings of both comfort and loss, as I eventually felt as though I belonged to both of these families; one of whom was Jewish and the other Christian. No small parallel here. Most of the slides were taken in the 60's, 70's and early 80's, and many were marked by wear and neglect. I felt as though I was recycling memories and provoking my own, as I identified with so many aspects of the images. The individual images that were taken to preserve a moment, an occasion, a feeling, become shared, collective memories and bring the past into the present. Often these images are badly cropped, poorly lighted and have re-emerged from dusty attics and damp basements. For me, these acts of signification and re-signification speak to the universal cycle of life and death.

In some of the other work in the show, I use found text and photos to suggest the idiosyncratic nature of remembering. In one piece called "LookOut Mountain", I have combined a found photo and found text to illustrate the private story of a young couple. In another work, old library catalogue cards are joined with current newspaper clips and headlines to take leaps into memory and association.

There isn't sufficient space here to describe all the components in **How We Remember: Images Found and Made**. I hope those who view this exhibit will make connections that allow their own memories to emerge.

I thank Big Car Gallery and Jim Walker for the opportunity to exhibit this work. I am grateful to the Arts Council of Indianapolis and the Lilly Endowment for giving me the support to remember and renew.