Curating Organizational Memory

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The Art of Forgetting in the Information Age

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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PREFACE

JAMES ELKINS

There are gaps in the ways people think about academic writing—for example, a book like this one—and the ways people think about fiction. The difference between them is not fully inhabited by what is called in North America "creative nonfiction," and it is not adequately covered by "experimental writing." I think of the territory between academic prose and fiction as a series of islands (representing theorized or named ways of writing) divided by abysses (representing ways of writing that may or may not be practiced, but don't have names, or haven't been well conceptualized). In this Preface I represent those abysses by two sets of empty brackets. I invite readers to fill in the empty spaces as they wish. I format these open spaces the way Derrida did in *The Truth in Painting,* whose first chapter has a number of lacunae. Derrida's purpose was to meditate on Kantian aesthetics, and my theme is different, but I am also borrowing something else from his book: one of the dozens of gaps in his text, I think, is intended to be filled by the book's final chapter. A reader is intended to discover that the entire text of the book's last chapter can fit into one of the spaces Derrida provides, so the book folds back into itself. Derrida doesn't say that, and I don't think any reader has noticed it. Likewise here, one of my gaps can be filled in: there is an existing set of texts that fits perfectly into the space I am leaving open. I won't say which texts, or which space.

Let me propose as a first "island" the sum total of administrative literature on art academies, art schools, art departments, and allied cultural institutions. The enormous and exponentially growing literature on accreditation, rubrics, capstone achievements, assessment, evaluation, and quantification belongs here, and so does the equally daunting literature on the nature of the academy, and of the PhD for artists. (My own anthology, *Artists with PhDs,* kept growing through several editions, and if it were to be re-done for 2016, it would have to be two or three volumes.) Then comes a gap. [

] On the other side of this gap is literature that critiques the academy and the teaching of art. Some of this is itself institutionally sanctioned, such as Christopher Frayling's work; and some is intentionally outside institutions, as in the many unaccredited, free art schools that have sprung up in the UK, the US and elsewhere, which Greg Sholette calls the "dark matter" of the art world. It would be possible to read this book as an example of this literature. It has pedagogic interests, but it does not directly address the actual literature (as in the first "island"). In that sense this book belongs in a well-known tradition, which the author mentions, of modern and postmodern anti-academies. Then comes a second gap. [

] On the far shore is writing that proposes itself as theory—in this case pedagogic theory—but is also willful, idiosyncratic, eclectic, and inventive beyond what can be considered useful or practical. This book is also like that: there's a lot of odd theory here. I can't imagine an actual director, administrator, rector, or department head reading the pages of Eco's wonderful essay on *ars oblivionalis* and thinking, Great, we can use this as a Freshman requirement. In that respect—if only in that respect—this book is like Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste,* or Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials.* Both those books, as different as they are, propose serious theories in unusual and even dubious narratives. Then comes another gap. [

] And here, on an even more distant shore, is work that presents itself as fiction. There is an important distinction between work that "needs to be read as fiction," as Gilman-Ševčík says, and work that more simply or thoroughly *is* fiction. I'll get to that in a moment. The sense in which this book is fiction is limited, and limitation—by an authorial voice that does not speak as a fictional character!—is not a necessary attribute of fiction. What Gilman-Ševčík means is that he will not "necessarily directly or explicitly address the themes and topics at hand," but will speak "obliquely." Of course there are many examples of nonfiction accounts that speak "obliquely" (Negarestani certainly does), and there is no reliable narrator in, say, *Madame Bovary* to tell us how to read. So this "island" is close to the mainland of fiction, but it is decisively offshore. There is a difference between *expositing* "how notions of blankness, emptiness, a gap or a kind of forgetting can inform and generate creative practice," and *embodying* or instantiating those blanknessses. [

] So, like one of those fishlike ancestors of dinosaurs, we crawl ashore on the last island, the Island of Fiction, where nothing is as it appears,

where no reference to reality can be counted on, where no narrator knows what she's saying, where there are no signposts because there are no roads and no maps and no destination. "There are so many things to forget," as Gilman-Ševčík says.

PROLOGUE:
THE ARCHITECTURE OF FORGETTING

"I'm at home." What are you doing when you get rid of your home phone? There is a certain negation of the place as space – it can no longer be called from outside. One way of "reaching" the home is lost, disconnected – part of a home is its ability to receive others, in the form of a visit, or a call. A house can accommodate, but by not being able to call the place, now you can only reach it by actually entering it. You can mail a letter, but the letter does not provide a concrete link that places the sender inside of the house. With the loss of the telephone line, the house is less anchored in space by a network. A degree of connectedness in place has been lost. A letter is simply sent to it, but it can be lost along the way, or taken away, there's no certainty of location, and besides, how many personal letters do you get anymore? An email is like a cell phone call, it is into space, not to a place. The receiver is impossible to locate. Location becomes a function of trust, of communication. You tell me where you are – it's one of the first statements of the cell phone user. "I'm at home" changes from an absurd response when picking up the home phone to a reassurance to the caller of geographic anchoring. It helps the caller to ground and understand the receiver. You have also lost a magnitude of certainty about who you are calling to – they meet you on an equal footing – just as they don't know where you're calling from (unless they have caller ID and you're on a land line), you don't know where you're calling to, or even if the phone has managed to remain with its owner.

Avital Ronell characterizes the telephone call as a withdrawal of presence, a rupture, and a break. As the phone is disconnected, this very withdrawal is withdrawn, or rather it is transposed, from the building onto the body, as the individual then carries the withdrawal on them, it becomes a part of them, a new sensory organ added to the body, the body "plus" organs. This seems to have at least two functions – first, to make the home more impenetrable – the visitor has to be invited in to get there with any certainty beyond trust – the visitor may come in person or through a video phone, which grants a greater degree of penetration, an extra sensory level of trust on the part of the receiver. Second, the individual with whom a phone resides becomes more of a place – you can reach them, get to them, in the

same way you could get to their home by calling it – they have taken a part of what made a home a home with them. But if, following Ronell, we characterize the phone call as a rupture or withdrawal, then that rupture is transposed onto the body. But this is a mobile place, a moving location. If they have their laptop too, then they are even more of a location, they have their words, their music, their photos, part of their individual heritage or ghosts with them. Their past is mobile, their mechanical memory storage moves with them, their present is mobile, they can communicate and be located while in motion, and their future looks mobile, there is no fixed future point except death, which is also not a place.

Location has become position, which is trackable, individuals can now choose to reveal their position, to provide constant public updates as to their situation and activity, to allow others to track them, to locate them in motion, to substitute the kind of reassurance from knowing someone was at home.

> "The questions are piling up, yet it seems that they are all circling around two concepts: dwelling and passage."
> "We Still Do Not Know What a Building Can Do"
> *Radical Reconstruction*
> Michael Menser, p. 157

To create the audio guide for an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, artist Philippe Parreno had the world memory champion, Boris Konrad, recite an extensive and detailed biography for all of the artists included in the show. It is a demonstration of pure memory, an attempt to break a world record, and it is unbearable to listen to. Each word struggles to emerge, they drop like the dead, one by one, as Konrad labors through the text, methodically and lifelessly. As each word is forced outward, with no inflection or emotion, it is actually cut off from the context of the rest of the script, cut off from the artist it refers to and describes. You find that you cannot even follow the narrative, the words become monads, self-contained and individual accomplishments, divorced of meaning (more on monads later). The listener's attention is forced to shift away from what the text is saying to an observation of the mere accomplishment of saying it. This is not thinking, it is memory in isolation. It does not invite you in to think along with it, and it does not broadcast meaning, it forces you to struggle to merely listen to it wrenching its way forward.

What it is missing is the cessation of memory, the gap between what the memory brings forward and what is added to turn it into an expression, an expression of the individual, of the information, of the message. Konrad is

harnessing just the mechanics of memory, a machinelike function that supplies information at the barest level. He is battling, methodically and arduously, against forgetting. He has isolated forgetting as his adversary, and only in defeating it, entirely eliminating it from his mind can he accomplish his goal. In his book *The Mind of the Mnemonist*, psychologist A.R. Luria interviews a man he calls S who has a memory that after years of study he deems to be not only limitless in capacity, but also in the "durability of the traces he retained." S makes his living demonstrating the power of his memory in front of large crowds, using lists composed by volunteers from the audience. When he is memorizing, he has an almost schizophrenic disassociation with thinking. Even if he is given a list of sequential numbers or letters, he still uses his laborious associative technique that lets him remember any list, no matter how long, complicated or irregular. It is not until he is reciting the list aloud that he might realize that there was a simple logic to the material, like that they are the numbers one to ten, or the letters of the alphabet in order. But when he first memorizes them he isn't able to see any pattern or sense, because he deals with everything that comes in front of him like nonsensical information, just as Konrad did with the script of the audio guide. As listeners, we can do nothing more than mark the items recited off a checklist – there is nothing more for us to learn.

The goal, or spectacle, of not forgetting appeals to audiences because it is a defiance of an inevitable phenomenon. Not forgetting, demonstrating prodigious and expansive memory, is like cheating death. The sense of relief when one remembers something that has been a struggle to recall is a soft shadow version of the feeling of having escaped a fatal accident. As we recall the fact or idea, it is accompanied by a sense of relief, of optimism, of even hope, that rushes in to replace the dread and fear of not being able to remember, of being defeated by our own minds. Compare it to the feeling of a close call with a car on a street corner, as the sickening possibility of impact is salved by the liberation from the threat, the possibility of going on, the lucky feeling of survival. Of course the experience of remembering is not always so dramatic, particularly when one is young or confident in their mental capacity, but with age or insecurity, the failure of memory and the encroaching proximity of death can echo one another more ominously. But can we say that accepting forgetting is a step towards accepting death? Both processes incorporate a necessary winnowing, they are inevitabilities that create great possibilities. Here we can examine the first in terms of its creative and generative role in thought, to see the constructive elements it brings to the process, and try to consider accepting and even utilizing it is as a positive and potential tool for thought.

From the beginning of Western Thought, memory and architecture have been interwoven. Just as we use architectural spaces to organize our lives, we have used architectural forms as ideas and metaphors to organize our thoughts. Frances Yates' book, *The Art of Memory*, saved the history of the deliberate building of mental architecture from obscurity by chronicling the history of efforts to construct an ordered memory system in the mind deliberately and methodically, from early Roman thinkers through the obsolescence of the practice in the Renaissance, when the combined rise of the printing press and rational, non-pictorial Protestant thinking overcame visual culture. Mnemotechnics, the art of memory Yates describes, is a visual system, not a text-based system – the practitioner uses visual cues, mnemonic devices in the form of objects, to remind the memorist of information for easy recall.

All of these "memory objects" are placed in imaginary architectural spaces, in thematically organized rooms within buildings, called "memory palaces" dedicated to particular bodies of knowledge, which are located within complexes or even towns and function as the organizing structures for the whole system. It's a modular building system, and can be expanded to order all human knowledge, which was not beyond the ambition of some memorists. The process of recall is then like a walk through these constructed spaces in the mind. For example, to speak about a certain medical condition, the memorist pictures himself walking into the building labeled medicine, and down the hallway to a room of illnesses, where he can quickly identify the particular condition by spotting the object that reminds him of each of the indicators he needs to look for in order to identify the illness and explain the treatment. In the books instructing students on the best methods to create one's own memory palaces, great emphasis is placed on the importance of using architecture from the real world as a starting point. Students were instructed to stand in front of and stare at a section of a wall that was distinctive, but not unique, so that certain details could help them ground the place in their minds, but not distract them with an unexpected or overly elaborated design as they memorized all the pieces of information that belonged in that space.

By studying the structure and function of the brain, neurobiologists point to a concrete reason why the memory palace might have worked so well for practitioners. By separating the real (the architecture) and imaginary (the objects), they could engage more of their brain in the construction. Eric Kandel explains "…other aspects of visual perception – motion, depth, form and color – are segregated from one another and conveyed in separate pathways to the brain… gives rise to two parallel pathways. One pathway,

the “what” pathway, carries information about the form of an object: what the object looks like. The other, the “where” pathway, carries information about the movement of the object in space: where the object is located.”

So the memorist, following best practices, would walk to a real location, and proceed to create an imaginary object in that place. By doing so, he was creating a parallel “where” pathway that would help lead him back to his memory object, firmly situated on the “what” pathway. Because the object was imagined, it would have no “where” pathway from the real world to distract him from relocating it later on. He essentially isolated it from its real world function to maximize its potential in the mind. When it came time to recount his object from memory, he would have both the “what” and the “where” pathways to lead him there.

The ideal conditions for memorization included the proper lighting, adequate, so as not to be too dim and hard to see the details of the memory objects, but not too bright so that there would be strong shadows that could also hide details. It was best to be familiar with the building, but not overly attached to it emotionally, and to visit it in the early evening, when it was still light, but wasn’t being used by other people, who could also be a distraction from the work at hand. For the dedicated builder, the palaces of memory offered an impossible promise – the complete structuring of human knowledge, an organization of mind resistant to human fallibility, total recall, to stave off forgetting. Today, technology offers the potential for limitless memory storage and it is even being used by some to create artificial memory palaces with utopian ideals similar to memorists. Computer systems are constructed through the creation of information architecture, pathways and locales as repositories for data, the built extension of the memory palace. Just as with the memory palaces, these systems are designed to defeat forgetting, to foster total recall. But the question arises, what is being forsworn in the adoration of recalled memory? Is there a similarly valid purpose of forgetting, how do the two interact, and if we have a clear and historic picture of the architecture of memory, how can we imagine the architecture of forgetting?

Yates’ archival work brought the art of memory as practiced for centuries back into popular discourse. She noted that at the time of publishing her work that, “There is no modern book in English on the history of the art of memory and very few books or articles on it in any language.” Memory palaces had faded into memory, like old memory technology – spools of wire, magnetic tape, or floppy disks. The books and diagrams were arcane and unreadable, the contents obscured. Because the principal work was done

in the mind, very few examples of actual memory objects were recorded– each individual was expected to create their own images, just as we organize our own computer files and bookshelves. So the solution to forgetting for centuries was nearly forgotten – it was subject to a technical obsolescence as it was replaced by the widespread mass publishing of books. During the decline of the practice, memorists, in fact, very quickly became objects of ridicule, seen as anachronistic throwbacks capable of only this kind of rote memory work, as recounted by Jonathan D. Spence in *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, the biography of one of the last of the memorists. The criticism leveled at them was that all they did was memorize, which was not achieving the higher order of mind – thought. By externalizing memory in books, relying upon printed reference material to take the place of the memory palace, the thinker was free to concentrate on associations, conclusions, insights – the true measure of thinking. The enormous and time-consuming work of constructing memory palaces could be replaced with higher forms of thinking.

Interestingly, Yates was the first to "save" the memory palace from the oblivion of history. No major work had brought the memory palace to the modern era, it had been made so obsolescent by books that the books which described, documented and taught its methodology had themselves become obsolete. But as thinkers on memory from Plato to Derrida have argued, nothing is ever truly forgotten, a trace always remains, however faint. Yates found the traces and pulled them together into the light for the first time in the modern era. This is reminiscent of the fear of losing data saved on old computer technology, like floppy discs. The technology of books did not, until Yates, reliably preserve the old methods of memory for the modern age – as books supplanted the system they also erased it.

Can we anticipate computers erasing books, and the memory of books? True devotees of the computer, such as Gordon Bell, who will be discussed later, have little time for books. Google, in collaboration with libraries around the world, is digitizing books at an incredible rate. The online bookseller, Amazon, is helping to make the form obsolete by marketing the digital equivalent, the Kindle, which is their improvement on the technology of books. Film for photography is rapidly being done away with. Before it was forced into bankruptcy in 2012, the giant of photographic film production, Kodak, suddenly ceased making the majority of its films, and even its once next generation improvement, Polaroid, died, though it was reborn under the name "The Impossible Project." Of course film, compared to books, hasn't had a very long history, and Polaroid film had even less, so its obsolescence is easily accelerated. Technology "forgets" its predecessor,

until it is necessary to reactivate the trace. So why is it now necessary to remember the memory palaces? Perhaps because the new memory storage of computers is so visually oriented that the visual will dominate text, as in memory palaces. Even the indexing of computers is a mix of visual and textual referents, a balance between differentiated icons and the text labels affixed to them.

Compared to books, which minimized the visual referents, this is a big shift back toward the presence and importance of the visual in memory palaces. Images were greatly reduced in importance in "serious" books, to being merely illustrations supplementing the written text. Until recently, as visual elements have gradually returned in some forms where they have been completely absent, almost by definition. Think of literary fiction – even tenuous interruptions of the text with loaded symbols like Kleist's dash in "The Marquise von O.," or Faulkner's conspicuous gap in the text of his novel *As I Lay Dying*, to the more potent use of the tiny coffin icon later on in the book received critical attention. These visual referents push the definition of reading into another level of perception, symbolized meaning that is not just read, but seen, in order to implant meaning through a nonverbal vehicle, one that packs in meaning with greater density, that expands into thought at a higher ratio of page real estate to insight than the single letter it replaces. More recently, the use of photographs was to be found in the "fiction" of such writers as W.G. Sebald and Jonathan Safran Foer. Not only did they violate the established literary norm of leaving the visual to verbal description alone, the visual elements undercut the validity of the fiction as fiction, with the veracity of a photograph which serves as proof of the existence of the narrated events, creating an unresolvable contradiction between the "truth" of the photo and the "fiction" of the text. The introduction of images suggests a failure of language to impart the narrative in its entirety. For these authors, words are no longer enough, the photographs are a necessary addition that work in conjunction, and in contradiction, to further the meaning of the story.

Computers began as counting machines then rapidly evolved into the greatest generators of visual imagery ever invented by man. The role of text is being challenged by the visual in computers, though text is the language that builds the pictures, it is framing itself out of the picture, so that only programmers and not users, the bulk of the population that come into contact with it, ever see the underlying text. The traditional instrument of writing, the pen, exists in relation to the computer solely as a visual tool, not to generate text, but like a conductor's wand to orchestrate movement and arrangement, to navigate through objects and doorways into information

storage units. If the pen was originally an extension of the finger writing in the sand, the computer stylus takes the place of hands and feet, to navigate and manipulate on a larger scale than individual words and letters.

Functions such as search have been experimentally reinvented as a visual interface, as seen on file display on Macintosh OS X Version 10.5 and forward, and Top Sites multi-page display beginning with Mac's Safari 4, where users select from images of the pages they are looking for instead of reading descriptions of them. Even a tool created for the profusion of language, the thesaurus, has been reimagined as a visual space where words hang like planets in a visual galaxy that illustrates connections in meaning, like on visualthesaurus.com.

> Images are meant to render the world accessible and imaginable to man. But, even as they do so, they interpose themselves between man and the world. They are meant to be maps, and they become screens. Instead of pre-senting the world to man, they re-present it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced. He no longer deciphers them, but projects them back into the world "out there" without having deciphered them. The world becomes image-like, a context of scenes and situations. This reversal of the function of images may be called "idolatry," and we can't currently see how this comes about: omnipresent technical images have begun magically to restructure "reality" into an image-like scenario. What is involved here is a kind of oblivion. Man forgets that he produces images in order to find his way in the world; he now tries to find his way in images. He no longer deciphers his own images, but lives in their function. Imagination has become hallucination.
> "Towards a Philosophy of Photography"
> Vilém Flusser, p. 2

Flusser ranks the invention of the camera, the reproducible or what he calls technical image, as a fundamental turning point in the history of mankind that he argues is as significant as the invention of writing. We are witnessing the transformation of the world, a shift away from the primacy of the word, to a new balance between word and image, or one of primacy of the image. He anticipated the computer's adoption of increasingly visual functionality, and its hallucinatory filtration of the world, reframing and distorting in invisible ways. He critiques our inability to decipher or "read" the images we surround ourselves with. Image forms do not always lend themselves to reading – they move with such velocity and volume that we cannot "see" them, actively, especially without training and working to do so. Slavoj Žižek teaches the reading of films, an infectious and insidious method that forces subtexts to the surface, pointing out the meaning behind the meaning that is stated or implied. He argues that films are all propaganda for a hidden

agenda of the culture that produces them, inculcating the passive audience, reinforcing their consumption of the imagery and message, building an audience for themselves. In "Pervert's Guide to Cinema" he wishes for a magic pill that will allow him to turn the film into a text that can be read, isolated to a clear meaning, rather than left in its ambiguous and misleading form that intermixes the verbal and visual. Without the pill, we can't, and don't read the film, but the hidden message is inscribed nonetheless. In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri state that you can create your own subjectivity, or it can be created for you, externally, by cultural factors. Flusser would call this creating functionaries for the apparatus, as the cultural object inculcates the viewers in the mindset of the culture, so that the cultural apparatus can survive, thrive and grow. He argues that what he calls the apparatus, be it on the micro scale of a camera or the macro scale of the institution, needs users to continue to exist.

By expanding its capability, being more accommodating, and simplifying the interface for the user, it increases both the number of its users and the dependence of its users on its function. Hence the "masters" of the device, someone who picks up and learns to use a camera, become the "functionaries" of the apparatus, following the rules the apparatus has programmed into it and helping it grow and adapt to become indispensable to the user. The camera as apparatus has succeeded to such an extreme degree that they have penetrated our telephones, our computers, our public and private spaces in a collective panopticon where people have cameras with them or on them much of the time. Language is not to be believed, only image – proof is provided in photographs, it is brought closer, a more authentic communication, describing your child is insufficient, you must show a photo, even though there is a certain anonymity to the snapshot because of the endless repetition of other images that it represents. Your baby photo could be any baby photo, but having no baby photo is to have a hole in your past. Films succeed as capitalism because of the simultaneity of the political and economic system, selling images so as to buy addicted audiences for further images. Political expansions are market expansions, and cultural exports are spies bent on converting non-believers, proselytizing through the glamorous appeal of its imagery. There is a danger of forgetting the world beyond the images, of the world that the images filter by interposing themselves between the viewer and the world, not as windows, but as screens. The screens create a distorting filter Flusser mentions, so looking at the film of a ritual one thinks they are seeing the ritual, not the artifice which can never communicate what the ritual did, especially not until the image has not been first read as image in all of its artifice of construction. How did the picture get made, by whom

and why? What was prepared, altered, or edited for the audience's consumption?

Documentary is riddled with fictions that it may or may not be possible to identify. Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss' encyclopedic "Visible World" project illustrates the seeing of the whole world without seeing anything beyond the banality and ubiquity of the "sights." They have assembled thousands of images of "attractions" from around the globe, shot in the most picturesque possible framing, a clichéd and iconic view that is not representative of any individual seeing, though the tourist photo stands as a badge of evidence of just that – it states "I have seen this place, I have been there, shared in its history, its significance, its uniqueness." It is a survey of the world as a flat, endless series of sight sites, which can be visited and consumed serially with a checklist in hand, like the popular book *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. Could the lust for tourism be a desire to make one's architecture global, even if it is just made up of corridors of experience snaking from tourist attraction to tourist attraction around the world? When we experience a place as a visitor, walking through in a bubble of financial protection, visiting the locale through only a privileged gaze, are we more present than when we study the reality of the inhabitants in researched data? Can we know a place more through information than experience? The two scenarios rival one another, of course a combination is necessary for the deepest experience, but are you cognizant of the cooperation of knowledge and perception as you move through any environment? Does the technology you employ enhance your understanding, or screen it? Watching a place through a video camera can be an active or a passive experience – you may not be able to see beyond the viewfinder, passively relinquishing your own perception for the total memory offered by the camera, anticipating replaying the tape later, sharing your "memory" of this expanded architecture when you are back home.

Flusser points to our inability to read images as the problem, but then goes on to discuss images' non-linear requirements for reading – text can be read because it is based in concept – though deconstruction demonstrates how difficult and ambiguous any read can be – if we can't read every reference and permutation of reading in words, how can we read images, which are not as systematically or logically based, if for no other reason than the fact that at least every word in the English language can be reduced to its letters? Even if it is not possible to understand words in their entirety, at least they have a predilection for being read (or misread, which is still a reading), where images are fundamentally to be seen, and doesn't the reading of them require an imposition of language? Can we read images as images, and then

present images that interpret and clarify them? Art is possessed of the capability, but often requires the addition of words for a more concrete and directed interpretation. Images are fundamentally ambiguous, though they can be at least partially explained. And words are fundamentally explicit, though they can be (and generally are) ambiguous?

Changes in the conception and application of technology have brought about conditions of greater mobility, which can shift a certain sense of stability towards a greater inclination for movement. An effect of this shift has been the beginnings of a move from the stability of place to the transience of position. As a result, some of the qualities that resided in place are carried by the mover, which causes changes in perception, as well as a feeling of being untethered. If memory is associated with anchoring, with stability, repetition and certainty, it can also be seen as a denial of death, a desperate attempt to totalize and preserve individual identity. The practice of arduously constructing a system for memory, even total memory, has persevered throughout history, in particular in our institutions of higher learning, even as technology has shifted, obliterating earlier systems as it proposes more dependable replacements. Even in its newest manifestation, an endless hard drive of sensory data, it remains futile, its ultimate goal of a mastery of mind a dangerous fallacy.

The current shift in history that we are witnessing takes logocentrism to a new stage, incorporating imagery to a greater degree, creating a hybrid that changes the strict linearity of reading, and increasing the presence of elements that must be read differently, or that resist reading and comprehension altogether. Technology offers the possibility of not reading, of instead trusting in its operation and function, and accepting the information it provides as a replacement to the difficult struggle of reading and trying to extract understanding. It promotes a tipping point away from thought, where memory is supplanted or indistinguishable from information, where the two are continuously streaming in, forcing an acceleration of release, effortlessness, acceptance. As the volume and velocity rises, the ease of release becomes ever more seductive. To remain engaged and aware, the stable dwelling of self can be reconceived as a craft, a navigable vessel that is not merely afloat, but symbiotically intermingled with the context it moves through. The context sweeps up, over and through the vessel – the dwelling does not offer a sense of isolating refuge, but it is charged, led and fed by the movement. Perception then needs to become as dynamic as the environment itself, one can never be misled by notions of mastery, but must struggle to pay equal attention to that which is perceived and that which is not, the presences and absences, the contours of a situation or object of

encounter. We cannot await a complete picture, but we can strive for a sense of the effect of that which we cannot perceive. Attention can radiate outward, effectively extending the individual's personal architecture, without endeavoring to become a structure of control or mastery, but as an outgrowth of thought and awareness, consideration and even momentary illumination. This is an attempt at describing an architecture of forgetting. Curating organizational memory means considering the re-formation of our organizations, and the possibility of even creating new organizations altogether to incorporate this new architecture. New ages often result in necessary art forms to engage with the particulars of the time, an art of forgetting is considered here in response to our present conditions, one that is formed within a new kind of organization. As an effort to demonstrate one potential form for this new organizations, and by extension strategies for thinking about them in broader application, we could experiment by blurring the line between fiction and documentation and form an organization within the pages of this book. This is the sensibility from which the Academy of Forgetting is born.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ACADEMY OF FORGETTING

The ongoing radical changes affecting our educational institutions are, from a practical point of view, brought about by digital technology and interconnectivity. To reconsider the nature of a particular kind of architecture, that of an institution of higher learning, the term "architecture" should not be limited to encompassing the form and function of a physical building, but rather to the overall structure of the institution, its operations, intents, its population and the interactions it facilitates. Then, applying the potentials and problematics of an experimental, theoretical "architecture" to the institution of higher learning at a time of monumental shift in purpose, function, even essence, it is possible to imagine how technology and innovation manifest our innate desire, as an outward expression of our essential inner drive. It is not invention that allows us to innovate, but instinct that leads us to manifest extensions of our id as we shape and build out our reality. In a simple example, toy automobiles are instantly recognized and adored by infants because an essential extension of our being has been manifest in their form and function. They exist because they are what we want. We continue to elaborate technological systems to store and index the memory of our learning, discovery and knowledge base, so how can we speculate that our institutions of learning will be shaped as our desire comes to fruition?

Traditionally, institutions of higher learning are institutions of memory. Following Augustine's model, they storehouse the learning and thinking of their faculty, researchers and students. They build libraries and art collections and databases and archives, recording and gathering knowledge in every format and variety, in every subject and classification. From lectures, seminars and symposia, to lab results and experiments, to articles, journals, anthologies and encyclopedia, they generate new material for their field and their peers, broadening the body of literature. In fact, the global rating systems of universities awards points based on research, citations, publications and awards, not instruction or its results. They index their accumulated data, they analyze it, they write about it and publish it in newly digested formats and feed that back into the storehouse of institutional

memory, broadening and reinforcing the foundations that they stand on and stand for as institutions.

Increasingly, however, all of that data, that accumulated institutional memory, is becoming distributed. In a shift from being centered in institutions of higher learning, it is being shared, reproduced, and is accessible online. The great libraries of rare and obscure documents are opening to the wave of new, searchable media, being digitized and made available, not just to those deemed eligible for access by the institution, but in more and more cases to all, to anyone interested in delving into the near limitless quantities and directions of every field as it has been explored and as it actively expands its boundaries. As resources and even daily classes are opened to unaffiliated, outside viewers, institutions are defining their policies as to how to administer the access and distribution of the accumulation of knowledge they have built for themselves and their formerly closed populations.

Our institutions of higher learning accumulate memory because they mirror society, reflecting our ever more powerful impulse to record everything and have it on hand, indexed and searchable, not subject to the wiles and variables of human memory, as when all history was oral. We feel increasingly compelled to record every shred of information in hard storage, in every evolving media moving from the printed word and picture to rich digital data of text, image and audio, extending our senses beyond experience into a framework aiding and aiming for total recall.

The Academy of Forgetting is an experiment in representation, exploring an institution of higher learning that does not pursue the dream of constant total recall. Rather than harnessing and accessing the limits of stored memory, it asks: why are we so afraid to forget? We know we are operating in a sea of archived memory, where all of the knowledge and information that we continue to accumulate and record far surpasses anyone's capacity to engage with it, so rather than struggle and drown in our endless sea of storage, what would happen if we cut ourselves off from institutional memory, allowed the flow of information to lapse, and waited to see what happens, to study and explore and accept the moment of forgetting? If, as Werner Hamacher argues, forgetting is the most extreme form of consciousness, is it possible to cultivate and then occupy the space of the extreme? Can we learn from such a precarious position?

Formulating the Academy, or any institution, on paper, rather than in practice, can be compared to pictorial representation, and it can be argued

that assembling a patchwork is a necessary approach. In "De Inventione," Cicero tells the story of a renowned painter, named Zeuxis, who is commissioned by the people of Croton to portray the embodiment of beauty, an institution in itself. The solution Zeuxis arrives at, after considering as models the many beautiful young women of the city that are presented to him, is an assemblage. He requires the features of five different women to make a single portrait, in order to approach a representation of Helen, who was considered the ideal of beauty. Cicero's point is that perfection does not exist except in our ability to assemble it from disparate real examples. Only by combining optimal instances of perfection in the material world can we come close to satisfying the ideal whole in our minds. He is writing about the art of speaking, and his lesson serves to illustrate his point that the traits of many different speakers must be adopted to approach an idea of perfection. Once the exemplary idea is assembled in thought, it must play out in reality, where it will again be incomplete. The writing of an institution stops an entity that if it were in existence would necessarily be in motion, and imperfect. A moment of incomplete stasis is essential in order to represent it, much like a painting, which Cicero calls a "mute representation." The different sections of this work are an effort to assemble a dynamic picture of a system in motion, not a system that is total, complete or monolithic. That movement is uncertain, at times contradictory, even unclear, but striving, like thought. In her extended study of the myth, Elizabeth Mansfield points out that Zeuxis is neither able to conceive of the ideal form without a model, nor can he confirm the existence of a model in the real work. However, he needs the ideal to exist, so he assembles it from the parts supplied. As she says, "Mimetic art… promises mastery but sows doubt."

What is an Anti-Institution?

Rather than establishing a form, the effort here is to formulate an anti-form, in fact an anti-institution with the specific function of sowing doubt, the details of that notion will be explored in greater depth further on. In general, the anti-form encourages the assembly of fragments that, contrary to Cicero's advice, do not coalesce into a whole, and are not parts of a complete system. The work of Georges Bataille can be studied as a way of understanding the establishment and particular strengths of anti-form. Seeking a position against the growing popularity of dictatorial leadership that threatened Europe, Bataille presented the "headless" and anti-hierarchical figure born of a spontaneous portrait of him drawn by Andre Masson. "Bataille criticised the Surrealists as hierarchical, and hierarchy is

of course the hall-mark of the fascist organization." The headless figure and the anti-hierarchical notion it embodied was reflected in his anti-aesthetic, anti-art journal Documents, and later in his secret society and art journal, both called Acéphal – the French for headless. In each venue he assails art as a mirror aiding man's self admiration, and the art journal as the vehicle which captures that ecstasy. So he made a practice of using the form to attack the form – an art journal that is an assault on art and art journals. This reflexive act plays out in the larger context of a countercultural move towards dissembling, by establishing a voice within the cultural dialogue. The platform of an academic journal remains accessible to only a limited public, but it also serves to record his critique of the broader structures of government and popular social movements that threaten society as a whole, especially when studied after the fact. He is protesting from a small pulpit, but speaking to larger issues. An implicit admiration of the vehicle underpins the effort, so that by creating an anti-journal in his case, or an anti-institution art academy as this work undertakes, the model is both vaunted and assailed.

So it is with *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, Bataille's "headless" encyclopedia: it works against the form it adopts, it does not encapsulate or explain – it is an encyclopedia of undercutting, not establishing, meaning. He also called it a critical dictionary, but he does not purport to define the words, but rather wishes to more powerfully "allow them to operate." "[Bataille] was convinced that thought, by its very nature, was unable to cast even a dim light upon those essential problems of life that he wished to explore." The encyclopedia, assembled from different authors and at first published serially as almost a separate magazine within the pages of Documents, guides a sensibility that does not seek to limit the world into explicable entries, but as a reflection of the headless, unthinking figure, "unaware of prohibition," which discovers and accepts itself as a monster – driven by base impulses. Bataille responds to the predominant fascist system of overwhelming power, momentum and disruption by creating an unstable foundation, a basis of parts with multiple definitions that lack coherence and unity, rabidly pursuing their own contrary agendas. The articles seem arbitrary, yet continually approach similar themes of structure, language, the body, and institution. His complex anti-system continued to evolve over years of writing and thinking, without ever becoming coherent, due to his acknowledgment of a philosophy, or perhaps even an ontology of contradiction, one that cannot and will not be resolved.

The book itself has spawned other writing and thought in similar bursts – a single article or even a phrase within that article has the potential to generate

a new body of work. Take, for example, the entry "Formless." Called the core text of the work as it is a critique of the concept of a dictionary itself, it is just a few short sentences that aim to unravel large systems. "Formless" captures an idea that two contemporary art historians, Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois, argue is definitive of an entire, unacknowledged current in modernist artistic expression. Their resulting book, and the large-scale group exhibition which serves as the book's demonstration, takes the thematic lead from Bataille's notion, but also the structure of an encyclopedia or dictionary. Formless, as Bataille lays it out, dissolves definitions and classification as an act. It is an impulse which has no rights and perennially finds itself attacked and destroyed. It is an undoing that must be rubbed out for form to exist. As academics, which Bataille defines as those fighting to find a categorical form for all of the universe, Krauss and Bois are assigning it exactly the task he says the term undoes: classification. They strive to classify remaindered and neglected artworks, unexplained asides in otherwise highly scrutinized oeuvres, to find a place for them in modern art history and a context for their function, and the resonance of the impulse that leads to their creation, which Krauss and Bois spent over a decade identifying, documenting and interpreting in the formulation of the work. Bataille wants to put words to work, given the jobs that he describes for them. In his definition they are not vessels of meaning, they are functional objects. Bois and Krauss acknowledge that their own dictionary, inspired by Bataille's, which explores the concepts underlying the formless impulse in artmaking, is more conventional. They acknowledge that it follows the alphabet, but not that it has classification at its heart, which it does.

Appropriately, they are using Bataille against himself, or at least Bataille's term against the definition he gave it, to continue to play the game of modernism, but by changing the rules, and fracturing its unity from within. This could be argued as an essential strategy to keep the critical power of the contradiction in play. They function within the system of classification that Bataile's formless intends to undo, as a means of further classification, which they call "porous." Their goal is to "perform" the works on display through a new function that allows for new reading, and new associations. They take pains to show how their effort both conforms to and bucks the conventions of art historical structure: they are considering and avoiding trends, applying rules and breaking them.

Without allying themselves to Bataille's reading of terms or even of specific artists, such as Giacometti, a colleague of Bataille, who they take as foundational, they have identified the utility value of his effort in its ability

to cause a tremor within the edifice of art history and the institution that houses it, the museum. "…in putting the formless to work in areas far from its place of origin, in displacing it in order to sift modernist production by means of its sieve, we wanted to start it shaking – which is to say, to shake it up." Bataille has included the museum in his encyclopedia, but he puts the term to work in relation to the public and the city, to the individual experience of art. He addresses what it does to man, not what it does to art. He calls the museum "…the most grandiose spectacle of a humanity freed from material cares and dedicated to contemplation," yet downplays its role in the making of meaning: "the galleries and the objects of art are no more than a container." Bois and Krauss, as art historians and curators, instead are harnessing "formless" to critique the limitations of art history as manifest in the display mechanism of the museum, they create a book that trumps the exhibition, as opposed to creating a catalogue subservient to a show. They aim to recast the past, present, and future of modern art to allow the formless to openly resonate and agitate next to form, which has been given the privileged position and recognition until now. This systematic construct runs contrary to the more freeform approach Bataille put together, as characterized by his biographer:

> "…the texts published here are not straightforward illustrations of one or two of his ideas, but often cover numerous aspects of the totality of his thought, in this respect one might almost look at them as a conflation of philosophical speculation and prose poetry…"

The Academy of Forgetting, similarly, is not the definition of a school so much as a part of the process of thinking how to unmake an institution. Reacting to the crisis of mechanical memory, the accelerating accumulation of information storage and access, the Academy attempts to think of a space of reserve, or interval. Instead of continuing the state of ceaseless function Jonathan Crary describes in his work *24/7*, it proposes "dysfunctions", which highlight the "flaws" of human thinking, the characteristic lapses of recall and lack of information that are the gaps that actually enable thinking. It is also a demonstration of the thought, following the two aphoristic assemblages described above. Just as a student cannot experience an institution in its totality, but rather follows an individual path of exposure through any educational experience, the reader, and the author, come to different realizations and relevancies that illuminate how an anti-institutional structure might appear or reveal itself.