Of Ghosts and Atlases:
Mythopoetics and Historical Perceptions

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Abstract

As a vast photographic tableau of images sourced from antiquity, the Renaissance and early-twentieth-century popular media, Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-29) was a means to formulating a fluid archive of cultural memory. In this exegesis, I show how Warburg’s mosaic of disparate remnants from the past has resonances with the mythopoetic structures that underpin my studio practice. Specifically, I adopt mythopoetics as both a conceptual and methodological strategy, as a vehicle for exploring first-person narratives and their capacity to formulate more defined and meaningful concepts of historical consciousness.

This exegesis examines the archive as a metonymic framework that supports the ebb and flow of narrative context within the historical, cultural and subjective realms. Through references to the nature of the archive outlined in Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1994) and Walter Benjamin’s concept of material history, I discuss the capacity for artefacts to inform both our historical awareness and current everyday experiences. The act of collecting as a mode of seeking out alternate forms of knowing and interpreting the past presents a counter-argument to the need to totalise historical narratives.

Within this context, I draw parallels between the archival projects of Warburg and Benjamin and the contemporary works of W.G. Sebald, Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. Specifically, I investigate how Sebald’s literary works poetically explore the historical structures and practices that continue to give meaning to the every day and consider this in relation to Richter’s photographic archive *Atlas*, (years–ongoing) in which the artist references a mapping of identity through the blending of personal and collective cultural locations. Similarly Kiefer’s artists’ books evidence a conjuncture of first-person narrative and collective history that evokes a continuous liminal transition between present and past experience.

This analysis provides a framework to consider the process of montage-collision, where disparate objects are seen as residues of the past and are reconfigured into new forms, which foregrounds my studio practice. These concepts are visually articulated through a diverse application of printmaking, artists’ books, sculpture and assemblage practices. Through my practice, I explore how the mythopoetic, as concept and method, can blend historical orientation with personal narrative. The series of works created reference a pensive questioning of the relationship between the fragmented evidence of the past and the specific narratives of first-person experience.
Statement

This work has not been previously submitted for a degree or a diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this exegesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Introduction

Mythopoetic Disclosures

In the contemporary world, constructs of identity and the desire to formulate a more complete sense of self through a stronger awareness of historical identity requires a questioning of the relationship between the often marginalised self-narrative and the continued dominance of history as a fixed, progressive narrative. According to James Macdonald (1981) and James Hillman (1983), both personal and collective narratives are inevitably informed and mediated by broader cultural contexts. However, it is often the rationally based and historically founded narratives that dominate the mediation process, creating a sense that self-narratives continuously remain at the periphery of historical descriptions. ‘Mythopoetics’ takes the position that myths operate as a symbolic mode of thought that can bring to bear imagination and intuition as a useable form of knowledge in comprehending an individual’s engagement with life. That is, the poetic form discovered through the blending of personal narratives with such myths allows the individual to gather a better understanding of their every day experience of the world. As Macdonald explains:

Broadly speaking, insights, images, and imaginative (or speculative) symbolizations are created as possible meaning structures. These meaning structures are however created as much or more by the concrete and practical experience of the participant in relation to the symbols, as they are in the coherence of the symbolic structure itself. The process of self-reflection in this case is the reflection upon the self, not reflection on the theory in a critical theory mode. (Macdonald 1981, 135)

Mythopoetics, providing a counter voice to empirical-based enquiry, is an expressive methodology for conveying the personal nature of the mythic as a source of knowledge. As a narrative-forming structure that helps comprehend the past through a process of open dialogue with the present, mythopoetics intrinsically involves searching within the marginal realms of both the personal and the historical. Social theorist James Hillman relays how memory within self-narrative descriptions is more connected with an imaginative landscape:

The only difference between remembering and imagining is that memory images are those to which a sense of time has been added, that curious conviction that they once had happened...Memory infuses images with memorability, making images more real to us by adding to them the sense of time past, giving them historical reality. (Hillman 1983, 41)

This exegesis argues that mythopoetic structures have the potential to assign a cohesive link between the contrary domains of the structured and the rational with the intuitive and the uncertain. Principally, these practices evolved as a method of personal storytelling in order for individuals to acquire a deeper understanding of human connection to the world and as a fundamental way of knowing. The task of mythopoetics is to both discover and create narratives that are capable of defining who we are within the societal and historical narratives presented by our specific culture. What is required for these narratives to resonate beyond simple fantasy or whim is a descriptive structure equivalent to that found within the structure of myth (Leonard 2008).
As a mode of inquiry, mythopoetics is concerned with the creation of self-narratives that provide a means of reinforcing or restoring meaning to the individual’s everyday experience. Its paradigm strategies set aside access to the past that acknowledges the interweaving narratives that unfold between it and the present. Their interconnectedness informs a narrative structure that accepts uncertainty and vagueness in comparison to the seemingly resolved descriptions provided by history. As such, my research considers the question: **How do first-person narratives, informed by mythopoetic paradigms, offer alternative perceptions of the relationship between individual experience and collective history?**

Within my studio practice, mythopoetic methodologies have become the vehicle for investigating first-person narratives and their capacity to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the individual’s relationship to collective history. Articulated through a diverse application of etching, artists’ books, assemblage and installation, my work presents a series of interlocking descriptions that blend historical orientation with personal narrative. The mythopoetic series of works references the enduring tension that exists between history and the personal, between the dispersed fragmented evidence of the past and the specific narratives of the individual.

In recognition of the lasting intrusion of the past within our experience of the present, the mythopoetic project deals with a system of thought that embraces intuitive leaps. Through the conflation of self-narrative and collective history, the mythopoetic outcome is one that will inevitably embrace the instability that lingers within the construction of a poetics of history that ebbs and flows. Within the context of the mythopoetic-as-paradigm-for-self-narrative, it is important to consider a pivotal feature within mythopoetic constructs: the concept of liminal space.

Liminality is an experience of time and space that relates to conditions of transition and potential transformation. The term, described by Arnold Van Genne’s (1960) analyses of the rites of passage in tribal-based societies, is defined by three phases—separation, margin and aggregation which he titled ‘liminal’, from the Latin *limen*, meaning ‘threshold’. This made reference to the transitional space between separation and reunion, where perceptions of a certain identity of self were fractious and a new sense of self-narrative was emerging. The English poet Keats made reference to a parallel liminal space in describing the need to embrace a particular state of uncertainty, mystery and doubt, which he termed ‘negative capability’ (MacKay 2004, 191).

In this context, liminal encounters relate to stages of transition where the individual recognises that stories from the past arrive at a point of having become devoid of meaning in everyday life, however this provides a space where more significant self-narratives can be conceived. The ascribing of liminal space within mythopoetic accounts is significant to my research in providing a platform for exploring personal narratives that encounter the liminal through their engagement with broader historical descriptions. A number of outcomes from my studio practice rely upon the notion of liminality, as the viewer is brought to a point of reflection where juxtaposed disparate elements create a threshold of indeterminate meanings.

The concept of liminal space is also manifest in my studio outcomes through the very act of collecting. The gathering of ephemeral materials and objects and the dynamic of engaging with the past and with loss are inextricably bound to melancholia and the liminal’s transitional space. This inescapable element does not allow for any greater access to understanding the objects, but rather,
as Schwenger reflects, “When objects from the past are re-presented to a viewing public as a new and strange thing of wonder they come to occupy a liminal space” (2005, 57).

In order to understand how the transitional spaces of self-narrative and collective history can be represented through a constellation of imagery, I will examine the significant archiving projects of Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, W.G. Sebald and Gerhard Richter. Drawing on the writing of Jacques Derrida, I argue that the archive facilitates an intersection between individual and collective remembrance. The concept of the archive, and the role that the remnant object plays as a sensor in formulating self-narratives in the context of a collective past, will be explored through a discussion of cartographic elements and the postcard-as-souvenir. Both the map and the postcard, as archival objects from the modernist colonial past, provide evidence of an experience of place that was immersed in a European nostalgia and longing for the need to connect with place. Within the context of my studio practice, the archival system attempts to map an understanding of the relationship between notions of a collective history and self-narrative. The archive is significant to mythopoetic understanding since the material remnants, in the form of photographic albums, letters, postcard collections and compilations of objects and ephemera, provide an immediate blending of self-narrative with historical descriptions.

This study is significant in providing a framework for the blend of personal narrative and collective history that is capable of informing a deeper understanding of the ebb and flow of the past and its relentless sway within the present. By entering into historiographic discourse, mythopoetics has the affect of creating a more transparent view of the past that gives way to a new social consciousness towards historical events.

To adequately explore the theoretical and contextual underpinnings of my studio research, the discussion will be dispersed across four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of Aby Warburg’s engagement with the image archive through *The Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) as well as Walter Benjamin’s conception of the archive as the similar convergence of self-narrative and historical consciousness. I contend that both projects engage with mythopoetic constructs.

Warburg’s vast photographic archive represents a study in iconology of the inter-generational migration of gestures and symbols; it juxtaposed photographic images of artworks from antiquity and the Renaissance with images from early-twentieth-century popular media sources. His tableau of reproductions in its uncompleted form consisted of almost 2,000 images from paintings, posters, sports illustrations, stamp albums and newspaper cut-outs. As an archive of hieroglyphic remainders of the past that continued to exist as historical intrusions within the present, Warburg’s atlas of images presented a methodology of metaphor and free association that similarly underpins my studio practice. Essential to his intentions was the notion of *Denkraum*, or ‘thought space’, which represented the experience of a reflective contemplative space that transpired within the viewer as they engaged with artworks. This thought space experience was conceived as a doorway that allowed for a symbolic identification or awakening. This is a parallel concept to mythopoetics’ association with liminal space.

Similarly, Benjamin’s concept of the archive differs from the principles of order, unity and effectiveness that institutionalised archives embrace. For Benjamin, what the archival object provided was not so much a mediation, but a collision, between history and self-narrative. Benjamin’s method of working was informed by archival practices through his collecting, cataloguing
and construction of ideas. In a fashion, his muse was the incidental within the archive where the details and fragments connected to form distinctive narratives. In regards to collecting, he was never overly interested in the utilitarian value of objects or their exactness. For Benjamin, those objects and artefacts consigned to human history through a natural unfolding of time arrive at a point of being silenced as their usefulness is diminished. This transitional exchange between nature and history, of time altering and exhausting the historical life of objects, sees the artefact transformed into a ruin.

For Benjamin, the natural history of all things points to a primary characteristic of human experience, namely that the symbolic forms in and through that life are seemingly ordered are gradually hollowed out to eventually reach a point where their essence is depleted. This collapse into material history and exhaustion of the artefact’s life allows for the possible emergence of a series of ‘enigmatic signifiers’ (Santer 2006, 17), functioning like hieroglyphs that continue to direct and inform our present lives. It is a similar convergence of self-narrative and historical consciousness through the archival artefact as a poetic and often understated reference that foregrounds the conceptual framework for the outcomes of my studio practice.

Chapter 2 will explore how the archive can articulate both self-narrative and collective history through a discussion of W.G. Sebald’s literary works and Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1968–ongoing). Here I describe how Sebald’s recurring motif of collections that enter his characters’ blend of self-narrative and historiographic reflections act as indicators of the past and its palimpsest trace that continue to affect a disquiet apprehension between the personal and the collective. A discussion of Richter’s vast photographic collection *Atlas* explores the artist’s collapsing of self-narrative within the historical collective through an essentially mythopoetic methodology that continually suspends the engagement with any fixed narrative structure.

As I will show, in Sebald’s literary works, an enduring tension between the collective and the personal remains essentially unresolved. His narrators and characters often engage with collections and archives that provide a catalyst for reflecting upon the ambiguous nature of history and to question its continual totalising influence. Through the collision of narrative with found and often manipulated photographs, Sebald’s narrative project brings the reader’s attention to the immersion in the cast-off debris continually surrounding our lives, where the marginalised figure frequently remains in a state of dislocation. Sebald uses these references of collections and archives to reflect on the continued determining impact within our contemporary lives of structures set in place centuries ago. For Sebald, such systems continue to hold sway by controlling modes of interpreting the past and managing the attention of the spectator.

The material references in the form of photographs and newspaper clippings in Richter’s *Atlas* mediate and articulate associations between self-narratives and references to collective history that continuously remain in a state of flux. The tableau of images references a mode of remembrance that is a hybridised form of historical reflection as the boundaries between memory, self-narrative and fiction become increasingly blurred. In its immersive format, Richter’s *Atlas* often reveals a filtering and slow siphoning of alliance between place, history and self-identity. Mythopoetics’ embrace of an open narrative form is evidenced in Richter’s montage of images that forms correlations with Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* and its flux of restrained associations within its iconography.
Chapter 3 provides a discussion of Anselm Kiefer’s early artists’ books, reinforcing the concept that self-narratives developing within geographical sites are capable of informing the synthesis of history and self-narrative to a more profound level than mere memory. This is particularly evident in the materiality of Kiefer’s artworks where all of these elements—history, self-narrative, place and memory—are interchangeable. Self and place are constituted through layers of history as well as through interactions with the constantly evolving veils of time and space in the present. Like Benjamin, Kiefer is constantly inquisitive about the residual of material resources, searching for their foundations and origins; what Benjamin described as ‘rebus’.

In Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of my studio project, which attempts to explore the sway of history’s often unrestrained view of the past through the intervention of marginal responses manifest in mythopoetic-based self-narratives. The fragmentary associations evoked within both Warburg’s and Benjamin’s methodology of montage-collision underpins the collective response within my studio outcomes. Several of the outcomes reference the tableau format of both Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas and Richter’s Atlas, which establish liminal spaces that reference Warburg’s concept of Denkraum. A series of altered and hand-bound artists’ books that engage collage, etching and fragmentary diaristic notations endeavour to disassemble the fixed narrative status of the codex book form as a referencing of the mythopoetic’s design of collapsing traditional narrative structures.

Assemblage and wall installation outcomes that are each sub-titled ‘object-poems’ act as a catalyst for exploring the mythopoetic’s embrace of liminal space. The poetic reference within the titles of these works reinforces the underpinning of an ambiguity created through the bringing together of disparate objects in an attempt to invoke poetic disclosures.
Chapter 1

The Mnemosyne Atlas, Archive Narratives and Poetic Logic

This chapter will discuss art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas (1924–29), and its correlations with mythopoetic methodologies. Warburg’s creation, a photographic collection of images sourced from antiquity, the Renaissance and early-twentieth-century popular media, traced the inter-generational migration of images of primitive symbols and gestures, or pathos formulae. The concept of Denkraum or ‘thought space’ was vital to Warburg’s creation of this disparate archive of cultural memory. This space of contemplation created within Warburg’s methodology of metaphor is relevant to my project as it mirrors the mythopoetic’s connection with liminal space where past and present narratives reach a point of suspension and detachment.

In order to draw correlations between the montage effects generated in the Mnemosyne Atlas and my studio practice, I present a discussion of Warburg’s concept of ‘engrams’ as a form of symbolic visual shorthand, capable of initiating an instinctive primal response. The fragmentary nature of the Atlas project that resists deep semiotic associations also reflects the mythopoetic’s embrace of intuitively based narrative structures.

As a metonymic framework, the archive allows for the ebb and flow of narrative context within the historical, cultural and subjective. The archive’s fundamental nature will be outlined through reflecting on Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever and Walter Benjamin’s gathering of narrative fragments from material history as the basis for a nonlinear historiography. Metaphor and poetic logic are central to a mythopoetic comprehension of our first-person experience of the world. Drawing on the writing of Carolyn Steedman and Gaston Bachelard, this chapter will also present an analysis of poetic reasoning and its capacity to provide a concrete mode of interpreting narrative structures that, within a mythopoetic context, are often stripped of their cultural framework.

The Mnemosyne Atlas and Denkraum’s Space of Contemplation:

Warburg’s study of iconography was a means to formulate a history of the psychology of human expression. Through an idiosyncratic and unorthodox methodology, he embarked on a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary study of art from antiquity, the Renaissance and early-twentieth-century media. Warburg’s journey to New Mexico in 1895 to observe the rituals of the Hopi Indians furnished insights into the way that symbols function within our cultural and historical consciousness as well as providing one of the essential experiences that informed his creation of the enigmatic Mnemosyne Atlas (Fig. 1) (Johnson 2012). The last of Warburg’s unfinished scholarly projects, the Atlas consisted of twelve wooden tableau panels covered with black cloth on which were pinned almost 2,000 graphic reproductions of images from prints, paintings, personal photographs, newspaper clippings, posters, stamps, sports illustrations and illuminated manuscripts.
His montage-collision of images was to become a method for connecting the primitive and the modern within a fluid “archive of memory” passed on within Western culture from antiquity to the present day (Schama 1996, 212). In his analysis of the ambiguous reading of Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the art historian Ernst Gombrich asserts:

> For where there is no clear gulf separating the material, visible world from the sphere of spirit and of spirits, not only the various meanings of the word “representation” may become blurred but the whole relationship between image and symbol assumes a different aspect...Warburg described as “Denkraumverlust” this tendency of the human mind to confuse the sign with the thing signified, the name and its bearers, the literal and the metaphorical, the image and its prototype...Our language, in fact, favours this twilight region between the literal and the metaphorical. (Gombrich cited in Johnson 2012, 56)

As well as the concept of *Denkraum*, fundamental to Warburg was his philosophical view of what was essential for any society in developing a meaningful cultural and historical awareness. The existence of this deep reflective ‘thinking space’ was a crucial element for the work of art and for that experience to be transposed within the viewer (Stewart 2010). Warburg believed that, as a historical collection of symbolic forms, art has always provided the spaces in which humans signify their emergence from the embryonic state, similar to the memory images created by children and primitive cultures as a means of defence against the natural world. Warburg conceived of the ‘pathos formulas’ as those residues of reality and the embryonic state that provided a prompt or “door to the *Denkraum* in which symbolic identification originally occurs” (Stewart 2010, 101).
Warburg’s intention of creating the reflective thought space of *Denkraum* within his atlas of images shares the mythopoetic’s engagement with liminality. In one of his last descriptions of his objectives, Warburg relates:

> The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world may very well be called the foundational act of human civilization; if this liminal space becomes the substrate of artistic creation, then the conditions are fulfilled such that this consciousness of distance can become a lasting social function, whose sufficiency or failure as an instrument of spiritual orientation means even the fate of human culture. (Warburg cited in Johnson 2012, 190)

Warburg’s writing, his library, and *Mnemosyne Atlas* were designed to create and preserve the conceptual space of *Denkraum* that simultaneously carried out a mnemonic function. For Warburg, modernity’s agency rendered the everyday experience of the individual immobile and mimetically inert, presenting a genuine threat to *Denkraum*’s decline. He regarded the encounter with *Denkraum*’s thought space as being essential for the individual overcoming modernity’s tempering of space and distance, where the individual’s body existed in a state that “twitches mimetically” (Stewart 2010, 101). This mimetic inertness imposed on the individual by modernity’s wrecking ball could be overcome through the contemplative space of *Denkraum*.

Warburg aligned *Denkraum* to the emergence of memory images linked to primitive cultures and childhood memory development as a means of internalising the uncertainty of the natural world. What Warburg termed as “phobic reflexes” (Gombrich 1986, 218) were embedded in artworks in union with the works’ “progressive symbolic evolution” (Stewart 2010, 101). Warburg believed that these vacant, embryonic residues of reality were set in place within the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

As a form of “unconscious memory”, the pathos formula was perceived by Warburg as a crucial element in guiding the process of interpretation as well as sustaining *Denkraum*’s metaphoric distance, *Distanz*. Within the details of symbols, the curtain folds, the decorative patterning, facial expressions, the gestures of figures—what Warburg referred to as ‘God in the details’—were all residues of the past that allowed for *Denkraum*’s “mimetic immersion” (Stewart 2010, 102). For Warburg, this meant that the task of interpretation was less a matter of deciphering the meaning of a text and more like an encounter with enigmatic objects that tests the limits of interpretation.

The aim of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* seems to have been to piece together the scattered remnants of historical consciousness. These collections of images are the pieces of a mosaic that are the raw materials for reinterpreting our sense of the past. Benjamin refers to them as fragments, “blasted out of the continuum of history” (Johnson 2012, 59), and, once unchained from that continuum, they are reusable and available for interpretation in the present.

Montage was a significant component in Warburg’s formulation of the concept of *Distanz* by introducing opposites in order to disrupt and to prompt tensions between images, and therefore “between the levels of reality from which these objects proceed” (Michaud 2007, 253). According to Warburg, montage mediates the distancing between the individual and the historical memory that was crucial in allowing *Denkraum*’s thought-space to take hold. Warburg’s montage-like method of thinking formed a foundation for interpretation based on the intonations between images and motifs contained within disparate compositions. He did not regard individual images as contextually...
bound but rather he credited each image with a new manifestation in each new constellation (Johnson 2012). Such constellations were never anchored to one singular system of thought, allowing for a metaphoric gap that mediated between the abstract and the rational.

Warburg’s montage method resonates with my studio practice; acting as a bricoleur, one who gleans the residues of the past to reconfigure new forms, foregrounds the methodology of my ‘mythopoetic’ project. Like Warburg’s efforts to resist a definitive meaning within his Atlas, the underlying composition of the collective narratives that underpin my work rely on the borrowings from other contexts and narrative fragments, which are rearranged to express a tension or a desired resolution that shifts between the psychological and the historical.

**Engram as Memory Trace:**

For the psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875–1961), myth was to be embraced as a mode of readmitting primitive beliefs into social behaviour and familiarity as a means to avoid modernity’s sustained displacement of individual experience (Psychology and Alchemy 1944). Warburg’s disenchantment with the ineffectual rational enquiry of the Enlightenment resulted in his serious regard for myth as a vital element in changing perceptions of historical awareness. Warburg explored the similar processes by which primitive rituals had evolved a symbolic index evident in artworks from antiquity and the Renaissance. Within these codified emblems, Warburg recognised resemblances of Egyptian hieroglyphs. This was to provide the impetus to explore the social and psychological means by which the primal had become redirected in works of art (Russell 2007).

The social psychologist Richard Semon suggests that memory’s purpose lies in its capacity as a mode of temporal transmission and preservation of energy that permits an individual to react to experiences from the past at a distance. For Semon, each experience that affects us in some form bestows upon our memory a trace that he describes as an engram, or “the reproduction of an original event” (Michaud 2004, 255). Warburg tailored this conception of the engram within his Atlas project in order to define the notion of a visual memory trace. As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben explains:

> Engrams are the crystallization of an energetic charge and an emotional experience that survive as an inheritance transmitted by social memory and that, like electricity condensed in a Leyden jar, become effective only through contact with the ‘selective will’ of a particular period. (cited in Johnson 2012, 63)

Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, as a collective of engrams, re-creates similar descriptions within the psyche, where this montage of iconography is a series of reproductions that animate elements of memory’s traces. For Warburg, what corresponded culturally within the concept of the engram was visually evident in the succinct nature of symbols. His recognition of the continuance of these symbolic traces in conjunction with contemporary imagery shaped his exploration of the primal embedded within such forms (Michaud 2004).

In his survey of the psychic corridor between individual identity and the repositories of memory within the landscape, Simon Schama compares Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* to a “gigantic vertical stamp album” (1996, 213). As an avid collector of stamps, together with signs of the zodiac, cosmology and heraldry motifs, Warburg recognised the potential of each of these constructs to
provide access for exploring the primitive within the contemporary. Like Benjamin, Warburg suggested that the residues of the mythic past could provide a more holistic understanding of the present. The significant point that Schama makes in regards to Warburg’s methodology is the thought that these images and their juxtaposition were never conceived of as ephemeral materials. As Schama relates;

He would, I think, have hated the scholarly classification of such things as ephemeral for in Warburg’s mind that is exactly what they were not. They were in fact evidence of longevity, of endurance, of an inescapable haunting. (Schama 1996, 213)

As such, Warburg’s Atlas reinforces the notion that history consigns moments into nothingness, yet they subsist and endure in a subterranean realm with the potential to emerge at some time in the future. The archive provides such an opportunity for objects from the past, either collectively or singularly, to be re-contextualised within the present.

**The Archival Collection and the Self-Narrative**

According to historian Carolyn Steedman, the archive remains emblematic in offering a way of grasping a more complete awareness of the present by accessing the past. As a repository of history’s trace in visual, oral and written form, the archive can be regarded as a tool of memory developed to assist society in both the recovery and recollection of the past. However, the foundation of archives and the associated institutional practices of regulating, cataloguing and attending such records effectively reduce such traces to mere representations of memory. Within this experience, memory is treated as a real and tangible object cut adrift from its original personal and social grasp. As a storehouse of the past, the archive conveys interplays between accounts of the individual and the collective. It also exists as a diverse accumulation of historical traces and the location for exploring the relationship between history, self-narrative and identity (Steedman 2002). This experience of archival recall, its conflation of self-narrative with the collective and its relationship to historical agency, is outlined in the following discussion in order to highlight alternative forms of integrating past narratives within the non-public present.

The current, almost-overwhelming desire people have to formulate a more complete sense of self by searching the past echoes philosopher Jacques Derrida’s interest in Western society’s collective and individual obsession with the desire to discover the beginnings and origins of all that we encounter in the world. In *Archive Fever* (1995), Derrida reflects on such fixations to locate the origins of things and provides an analysis that deconstructs the notion of archival practice in association with Freud’s psychoanalytical methods of interpretation. For Derrida, this fever or sickness is the consequence of the power of control the archive maintains as well as the feverish desire to not only retrieve all that is contained within the archive but also to own and possess it. As Derrida states in *Archive Fever*:

> It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (1995, 91)

Despite the archive’s capacity to mediate a desire to return to the origin of things, for Derrida, this is a process that is flawed and essentially remains unreliable and incomplete. The allegorical associations often described between memory and the archival system is also considered
threadbare. Whether it is memory as storage of conscious experiences, memory as commemoration or memory as recall, for Derrida, the archive presents itself as a self-contained continuum of origins that are capable of retaining their own autonomy. Steedman (2002) suggests that the archive is quite dissimilar to memory for the reason that it does not contain everything from the past but from consciously selected materials together with the madcap, unexpected and fragmented. Steedman regards the system of indexing and cataloguing associated with the archival form as creating a place where essentially nothing takes place.

The archive is also a place where the historical, cultural and subjective context of artefacts has been reconstructed to form a metonymic framework. This re-contextualising transpires through a system of classification or ordering into a collection that often takes priority over the original historical context of the objects. This process is evident in a diverse range of contemporary museums, natural history museums, and public library collections throughout the Western world. The once open-ended nature of these collections is transformed to varying degrees with the introduction of a regulated system of classification and taxonomy. Within the taxonomic system, the ordinary object reaches beyond its historical context. As museum studies authority Susan Stewart argues, “the object is first removed from its cultural, historical or inter-subjective context and made to stand, in metonymic fashion, for a larger abstract whole” (1993, 161).

The archival object itself could be regarded as providing a point of mediation between the public and private, or the historical and the self-narrative. Within its structure, self-narrative and history co-exist and are able to invent constant references to one another. Historian Pierre Nora termed the phrase ‘lieux de memoire’ to reference the spaces of museums and public art institutions that “displayed vestiges and illusions of eternity” (Nora 2007, 57) that emerged at the end of the twentieth century as surrogates for memory, fabricating a new phenomenon that was essentially archival. For Nora a form of contemporary archival culture has evolved as a substitute for memory. As Nora reflects:

Lieux de memoire arises out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. (2007, 12)

Theorist Michel Foucault questioned the influence of the archive and the power of the institutions that controlled the relationship between the collector, the collection and the viewer. In The Order of Things (1962), Foucault identified the transformation of practices of collecting from the Renaissance to modernity. Within the Renaissance, objects were identified within veiled relationships, and collections were ordered within universal correlations. Free of any specific method of verification, the affiliations within such collections maintained a constant fluidity. This open-ended methodology was dissolved through a classical period mode of taxonomy and empirical classification where things could be measured, differentiated and ordered. The progression from the classical and Enlightenment to the modern witnessed the ordering of collections within the flow of time or, as Andrea Hauser describes it, “a temporalisation of taxonomy” (Hauser cited in Long 2007, 29). It is from within such totalising order that the state reinforces ideologies of historical progress that the visitor is able to identify with, and discover themselves within the expansive narrative (Long 2007).
Foucault perceived the concept of the archive as very much a phenomenon of modernity, reflecting that:

the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and protected from its erosion, the project of thus organising a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move—well, in fact, all this belongs to our modernity. (Foucault 2000, 182)

By dematerialising the notion of the archive, Foucault turns it into an abstract system. The processes of archiving memory and historiography are all-inclusive when reflecting on how the past informs the present. The concept of the archive is intrinsically connected to the task of comprehending history. It constitutes a particular space within the relationship to memory and how it reinforces our experience of the here and now. The task of understanding history relies upon an awareness of the archive’s capacity to inform both forms of self and collective identity. Archives emerged as an arm of the modernising state. Collecting, preserving and classifying were a means of the expanding interests of the state that were ultimately a method for allowing for control and intervention in the life of the individual.

In contrast, for Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), the concept of the archive differed from the principles of order, unity and effectiveness that institutionalised archives embrace (Fig. 2). Benjamin regarded what the archival object disclosed between history and the self-narrative was not so much a process of mediation but of collision. Benjamin’s style of literary montage was a method of shattering the fixed positions of historicism that embraced the authoritative and mythical narrative of historical progress. Through his absorbed investigations, he recognised that the fragmentary form resists closure. This methodology was fully realised in The Arcades Project (1927–40), where the passageways of the arcades of Paris provide the catalyst for a relentless montage of quotations and descriptions that fundamentally act as a metaphoric dissolving of the notion of history as a linear progression (Buck-Moss 1991). In his preliminary notes, Benjamin reflects:
It can be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism within which the idea of progress has been annihilated. Precisely on this point historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois mental habits. Its basic principle is not progress, but actualization. (cited in Buck-Moss 1991, 79)

For Benjamin, the division between collective and individual history was a fabrication. Instead he believed that collective historical transformations are experienced simultaneously by the individual on the micro-levels of psychophysical life. In other words, individuals register historical developments both psychically and corporeally, with their individual sensorial functioning almost as historical documents (Stewart 2010). For example, in Berlin Childhood (1933), Benjamin presents a series of fragmented vignettes of the places and objects from his childhood in Berlin, which attempt to reinscribe self-narrative into a more collective communal language. Benjamin’s work transforms allegory from its fixed connection to culture at a certain moment in history into the personal and self-narrative (Haverty-Rugg 1997). Benjamin referred to these fragmented narratives as Denkbilder, ‘thought figures’, an assemblage of reflections that continued his commitment to montage.

Benjamin’s historical philosophy was a form of restoration and reconstruction determined by reflecting on objects continually exposed to their own historicity. Evoked within a philosophy of the fragment, Benjamin’s inflections regarding debris and loss are attempts at salvation with the hope of recovering “flashes of originary moments” (Stewart 2010, 63). This immersive process into history’s materiality allowed for the possibility of re-negotiating new meanings. Often, these allegorical constellations of meanings provided a way of seeking out an alternate form of knowing the past and presented a counter-argument to the need to totalise historical narratives (Stewart 2010). Re-negotiating the historical through immersion and the dissolving of fixed historical narratives provides an alternate methodology in re-negotiating one’s relationship to the past. For Benjamin, the natural history of all things points to a primary characteristic of human experience, namely that the symbolic forms in and through which life is seemingly ordered are gradually hollowed out to eventually reach a point where its essence is depleted. This collapse into material history and exhaustion of an artefact’s life allows for the possible emergence of a series of ‘enigmatic signifiers’ (Santer 2006, 17). Functioning like hieroglyphs, they continue to direct and inform our present lives. This reference mirrors Warburg’s methodology for the Mnemosyne Atlas, where his archive of hieroglyphic remainders from antiquity to the first quarter of the twentieth century continued to exist as historical intrusions within the present.

For Benjamin, the materiality of both the collective and personal experience filters out into the world to eventually become fragmented and disparate (Buck-Moss 1991). The archive is deceptive in the way that it presents an illusion of permanence and cohesion in context and narrative, yet its very structure is assembled through the fragments of what has collapsed. Benjamin realised that the assembling of narrative fragments to create an apparent structure of meaning admits the element of seduction within the spaces in between the fragments. This mode of reassembling fragments into some meaningful narrative retains an ambiguity of resisting narrative as cohesive, ordered and structured.

How my studio practices references the archive and how it navigates an understanding of the relationship between history and self-narrative transpires through a variety of material references.
Collections of found photographs, abandoned postcards and atlases all mediate as material registers that explore the convergence of self-narrative within the archival object. The materiality of the studio works endeavours to infuse first-person narratives with greater significance by aligning them with the *de facto* histories of found objects. The application of this material resource within my studio practice can be compared to Benjamin’s engagement with what he described as the rebus of the past that he considered had the capacity to inform the synthesis of history and self-narrative to the same degree as memory. The use of *de facto* materials also relates to the archival artefact’s capacity to locate the foundations of a meaningful understanding of history revealed as a filtering of associations between place, history and self-identity. The self-narratives that are often embedded within past ephemera are frequently marginalised within the bigger picture of historical reflection. The use of such materials in my studio practice allows them to evolve as indicators that elicit a certain poetic narrative pattern in an attempt to achieve a more holistic view of the ways in which the past informs the present. The association of metaphor and poetic logic in my studio practice provides a means in allowing the work to remain detached from any specific context.

**Poetic Logic:**

Metaphor acts as a bridge between the abstract and the cognitive. As a connection between two forms of acquiring knowledge and as a method for constructing narratives that challenge binaries between the personal and the collective or the imaginal and the rational, a discussion of metaphoric attitude will be outlined. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico’s concept of ‘poetic logic’ sanctions the subject’s sensory interpretations to formulate first-person experience into holistic associations. This fusion between meaning and the senses sets it apart from the arbitrary and standard nature of the sign that “separates meaning from the sensible as much as possible” (Ricoeur 2008, 209).

Metaphoric or poetic logic allows for a displacement and dismantling of association and interpretation within language that validates the process of re-describing. The distancing constituted through metaphor was crucial to Warburg’s engagement with his *Mnemosyne Atlas* where metaphor plays both an aesthetic and a semantic role. The mediation process enacted through metaphor establishes a distant relationship between the individual and the complexity of the world. Metaphor, for Warburg, describes how artists and thinkers create *Distanz*, that cognitive, psychological, historically self-conscious stance by which emotion, the rational and the cognitive coexist. Warburg’s *Atlas* provided a methodology of ideograms in the form of disparate interconnections with the intention of creating something new. For Warburg, metaphor was method (Johnson 2010). As Aristotle recognised in poetry, these discourses beyond determinations are related to metaphors, whose ideas “of intuitive capturing correspond to an analogy between unlike objects” (Bastian 2011, 240).

The use of metaphor, symbol and myth allows for a way of viewing and constructing our everyday existence that embraces uncertainty. Philosopher and historian Hans Blumenberg (1920–96) discussed the mediations of the nature and manner in which metaphor negotiates a non-conceptual approach in providing meaningful connections to the individual’s experience of the world. His referencing of historical events by way of metaphorical description allowed for the possibility of holistic disclosure of past events where concept falls short. He reasoned that metaphoric
descriptions were capable of providing a complete and tangible form of comprehending our everyday experience of the world.

Likewise, Vico regarded metaphor as a strategy for representing abstract concepts through the gathering of associations between the familiar and the unknown. The distortion created in linking disparate impressions together linguistically resulted in the recognition of a specific resemblance between things (Danesi 2004). For Vico, poetic logic provided a sense-implication of comprehending the everyday world that was manifest as “fable in brief:”

> All the first tropes are corollaries of this poetic logic. The most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent is metaphor. It is most praised when it gives sense and passion to insensate things...thus every metaphor so formed is a fable in brief. (cited in Danesi 2004, 56)

The rupture of historical narrative conveyed in the literal montage of Benjamin’s Arcades Project abandons the perception of history fixed to a notion of linear time and sanctions a more metaphoric and self-reflective based interpretation of the past. In Steedman’s book Dust: The Archive and Cultural History (2001), she suggests that the archive makes available a similar engagement of space and place that Gaston Bachelard used in composing The Poetics of Space (1958). Just as Bachelard’s ordered psychological survey of the intimate places of our everyday experiences provides a repository for our imaginings, Steedman regards the archive as affording a comparative location; as she explains,

> The Archive is this kind of place that is to do with longing and appropriation. It is to do with wanting things that are put together, collected, collated, named in lists and indices; a place where a whole world, a social order, may be imagined by the recurrence of a name in a register, through a scrap of paper, or some other little piece of flotsam. (Steedman 2002, 81)

Steedman suggests that Bachelard’s methodology of poetic enquiry offers an instructive means for engaging with archival materials to a means of discovering more diverse forms of collating historical narratives. Bachelard’s poetics convey an exactness that engages a form of microscopic phenomenology. Its methodology achieves a parallel rupture to narrative to that of Benjamin’s literary montage in avoiding the course of rational process as composition is discarded and the correlations between past and present are dissolved. Within the collating and gathering of the poetic image, Bachelard advocates, “the past rises to the level of the present” (Bachelard 1958, 141). What is achieved through the process of poetic or creative imaginings and associations is a point of origin and the instigation of a primal condition of non-knowing, not as a form of ignorance but as a complexity of associations arising above rational thought and structures of knowledge (Bachelard 1958).

Steedman recognises the instructional capacity of adopting Bachelard’s poetic gaze towards the archive, which suggests that history itself is capable of delivering the same degree of intimacy. Bachelard’s dictum “to be moved by the vast museum of insignificant things” (Bachelard 1958, 142) supports a conviction that history, like the corners of his intimate spaces, is constantly exposed to the arrest of poetic and imaginative interpretations. That is, the chests of drawers, the corners, and wardrobes of history provide symbols of solitude for the imagination where we are able to withdraw
into ourselves and, like a small casket being opened, history transpires a dimension of intimacy that allows the imagination to wander and unconsciously recapture the lost-in-thought existence of the most insignificant stories.

The role of poetic logic and metaphor in my studio practice is manifest in the linking of disparate impressions through the process of montage. The creation of disparate linkages in the works’ iconography and surface relationships reinforces the poetic’s embrace of ambiguity and its capacity to dissolve any singular interpretation. The use of found and ephemeral objects evokes a poetic discourse relating to concepts of trace formulated on the reciprocating dialogue between all that is both present and absent in experience. Metonymic references are also made available through the materiality of the works. Transparent fabrics, beeswax, shellac and thread are independently and collectively used as persuasive material elements that endeavour to evoke metaphoric descriptions and associations that mirror traces of experience constantly being created and partially erased.
Chapter 2

W.G. Sebald: The Seduction of Collecting and Gerhard Richter’s Archive Atlas

A discussion of W.G. Sebald’s literary works establishing a more layered relationship between historical awareness and self-narratives that requires a disbandment of any one fixed linear perception of time and history. This section does not attempt a literary review of Sebald’s works but rather provides an overview of his approach to the archive, and, in particular, the images that he incorporates in his textual works in order to fracture the narrative flow, together with providing a questioning of the authenticity of the photographic image. For Sebald, history provides a narrative mode for navigating and telling a story where everything remains as a trace. Within the writer’s project of finding an identity through the merger of self-narrative and historical perception, the past is examined for something that reinforces a sense of self in the searcher and offers a form of mediation within the measure of things in the present.

I suggest that points of intersection exist between Sebald’s use of the photograph and Gerhard Richter’s expansive photographic project Atlas. Just as Sebald’s included photographs often dissolve and interrupt the narrative structure, Richter’s photographic montage embraces an open-ended association between an implied narrative and the photograph that collapses into uncertain pictorial associations. Both writer and artist attempt to reconstruct, through the photographic image, what has been lost to the past, yet resist formulating a specific link between image and narrative. In the works of both Sebald and Richter, the photographic image provides a confluence of the personal within the universal and the first-person narrative within the collective historical memory.

This chapter will also discuss the collapse of the interplay between self-narrative and the collective manifest in Richter’s Atlas. Richter’s vast archive of both found and personal photographs enriches Nietzsche’s contention that historical understanding is always guided by self interests. The artist’s reluctance to embrace a single conceptual framework in relation to the gathering of his archive supports the mythopoetic mapping of experience through imaginative and metaphoric narratives. As such, the discussion of Richter’s Atlas provides an important contextual framework to my approach in the attempt at collapsing self-narrative within the historical through a fragmented gathering and collating of images that continually suspend reference to a specific narrative.

W.G. Sebald: The Seduction of Collecting

Modernity’s affinity with the new and its subsequent propagation of loss and discarding of anything dated has created a shift in how our collective and individual identity is informed by the past. For German literature professor J.J. Long (2007), the consequence of discarding the past so freely has provoked a crisis of memory where traditional forms of recollecting the past have experienced a mass disruption. As Long explains;

One characteristic of the memory crisis is that memory ceases to be a pure matter of consciousness, and comes to reside instead in the very material of our social or psychic life. (2007, 4)

The narrative design of Sebald’s literary works, The Rings of Saturn (1998), The Emigrants (1992) and Austerlitz (2001), comments on the continued and determining impact that structures set in place within the late nineteenth century still have today. The narrative structures are continuously bound
by objects as remainders of former lives, often in the form of archival collections that have the capacity to release memory. These material sources are presented as discarded and fragmented collections that allow for memory to be recovered. The embedded nostalgic elements activate an enchanted past that has the effect of rendering the present almost completely unresponsive. For Sebald, the many facades of contemporary life remain transitory compared to the experiences of technologies and structures set in place a century ago that continue to hold sway within our daily lives.

Thus, Sebald’s narratives regularly explore representations of the past that contain traces of what remains invisible and that the palimpsest traces of the cast-off debris continually surrounding our lives evokes an enduring tension between the collective and the personal. Sebald’s methodology is concerned with linking disparate fragments gathered from various sources that have the capacity to linger within a certain unknowable realm of experience. Deane Blackler reflects:

> It is part of Sebald’s aesthetic enterprise to make connections, to construct a kind of continuity, but to continue to allow each moment its mysterious character. (2007, 142)

Sebald’s interest in the uncertainty of the past Blackler identified enables a different form of recollection to emerge because it establishes a form of dependable doubt that allows us to question meta-narratives in favour of the personal and intimate. Sebald’s narrators and protagonists often engage in reflections or circumstances that signal the collapse of the colonial gaze. Often, these marginalised figures exist in a state of dislocation, preoccupied with collecting, archival referencing and visiting museums. Sebald uses this metaphoric structure to question the ways that subjectivity and identity are constructed through the experience of archive systems.

The cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) regarded collecting as a practice that is never really meant to be completed, as its conclusion enacts the death of the subject. As long as the collection remains incomplete, the collector’s sense of self-identity remains stable. This situates the narrative structure of collections within the realm of the unconscious, allowing for a slippage of associations that eludes conscious descriptions. Baudrillard regarded the act of collecting to be stimulated by an unconscious form of alienation; as he explains

> It is because he feels himself alienated or at least lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom that the collector is drawn to construct an alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the only one who dictates its signifiers—the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself. (1996, 24)

Regardless of the narrative evoked, its reflections are always projected back to the collector. The innate instability of any collection is a consequence of the metonymic threads and associations that have the capacity to render narrative systems unstable. In parallel to the archive of objects suddenly de-contextualised and dislocated from their origin, what is evoked remains free of any fixed narrative.
J.J. Long recognises the collection within the narrative structure of Sebald’s texts as a product of colonial geopolitics. Sebald’s narrative structures are often concerned with the associations of power, knowledge and the manipulation of subjective thought processes imposed by the colonial project. This sets up a power and knowledge discourse where the context of what, where and how the collection is seen is manipulated and predetermined (Blackler 2007). Sebald’s narratives flourish with collections from individual’s cabinets of curiosities, photographic albums, and postcard compilations to the archive collections of libraries, museums and private institutions (Fig. 3). For Sebald, collections not only extend the colonial discourse but also relate to identity through the emergence of Enlightenment’s notions of selfhood that saw identity associated with possessions and property. The narratives that are evoked through the juxtaposition of objects within any collection, regardless of the collector’s intentions, will inevitably find their own silent discourse for each viewer. This opens up a liminal realm where a certain suspension of rational narrative is experienced, allowing for imaginative and creative responses from the viewer. Sebald reflected on the way that objects from our past often filter into our experiences of the present:

Things know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside of them—in fact—the book of our history opened before us. (Sebald 2000, 56)

Part of the considerations of Sebald’s use of collections is the control imposed on the viewer within the taxonomic categories of artefacts and the way they are interpreted within the archive collection. Once subject to detailed taxonomical classification, artefacts are removed from their original environment. The archive’s sway is also evoked within the domestic spaces manifest in the gathering of collections of photographs, postcards and ephemera that, in an understated fashion, register as a form of resistance towards the sense of dislocation imposed by modernity. The collection allows Sebald to suggest the significance of how identity is informed by objects and the histories attached to them. As a source of identity, the collection becomes a controlled enclave that reflects the collector back to themselves, responding as people never did.

Sebald further ruptures the flow of narrative structure through the use of the photographic image. In each of his novels, echoes of the past are constantly reconstituted in the present moment through the juxtaposition of photographic images within the pages. The reader is often exposed to connecting the threads of association between the textual and the photographic, yet Sebald’s
avoidance of captions allows the images to ebb and flow vaguely between support and contradiction of the adjoining text (Fig. 4). The author openly admitted to manipulating photographs to varying degrees through the use of a photocopier or by inventing associations. Often found images from his travels abroad would find their way into his narrative. The authenticity of the photographs’ origins in the context of his stories also pushed the boundaries between fictional and historical references. These destabilising effects afford the reader a reflective and poetic space that allows for a more diverse interpretation of the past, together with questioning the mnemonic virtues of the photographic image (Frey 2007).

Figure 4.
Austerlitz 2001
W.G. Sebald
Photo  detail of pages 188-89.

Liminal space is frequently encountered within Sebald’s narratives, with many of his characters existing in a state of transition, having arrived at a point where a new sense of historical awareness needs to be created. Unfortunately, many of them are incapable of doing so. The overwhelmingly melancholic tone of Sebald’s writing stems from a sense of irrecoverable loss that the past presents us with and the more things we gather, the less convinced and certain he is of how the past informs the present. In Vertigo, he reflects, “The more images I gathered from the past, I said, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way” (Sebald 1990, 212).

Sebald’s texts poetically reaffirm that to comprehend the present requires an imaginative response not to the superficialities of contemporary life but to the historical structures and practices that continue to give meaning to our everyday experiences.

Like Sebald’s narratives, which consistently develop a conjuncture of biographical, autobiographical and historical literary forms, my studio practice attempts to conflate elements of collective history and self-narrative experience. The function of history that Sebald invokes through references to collections and in the archival experiences of his characters corresponds with my use of collections in the form of found photographs, postcards and gathered ephemera. In my studio practice, the counterpart of a narrator is evoked through including diaristic elements that attempt to reinforce
the thought of identity and self-narrative being unrelentingly bound to the interaction of past and present experience.

The constant collision between collective histories and biographical description evidenced in Sebald’s narrative structure is extended within a further archival collection manifest in Richter’s photographic anthology Atlas. Richter’s vast photographic archive of family snap-shots, found photographs, magazine and newspaper cut-outs provides an example of a mapping of identity through personal and collective cultural references.

**Gerhard Richter’s Archive Atlas:**

Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1964 ongoing) (Fig. 5) represents an archive of personal and found photographic images sourced from popular media since the 1960s that establish loss and remembrance as integral components of identity. *Atlas* continues to be an ever-increasing encyclopaedic depository of photographs, where commonplace images exist within a principle of indiscriminate collecting. Despite its banal undertone, *Atlas* is unavoidably linked to historical context as the images and their fragmented details represent a conflation of the historical, the personal and the everyday. In its first showing in Utrecht in 1973, it contained a collection of personal black-and-white photographs sourced from family albums juxtaposed with photos from the Holocaust together with magazines and newspapers clippings. This aesthetic afforded comparisons with the collage aesthetic of Fluxus, a group whose early influence the artist has openly noted (Schutz 1990).

![Figure 5](image-url)

*Atlas* 1964 (detail)
Gerhard Richter
Original photographs and text panel 13

Through the suspension of narrative structures by means of incorporating everyday rituals and objects in collage and montage practices, Fluxus questioned the notion of authorial choice and
artistic authority. Although offering a direct mediation for his concerns in painting, Richter’s use of found photographs and images sourced from the daily newspapers and magazines is a way of dismantling the sanction of artistic agency, which creates an almost encyclopaedic position of investigation. Richter juxtaposes the grounding of private identity, in the form of the family photograph, with the perception of public and historic identity, through historical and popular media imagery.

Since the Atlas’s inception, Richter has never offered an explanation that binds it to a specific ideology, or of any preconceived approach in either his collecting or ordering of it. Although arbitrary choice and chance play an important part in the construction of the archive, Richter has described his intentions as a mix of unconscious thought and systematised control; “a deluge of images that I can control only by organising them” (Richter 2003, 20). Benjamin Buchloh considers the experience of the relationship between the constellation of images as one that simultaneously generates a sense of meaning yet disintegrates any particular reading (Buchloh 1993). This collision between Richter’s restraint in not wanting to engender a cohesive understanding and the ever-present wish to establish a fixed meaning revisits the thought-space of Warburg’s Denkraum. In its illusive and ambiguous descriptions bound to metaphoric dynamics, Warburg’s thought-space offers a mode of observation that retains a sense of detachment from any singular environment and a means of negotiating the gaps between past and present, the self and historical narrative.

In his 1923 journal, Warburg described an “iconography of the intervals” (cited in Johnson 2012, 78) to reference his methodology that attempts to grasp the associations of iconography based not on the meaning of individual images but on the interrelationships between the figures within their autonomous placement, continually rejecting a fixed dissertation. Like Warburg’s Mnemosyne project, Richter’s Atlas, in its expanse and collective constellations, occupies the interstices and intervals between the self and history. The assemblage of images within each of Richter’s panels remains contextually unbound, allowing them to suggest that each image retains an assertion of its relationship between the self and its past (Johnson 2012). Through such discontinuities, Atlas dissolves the boundaries between painting, photography, history and autobiography, conscious of never allowing itself to be bound to one particular explanation for very long. As Buchloh describes it, “a check both against the impulse to generate understanding and the ever present desire for it” (cited in Cooke 1995, 105)
With its immersive archival format, Richter’s *Atlas* appears to disclose both of the opposing ways that photography informs the relationship between self and the world, which Susan Sontag references in her essay *Photographic Evangels* (1977). The first method is where photography is regarded as a manifestation of the individual’s sense of dislocation in the world and provides a form of overcoming reality through “a fast visual anthologizing of it” (Sontag 1977, 611). The second method relates to the use of photography as a way of discovering one’s connection to place through an objective detachment of the subject matter. Both of these forms are supported through Richter’s overwhelming excess of images that comprise an anthology of, at times, banal and detached subject matter, such as doorways and chairs (Fig. 6).

Richter’s gathering and use of the photographic image can be considered as questioning its mnemonic capacity. In relationship to identity and place, it is not that the experience of place is mediated by the photographic image, but that places lose their geographical specificity and subjective significance once they are amassed within an archival collection. In a form that resonates with Sebald’s inclusion of photographic images within his narrative structure, Richter’s *Atlas* becomes a type of memory game where the photographs are displayed and dealt out like a card game of patience. Each deal of the cards provides the possibility of new correlations with the past. Either viewed as a mode of filtering the artist’s response to the world, binding the desire for identity through painting, or as a constellation of descriptions between collective history and personal narrative, Richter’s *Atlas* transmits an archival consciousness. Unlike the museum structure, Richter’s system of ordering remains severed from its context and referents, allowing it to resume a non-hierarchical sway. The *Atlas* collection rendered vacant of determined narrative questions the
archival implication once the immediate social, political or historical function is removed. All that remains is a sameness and equality.

It is a similar correspondence between an archival consciousness embedded with uncertainty and pensiveness that establishes correlations with my studio practice. The gathering and fabrication of collections, multiples and encyclopaedic-type categories provide methods of dissolving fixed meanings through a combination of collage and assemblage practices. Although photographs form a minor component of my studio outcomes, the integration of postcards and collaged envelopes displayed in grid-like format reference Richter’s *Atlas* and the immersive experience of having to decipher a singular narrative within a montage of images. It could be suggested that the tableau of postcards and collaged envelopes provides an equivalent reference to Richter’s use of photographic images and their inherent mnemonic affects. These mosaic tableaus are often tentatively anchored to a title as a means of providing a hint of their associated meaning, although, essentially, their origins remain fixed to a random gathering of self-narratives and intuitively informed responses. The ambiguity of the works’ meaning allows for the possibility of re-negotiating and transforming past narratives. This element of indistinctness also upholds a counter methodology for the necessity to be constantly emphasising the totality of historical narratives.
Chapter 3

Anselm Kiefer’s Artists’ Books and Mythopoetic Narratives

This chapter will focus specifically on Anselm Kiefer’s artists’ books. In these books, the deliberate blending of personal narrative, history and mythology allows for the experience of each new page to suggest a continual threshold of transition between past and present experiences. Often, the visually fragmented quality of his books invokes the experience of liminal space, creating a sense of a ‘betwixt and between’ state of engaging with the implied narrative and meaning of the work. Kiefer’s measured placement of self in either painted or photographic form acknowledges a state of individual consciousness that is continuously standing at the threshold of self and one’s sense of the historical self, eternally drifting from one to the other. The relevance of referencing Kiefer’s artists’ books is evidenced in a series of hand-bound artists’ books in my studio outcomes that engage etching, diaristic notations, collage and drawing methods as a means of integrating self-narrative elements, which fragment the traditional codex format of a cohesive linear narrative.

Anselm Kiefer and Mythopoetic Narratives:

According to Joan Lyons (1976), artists’ books gained recognition in the art world during the late 1960s and 1970s, and they are often perceived as representing the mood of experimentation and rebellion that defined those times. Kiefer’s artists’ books embrace a similar defiance and provide a key reference to the reframing of concepts of identity and place in the context of a nation’s collective and historical consciousness. Kiefer often exhibits these books alongside paintings and sculptural works in the same way that traditional sketch books index completed works. Throughout Kiefer’s career, his book projects, in their often fractious and artless format, deal with issues of identity within the realms of both the personal and the collective. Effectively, his early collaged photographic albums are a mode of enquiry that attempt to reframe the relationship between the individual’s sense of historical consciousness and a nation’s collective history. The point of these works is doubled-edged as Kiefer brings to light the narcissistic rigour of Germany’s fascist ideology and testimonial evidence of his own Germanic identity as anti-hero or anti-Nazi. In their most fundamental design Kiefer utilised the artist book form in his initial attempts as mediator for renegotiating German identity.

Kiefer has often used the photographic image as his central medium. In Occupations (1969) (Fig. 7), Kiefer evokes the severe constructs of National Socialism by presenting a series of black-and-white photographic self-portraits enacting the Nazi salute in various locations throughout Europe. These enactments evidence a redemptive act of freedom from the historical overtones of fascism. Through combining black-and-white photographs, drawing and collage, Occupations mediates the historical association of self and place. The use of photographic self-portraits in narrative form claims the body as the source and focus of the staged autobiographical deconstruction of self and history.
By its very nature, the photographic image—not unlike autobiography—often refers to something beyond its subject matter. The serial arrangement of photographs in book form is a means of controlling associations as well as a method of encoding possible meanings. To say anything that deviates from the messages of an official culture depicted by photographs, one must inflect their meaning in a way that either heightens or diminishes their realism. Kiefer’s method of displacing the readings of his culture through the photographic medium was to alter the context in which they were viewed and therefore interpreted. Essentially, these autobiographical acts allow the artist’s work to enter the realms of disassociation that ultimately manifests as the individual’s observation of the self as Other. In exploring this position, Kiefer introduces the possibility of reconciliation and restoration (Celant 2011).

His 1996 artists’ book titled Heroic Symbols (Fig. 8) continues his use of the photographic image together with postcards and prints mounted within the pages of a hand-bound linen album. This book includes photographs of the artist’s Nazi salute enactments juxtaposed with postcards, watercolour studies and handwritten text that reference cultural icons embraced by the Fascist regime. Through the fragmented, altered and free association of the relationship between a mix of historical iconography and personal photographs, this book often delivers the viewer to a threshold of a liminal space, uncertain of the point where one narrative begins and another ends.

Within the quieter spaces of these pages is the implication of individual identity as a vehicle for questioning both the existential-self-as-artist and the self-as-historical-being. The open, unfinished quality of this and many of Kiefer’s book works evokes the possibility of narratives being re-engaged at any point in time, allowing for alternate conclusions. Kiefer’s use of the photographic image in Heroic Symbols constitutes a clash of the self with the historical self, questioning the dichotomy between subject and object. For Kiefer, the photographic image lays the foundation for the
questioning of selfhood and history that simultaneously attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct memory as a means of coming to terms with an inherited traumatic past (Celant 1997).

Figure 8.

Heroinc Symbols 1969 (detail).
Anselm Kiefer
Artists Book: Original photographs, graphite text.
36x25x5 cm
Collection: The artist

Presented in book form, these images allow for a subjective re-entry into Germany’s objectified past, and it acts as a transitory vehicle that breaks the repressed silence of Kiefer’s parent’s generation. If we are to accept that the photographic image acquires its value through its objective qualities—that is, its status as an object, removed from subjective human perception—it becomes evident that Kiefer attempts to shift the boundaries between self and historical consciousness. This investigation of German identity informed by the Holocaust was initiated within a collective identity that still felt the guilt and oppression of their recent past. Donald Kuspit wrote of these early historic enactments:

Kiefer eliminates the arrogant structures (characteristic of the German psyche) by disintegrating them, by turning them against themselves, so that a new beginning can be made in the sense of the creation of a new human self (Kuspit cited in Hutchinson 2008, 126).

On another level, this provides evidence of a very deliberate attempt to disrupt the relationship between the personal and the historical. Perhaps the most significant element
about these photographs is that they document a performance. Their staged historic irony thus offers a certain liberty to Kiefer’s cause as well as symbolising the repression of memory and loss of historical consciousness.

As a nation, Germany inherited a form of amnesia towards its recent past that manifested itself as suppression in the form of silence. Germany’s historical consciousness was embedded with an ideology of Fascism that remained submerged by Kiefer’s parent’s generation (Celant 1997). Kiefer essentially attempts to exhume the suppressed memories of his parent’s generation not only for himself but for his contemporaries. He is not interested in creating new methods of portraying the past but in finding ways of understanding his relationship, as a de facto observer, with the inherited generational silence regarding the victims of the Holocaust. This instigates a process that art theorist Marianne Hirsch regards as ‘post-memory’.

Hirsch’s idea of post-memory is concerned with a particular narratorial position where often the connection to material residues and memories inherited from previous generations are understood through imaginative and creative modes of inquiry. Hirsch explains:

Post-memory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. (cited in Long 2007, 59)

The obligation of post-memory is its continuance of transition and of working through inherited past events as opposed to a “process of reply” (Gibbons 2009, 73). As Kiefer has suggested in personal interviews, these books formed part of a holistic psychoanalytic process of ‘working through’ the past. With the benefit of time and distance, ‘post-memory’, in the form of the secondary witness, is capable of re-presenting diverse ways of viewing the past. The counter-argument to this form of expressing the past is that a certain stylisation and commoditisation of history takes place. For cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, the aestheticising of traumatic past events has the capacity to isolate its victims and disconnect them from the painful events. However, Kiefer is unconcerned with reframing historical events; rather, he is interested in subverting pre-existing divisions between self and history. For Hirsch, as it is for Kiefer, post-memory is grounded in the process of transition and of discovering new ways of relating to the past.

The fabrication of one of the works to emerge from my studio practice references similar concepts of post-memory; with the assembling of a scaled replica of an aircraft wing from a plane that crashed off the coast of my childhood home of Mackay in 1962. Memories of this tragic event belong to my parent’s generation, yet the subsequent narratives were responsible for framing a personal connection to place where the accident occurred. The fabricated wing represents a fragment ruin as well as a relic object that is capable of extending the relationship between self-narrative and the collective memory. As a material trace, the wing also mediates between a tragic public event and an imaginative private memorial.

The layers of meaning within Kiefer’s early book works, such as Memories IV (1969) (Fig. 9), provide a reference to the artist’s engagement of creation myths as a method of questioning the relationship between identity, place and historicity. Kiefer broadened his reflection on these associations by
exploring narratives that reference German mythology within the landscape. How we negotiate and re-present the past either as individuals or collectively as a nation forms part of Kiefer’s continual universal concern. Kiefer’s sense of ‘place’ is not evoked through a referencing of memory but through images of the very landscape that continues to bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust. For Kiefer, the forests and rural landscapes play an active role in recreating the historical past in order to reinscribe new beginnings. By returning to the witness of landscape, Kiefer acts as an existential historian and narrator in attempting to give ‘place’ a voice.

Figure 9. Memories IV 1969 (detail).
Anselm Kiefer
Artists’ book: Original photograph, gouache painting.
66x30x4 cm
Private collection

Through the use of inexpensive, everyday stationery journals or note pads, Kiefer’s books invoke a direct relationship to albums that may have survived the Holocaust, the suggested evidence of an anonymous historical archive. This foregrounds the close relationship imparted between the power of the state and the archival template. Analyses of Kiefer’s books have discussed how their ‘incompleteness’ in the use of space and their fragmented format allows the viewer to return to these pages to extend their history. This work evokes the act of returning to view a collection of images found in the pages of a family photo album where time inevitably invokes an altered response from the previous viewing. Historically, the album, photographs and postcards form a particular connection to the process of archival practice. German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst makes the point that archives only become an authentic form of historical investigation after they have lost their political potency, arguing that the historians engagement with the archive commences only at the point where the connection between the documents and power have dissolved.

When using archival references—whether they are genuine or fabricated—there is recognition of the associative value being just as potent as the authentic item. Through the use of lead, sand, straw and surface reactions to chemicals, the materials register the failure of cultural identity for both the individual and collective (Gibbons 2010, 83). The archival-related object retains an existential hold on
the here and now despite its reference to the past. The use of non-archival papers by Kiefer, such as ferrous oxide, sand, straw, shellac and ash, provide a visceral contradiction of the very nature of the archive. All of this reaffirms Kiefer’s underlying theme of transfiguration and transition. The photographs combined with selected natural materials act as indexical references that harbour both a collective and individual connection to the past. Kiefer’s book works reaffirm the concept of an internal archive evolving in relation to a practice of remembering that is visual rather than rationally narrative (Long 2007).

Through the use of the remnants of materials and their surfaces that reference an archive of materiality, these book works reflect upon the historical resonances of a particular time and locality as a means to establishing a greater understanding of the connections between self and place. Kiefer attempts to reinscribe his experience of place often through its emptiness and within the binaries of presence and absence. It is a positioning of the self that constantly puts events at a distance. This may form a parallel to our relationship with history, deploying materials onto surfaces that evoke the gradual temporal dissolving of self and culture. Arising from my studio practice, a series of artists’ books and altered books explore similar associations of historical displacement. An altered book series titled Readers Digest Atlas of Australia I-IX, (2013) (Fig. 10) comprises nine identical encyclopaedic atlases printed in the late 1960s, which I were used as backings for engravings and photographic collages.

Figure 10.
Atlas IV 2013
Glen Skien
Altered book: Readers Digest Atlas, etching plates and found photographs
30x27x3.5 cm
Collection: the artist
Each atlas was made inaccessible with aluminium dry-point etching plates nailed to both the front and back covers. The only text that remains visible is the title on the spine of each atlas. The central imagery is of a series of silhouetted female figures appropriated from the early photographic studies of the human form in motion by Eadweard Muybridge. The inclusion of found black-and-white photographs of anonymous Australian landscapes embedded and juxtaposed with the silhouetted forms evokes a sense of figures fleeing some kind of invasion or traumatic event. I used the atlases to reference colonial mapping as a Western form of ownership of place. As a cultural object of the 1960s that appeared in almost every Australian home, the atlas could be seen as referencing the colonial palimpsest that continued with existing Indigenous culture.

The use of the artist book in my studio practice extended into a series of four, large, hand-made books that simulated the dimensions of large atlases, reinforced in the titles of *Atlas I to IV* (fig7). Collectively, this series of books incorporates collage components of found photographs, drawings, dry-point etchings, stencilling and hand-written text. In the context of an exhibition space, these books offer the viewer the experience of searching through the pages of a library reference book or historical archive. There was a conscious choice of making these books available to gallery visitors in order for them to suddenly find they were examining the pages with the expectation of engaging within a certain logical narrative but ultimately uncovering no such structure. In *Atlas I*, the text is a random selection of diaristic reflections often placed in sequence with simple contour figure illustrations and captions that bear no association with the accompanying text. In a second book, fragments of found photographs are collaged together to form single framed images that conclusively speak of a certain past but reference no particular place or time. (Fig. 11)
The autobiographical narrative structure for many of Kiefer’s artist book projects reflects a particular mix of estrangement, renewal and transition in relation to his nation’s history. The element of opposites continues to be explored through Kiefer’s engagement with materiality as a sensor of metaphorical meanings. The relevance of the coexistence of opposites within humanity—of the nature of positive and negative, present and past, good and evil—is often directly associated with the artist’s use of materials.

**Kiefer and Liminal Space:**

The fluidity of Kiefer’s artist’s books often renders them devoid of a cohesive narrative, which allows the work to engage with the transitional realms of liminal space. Kiefer created these works at a time where his generation was increasingly debating Germany’s post-war identity and historical consciousness. Kiefer’s revival of Nazi iconography and cultural figures embraced by the Fascist regime was a way of re-focusing the insanity and inhumanity of such a project (Rosenthal 1987). Essentially, Kiefer’s project could be viewed as engaging with the transformative processes that define encounters with liminal space. Liminality is significant for Kiefer as it provides a method of reflection concerned with transforming and embellishing both symbol and narrative. It is a process of action as well as imaginative altering that enables more meaningful narratives to be realised.

This continuous presence of a certain in-between state is further implied in Kiefer’s collaged photographic albums that invoke a strong filmic resonance. In *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen* (1974) (Fig. 12), the 104 double-paged bound photographs of the Buchen landscape, the surface quality and integration of fade-out at the edges of the photographs, give them the sense of being the stills from a documentary film. An implied, liminal engagement exists through the book’s reoccurring blank, black pages; likewise, in *Martin Heidegger* (1976). In both of these book works, Kiefer is able use the landscape and architectural forms to make visible representations of liminal space. Through the collapse of mediums such as bitumen, straw, dirt and the photographic image, Kiefer’s artist books provide the viewer with a sense of having been piloted towards a threshold where past narratives have been partially dissolved, allowing for the possible creation of more positive descriptions.
The referencing of liminality in my studio practice is often present within the debris of narratives evoked through the use of ephemeral materials. This mode of reassembling fragments into meaningful associations retains an ambiguity of resisting a coherent narrative structure. As a methodology, it allows fragments from unrelated contexts to be reconstructed within a duality of possible meanings. Mythopoetic structures embrace a parallel sense of ambiguity similar to the way Kiefer surrendered narrative to a liminal space that permits objects and surfaces to collide in understated and evocative ways. My studio practice shares a comparable link with Kiefer’s methodology through the conjunction of first-person narratives and collective history in an attempt to establish a more insightful perception of historical awareness. Such processes sanction a poetic, reflective mapping and re-inscribing of self-narratives within the palimpsest of colonially informed definitions of history, space, time and place. At the core of my studio practice, the liminal is encountered through the materiality’s implied stages of transition; where narratives that have arrived at a juncture devoid of meaning impart a space that allows for more meaningful self-narratives to be conceived.
Chapter 4

Studio Outcomes: Mytho-Poetic: Print and Assemblage works by Glen Skien

The collective experience of the works created within my studio practice attempts to navigate alternative responses to the sway of history’s ‘big picture’ view of the past through the intervention of mythopoetic related self-narratives. The cryptic and fragmentary associations evoked within Warburg’s *Mnemoyne Atlas* are reflected in several tableau-style works. Warburg’s compilation of images of newspaper and travel advertisements, art reproductions, geographical maps and personal photographs created a form of mediation of historical consciousness through the non-conceptual logic of similarity and metonymy. My studio practice mirrors a similar methodology to Warburg’s montage-collision of disparate images. As in the way Warburg engaged with metaphor, the metonymic references in my mythopoetic based images place meaning in a continual state of flux. The disquiet concept of *Denkraum*, or thought-space, is an insightful element fashioned by Warburg’s visual metaphorics. Shaped by the subtleties of metaphor, *Denkraum* is fashioned from *Mnemosyne*’s chart of images’ grafting of mythos and logos, the rational and the poetic, to create a nexus between the realms of rational consciousness and the flux of everyday existence. As Warburg’s journal notes reflect:

> For only in this way could I hope to incorporate eminent and powerful artistic figures as evidential links in the chains of my deductions, which aims above all at a new doctrine concerning artistic creation...in gathering the material for an atlas of images, in which one sees spread out in its sequences of images the function of pre-stamped, classicizing expressive values for the representation of internal and external life in motion. At the same time the atlas should be the basis for the development of a new theory concerning the function of human pictorial memory. (Johnson 2012, 222)

Such impressions allude to Warburg’s application of spectral materialism that registers the capacity of past events to be absorbed into the substance of lived space and into the location of human history (Santer 2006). A reciprocating dialogue transpires within the notion of liminal space as a type of threshold between the past and present, and foregrounds many of the studio outcomes.

A suggestion of mapping through the inscribing of cartographic notations pervades many of the works within my mythopoetic project. The referencing of cartography acts as a literal and metaphoric reference to colonial imposed acts of erasure and the palimpsest inscription of pre-existing forms of knowledge. Warburg used maps in his opening panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a metaphoric reference to cultural changes that circulate the world over. My cartographic inscriptions also reference Sebald’s notion of the perpetual influence of methodologies set in place from past centuries that continue to hold sway in contemporary life.
Figure 13.
*Archive of the Unfamiliar* 2013 (detail).
Glen Skien
Altered postcards, etching, collage, bees wax and thread
Dimensions variable
Collection: the artist

The wall installation titled *Archive of the Unfamiliar* 2013 (Fig. 13) consists of almost 1,200 postcards collected from antique stores from 2010 to 2013. The tableau of altered postcards is overlaid with hand-written juvenile inscriptions, erasure markings and hand-stitched thread surfaces that gesture towards concepts of identity, place and historical consciousness within the context of enduring postcolonial discourse. Although sourced in Brisbane and the greater south-east region, this montage of postcards has a blend of Australian, British and European origins. Each of the postcards has its early-twentieth-century hand-written memorandums cancelled out with red or black ink as a reciprocating reference to the re-inscribing and near erasure of pre-existing Indigenous languages as a result of colonisation (Fig. 14). Pictorial components have been reconfigured through collage techniques as well as being cut and hand-stitched to create disparate associations of identity and place. Each postcard has been immersed in beeswax, which could be interpreted as history’s fading clarity within the palimpsest of earlier narratives. The wax is a material device, albeit a subtle one, that could be interpreted as delivering the viewer to a point of liminality where what was perceived as accessible is suddenly rendered unattainable.

The collection includes two identical portrait images that have been superimposed over postcard reproductions of northern and southern hemisphere astrological maps. These reference the permutation of colonial cultural encounters with the colonised ‘Other’. The images also resonate within the realms of myth-poetic self-narrative, as the figure depicted is my partner who was born
on Manus Island, a place that the Australian government has again re-fashioned as a detention centre for political asylum seekers and refugees. Use of the postcard fosters a direct referencing of its transformative character as a colonial means of converting space into place. J.J. Long (2007) perceives this as being carried out in two ways. The first presents space as an abstract entity where the postcard reduces space to a souvenir, something to be collected and devoid of context. The second allows the photographic image to mediate a very exclusive vision of place to the viewer; as Long suggests:

The postcard establishes a hierarchy of spaces by excluding from representation those places that are not worthy of being seen/photographed, and decreeing in advance how these spaces that are represented are to be both seen and remembered. The viewing subject is thereby positioned within a set of representational conventions and becomes a product of the regime of spectacle (2010, 79).

Figure 14. Archive of the Unfamiliar 2013 (detail).
Glen Skien:
Altered postcard.
13x9 cm
Collection: the artist

Archive of the Unfamiliar endeavours to evoke within the viewer a sense of participating in the deciphering of wasted texts and images from the past in the hope of discovering some rational meaning or gaining some form of historical awareness. Peter Osborne likens the postcard collection to the cabinet of curiosities, locating in its medium the “dichotomous desires of the collector, who, in gathering, selecting and collating a collection, could claim allegiance to scientific and objective pursuits” (2010, 129). Creating an effect of mystery and speculation, the postcard collection matches the strangeness of the cabinet of curiosities through the need to possess, order, and control. Through juxtaposing text and image, it is hoped that the interrelations form a palimpsest narrative of identity. Yet, ultimately the experience of engaging with this archival tableau offers little more than an encounter with Denkraum’s reflective thought-space. In having guided the viewer to a threshold of a European re-inscribing of place, the work reflects upon the possibility of composing alternate narratives based on a more rigorous gathering of historical awareness within our colonial beginnings. In a sense, this work could be viewed as progressing towards the act of complete erasure and the rendering of a tabula rasa that is created not as a testimony to vanished opportunities but towards a still-to-be-realised future.
The work titled *Letter from America 1* (2013) (Fig. 15) presents 100 hand-made muslin envelopes whose surfaces and interiors have been embedded with etching, collage and beeswax. The collage images are a random collection of encyclopaedic-like illustrations gathered from various sources. Once enclosed within each envelope, they attempt to evoke an ensemble of ambiguous narratives and poetic associations. The transparent nature of the work, enhanced through the use of beeswax, reinforces a measured reference to the transitional nature of time passing and the liminal encounter of having to relinquish even the small pleasures of everyday life. The title of the work references the demise of a radio program that I had listened to for almost fifteen years on Australia’s ABC Radio National. ‘Letter from America’ was presented by London Times foreign correspondent Alistair Cook who delivered a weekly half-hour critique on contemporary social and political life in North America.

Apart from the work’s intentional reference to the transitory loss of a favourite radio program, I recognised the potential for the integration of a far wider range of hermeneutic associations through the conflation of first-person experience, temporal hints and the trace of archival narrative evident in the work’s title. This fusion of narrative, text and image is implied through the use of the envelope form as well as being an indicator of loss through the diminishing art of letter-writing as a result of more technologically advanced methods of communication. The cut-out illustrations embedded within each envelope suggest a certain hieroglyphic code waiting to be deciphered, which occupies the margins of meaning between the visual and the verbal. This forms a direct association with Warburg’s use of montage as a way of translating images into a deeper mode of conceptual thought. For Warburg, montage was “capable of transforming hieroglyphs into action—capable, that is, of setting them in motion” (Michaud 2004, 285).

The transparency achieved through combined muslin and beeswax triggers a sense of liminal space, as if these objects were being held within a betwixt and between position amid the subconscious.
and past experience. Self-narratives that draw on the mnemonic sway of the visual object frequently rely on the photographic image as a metaphor for memory. Although there are only traces of the photographic image within this work, the embedded figures caught within layers of etching, collage and beeswax seem to deliver a narrative structure aligned with a photographic documentary. Its sequencing of fragmented figures also verges on associations of a filmic experience.

The cut-out figures provide further photographic subtexts through associations with Roland Barthes’ concepts of studium and punctum. As a general description, Barthes defined the studium as what draws the interest of the viewer, enabling a certain cultural engagement with the photograph’s content. The punctum is a nuanced detail within the image that disrupts the general aboutness of the photograph. Barthes explains: “it is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes 1981, 27). The beeswax envelopes, with their cut-out figures fixed in place, provide an immediate sense of the punctum experience that remains detached from any general cultural reference. In an extended conjunction of text and image, the titles of the works within the mythopoetic project at times inhabit the works like a veil that subtly adds a further layer of experience of the work. This mode of subtle textual convergence and intertwining with images is continued in the series of works Object-Poems, the title of which is directly borrowed from the Surrealists’ attempts to infuse artworks with varying degrees of poetic reverie.

Figure 16.
Object-poem 1: All of the things I could have told you about birds 2013
Glen Skien
Bird sculptures from etching muslin, hand-made collection boxes, shellac, wax thread and pins.
300x150 cm
Collection: the artist

The wall-assemblage piece titled Object-Poem 1: All of the Things I Could Have Told You about Birds (2013) (Fig.16) maintains a similar bricolage of text, image, and object associations. The work
consists of a series of twenty-eight, hand-made, shellac cardboard collection boxes positioned upright on the wall in a horizontal grid format. Placed beside each box are various soft-sculptured bird forms that have been shaped from the residues of the muslin fabric used to wipe excess black ink from etching plates. Each bird form has been bound with a wax thread with constellations of dress-makers pins embedded in their surfaces. The title of this work deliberately references a past-tense disclosure of information about bird life as an intentional strategy to emphasise a sense of estrangement, loss or remembrance of a past relationship. The self-narrative element of this installation piece is embedded in the title itself.

Essentially, the work, with its two elements—the hand-made collection boxes and bird forms—was never conceived of as one unified artwork. Each component evolved from two separate events. Their point of semblance was simply the recognition of an identical heightened intuitive response shared within each encounter. The bringing together of these disparate objects, sequentially fabricated within the same studio space, references the process of montage-collision where disparate components collide to form explicit poetic associations. The juxtaposition of these fabricated objects creates a narrative pattern that is never a conscious subversion but simply a prompting of the embedded narrative towards a more poetic resonance or effectively towards the realms of Warburg’s *Denkraum*. The experience of liminality as a transformative process is afforded through the suggestion of loss and abandonment in the vacancy of the empty collection boxes and the embalmed bird forms that essentially tell the viewer almost nothing at all about birds.

The ambiguous associations that resonate between the unfilled collection boxes and the preserved bird forms invoke mythopoetics’ metaphoric inquiry that requires a submittal to the uncertainty of deriving any one specific interpretation. The seemingly incidental and residual materials used in the work offer a potent yet understated index that reinforces the liminal and its melancholic mood. Each element imparts seemingly contradictory attempts either to animate the inert or to render a stillness and silence that seems unwarranted and excessive. The multiple layers of shellac applied to the box forms, the embedded pin heads that form constellations of star-like patterns in each bird form (fig...detail), and their binding with a wax thread all gesture toward a contradictory mode of random yet precise ordering that underpins the ambiguity of *Denkraum*’s thought-space.

Object-Poem 2: *Fokker-friendship 1962* (2013) (Fig. 17) references the aviation disaster that occurred off the coast of my hometown of Mackay in 1962 in which all of the 28 passengers and crew were killed. The work comprises a scaled-down fabricated aircraft wing made from a combination of strawboard and dry-point etching plates, the making of which included visits to the Caloundra Air Museum to document the same 1962 model Fokker Friendship aircraft. Beneath the suspended wing, a thin channel of wire-mesh-protected metal trays simulates the use of soak-away trays found in mechanical-engineering repair workshops.
As a simulacra ruin or memorial remnant, the wing and soak-away trays endure as a metaphorical spark that attempts to formulate more nuanced descriptions of the relationship between collective historical consciousness and self-narrative. The intention is for the fabricated wing to convey memory as a relocation of a past event that is capable of reaffirming a more enduring connection within the present. In effect, as an object, it performs the self-contained process of memory, allowing for a temporal-historical encounter that transcends its material presence. As a child, the event was defined through a combination of post-memory familiarity through my mother’s accounts and self-narrative descriptions through my childhood experiences having unfolded within close proximity to the tragic event. The implied reciprocating dialogue between the fabricated wing and the torpid soak-away trays forms a crucial relationship within the work.

The ambiguity of this relationship establishes the location of a liminal encounter. This is reinforced through the wing’s indexical echo as a memorial to the event. As a mix of exposed cardboard, paint and bitumen, the surface area attempts to affect a certain intimacy and fragility that contrasts with the presumption of its durability. Often, collective history takes ownership of past events and guards them with zealous protection. The deliberate incompleteness of the wing aligns it within a vague scaffold of traces that shift between a disbanded aviation venture and a restoration project in progress. This reconstitution of the past through more nuanced and poetic associations is a mode of re-claiming past events from the often exclusive intentions of history’s greater representation. The close proximity of the event to my childhood home suggests the possibility for place; the sea in which the plane crashed and the immediate coastline serve as geographical indicators of a liminal threshold.
This form of reflective, poetic consideration encourages the viewer to return to the work in order for the layers of details, of assembled surfaces and embedded forms to disclose their points of reference. Evoking a tragic event, the wing assemblage encapsulates the historical through post-memory constructs and the mythopoetic through self-narratives formulated throughout my childhood and adult years. Out of each of the works from the Mytho-Poetic collection, it is this assemblage piece that reinforces the notion that the poetic is most visible at the point where memory and historical awareness begin to diminish. This point of dissolution allows both personal and collective memory to register its true affect in functioning as a form of absent presence.

Figure 18.
Resemblance I 2013
Glen Skien
Soft ground etching.
220x55 cm
Collection: the artist

The series of soft-ground etchings titled Resemblance I–IV (2013) (Fig.18) are deliberate attempts to extend the narrative structures and mythopoetic resonances fashioned in the aircraft assemblage piece. By developing the three-dimensional assemblage work into a two-dimensional print, there is the potential for the etching series to create an archival presence for this post-memory-conceived work. As such, it makes reference to the museum experience, which is often informed by a collection of artefacts and their realisation in two-dimensional form that acts as a mode of authenticating the experience of the original object. The cartographic references mentioned in previous works are also prevalent within the etching series, although almost on a microscopic scale. The method of soft-ground allows for low-relief three-dimensional objects to be transferred into print form through a process of embedding low-relief objects onto an etching plate prepared with a malleable ground applied to the plate.
Included in the exhibition are components of hand-made artists’ books and altered book forms that, to varying degrees, attempt to subvert references toward a structured linear narrative. In the series of altered books titled *Miscellaneous Books: 1–13* (2013) (Fig. 19), the intention was to create a measured ambiguity towards the possible meaning or narrative content within each of these hybridised book covers. The juxtaposition of fragments from the covers of books, the content of which ranges from history, biography and fiction to poetry, endeavours to dismantle the fixed narrative status of the codex book form. The transitory and fragile quality fixed to their defaced and bound condition invokes a sense of Benjamin’s “failed materials” (Buck-Morss 1991, 164). That is, within their emblematic fragility, they are capable of insightful allegorical intent. The binding of each of the books in segmented packages enforces a duality of intention in the notion that the bindings may suggest a form of archival obligation, yet simultaneously renders their contents inaccessible.

Through avoiding a specific narrative by bringing disparate objects and surfaces together, Baudrillard’s concept of seduction relates to many of the outcomes in my studio practice. Essentially, the element of seduction “has its own version of generative power—not straightforward as in a line, but flickering through a series of tangents, touching at one point only then drawing apart through an infinite and unpredictable range of possibilities” (Schwenger 2006, 155). Seduction originates within a narrative structure whose intention is never to manufacture meaning but to suspend and delay its disclosure long enough for the effect of seduction to take hold. This lingering protraction of meaning allows the rapid associations of the mind to participate “in the spaces where meaning is not” (Schwenger 2006, 155).
The series of four hand-bound artists’ books titled *Atlas 1–4* (fig. 20) extends the arbitrary and fragmented engagement with narrative. Each book is hand-bound as a standard codex and the viewer is able to turn the pages in search of some inherent logic to the combination of text and image. The title of ‘Atlas’ in each of these books references the large *Reader’s Digest Atlas of the World* that was part of many Australian households from the mid-1960s on. Although their content was predominantly of a cartographic nature, they were in part a systematic encyclopaedia. In attempting to challenge and disrupt fundamental notions of narrative and classification, each of the book albums in the series foregrounds a similar random and encyclopaedic form of locating and obtaining information. The immersive experience of the large atlas book format forecasts obtaining a certain body of knowledge in a similar fashion to the *Archive of the Unfamiliar*, yet their pages deliver little more than a collection of disparate diaristic reflections tethered by arbitrary illustrations. Once again, there is the implication of having delivered the viewer, the reader, to an estranged reflective space tied to notions of *Denkraum*.

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**Figure 20.**
Artists’ Book; etching and dry-point
75x50x3 cm
Collection: Private
Studio Environment and Montage-Collision:

The arbitrary and intuitively informed collections that have evolved within my studio space over the last three years are a measurable entity within the development of my studio practice. In a similar vein to Warburg’s collating of his Mnemosyne Atlas and library books, the studio has existed as both a place of archive and assembly, fostering disparate interchanges through the process of montage. In relation to my studio practice, montage allows for a reflective space that is fuelled by a similar non-conceptual logic based on similarity and metonymy that seems to resist being transformed into mere abstract ideas. Warburg believed that a library operates within a similar fashion to montage—with the aim “to disrupt conventional classifications of ideas or things in order to produce novel thoughts” (Michaud 2004, 231). Warburg expressed the necessity to have his resource material at hand so that contrasting books could be placed beside one another to create his idiosyncratic ordering:

I bring together documents from the domain of language as well as from the plastic arts or from the world of religious and secular drama. To be able to do this, I find and my young assistants must use large tables on which to lay out the documents, i.e., the books, the images, so that we can compare them, and these books and images must be easily and instantly within reach. I therefore need a veritable arena with tables, so that I can have at hand both the ordinary books and the iconographic material. (Michaud 2004, 233)

This description correlates with my need to have the images and objects I have collected continuously visible within the studio environment in order to retain a direct engagement of ‘free association’ with the process of montage and assemblage. Both Warburg and Benjamin employed montage-like processes through isolating fragments of images and descriptions in order to create new and transformative associations. Commenting on Benjamin’s montage approach, Adorno observed:

The most significant is the extraordinary restraint in the formulation of theoretical thoughts in comparison with the enormous treasure of excerpts. This is explained in part by the idea which is formulated explicitly in one place, of the work as pure montage, that is, created from a juxtaposition of quotations so that the theory springs out of it without having to be inserted as interpretations. (Buck-Morss 1991, 73)

This corresponds with the concept of dialects as a mode of investigating the relationship between the image and language. Essentially, it deals with concepts that regard an image-based sense and sensibility as the most authentic form of interpreting history. It is concerned with historical interpretations versus ‘dialectical’ relations. As Benjamin relates,

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present is purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image,
suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images [that is, not archaic]; and the place where one encounters them is language. (Benjamin 1968, 58)

Benjamin saw the image not as a representation of the everyday but as an archetype, a universal symbol for determining the meaning of the historical past. The archival or dialectical image he evoked in the *Arcades Project* is connected to this idea of assembling fragments that never fulfil a specific destiny. Within the context of my mythopoetic project, the anthology of altered postcards from *Archive of the Unfamiliar* references a similar relationship. As a collective of fragments of the past, the postcards evoke a sense of material objects perpetually caught within a liminal space, still capable of invoking meaningful resolve within the present yet having served their original objective.

The *Arcades Project* was an attempt to define the dialectical image. Through his constellations of references and associations, Benjamin perceived the dialectical image as a description of the past that carries the desires of the past generations into the present; an image that crystallizes antithetical elements and where the synthesis of these antithetical elements is not a movement towards resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect. (Stewart 2010, 168)

It is this experience of displacement presented in the materiality of the mythopoetic project that corresponds to a similar Sebaldian sensibility. Components of these materials are fixed to a similar nostalgic resonance in the tableau of postcards, the repeated envelope form and cartographic references within the etching series. Juxtaposing postcard images also assists in evoking different time frames that present the conjuncture of past and present. In a similar fashion to the photographic image, the postcard is valued for its indexical connection to the past, preserving traces of their material referents that alternate between the boundaries of the real and the imagined.

The use of remaindered objects and abandoned texts reconstituted within altered books, collage and assemblages were significant elements within my studio practice at the initial stages of my doctorate undertaking. The exhibition titled *Trace* comprised over seventy individual pieces that each carried traces of fragments of found objects in the form of books, photographs and postcards, which explored the transformative understanding of the relationship between self and place. The act of collecting and collating this resource material as a mode of phenomenological questioning provided an underlying structure to my use of found objects. In this sense, the flotsam and jetsam of altered books, fragments of photographs and abandoned postcards were reconstituted in the hope of establishing alternative understandings of how the past informs the present.
A more deliberate dissolving of narrative is referenced in a series of altered plays completed in 2014 in the final phase of my studio project. The montage of familiar titles of plays that I studied in my school years or works that were residues of siblings’ senior school years, for example, *Death of a Salesman* (Fig. 21), were fragmented and collaged into disparate relationships, austerely bound with black masking tape and wax thread. This series was a continuation of a metaphoric exploration of narrative structure where the wax thread grid used on each play referenced the method often applied in painting to transfer an image onto the canvas before painting. In each work, a window has been cut away from the play’s cover to reveal fragments of descriptions or dialogue, and black masking tape has been used to render it inaccessible, with only the title remaining visible. Ultimately, this final series poetically references the notion of implied narrative that is maintained without the cover of the play being opened. The use of masking tape not only renders the play inaccessible but also establishes a type of ground zero of narrative where, despite the masking off of the narrative, the play in its manifestation as a codex book is still able to invoke a sense of narrative and meaning.

Indeterminately, the collective series of altered plays also establishes a liminal experience with the reference to the play enacted as a theatre performance together with any anticipated narrative having been dissolved to allow for the possibility of encountering alternative and shifting interpretations. The description of Warburg’s accompanying lecture on the *Mnemosyne Atlas* of it being more suited towards a library practice experience, where the audience is able to refer to maps, open dossiers of archival images, and to consult books, offers an appropriate closing comparison with my mythopoetic project. As a single body of work, this analogy of a library or
museum experience corresponds to my intentions for the gallery audience to have a sense that the seemingly disparate collection of prints and artists’ books, tableau of postcards and assemblage elements collectively provided a simulacra experience of involvement in a vaguely historical research project. This enforced uncertainty is reflected in Georges Didi-Huberman’s observation of Warburg’s library:

The library constituted a kind of *opus magnum* in which its author loses himself as much as he constructed a ‘space of thought’ [Denkraum]. In this rhizomatic space art history as an academic discipline underwent the trial of an ordered disorientation. (cited in Johnson 2012, 68)

Ultimately, what the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and the *Mytho-Poetic* studio project impart is the significance of continuing to salvage the fragments of the past that are discarded by both historical and collective memory. With the same sensitivity to the detailed gestures of the past that pieced together Warburg’s *Atlas*, we need to avoid fixing such fragments to any specific contextual past, to enable the colliding narratives to form new constellations for interpreting history’s sway within the present.
Conclusion

The Chronicler

Within the realms of both the collective and personal narratives that ascribe to a larger cultural identity, the desire to secure our individual stories to a seemingly more immersive historical narrative continues to gain ascendency. The abundance of ancestry web sites, the prevalence of memory studies within universities and the emergence of social history research in the last two decades, affirm contemporary Western society’s need to affix self-narratives to the past as a way of discovering a deeper correspondence with the present. This desire to articulate a broader sense of self through a stronger perception of historical identity, as I have recognised, seems to require analysis of the relationship between the marginalised self-narrative and the persistent gathering of collective history bound to notions of a progressive linear narrative. James Macdonald (1981) and James Hillman (1975) recognised the sway that broader cultural identity extends to personal narratives yet believed that self-narratives are often positioned within the margins of historical descriptions through the dominance of empirically based methodologies.

As a useable and personal form of knowledge, mythopoetics identifies that myth operates as a method of understanding the individual’s engagement with life whereby associations with the poetic form allows for the discovery of the vivid meanings that exist within language itself. The incursion of mythopoetics within collective histories as a means of reinscribing self-narrative embraces strategies that accept uncertainty and ambiguity in comparison to the determined narrative of most historiographic practices.

Visual representations of the transitional spaces that exist between the convergence of self-narrative and collective history were represented initially through a discussion of Aby Warburg’s enigmatic Mnemosyne Atlas. Warburg’s immersive atlas of disparate images was presented as a form of cultural memory depository where symbolic and hieroglyphic remainders within art history and contemporary media iconography existed as historical intrusions that continue to disclose meaning within the present. Aligning these shadowy surviving gestures with Richard Semon’s concept of engrams as an embedded emotional response inherited and transmitted by collective memory, Warburg recognised the potential for exploring the primitive within the present-day. Warburg’s concept of Denkraum or thinking space provided a doorway through which the possible deciphering of these symbolic residues could take place. As an underpinning structure to several of the works from my studio outcomes the concept of Denkraum provided a parallel discussion with the mythopoetic’s alliance with the concept of liminal space.

Liminality relates to an experience of time and space where perceptions of identity become fractious and a new sense of personal or collective identity arrives at a point where more significant narratives need to be conceived. The discussion of liminal space within mythopoetic methodologies was significant in providing a platform for exploring self-narratives in my studio outcomes that often occupy a liminal space once engaged within the objective and expansive descriptions of history.

Reflections on the nature of the archival collection and its capacity to define a more complete awareness of the present by making the past more accessible were examined in relation to Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever (1995) and Walter Benjamin’s concept of historical materialism. Derrida’s deconstruction of archival practices reflects on Western society’s fixations in not only recovering the
origins of things but to control and possess their very beginnings. Regardless of the archive’s potential to mediate a more comprehensive understanding of the past Derrida regards the process as a continuum of incompleteness and remains essentially flawed. The metaphoric associations between memory and the archive is dispelled by Carolyn Steedman’s (2002) suggestion that the archive is unlike memory in that it does not include everything from the past but is a conscious selection of materials and narratives alongside the unusual and fragmented. Susan Stewart (1993) similarly identifies the discussion of the fractious nature of the archive with reflections on the re-contextualisation of artefacts as they enter a regulated system of taxonomic classification. For Stewart the systems of cataloguing and classification evident in contemporary museum, public library collections and natural history museums often takes precedence over the original context of collections and objects.

This is reinforced through the sighting of social theorist Michel Foucault’s questioning of such institutions manipulation of the relationship between the collector, the collection and the viewer. In The Order of Things (1962) Foucault recognises the transformation of collecting methodologies that from the Renaissance through to modernity has transformed from a fluid collision of associations to the present day totalising order that too regularly reinforce a linear and progressive historical narrative. Within the context of my studio practice a referencing of the fracturing of such imposed archival structures is addressed in a number of outcomes that are presented as disparate archival collections.

A discussion of Walter Benjamin’s methodology of literary montage, realised in both Berlin Childhood (1933) and The Arcades Project (1927-40) was used to illustrate how the placing of self-narrative within historiographic reflections could operate as a metaphoric suspension of the concept of history as a linear progression. The non-linear historiography expressed through Benjamin’s methodology finds comparative associations within my studio outcomes where a series of artists’ books engage disparate diaristic text combined with random illustrations that attempts to dissolve any reference to a progressive narrative structure. An outline of concepts relating to metaphor and poetic logic provided a contextual reference for the poetic narrative patterns that are frequently invoked through the use of found objects and collected ephemera in my studio practice.

Structures of poetic discourse are discussed in reference to Gaston Bachelard’s poetic survey of the intimate spaces of our everyday experiences presented in The Poetics of Space (1958). The suggestion by Steedman that in adopting a similar poetic gaze towards the creation of historical narratives and the archive collection supports a conviction that history, like the corners of Bachelard’s intimate spaces, is relentlessly exposed to the capture of poetic and imaginative interpretations. The referencing of poetic form in relation to my studio outcomes is also reinforced through reflections on mythopoetic’s connection to a non-conceptual approach in providing meaningful connections to the individual’s experience of the world.

A discussion of the literary works of W.G. Sebald referenced a methodology that conflates first-person narratives and historical perceptions as a mode of both rediscovering and reinforcing identity. For Sebald collective histories provide a narrative mode for navigating and telling of a story where the concept of how the past informs the present is manifest in the trace. The recurring engagement of both personal and collective archives by the protagonists in each of his novels acts as a catalyst in reinforcing the continued influences of structures set in place centuries ago. These collections are
also used to explore representations of the past as palimpsest traces that continue to evoke subtle yet lasting tension between the collective and the personal. This conjuncture of biographical, autobiographical and historical description is reflected in my studio outcomes through the use of found objects reconfigured as archival assemblages that reference a collision of self-narrative and collective histories.

The sighting of W.G. Sebald’s use of found and manipulated photographs within the narrative structure of all his novels provided a further example of destabilising traditional narrative structure as well as questioning the mnemonic character of the photographic image. Sebald’s mnemonic questioning evidenced through the use of photographs was extended into a discussion of the vast photographic archive of Gerhard Richter’s Atlas (1961-present). The extensive archive of personally sourced and found photographs that now amounts to over several thousand presents an enigmatic collision between collective histories and autobiographical references. The artist’s grounding of references to personal identity through the use of family photographs in juxtaposition with historical and popular media images has the effect of dismantling any artistic control in preference for an encyclopaedic gathering devoid of indexical clues.

Attention to the early artists’ books of Anselm Kiefer despite their anti-archival use of remaindered materials the narrative structure is a very deliberate and conscious blending of personal narrative, historiographic references and myth. In many cases the formatting of these early books were fashioned like scrap books with a collection of fragmented collaged elements that included photographs, hand written text, drawing and painting. Kiefer’s use of the self-portrait in photographic form provided the source material for a series of staged self-narratives that attempt to deconstruct the sway of history in connection to existential self. A further discussion of liminality was presented in relation to Kiefer’s artists’ books as their montage format and absence of any fixed narrative invokes the transitional realm of liminal space.

The final chapter presented descriptions of significant outcomes from my studio practice underpinned to varying degrees by the methodology of montage collision referenced in the discussion of Aby Warburg’s Mnemoyne Atlas and Walter Benjamin’s practice of historical materialism. A poetic and metaphoric referencing is established in the use of collected ephemera that questions the relationship between the fragmented evidence of the past and the specific narratives of first-person experience. The engagement of mythopoetic based self-narratives within collective history challenges traditional forms of historiographic descriptions by calling into question essential assumptions about the nature of identity, time and space. History’s objectification of personal stories often evokes a sense of alienation and displacement.

The duel vision of the historical and the individual conflates within the structure of the archive and within the de facto histories of the artefacts themselves. The reinscribing of self-narratives within collective history requires a process where our personal stories maintain a strong connection to a blend of poetic narrative, archive document and historical detail. The recurring methodology of Warburg, Benjamin and Sebald in allowing for the emergence of a fluid collision of disparate images whose poetic blending with our collective history establishes an attitude of Benjamin’s chronicler who collects but avoids the need to categorize and who sees the need to rescue everything from being lost in history, not because everything has meaning but because nothing is unimportant.
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