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Author

Hussey-Smith, Kelly

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APART & A PART: A NEED FOR NARRATIVE

Kelly Hussey-Smith, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University

Occasionally, as the light changes at the end of the day, just before sunset, I can still be overcome by the sensation: 'it's too late now for anyone to visit us in the Home today.' (Sheedy, 2005, p. 67)

Abstract: For many individuals who spent time in institutional and out-of-home care during the 20th century, the experience was marked by longing, loss, and displacement. This paper outlines theoretical and methodological directions in the collaborative work, *Apart and A Part*, and introduces some of the key works resulting from this collaboration with Australian care leavers. The historical and theoretical work of John Murphy (2010) is used to discuss the complexities of the formation of memory, narrative, and identity, and the work of Margaret Somers (1994) and David Carr (1986) is used to explore how intrinsic narrative and belonging are to our ontology. Many individuals who grew up in institutional care have inconsistent records of their heritage and therefore a linear history can be difficult to construct due to a lack of information, the withholding of information by authorities, or the impacts of trauma and grief on the individual.

If, as Murphy, Somers and Carr suggest, a narrative is an ontological requirement for sense making and the avoidance of chaos, then it is not difficult to imagine the confusion and loss that many children who were raised in state, church, or foster care experienced when trying to construct adult narratives of the self. Through blending oral history, creative non-fiction and collaborative art practice, *Apart and A Part* explores how life has played out for individuals after leaving out-of-home care, and investigates how this can be represented through non-linear approaches to storytelling and narrative.



Occasionally, as the light changes at the end of the day, just before sunset, I can still be overcome by the sensation: 'it's too late now for anyone to visit us in the Home today'.

For many individuals who spent time in institutional and out-of-home care during the 20th century the experience was marked by longing, loss, and displacement. This paper outlines key theoretical and methodological directions in the collaborative work, *Apart and A Part*, and introduces some of the key works produced as a result of this collaboration.

Through collaborative dialogue this visual research aims to locate how the institutional or 'care' experience has manifested in the lives of care leavers and how this has affected notions of self. The work attempts to capture the affective dimensions of trauma, memory, and narrative, adding to an established body of literature on the institution and an emerging body of literature on Australian Care Leavers, the term that describes an individual who spent time in institutional or out-of-home

care in the 20th century, while exploring contemporary approaches to visual arts inquiry that allow non-rational and intangible aspects of the lived experience to be interrogated and communicated.

An estimated 500,000 children were placed in institutional or out-of-home-care during the 20th Century in Australia. Many individuals identify as being harmed as a result of this 'care', and continue to experience the impacts of abuse and neglect in their adult lives (Penglase, 2005; Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). There are many reasons why children were placed in care, including social, political and religious pressure in addition to personal reasons. In many cases, questions of *why* children ended up in care are unknown because of inadequate record keeping, or records being lost, withheld, censored, or impossible to interpret (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). As such, these gaps in individual narratives create what Taryn Simon (2011a) refers to in her work, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, as the unobtainable archive (Simon, 2012b).

Investigations, such as the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, and reports, such as the *2004 Senate Committee Report:*

Forgotten Australians, are tremendously important, and contain emotional testimonies, but they are also institutional, bureaucratic and detached. *Apart and A Part* addresses what I consider to be a gap in the telling of these histories.

Connecting our lived experience to others assists our ability to construct narratives of the self and make sense of our lives (Carr, 1986, Somers, 1994, Murphy, 2010). When a story lacks a guardian, or when the guardian of a story is institutional, bureaucratic or detached, narratives of the self can confuse and fracture, rather than illuminate and connect. In this context, as described by Brad Zellar (2012) in *House of Coates*, we can understand “the difference between *apart* and *a part*” (p. VI) as the void felt by many care leavers both in and out of care.

Building on approaches in contemporary documentary practice, the methodology developed in *Apart and A Part* also blends aspects of community arts practice, oral history, creative non-fiction, and heuristics to assist in embracing the ethical and political challenges of making work with communities. The work is not a retelling of abuse, or a series of testimonies, but rather an exploration of how life has played out for individuals on leaving out-of-home care, and how this can be represented through non-linear approaches to storytelling and narrative.

A P A R T

In understanding the legacy of the institution, I have engaged Erving Goffman’s (1991) seminal work on the total institution to understand the fracturing of individual identities and the legacy on the self. In its most literal definition Goffman describes the “total institution” as a place of residence where there is a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating sleep, recreation, and work (p. 17) and “where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (p. 11). Through “contamination” and “mortification” of the self”, the individual becomes easier to control (p. 34-46) and individual refractions easier to identify and discipline (p. 18). In his analysis of Goffman’s *Asylums*, Greg Smith (2006) states that “it is our ‘civilian selves’ that come under attack upon entry to the ‘total institution’” (p. 72)

and that the intention is to de-identify individuals from “*expressive civilians*” to “*homogenous inmates*” through a re-programming of the self (p. 72). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1991) describes the ongoing legacy of the institution as a shift in the mechanisms of control from external to internal surveillance, disciplining an individual’s psyche, rather than their physical self. Christie Davies (1989) argues that many of the features of a total institution are incompatible with many of the social institutions of a western democracy and the basic structure of family and social life (p. 78), and as Goffman observed, moving between these two worlds can be “painfully experienced” (p. 25).



Kelly Hussey-Smith *Objects of oppression #1*, 2014.

A PART

Margaret Somers (1994) argues that “narrative is an ontological condition of social life” (p. 606). Her way of thinking about narrative connects our ontological need for narrative with the construction of our self-identity (p. 606). David Carr (1986) suggests that maintaining a narrative is a reaction to the threat of “impending chaos” (p. 91) thus implying that narratives allow us to distil information into coherent pathways that assist us in relating to, and understanding, the world (p. 91).

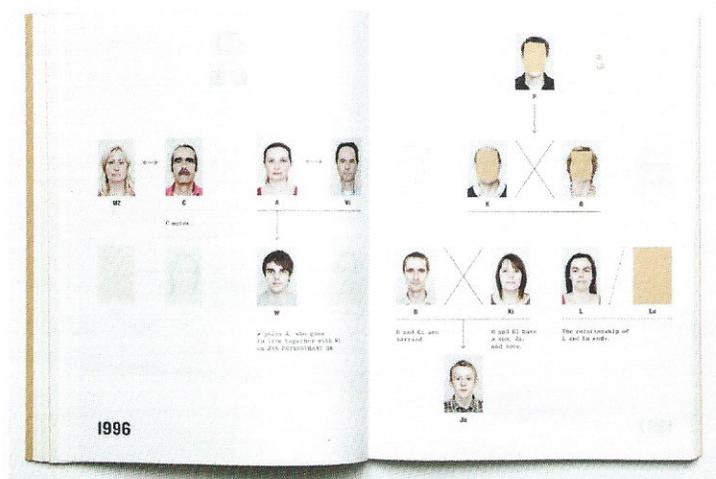
Sequences of events may be missing due to a lack of information, the withholding of information by authorities, or the impacts of trauma and grief on the individual. In his extensive oral history project with Australian Care-Leavers John Murphy (2010) found that while most participants had some understanding of

their “narrative origins” (p. 304) a large number of care leavers were forced to become “archivists of the self” (p. 302) to make sense of these narrative fragments.



Kelly Hussey-Smith *No return address*, 2013.

At the crux of the issue is the desire to belong to people; as Somers suggests, it is part of our “ontological condition” (p. 614). If a narrative is an ontological requirement for sense making, and a way of avoiding chaos, then it is not difficult to imagine the confusion and loss that many children who were raised in state, church, or foster care experienced as care leavers when trying to construct adult narratives of the self.



From the book *___ and Willem* by Willem Popelier.
Reproduced with permission from the artist.

In the book, *___ And Willem: Documentation of a youth*, Willem Popelier (2010) revisits his separation from his identical twin brother at age four. Employing evidentiary documentation through imaging objects, documents, photographs and people he painstakingly retraces the impacts of the separation. Popelier addresses the idea of ‘narrative confusion’ by asking the viewer to follow a complex representation of familial relationships represented diagrammatically through the family tree. In doing so, the reader simultaneously experiences

confusion and loss. The final chapter of the book consists of a series of photographs of Willem and ‘___’ participating in childish rites of passage – birthdays, holidays at the beach, riding bikes – first together then separately, clearly addressing the very real difference between apart and a part.

In *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, Taryn Simon (2011a) looks at the trans-generational impacts of a single event or chain of events. The work presents a genealogy of descendants that stem directly from this event, effectively broadening the notion of our ‘physical and psychological inheritance’. Simon suggests a bloodline is an “absolute catalogue” (Simon, 2011b) and perhaps the most objective evidence of our existence. By extension, she argues the impacts of external factors such as governance, power, institutions and religion become easier to identify when applied to this catalogue (Simon, 2012a). Furthermore, she suggests that the real knowledge in her work, the “unobtainable archive”, exists in the unwitting testimony of the gaps between the eighteen stories (Simon, 2012b). Combining Simon’s argument that a bloodline is an ‘absolute catalogue’ with Somers’ argument that a narrative is an ‘ontological necessity’, we can assume that connection is central to defining the self.

A P A R T & A P A R T

After an initial period of meeting care leavers and listening to their stories, I began to question the appropriateness of commonly employed methods in photographic and academic evidentiary data collection (structured interviews, typological portraits, and testimonies), quite simply because I could see little benefit in asking participants to directly retell their trauma. I became interested in how to communicate the ongoing impacts of these experiences rather than the event itself. In *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Ulrich Baer (2002) draws attention to the difficulties in locating and understanding traumatic experiences through conventions of realism. Baer is interested in the way traumatic lived experiences are recalled and form memory, in that they are more likely to be non-linear, visual and sensorial, fragments of events and places rather than coherent narratives. He contends this should not “invalidate their realness”; instead it should challenge our perception of how trauma and loss imprint on a lived experience (Baer, 2002, p. 8-10).

Likewise, Carr argues that fragments of non-linear memory are “permanently present, at the periphery of our consciousness” but as they are not the dominant form of memory expression, they are associated more with “madness” than they are narrative expression (Carr, 1986, p. 88). When we consider that the individuals experiencing the trauma were adolescents, children, toddlers and babies, who had little to no experience of how to contextualise their experiences, we can begin to imagine how these experiences imprint an adult psyche.

In their work on adoption and family narrative, Brookfield, Brown and Reavy (2008) state that “far from being a solitary activity, the memories we hold of our past are collectively formed out of the storytelling practices which we, and significant others, participate in” (p. 475). For care leavers, the absence of a structure for remembering may mean it is difficult to anchor memories and lineages coherently. Brookfield, Brown and Reavy use the term ‘joint remembering’ to discuss the process of anchoring memories into a collective bank as it is often families and significant others who play a key role in bridging the gap between past and present (2008, p. 475). Murphy (2010) states that, “We do not so much ‘have’ memories as ‘remember’ them, actively re-shaping them in ways that make the past continue to be coherent” (p. 300). Therefore, for many care leavers, these gaps in personal narratives can “create uncertainty” and, for many, the act of memory making has become “...an exercise in merging fiction with bureaucratic fact” (Brookfield, Brown and Reavy, 2008 p.476).

Early conversations with care leavers precipitated a conscious turn away from recording narratives of abuse and neglect as it became clear such methods could play into the ‘language of the institution’ by recreating a standardised and depersonalised ‘institutional’ gaze. Murphy suggests that standardised appearances, clothing, and narratives, all contributed to feeling like “an object in an administrative machine” (2010, p. 305). In response to this, collaborations with participants expanded to broader conversations and observations of life after the institution. In short, as I came to understand the enduring impacts of the institutional propensity to ‘depersonalise’ and ‘standardise’, I felt the need for a visual response to be less serialised because the impacts varied and each person’s lived experience was unique.



Trevor and Jane*, from *Trevor's Archive*

A P A R T

As this paper discusses evolving work, I will focus on turning points that have given direction to the project.

I met Trevor in the early stages of the project. He was open about his experiences growing up in both institutional and foster care. He considers himself “one of the lucky ones” (T. Laird, personal communication, 7 August 2012) because when he was fostered out as a child, it was with his younger sister Jane* at a time when it was common practice for siblings to be separated.

As we continued our conversations he mentioned he had recently lost a significant amount of his personal archive in a fire. I was interested in the idea of a ‘personal archive’, as I didn’t think about my own identity as one that I was consciously archiving. Trevor had been a ballroom dancing champion from a young age, and had meticulously collected evidence of his achievements in the absence of anyone else doing so. We began to refer to his archive as a kind of family album because, just like most family albums, the archive neglected to include any signs of unhappiness, stasis or fracturing. A week before meeting Trevor I had discarded a significant part of my own ‘archive’ including symbols of achievement, clippings, photographs, and cards of celebration. It was a privilege for me to let go of those objects. I had never worried about being forgotten, because my archive has guardians. On realising this, we decided to photograph every object in Trevor’s archive.

In *Light in the Darkroom, Photography and Loss*, Jay Prosser (2005) explores photography’s inherent

relationship with loss, primarily through the idea that “...the presence of a photograph indicates its subject’s absence” (p.1). He describes photography as a form of “autobiographical loss” (p.21) in that every image is not only a reference to the death of a moment, but to the passing of that moment’s presence. I came to see the contents of Trevor’s archive as similarly complex, in that it is at once a celebration of achievement, but also a reminder of the absence of witnesses to these achievements.

Trevor was never told why he ended up in care, just that his ‘mother didn’t want him’ – four words that we know, due to the complexities of the social, political and religious attitudes of the time and the lack of a welfare state (Swain & Howe, 1995), are most likely untrue - but which are of course devastating for a child to adopt as part of his identity. Trevor’s substantial archive is then weighed against the void created by the ‘unobtainable archive’.



Michelle Rose Turnbull (formerly Michael Charles),
Nudgee Orphanage, Age Unknown

Michelle Rose remembers being handed her files in a government office waiting room and being unable to make sense of the ‘bureaucratic memory’ embedded

in the documents. What was presented was a series of bureaucratic forms purporting to represent 21 years of life as a ward of the state. Most of the text had been ‘whited out’ with her name being the only information remaining on many of the pages received. The unwitting testimony of the void, embedded in the pragmatic, clinical, and administrative case file language, is demonstrative of how non-stakeholders document lived experience.

A turning point in our collaboration came from Michelle’s recollection of being pushed to the back of photographs - because her status in the orphanage as ‘illegitimate’ - made her less attractive to prospective adoptive families. Michelle had no knowledge she had been born out of wedlock nor did she have an understanding of the social context surrounding discriminatory labels, but being ‘pushed to the back’ remained an acute memory. Significantly, the photograph triggering this memory is the only image Michelle has seen of herself before the age of 21.



Kelly Hussey-Smith, *Michelle Rose-Turnbull*, 2013

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, these collaborations don’t seek to provide broad sociological context (such as strata, poverty, health), but rather to provide specific,

personal context, through locating the affective dimensions of loss and longing. At the crux of the work is the desire to belong to a story about people. What has been highlighted through this process is that this form of collaborative practice, based on a constant and evolving dialogue between collaborators and myself, in some ways mimics the process of memory-making. Such a framework opens up new channels of communication where both parties can explore narrative construction through actively ‘remembering’ experiences that exist outside the more dominant institutional narratives and, by extension, ask new audiences to remember them too. We hope the process validates these lived experiences, despite their variation from dominant narratives of belonging.



Kelly Hussey-Smith *The Embrace*, 2014.

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Kelly Hussey-Smith is a Brisbane based artist and lecturer at the Queensland College of Art where she is also completing her PhD research project: *apart and a part*.