

# REMEMBERING THE PRESENT



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Hanna, our families and all our friends.

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# **REMEMBERING THE PRESENT**

**On the photographic representation of  
memory in the work of Sara Ahde**

**Richard N. Jones, Sara Ahde**

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves...such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account—whether forgotten or repressed—as by what is actually told.

Annette Kuhn

The camera saves a set of appearances from the otherwise inevitable supersession of further appearances. It holds them unchanging. And before the invention of the camera, nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory.

John Berger

The discourse on the relationship between photography and its use as an evidentiary support for the extenuated preservation of both individual and cultural memory has long been a problematic one. From its earliest beginnings alongside the tumultuous and reverberating social upheavals of the industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, when Niépce and Daguerre first began to experiment and develop the chemical processes necessary for producing the first ever permanent images of a world reduced to a set of static appearances frozen in time, humanity's perception of that world would definitively and unalterably never be the same again. Indeed, the philosophical implications for photography, as both a form of visual culture and as an indispensable technology for pulling apart and re-examining the vestiges of the past in all its contexts, has generated an enormous amount of literature on the subject, and has been tackled, with varying degrees of success, by numerous academics; most notably by Roland Barthes in his seminal work on the subject, *Camera Lucida* (1981), and by Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (1979). But more recently, the field of inquiry has been greatly expanded by the work of, amongst others, Annette Kuhn, Jonathan Crary and Geoffrey Batchen to include a reassessment of the role of photography from within the relativist discord of the postmodernist debate, calling in to question its validity as a viable source of historical knowledge in an age where the everyday saturation of photographic imagery has reduced humanity's sensitivity to depictions of the world through an overconsumption of fabricated ephemeral images. But what does it mean to consider the actual possibility of using the medium of photography with the sole intention of reconstructing the past in the present, if indeed such an undertaking is at all possible?



The overall scope and legitimacy of the photographic image as a form of visual documentation—in part due to the fact that it only offers the viewer a discontinuous and fleeting glimpse of moments from the past—is inevitably limited to how we experience its ambiguities as an object for consumption and in what contextual mode those ambiguities ultimately come to be viewed and engaged with. Photography, like human experience, is discursive by nature and relies, to a large extent, upon a certain level of interaction in order for it to attain the meaning(s) that the photographer or artist using the medium ascribes to it. Photographs carry with them a wide variety of different meanings for different people, and so it is therefore very unlikely that any two individuals would have the same opinion about or, indeed, experience of viewing any one particular image. As visual records that attempt to narrativise, distil and demystify specific occurrences that have already become lost to history, a photograph seldom presents the viewer with all the pieces necessary to convincingly complete the puzzle and view what is essentially a much larger picture. Photographs, as a consequence of their making, always present the viewer with something of an edited view, a visual conundrum that inevitably opens the door to both conjecture and supposition.

Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *fait divers*. The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination....Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

(Sontag, 1979: 23)

Nowadays, from a contemporary theoretical stand-point at least, photographs are increasingly coming to be viewed more as the representation of traces of the past as opposed to actual depictions of it, and, in some ways, this is very similar to how the human mind perceives recollections of the past as well, insofar as memory is also highly selective about what it chooses to remember. The optical adaptations and psychological impact that photography engendered, as Cray has suggested, emerged within a relatively short period of time, and as a consequence broke new ground in opening up hitherto unknown modes of perception which in turn seemed to offer a renewed fascination concerning the discourse on human



subjectivity. The evolutionary processes that have resulted in humanity acquiring and developing the cognitive abilities necessary for the retention of memories ultimately boils-down to the mechanics of perception, and photography, as Celia Lury has pointed out, 'has given rise to novel configurations of self- and collective identity, experience and information.'<sup>1</sup> The advent of the photographic image has, then, produced an ambiguous chasm within humanity's understanding of the subjective experience of both time and memory, which in turn has allowed for the disembodiment of memory from its former locus as a purely internalised condition unique to the human mind, cutting memories loose 'so that they no longer have clear individual or territorial boundaries.'<sup>2</sup>

Unlike painting or language, photography can never deny its past, that the thing existed and was there in front of the camera, but that real is lost the moment the photograph itself comes into being. And it is this that is the very essence of photography – its *noeme*, that is to say, its 'that-has-been' or its intractability.

(Homer, 2005: 93)

Born in northern Finland in 1979, Sara Ahde produces disarmingly simple images that are intended to evocatively articulate the presence of a world haunted by the emotional burden of one's past. The disquieting austerity that populates the representational logic of these images is partially supported by the fact that, upon first inspection, they appear to usurp the visual language of vernacular or everyday photography as a strategy for exposing (and perhaps underplaying) the psychological impact of their content. The immediacy and apparent randomness of the way in which many of the images are captured—often employing the spontaneous exposures of Polaroid film - has the uncanny effect of revealing a latent sense of foreboding that all too often undermines the viewer's response, particularly when considered in relation to the apparent ordinariness of work's presentation. Ahde's primary aesthetic concern is with the retroactive representation of a highly specific and emotive vision of the past. In her returns to specific locations that she most associates with particular memories, Ahde uses the medium of photography to make a visual record of the site, and, in some cases, even goes so far as to stage partial reconstructions of the narrative framework from which the memories of the locations in question arose in an attempt to preserve some of the underlying emotional content that the event's significance has had on her life. As the





artist has herself stated, ‘photography for me is the documentation of moments from the past that become memories with emotions attached to them’<sup>3</sup>. The overall effect of this mode of representation is that much of Ahde’s work can be somewhat difficult to quantify in terms of its visual appeal, especially when the categorical underpinnings of its largely (auto)biographical content are taken into account. But do the images succeed in actually conveying the sentiment to which the artist ultimately intends for the work to produce?

If we are to accept these images at face-value and attempt to understand them as actual reconstructions of moments from the past made palpable in the present—which, rather paradoxically, they have already become in the instant of their creation—then one must begin to deconstruct the narrative thread which has ostensibly been presented in order for the spectator to fathom the desired reading to which the artist intended. What becomes immediately clear upon first viewing the work is that there arises an apparent conflict of interests between artist and spectator. The viewer must call into question what is actually being presented and why, and what the meaning of its significance is intended to intimate in accordance with the viewer’s perception of it. But these propositions in themselves present yet another rather problematic issue, because, as a necessary condition of their creation, the works are presented to the spectator in the form of staged events, as recreations that refer back to events that have already passed out of the continuous sequence of time and without the knowledge the viewer needs to piece together their emotional connection to the artist. All the viewer has to go on are the titles of the works—which are themselves rather ambiguous—and from this conclusions must be drawn. This is further complicated, as was touched upon above, by the fact that no two individuals are ever capable of sharing the exact same experience of the same event, and instead, we, as the viewers of the work, are invited to refocus our attention on trusting the intuition of the artist at what is in actuality actually being presented to us. The conceptual premise of Ahde’s project is therefore ultimately unknowable under the normal conditions of artistic practice, because it would require an inter-subjective leap of faith in order for the viewer to truly experience the projected intimations of another person’s memories. But from within this gap, however, there still exists the possibility and the opportunity for the viewer to empathise with what another has (re)remembered and to explore its discursive parameters as an archival resource for the narrativisation of the self and all that that entails. Ahde’s photography can therefore both be seen and read as a text that serves



to illuminate its subject as a material referent in a set of circumstances that no longer exist, however qualified or limited that referent may be at drawing out the implications of its origination.

What is perhaps most intriguing about Ahde's photography is that the artist herself is curiously absent from her work, and this realisation operates on a number of different levels that intersect and re-contextualise the viewer's relationship to the images. Whilst it is almost certainly true that no one is effectively capable of representing themselves from within the confines of a memory, as memories are generated from without as subjective recordings of the passage of time, Ahde chooses not to depict herself as a presence in her work to facilitate a means of distancing herself from the spectator's interpretation as well as her own relationship to the documented material. What arises as a result of this situation is a shift in the relational values between, on the one hand, the spectator's perceptions and, on the other, the artist's intentions. Upon viewing the work, the observer becomes implicated as a stand-in for the artist insofar as the viewer assumes the subjective stand-point of the artist herself; the viewer is forced to observe the photograph—which in this case is also a stand-in for a memory as well—as if it was remembered by the observer him or herself. The viewer essentially experiences an inter-subjective exchange and becomes implicit in what is being depicted. Rather paradoxically, it is almost as if one becomes both the subject of the memory and the memory's subject as it is or was remembered in the first instant—which is to say that one experiences the memory in the form of a second-hand event so to speak. The image, as a result of this displacement, then becomes a window for the spectator's own subjective experience of remembering the event as it would have happened, albeit in a very fragmentary configuration. The viewing subject is thus simultaneously transposed to become both the observer of the event as well as the subject who originally preserved its memory. The observer is essentially reduced to a prosthetic anomaly with the sole purpose of revealing the artist's presence to the viewer. The success of the work, then, is largely based on whether or not this set of conditions is fulfilled in the viewing subject in order for the work to attain its intended retroactive effect. Ahde's photographic revisitations necessitate an involuntary regression on the part of the viewer, an othering that punctuates the very essence of the self and its discourse, which under normal circumstances would remain foreclosed from the otherwise ordinary everyday experience of remembering.



For Barthes, however, photography becomes not only a device that enables one to return to the past, but concomitantly functions as a tacit phenomenological construct that allows for the mourning of a photograph's passing and, by default, the latent reality to which it refers. Photographs mark an occurrence that produces

an image for a consciousness that essentially mourns an absent object or person rather than relishing its presence. Photography provides an image of actual people and places that become "certified" as really having been there. If photography bespeaks a past presence, it also ultimately refers to death...forcing us to stare more directly at reality.

(Rabaté, 1997: 3)

...in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography....what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.

(Barthes, 1981: 76/77)

So if this is the case, and photography does necessitate a certain re-imagining of the past and an incitement to remember, what is it that we actually think about when we think about the past? And what is it that we remember most when we look back and open up to scrutiny the intimate details of the lives we believe ourselves to have lived? For most of us, memories remain a remote collection of disassociated instances, each enveloped by an impenetrable cloud of mystery and often accompanied by an unfathomable twinge of recognition that resonates deep within the chemical processes of the brain itself. Memories, which are the very foundation upon which the realisation of each and every preceding moment is built, are likewise a continuously shifting assemblage of muddled impressions and compartmentalised sensations that seemingly drift in and out of our conscious perceptions of them, regardless of whether we want them to or not. Indeed, it is certainly not an uncommon occurrence for one to experience, for whatever reason, the sudden and involuntary manifestation of an inexplicable memory—the face of an old friend or relative, or an insignificant recollection









from childhood—which has unconsciously trespassed the tentative boundary that forever separates the unremitting present from the receding haze of the past without the slightest hint of mutual consent. Put quite simply, memories, one might suggest, are perhaps one of life's most uncertain of certainties; they are the elusive representative of the narrative history of the self, a self that one is never quite granted the unconditional access to that one might ultimately desire most. A photograph, then, much the same as a memory, can likewise be seen as a 'souvenir sent like a postcard into the future.'<sup>4</sup>

But with this realisation there also comes something of an ethical responsibility on the part of the photographer, which concerns the ability of photography to provoke certain nostalgic responses that all too often cloud human judgement into making certain assumptions about the truth and the nature of the reality that one believes one has perceived and remembered, or, indeed, experienced. Derived from a mixture of the Greek word *nostos* (to return home) and the Latin *algos* (pain), nostalgia is characterised as a melancholic longing to return to an idealised past which is looked upon with great affection. Or to directly interpret the etymological foundations of the word's meaning in its purest form: the pain a sick person feels because of a wish to return to a native home that is feared will never be seen again. The concept of nostalgia is thus formed from the tentative longings of a false impression (or a false memory) that finds its cause in an irrational distortion of the past. The memory of the town of Combray, for example, in Proust's epic novel *In Search of Lost Time*, was not Combray as it really existed, but was rather a fantasised (phantasmatic) vision of the town as it was thought to have existed in the mind of the narrator as he recalls impressions remembered from childhood—an idealised Combray packed full of a wistful nostalgia to return to a past that in actuality never really was. Whilst it could be argued that Ahde is only concerned with revisiting the memory of certain events to draw out the emotional turbulence of their traumatic kernel, the notion of a nostalgic return to the past nevertheless permeates the very fabric of the images she produces. And from within this nostalgic enclave, there also arises certain concessions: the ability of a photograph to heal a rift in the past allowing for the reclamation of its meaning through its revisitation. Indeed, Freud believed that the feelings of melancholia that one most associates with nostalgia were in fact rooted in his notion of mourning; the quintessential difference being that in mourning the lost object is eventually grieved over, allowing for the possibility of one to move on, but with nostalgia, however,



those feelings are never properly worked-through and the lost object continues to remain a source of avid fixation. As Sontag wrote, '[p]hotographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help individuals to take possession of [a] space in which they are [themselves] insecure.'<sup>5</sup> If we are to follow this line of reasoning, then, and allow for the possibility of photography to act as a kind of therapeutic prop that enables one to redress the imbalances of one's life, then perhaps it is only through a working-through of the past that images of this kind represent that one can fully begin to stake out the position of one's relation to the world and the place that one's memories must ultimately come to occupy within it. Margaret Atwood was perhaps able to sum it up best when she wrote that '[t]he memory is no friend. It can only tell you what you no longer have.'<sup>6</sup>

It is often said that time waits for no man, and the myriad ways in which we choose to interpret and remember certain recollections about the past, as Proust's work uniquely highlights, are plagued with a variety of representational challenges that can be difficult to overcome. There can be no circularity, no actual return to the past in the medium of photography, because (and this is also true of memory) any moment that one endeavours to recapture will inevitably have moved on before there has been sufficient time to properly digest its significance. In this sense, time and memory are both always perceived as essentially abstract ideas, because their substance is continuously shifting to the immediate data of consciousness and ultimately out of reach. But nevertheless, memories still remain imbued with the inescapable presence of the reality from which they germinate, no matter how unpleasant that reality might be to entertain. Memory by itself is therefore an unreliable witness and is often given over to certain distortions that present endless permutations. The limited abilities of a photograph, by proxy, to "remember correctly" on behalf of its subject is incompatible with securing the infinitesimal details of a life that is inexorably always in the constant process of moving forward. Photographs are only ever capable of recording instants that have been cut from the continuous sequence of reality as it is lived. Photographs represent an edited form of a narrative cut away from the gratification of its resolution. In this respect, Ahde's reconstructions are not so dissimilar to dream images, because they are presented, as dreams are presented to the mind, so as to be split-off from the remainder of their content in the sequential unfolding of the events and situations that they depict. The non-linearity of pictures take on the weight of suspended narratives that allow for only the possibility of a hint



at their numerous untold outcomes. What the viewer essentially encounters and is left with are merely a collection of jumbled fragments that refuse to divulge any adequate explanation for the encounters that they unconsciously seek to tell us.

The tentative relationship between photography and the study of memory has often (sometimes incorrectly) been labelled as a reciprocal one. In direct opposition to the subjective copying of reality that relied upon the accuracy and co-ordination of the artist's hand and eye, the wide-spread use of photography succeeded in preserving the material essence of the past and kept 'open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces.' To view a photograph is to be caught in the grip of what has already been removed from the normal flow of time, and in that paradoxical situation—in that the material referent of a photograph is simultaneously both present and absent—a variety of misconceptions can begin to arise. Photographs, as Sontag wrote, are 'a thin slice of time',

a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs – especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie...they are attempts to lay claim to another reality.

(Sontag, 1979: 16)

Whilst it can be endlessly debated as to whether or not the mimetic presence of photography actually does preserve a measure of the material essence of reality without distorting or idealising the remnants of its content, it can be inferred that photographs do serve as a reminder of a reality that one can never again experience in the same way. 'Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality...of making it stand still....One can't possess the present but one can possess the past.'<sup>8</sup> And it is in this sense that one should begin to approach and understand the representational logic of Ahde's returns to the past. Ahde's images, to some extent, do seem to suggest a way of both possessing the past, but, at the same time, of also keeping it at a distance. The apparitions of her memories effectively reside in two distinct places at the same time, separated by an unequivocal distance that disrupts the boundaries of their evocation.



In his essay, *Uses of Photography* (1979), John Berger makes the shape distinction between two realms of photographic experience: namely the private and the public. But in drawing this distinction, he also calls into question the validity of photography, as it is consumed in the public sphere, to accurately record what memory, independent of the image upon which it relies, has itself remembered. Berger points out that photographs possess a certain tendency to have their content mythologized in such a way that they can be endlessly manipulated to serve a variety of different purposes depending on the context in which they come to be shown. A photograph by itself, he suggests, is unable to choose the meaning that ultimately comes to be associated with it, and it is precisely in this misconception that photographs achieve their status as cultural artefacts that reveal not so much about the meaning of their content but more about the meaning that people seek to find in them. ‘Unlike memory’, he writes, ‘photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearance—with all the credulity and gravity we normally lend to appearances—prised away from their meaning....Photographs in themselves do not narrate. Photographs preserve instant appearances.’<sup>9</sup> Or to put it another way, photographs are indifferent to meaning. There exists, then, a discrepancy between the intentionality of a photograph and that of the meaning to which it purports to elicit in its intended audience. Once removed from the continuum of time, the entropy of a memory that a photograph leaves behind as its trace often begins to take on a life of its own, and it is from within this set of circumstances that ambiguities begin to complicate the photographic method and present us with an irresolvable representational dilemma that invites us to reflect upon what it is that we have in the end truly seen.

Ahde’s photography, as we have seen, deals implicitly with the heuristic efficacy of trying to recapture, consolidate and distil the emotional essence of specific moments from her past. Although her work is characterised by the subtleties of its outward ambiguities, the reconstituted recollections of half-remembered events and neglected moments that the imagery endeavours to intimate marks an attempt to reconcile the inevitability of the passing of time and our experience of it as we each pass into the collective memories of one another and those closest to us. Or to put it in another way, if we posit that the notion of memory is, in its most fundamental incarnation, the ostensible reproduction of our conscious experience of time—the quilting point where subjectivity and reality coalesce—then, as Kuhn has observed, ‘remembering is clearly an activity that takes place in the present.’ In her photographs of





empty waiting rooms and semi-deserted landscapes, Ahde's photography charts the emotional depths of a world cast open to the overabundance of the presence of absence—the having 'been there' that equates to the collisions of time's infinite unfolding. At its very core, what the work tries to express is that in these seemingly insignificant traces of the substance of memory and the infinitesimal details of everyday life, which lay dormant in the accumulated archive of personal experience, there can be a certain degree of understanding in what we believe the unimaginable character of memory to truly be.

As historical artefacts residing in the present...[photographs] come to represent not their subjects, but rather the spectre of an impossible desire: the desire to remember, and to be remembered.... Photographs remind us that memorialization has little to do with recalling the past; it is always about looking ahead toward that terrible, imagined, vacant future in which we ourselves will have been forgotten.

(Batchen, 2004: 98)

As a neurophysiological consequence of the evolution of the mind, the memory engrams that inhabit the synaptic pathways of the brain are seldom contemplated as actual things (objects) in and of themselves—as empirical facts with definite and quantifiable properties, but are rather taken for granted as a consequence (or side-effect) of our being consciously aware of our passing through the uniquely personal experience of our journey through time. On the one hand, memories are to be enjoyed and reflected upon with a profound sense of gratitude and wonder, to be recalled at will or with very little effort depending on the condition of the mind in question; whilst on the other, the psychological trauma that some memories elicit is an unwelcome visitation into waking life, condemning those who experience such afflictions to endlessly repeat the horrific torments of the same. Manifested in this form, memories are an insidious and disturbing intrusion, to be retreated from or resented with the unequivocal loathing of the utmost contempt. Equally, memories can also be a source of great motivation and inspiration, and we can learn much from the lessons that they have to teach, both about ourselves and the lives of others; they are a universal source of conscience and, moreover, a guiding hand with the omniscient power to eventually free us from the crippling constraints and accumulated burden of the mistakes we have made in the past. The act of remembrance and the preservation of a shared sense of cultural heritage,



If remembrance is a working through of the past, we repeat the past not simply to work through it, however, but to discharge and create beyond (beyond ourselves). The aim is not to conserve the past but to lighten its load, so as to make it bearable by making it light.... Memory is the 'fundamental synthesis' of time since it constitutes the being of the past.

(Ansell Pearson, 1997: 26/27)

To be emotionally affected by a particular moment, place, time, event or situation from the past is to be at the mercy of what it means to experience the very essence of remembering and remembrance. Whilst it is not always true that memories fade with the passing of time, time does present a particularly difficult obstacle when attempting to retroactively reconstruct the past in the present from a narrative framework that may be, at best, fragmentary or inconclusive. And any person seriously contemplating the possibility of actually doing so will perhaps ultimately run the risk of entertaining certain idealised – which is to say imaginary – perceptions or misgivings about the past. For those of us who are struggling to come to terms with the past, living with unwanted memories can sometimes be a terrifying ordeal to endure and from which there is seldom any reprieve. It is often said that in order to move on in life, one must ultimately come to terms with or forget their past, and it is from this perspective that one should begin to appreciate the representational logic of Ahde's "memory works." In the very instant that one takes a photograph, which sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in rendering a facsimile of a reality produced as an object for the memory to contemplate, what one is actually doing is recording an instantaneous representation of what is simultaneous committed to memory at the exact same moment as the exposure itself occurs. Memories, much like photographs, are an intimate catalogue that reference personal experiences which we can use to tell ourselves about ourselves. Photography partially functions to assist with the reorganisation of one's own limitations in the face of an uncertain future. At the very least, what Ahde's images ultimately try to convey is that in the very act of cataloguing one's personal history and exposing the rudiments of that journey to the scrutiny of others, we are asked to consider what it means to be human apropos to that most human of traits, asking for neither compassion nor forgiveness.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lury, C. (1998), *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity*, London: Routledge, pg. 148
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 148
- <sup>3</sup> All quotations attributed to Sara Ahde are gathered from direct conversions with the artist.
- <sup>4</sup> Harbord, J. (2009), *Chris Marker: La Jetée*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pg. 95
- <sup>5</sup> Sontag, S. (1979), *On Photography*, Hammandsworth: Penguin, pg. 9
- <sup>6</sup> See Atwood, M. (1998), *A Visit in Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965-95*, London: Virago
- <sup>7</sup> Sontag, S. (1979), *On Photography*, Hammandsworth: Penguin, pg. 111
- <sup>8</sup> Sontag, S. (1979), *On Photography*, Hammandsworth: Penguin, pg. 163
- <sup>9</sup> Berger, J. (1978) *Uses of Photography in Selected Writings*. Dyer, G. (Ed), New York: Vintage, pg. 288

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