

Multisensory narratives of home and belonging: Investigating virtual representations of physical places in *Towards Telepathy* (2017) and *Home Museum* (2020)

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Abstract

In 2017, while living in two geographically distant locations, South African artist, Katherine Bull, and French artist, Emmanuel de Montbron collaborated on a project in which they used mobile phones and an online blog to share stories about their experiences of place. The end-product of their collaboration is *Towards Telepathy* (2017), a two-channel video that engages viewers on a visceral rather than merely visual level. In a similar manner, artists who participated in the *LagosPhoto20* virtual exhibition, titled *Home Museum* (2020), used photographs to produce narratives of home and belonging that are shared with others in an online environment. In this article, I explore how *Towards Telepathy* and selected photographs from *Home Museum* draw on memories of multiple senses in order to relate stories of place-making when geographic and physical distance have become the norm. I argue that all the artists can be regarded as sensory autoethnographers as they used digital technologies to record and present their life histories virtually. Furthermore, I analyse the video and the photographs with reference to Laura Marks' (2000) notions of *haptic visuality* and *recollection-objects*. These lenses allow me to show how the images increase the potential for distant others to empathically connect with the artists' personal and collective stories of place and belonging by evoking sense-based perceptions other than sight.

Key words

Space, place, sensory autoethnography, digital communication technologies, *recollection-objects*, *haptic visuality*, *Towards Telepathy* (2017), *Home Museum* (2020)

Introduction

In this article, I investigate how a video work and selected photographs draw on multiple senses in order to produce multisensory narratives of place and belonging in virtual environments. The artworks under investigation are South Africa artist, Katherine Bull's, and

French artist, Emmanuel de Montbron's two-channel video *Towards Telepathy* (2017), and selected photographs exhibited as part of the *Lagos Photo Festival* in 2020. The places the selected artworks describe are their creators' homes. Produced using digital tools and viewed in online environments, the artists experiment with the virtual representation of physical objects and places. Sharing the video and photographs online potentially inspires empathy and personal connection with distant others. My argument draws on theories of embodied spectatorship and phenomenology as they surface in film theory, cultural geography, photography and art history. The aim is to show how the selected artists activate individual and cultural memory by appealing to sense-based perceptions other than sight.

I begin by discussing the relationship between 'space' and 'place' emphasising the significance of all the senses in place-making activities. Thereafter, I explore how Bull and De Montbron employed mobile devices and online communication platforms to gather data about, and share their senses of place with each other as they collaborated on producing *Towards Telepathy*. Moreover, I show how the video heightens the memory of multiple senses, engaging viewers on a *visceral*, rather than merely *visual* level. In this analysis, I employ film scholar, Laura Marks' (2000, 162) notion of "haptic visuality" in order to argue that spectators become entwined with the video as a result of vision's close connection with tactility. Thereafter, I discuss the conceptual underpinnings of *Home Museum* (2020), an online exhibition of photographs submitted for the 2020 *Lagos Photo Festival*, hereafter referred to as *LagosPhoto20*. The photographs themselves, as well as the objects they represent, are analysed with reference to Marks' (2000, 77) notion of sensory "recollection-objects".¹

Place-making and the senses

Towards Telepathy and the photographs I have selected from *Home Museum* deal with place-making in that they focus on people's lived relationships to specific places. Even though there is already a substantial body of literature that deals with the different ways in which 'space' and 'place' are formulated and understood, actual place is notoriously difficult to define. Human geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 136), takes an experiential perspective on the

¹ *Recollection-objects*, which I elaborate on later, evoke multiple memories of the past in their various audiences (Marks 2000, 77).

matter, arguing that space is “transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning.” These definitions and meanings arise mainly through the social interactions that take place between people in particular spaces. Human relationships are so integral to place-making, argues Tuan (1977, 140), that “things and places are quickly drained of meaning” when people are absent. Whereas one might find solitary experiences in particular places meaningful, Tuan highlights the effect of the *social* exchanges that occur in spaces that transform them into places. Likewise, the anthropologist Catherine Degen (2016, 1646) highlights that it is through our dynamic and embodied interactions in particular spaces that we become attached to place. She points out that this attachment to place is “... a collective, relational and embodied process, [that is] caught up and experienced via social memory practices and via embodied, sensorial registers.” For Tuan and Degen, spaces become meaningful places when socialising, sensing, feeling human beings enter them. The intersection of sensory experience, the production of place and place-making is aptly summed up by anthropologist Steven Feld (1996, 91) who writes that: “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place.”

In 2020, more than two decades after Feld wrote those famous words, the COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the globe threw his statement into sharp relief. Owing to restrictions on people’s movements in public spaces, for many, work and social gatherings moved from actual well-known places to online spaces where digital technologies mediated human interaction. While it is not a novel observation that digital technologies assist in establishing and maintaining work and social relationships at a physical distance, this situation has been accelerated by the social impact of the pandemic as many people were forced to make such work and social ‘places’ online in unprecedented ways. Carlos Velasco and Marianna Obrist (2020) argue that before the pandemic, people were “reluctant to do certain things online, perhaps because of the lack of sensory cues (it does not feel as ‘real’) that are often present in offline situations” Despite the multisensory poverty of online communication technologies and environments, owing to the movement of people across the globe – whether as a result of diaspora or displacement – the use of digital technologies for ‘keeping in touch’ with others will likely increase even further.

That digital communication technologies do not enable sensory experiences other than sight and sound, and therefore impede satisfying human interaction, is an argument that has regularly been made. For instance, in philosophy, sociology and psychology, theorists argue

that communication via digital technologies inhibits deep connection with others (Casey 2012, Turkle 2015). Likewise, scholars of media and technology argue that online environments and digital technologies are characterised by “a sensorial paucity” (Jewitt et al 2021, 19). In light of the presumed sensory inadequacy of online environments and the digital tools we use to communicate with others, designers are increasingly exploring ways to enhance multisensory experiences online by “developing novel sensory-enabling technologies that emulate the real world” (Velasco & Obrist 2020, Jewitt et al 2020). Since people are spending more time communicating and living online, one may wonder how a focus on the senses might contribute to the enhancement of a shared ‘sense of place’ in and through the virtual.

Place-making with digital technologies

While some theorists (such as Casey and Turkle) are sceptical about the ability of digital technologies to effectively bring people closer together, new media theorist, Iain Sutherland (2012, 158), argues that mobile devices, such as cell phones and laptops, have become so interwoven in our daily lives that they are now inextricably part of the process that transforms ‘space’ into meaningful ‘place’. According to Sutherland (2012, 157), “media and communications technologies have often been pitted against authentic place-making practices because they are conceptualized as homogenizing human experience across different places.” In contrast, Sutherland (2012, 158,159) argues that digital technologies do not “degenerate place” but create a new concept and experience of place. Accordingly, digital technologies need to be embraced as part of the human experience as they are “becoming part and parcel of a bodily perceptual apparatus through which place is experienced” (Sutherland 2012, 169). Mobile phones are especially useful creative apparatuses in our pockets, ready at hand to share our personal experiences with others (Wilson 2012, 15). Bull’s and De Montbron’s video *Towards Telepathy* (2017) effectively demonstrates how digital technologies – in this case, mobile phones and an online blog – have the potential to establish deep connections between people living in geographically distant locations.

***Towards Telepathy* (2017)**

Towards Telepathy (Figure 1) is a short video of three mins and 45 seconds that was produced and exhibited in 2017 at Gallery Momo as part of *Closer Than Ever*, an exhibition

curated by Michaela Limberis (Art Meets TV 2017).² Although the video was made in 2017, in some ways it predicts the experience of lockdowns and isolation caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, because it deals with the use of digital technologies to communicate and connect with distant others when it is not possible to be with them. Living on two continents – Africa and Europe – and in two very different cities – Cape Town and Paris – Bull and De Montbron set out to produce an artwork that conveyed their individual connection to place and that would increase their connection to each other.



Figure 1: Katherine Bull and Emmanuel de Montbron, Still from *Towards Telepathy* (2017). (courtesy of the artists).

Each day the artists used their mobile phones to record videos of their immediate physical surroundings, observing and analysing its qualities and textures. At the same time, they each kept a dream journal. Using a blog, they shared short (one or two second) clips from the videos they had made, as well as extracts from their dream diaries with each other. This multimodal blog was a shared space where the artists collectively created an archive of each other's personal stories in image and text. Uploading the data daily meant that they could respond to each other's posts and maintain a long-distance conversation. Finally, each artist created their own narrative by editing all the material on the blog and creating their own collage with the fragmented images and text. These individual collages were combined to form a two-channel video artwork as depicted in the screenshot in Figure 1. The end result is a parallel – if fragmented – dialogue using image and text that hints at each artist's everyday experiences.

² Since then, the video has been available on YouTube where it can be viewed repeatedly. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYpxL4swgnA>.

Sensory autoethnography

By recording the sensorial atmospheres of their environments, Bull and De Montbron went about their research like sensory autoethnographers. Autoethnographers immerse themselves in a place and its people, with the aim of producing “meaningful, accessible, and evocative research” (Ellis et al 2010). Sensory autoethnographers take this further by paying “a heightened attention to [those] aspects of experience that have hitherto been unrecorded” (Degen et al 2018), focusing on their own embodied and multisensory experiences as they undertake their research. Sarah Pink (2009, 7) suggests that multisensorial experience is “fundamental to how [sensory autoethnographers] learn about, understand and represent other people’s lives.” Importantly, however, sensory ethnography does not “do away with the visual or the spoken word” (Degen et al 2018). It is precisely through the visual and the textual that the multisensorial aspects of experience are re-counted to others.

Apart from working as sensory autoethnographers, Bull and De Montbron created ‘life histories’ by also sharing their dreams with each other on a blog. Life history refers to the narrative genre commonly known as the life story where the writer presents their personal experiences as authentic recollections of real events and places (Page 2014, 313). In this case, however, their life histories were not only about real events and places, but included recollections of the artists’ dreams. As Ruth Page (2014, 314) argues, life histories are increasingly being recorded via e-mails, blogs, forums and social networking sites. These digital platforms allow their authors to upload a variety of multimodal media including videos, photographs and text that can be shared as the authors prefer. As such, they function as connective tools, “preserv[ing] the voices of everyday speakers” (Page 2014, 314) and deepening the life history created and shared with others.

It would be risky to argue that the blog allowed the artists to share their voices ‘telepathically’, as the title of their video suggests. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes 2001, 934), telepathy refers to “the supposed communication of thoughts or ideas by means other than the known senses”. However, while the blog might not have enabled telepathic communication (yet), by sharing dreams and sensorially evocative images, it allowed each artist to ‘get into’ the other’s head. In this way, it facilitated a deep, rich and empathic *telecommunication* between them. In addition, the composition chosen for the final two-channel video sets the audience the arduous task of deciphering the images while piecing

together the narrative. The video – now available on YouTube – can be paused and replayed depending on the viewer’s needs, and becomes interactive by affording them a level of participation.

Towards Telepathy opens with the following phrase that appears on the left-hand side of the screen: “it is early morning and I am writing.” The viewer expects that these are the opening lines to a logical narrative that will follow. However, the next fragment on the right-hand collage reads: “the book in question ...”. Leaving the audience confused, the next line (on the left) reads: “trying to remember something ...” and the phrase on the right: “I cannot recall the title”. The images on the left of the screen jump haphazardly from a suggestive reflection of light on a wall, to an indistinct view from a moving vehicle, to what appears to be a jungle, and then to a suburban road with elusive shadows. Although the narrative promises the capacity to be deciphered as a logical story – with the combination of images and text subtly hinting at coherence – it is impossible to piece together a coherent narrative from these fragments. However, the indistinctiveness of the images and the snippets of text arouse one’s curiosity. These fragments draw on a viewer’s memory-images appealing to their own remembered sensory experiences.

Gavin Wilson (2012, 81) argues that non-professional, experimental films made on mobile phones, are especially effective at “forging a link between people; a bridge to the Other inferred by a bodily connection through vision, appealing to an immediate if mediated sensory experience”. These films “grow organically in situations and locations” with the effect that they materially affect the relationship between the filmmaker and the spectator (Wilson 2012, 62). Through its “connective influence” (Wilson 2012, 62) a film made on a mobile phone produces an empathic – if not fully *telepathic* – connection between a spectator and the image on screen. Even if the meaning of *Towards Telepathy* evades full comprehension, it allows spectators to feel part of the artists’ worlds – to empathise with them and imagine what it would be like to live in the environments they have represented.

Film phenomenology and *haptic visuality*

The empathic connection produced between a viewer and the images that unfold in *Towards Telepathy* owes a great deal to the emphasis Bull and De Montbron have given to the sensible rather than intelligible qualities of the video. For this reason, it is useful to examine the video

through the lens of film phenomenology – a strand of film studies that has been developing since the early 1990s.³ Film phenomenological research is concerned with the representation and experience of the senses and embodiment in film spectatorship. A significant point of interest for film phenomenologists is the ways in which touch is evoked in cinematic images with film scholar, Laura Marks, theorising the tactile encounter with moving images as a form of *haptic visuality*. In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), she analyses experimental, intercultural films made in the late 1980s and early 1990s using video cameras.⁴ The term intercultural cinema refers to the cinematic expression of a diverse group of people who “share the political issues of displacement and hybridity” (Marks 2000, 2). Thus, intercultural films represent the experiences of people living between “two or more cultural regimes of knowledge” and often deal with the effects of immigration, displacement and living in exile (Marks 2000, 24). The places filmmakers represent in these films are entwined with memories of the social relationships that occurred in them or are now absent from them.

Marks (2000, 162) argues that producers of intercultural cinema often rely on techniques that elicit the sense of touch in their spectators. In this way, the films evoke a mode of looking that she terms *haptic visuality*. Marks’ notion of *haptic visuality* is informed by Alois Riegl’s distinction between haptic and optical images.⁵ Riegl (in Iversen 1993, 9) describes two fundamental categories of looking at art: the optic and the haptic. Optical looking involves scanning objects according to their outline and their position in space, while haptic looking focuses on surfaces (Iversen 1993, 9). Optical visuality requires a separation between the viewer and the object of the gaze so that one can perceive distance. On the other hand, in *haptic visuality* the eye moves over the surface to see texture rather than illusionistic depth or form. Linger on the surface of an image, optical looking tends to *gaze*, while haptic looking tends to *graze* (Marks 2000, 162). This means that “in haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (Marks 2000, 162). While *haptic visuality* calls up

³ Vivian Sobchack’s approach to cinema in *The Address of the Eye: Phenomenology and Film* (1992) laid the foundation which would inspire a great deal of writing about film from the perspective of phenomenological understandings of embodiment. Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich (2016), as well as David Sorfa (2014), provide solid overviews of the different ways in which film phenomenology has expanded since the 1990s.

⁴ These films were mostly shown in non-commercial theatres or spaces where small audiences gathered. The point is that these are not mainstream films, just as *Towards Telepathy* is not for wide commercial circulation or viewership.

⁵ The German *haptēin* means to fasten, seize or grasp and the Greek *haptikos* means capable of touching (Gandelman 1991, 5).

tactile memory, it also “invite[s] the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate[s] the experience of other sensory impressions as well” (Marks 2000, 2).

Towards Telepathy employs a variety of techniques that invite a viewer to experience it haptically. In the first 30 seconds, a small, indistinct image of hands is shown on the right channel as if reflected in the window of a moving vehicle. For a short time, the same image of hands is repeated on both the left and the right video channels, overlaid with fast-moving, faint images of lights on a predominantly dark background. Later, a close-up of two sets of hands in a tight embrace dominates the channel on the left (Figure 1), then hands holding a book and flipping through its pages are shown on both the left and the right. Following this, the image of the tightly-clasped hands is repeated on the right. The artists’ emphasis on hands lends a ‘human touch’ to the images and might be read as an evocation of a sense of bodily connection: between the artists themselves and also between the images and viewers.

The use of haptic images – that defy narrative logic in their inaccessibility to vision – results in the viewer “resort[ing] to other senses, such as touch, in order to perceive the image” (Marks 2000, 159). Blurry images and fragmented close-ups can be intensely expressive as they encourage the eyes to wander over the textures before them. Unable to *gaze* at the video and make sense of it, the viewer’s haptic *gaze* jumps around, as if lightly touching the surface of the images onscreen. It is precisely through *haptic visuality* that an empathic connection potentially emerges between the video and its viewers.

In addition to touch, tactile images also evoke other senses, such as smell, taste and sound. In the following section, I turn my attention to photographs that were exhibited online with the aim of representing individual photographer’s attachment to physical places virtually. In this discussion, I focus more closely on how we might think of the subject matter selected by the photographers as *recollection-objects* that potentially generate multiple memories in their various viewers, specifically memories of past sensory experiences.

Home Museum

Like *Towards Telepathy*, *Home Museum* combines text and image to represent a sense of belonging virtually. In what follows, I demonstrate how selected photographs in the

exhibition draw on sensory knowledges in addition to the visual to express personal and collective stories in an online environment. By evoking the senses of touch, taste, smell and hearing through the visual and the textual, selected individual exhibition ‘rooms’ in the main online gallery space of *Home Museum* produced senses of place and belonging that activate memories of embodied social interaction. *Home Museum* is, therefore, an example of how the ambiance of physical places can be represented virtually and, more specifically, how storytelling contributes to the sharing of place online.

Curated by Clémentine Deliss⁶ (co-director), Azu Nwagbogu⁷ (co-director), Oluwatoyin Sogbesan (guest curator), Asya Yaghmurian (guest curator), Philip Fagbeyiro (assistant curator), and Feranmi Olukosi (guest curator), the impetus behind *Home Museum* were two intersecting topics. One was the issue of the return of iconic artefacts to the African continent that were stolen by colonial powers and that are still being held in collections in the Global North.⁸ The other was the global pandemic and the implementation of national lockdowns that enforced social distancing and staying at home. These lockdowns meant that the *Lagos Photo Festival* – an annual, international festival of photography in Nigeria – had no alternative but to take a digital format.

The theme chosen for *LagosPhoto20* was “Rapid, Response, Restitution”. Since many people were spending a great deal of time at home, the curators wanted to shift attention away from the broader complicated arguments about cultural restitution towards the heirlooms kept in the intimate spaces of people’s homes. Through an open call, the curators invited people of all ages, races, genders, socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations to submit photographs of ‘objects of virtue’ that represented their personal and family’s cultural heritage. The call was sent out in ten different languages and encouraged anyone interested to submit a maximum of 12 images of objects that are either used daily or stored away and held dear (Sogbesan 2020, 36). Participants emailed the photographs to *LagosPhoto20* along with a short story about the significance of the object. Acknowledging that photographs are part of the process of restoring lost heritage, the organisers reminded people that the objects in their

⁶ Deliss is Associate curator at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, and a Professor in Theory and History at the Hamburg Academy of Fine Art.

⁷ Nwagbogu is the director of the African Artists’ Foundation and the *Lagos Photo Festival*.

⁸ Jonathan Paquette (2020) provides a solid overview of the controversial Sarr-Savoy report of 2018 as well as different perspectives on this debate.

homes “bring back memories and tell stories about our culture and history in ways we don’t always recognise” (Delisse and Nwagbogu 2020, 16).

The photographs were exhibited virtually on a platform created specifically for the exhibition; the site was titled *Home Museum*.⁹ Since the curators did not select photographs but instead displayed all those they had received, participants were co-creators of this online exhibition. This approach also served to democratically decolonise the museum space (Sogbesan 2020, 40).

The landing page for *Home Museum* offers the viewer-reader four points of access: a) I Like to See; b) Tell Me a Story; c) Guide Me by Name; and d) My Collection. With over 200 participants, the collection is substantial and there are hundreds of images on the ‘I Like to See’ page. Clicking on a photograph reveals the name of the artist. ‘Tell Me a Story’ provides an explanation of the significance of the object for the photographer. ‘Guide Me by Name’ takes the viewer to a list of all the participants, where clicking on a name takes one to a page with all the photographs submitted by that person. From this page one is also able to save specific images to ‘My Collection’ which you can later access with a personal key. ‘My Collection’ thus allows the viewer to select images or stories for later viewing/reading and, in a sense, curate their own exhibition.¹⁰ The website thus offers the viewer choices; one can either look at the vast expanse of images or read the stories that give them meaning. The organisation of the content into ‘rooms’ adds to the sense of physicality the audience might feel as they move from one virtual space to the other (King, Smith, Wilson, and Williams 2021:496). Moreover, being able to curate their own room with photographs of their own choice, adds an interactive dimension to the exhibition. In this case, the viewer might even more accurately be referred to as a participant.

Since almost all the photographs were taken while people were living in various forms of lockdown, they are as much about cultural and personal heritage as they are profound investigations into what a home is. Our homes are so intimately entwined with our daily routines and so full of ordinary objects that are known through repeated use, that “... they are

⁹ The exhibition can be viewed at <https://homemuseum.net/menu>.

¹⁰ My personal key is: 75e6bf39-6da1-4114-9ed2-61b792099007. By copying and pasting this key in the relevant space on the ‘My Collection’ page, the reader can access my own collection which comprises all the works discussed in this article as well as others that are relevant to the arguments made here.

almost a part of ourselves, too close to be seen” (Tuan 1977, 144). Moreover, home is more than a house, or a building; it is as much the objects and furnishings contained in it that evoke cherished memories. According to Freya Stark (quoted in Tuan 1977, 144), it is particularly via the objects in our homes that can be touched and smelled, that “memory weaves her strongest enchantments.” As the curators of *Home Museum* explain, the photographs they received say, “Come into my home, here is my history. This is my museum” (Deliss and Nwagbogu 2020, 16). These “fast shutter excavations” of “a decolonial citizens’ history” (Deliss and Nwagbogu 2020, 16) are visual testimonies of senses of place and imposed isolation under lockdown. Since people the world over were subjected to restrictions on their movement, these are experiences with which we can collectively identify. Thus, whilst personal and subjective – and oftentimes fleeting and fragmented – the stories evoked by the photographs may strike a chord with people across cultures and geographic locations. Moreover, by evoking various memories for different viewers, we might think of the objects selected by the photographers as *recollection-objects*.

Recollection-objects

The photographs in *Home Museum* represent objects that activate memories of different pasts and will, therefore, be interpreted in a variety of ways by their diverse viewers. Marks’ (2000, 77) notion of *recollection-objects* is a useful lens through which to understand how the meanings of objects, as carriers of memories, might evolve. A *recollection-object* is a “material object that encodes collective memory” (Marks 2000, 77).¹¹ Marks is writing specifically about cinematic images in intercultural films whose main focus is the diasporic movements of immigrants and exiles; however, her arguments are just as applicable to the photographs exhibited in *Home Museum* which tell (and sometimes revive) the stories of objects of personal and cultural heritage. Marks (2000, 78) argues that *recollection-objects* that bear the stories of cultural displacement appear in the mise-en-scène of intercultural films where they act as “mute witnesses to the character’s history” (Marks 2000, 81). *Recollection-objects* gain new meanings as a result of cultural translation and transcultural movement. As they ‘emigrate’ with the subject, these objects acquire layers of meaning and importance, thereby collecting, creating and serving memory. In this way, *recollection-*

¹¹ Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin, Marks (2000, 77) also associates *recollection-objects* with ‘fossils’ and ‘fetishes’.

objects “condense time within themselves, and ... in excavating them we expand outward in time” (Marks 2000, 77) giving them a new life in the present. The *recollection-objects* exhibited in *Home Museum* have survived from another time and another place and offer a starting point for conversations around “remembrance, isolation and legacy” (Sogbesan 2020, 44). These conversations are enabled through the networked online environments in which senses of place and belonging are shared.

Even though (and perhaps precisely because) viewers are given only glimpses of what the photographs mean for the artists, the images are richly evocative. Saturated with history and vitality, the objects the photographs represent have been variously described as “carrier[s] of energy”, as “hold[ing] spiritual properties”, and as subjects rather than objects (Ahuja 2020, 65). These descriptions bring to mind Walter Benjamin’s ambivalent fascination with the energies that some objects and people possess. In his most famous and often-cited essay of 1931, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction” (1968a), Benjamin develops his theory of the auratic power of images. Interpretations of this essay usually narrowly understand Benjamin’s *aura* as an aesthetic category – as the qualities of traditional art that are waning due to the technological reproducibility of images and objects in modernity. But the concept also appears in an earlier essay by Benjamin, titled “Little History of Photography” (1931, 517) where his use of *aura* is reminiscent of its more common association with a “breathy halo” or ethereal substance that surrounds a person or object. Using the example of a client sitting for a portrait photograph, Benjamin (1931, 517) explains that the photographer was “confronted by” his sitter whose “aura ... had seeped into the very folds of [his] frock coat or floppy cravat.” In this sense, an object’s *aura* invites a relationship that is similar to a relationship we might have with another human being (Benjamin 1968b, 188).

The *aura* is a unique quality that emerges as a result of a recognition of an individual’s or an object’s past (Hansen 2008, 341). This connection with the past bestows a power on a person or an object such that Benjamin recognises that the object itself possesses an agency and returns the gaze of the beholder (Hansen 2008, 343). As the “witness of the object” (Marks 2000, 81), the viewer excavates the past hinted at by the object’s auratic gaze as it “look[s] back at *us* across the distance of time” (Hansen 2008, 343). The *aura* thus projects the object’s past into the present, where it also stretches into the future by way of the “beholder’s compulsively searching gaze” and desire to uncover its potential meanings (Hansen 2008,

341). In the same way, the *recollection-objects* that were photographed for *Home Museum* serve as ‘mute witnesses’ of pasts which either remain alive in personal or cultural memory, or simply bear a trace (even if somewhat obscure) of those narratives.

In addition, some of the photographs specifically draw attention to the sensory qualities either of the objects themselves or to the memories they trigger. For this reason, like Bull and De Montbron, the photographers of *Home Museum* worked as sensory autoethnographers. In my view, some of the photographers were intuitively aware of giving expression to the multisensorial aspects of their homes even if this was not always a conscious decision. As Marks (2000, 110) points out, “the senses remember when nobody else does.” Put another way, in their engagement with memory, *recollection-objects* are also fundamentally engaging with the memory of the senses.



Figure 2: Lena Altshul, Untitled, from *Collection of Smells* (2020). (photographs courtesy of the artist).

Some photographers explicitly mention smell, touch, sound and taste in their narratives. For example, Lena Altshul’s contribution, *Collection of Smells* (2020) (Figure 2) comprises a series of transparent glass bottles which ‘capture’ smells from her grandmother’s home. The odours in the bottles include flowers, grass, matchsticks, strawberries and wool. Influenced by the Proust phenomenon, Altshul creates her own collection of smells in order to re-live a

happy time in her childhood (Altshul 2020). The Proust phenomenon is based on an anecdote by Marcel Proust (1922) describing how he was transported back to his childhood when dipping a madeleine biscuit into his tea. This piece of folk wisdom has often been cited to describe how smells are very powerful autobiographical cues (see Chu and Downes 2002).¹² In their sharp focus on strawberries on the one hand, and grass cuttings on the other, Altshul's photographs depicted here (Figure 2) easily bring to mind what these objects smell like. Even if I cannot imagine the Altshul's grandmother's home, I certainly can imagine these smells in my own home.



Figure 3: Elizabeth Miller Vermeulen, *Untitled* (2020). (photograph courtesy of the artist).

Elizabeth Miller Vermeulen evokes the sense of touch (and also sound) in the photographs of a pair of scissors, an order book and a stitching awl that belonged to her grandfather. By using close-ups and cropped compositions, Miller Vermeulen draws the viewer's attention to the marks and scratches on the surfaces of these objects, acquired through decades of use. She describes the paint on the handles of the scissors as "worn" and "peeling" and points out the "pressure points" made by the ink on the pages of her grandfather's order book (Miller Vermeulen 2020). The awl bears the indentations made by the pressure of a hand and fingers, presumably her grandfather's (Figure 3). Tuan (1977, 139) argues that 'home' is wider than

¹² Research in the cognitive sciences has offered various explanations for the Proust phenomenon. These include: that odour events are recalled for longer periods than other perceptual events; that odours evoke memories that are older than memories evoked by other stimuli; and that odours trigger memories that are emotionally "heavier" than others (see Chu & Downes 2002, 511).

the houses we dwell in; home can be another person, in the sense that “one human being can ‘nest’ in another.” Miller Vermeulen’s carefully composed images, combined with the story related by the artist, bring the meanings of these everyday objects to life and they offer a glimpse of the sense of home and belonging that she experienced with her grandfather. If viewers have held a similar pair of scissors, we can imagine their weight and the sound they make whilst cutting fabric. Equally, we might imaginatively smell the polish on the wooden surface in the photographs of the awl and may even be able to imagine what it would feel like to hold this tool in our own hands. It could be suggested that, more so than other objects, tools are imbued with phenomenological significance because they are made to be used by human hands. For this reason, one might empathise with the artist’s connection to a loved one through the *recollection-objects* that are precious to her.



Figure 4: Enekwachi Agwu, *Ukoro of Uburu* (2020). (photograph courtesy of the artist).

Enekwachi Agwu emphasises sound in the text that accompanies the photographs of the *Ukoro of Uburu* (Figure 4). Also known as Ikoro, this hollowed-out and decorated piece of wood serves as a gong that is used for various purposes in traditional Igbo society. Its uses

include announcing the death of an important person, alerting the community of impending invasion, or signalling the arrival of the harvest season. The resonant quality of the gong, explains Agwa, is produced through the precise hollowing-out and carving of a suitable piece of wood with the aim being to create a deep booming and authoritative sound with a wide reach (Agwa 2020). Agwa's careful description echoes the sound and the uses of this object in Uburu culture, allowing the viewer to imaginatively reconstruct what it might sound like.

The three examples I discussed above demonstrate the photographers' deliberate attention to the senses of smell, touch and hearing. But in many cases, it is through the use of deliberate photographic techniques that a photographer intuitively elicits memories of the senses in the beholder. Although photographs cannot technically represent the senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell, they can nevertheless appeal to these senses imaginatively. They are able to do this because photographs are created by individuals living and moving in dynamic environments that are saturated with sensory stimuli (see Pink 2011). Sarah Pink et al (2015, 355) argue that since photographs are made *in* environments, and not *of* environments, they can help us understand how atmospheres of home "are constituted and experienced ... at the interface between people, materiality and the sensory, emotional and affective."



Figure 5: Hamed Hosseini Sangari, *Untitled* (2020). (photograph courtesy of the artist).

Even though photographs cannot literally capture the actual felt atmosphere, or the smells and tastes of a place and the objects in it, the visual is a gateway into narrating the stories of places and their atmospheres because the visual elicits more-than-visual sensations. As I have previously argued, representing the sensory world visually is often effectively achieved by images that elicit a haptic mode of looking from their viewers. Just as *Towards Telepathy* elicited a haptic *graze* from the viewer, so too is Hamed Hosseini Sangari's photograph of a curtain particularly evocative, arousing a deep bodily response from the haptic viewer (Figure 5).¹³

The curtain dances lightly away from the window on the right. I assume its gentle movement is caused by a soft breeze rather than a strong, gusty wind. The dappled light entering through the window gives the material a translucency reminiscent of delicate lace. I imagine the coolness of the breeze and the warmth of the sunlight shown in the photo on my own skin, because these sensations are already stored in my body's archive. The sharp light at the top of the composition contrasts with the darker area on the left of the picture plane where there is hardly, if any, receding space. My eye moves back to the curtain and the white burst of light at the top. When I go back to the darker section my imagination takes hold. Have I been in this room before? My eyes want to linger on the surface of this image for it emits a deeply comforting feeling. Meaning has registered somatically even if it is not explicitly expressed. The story that accompanies this image is brief:

The day my mother came into my room, with some fresh plant leaves. I remembered that I had forgotten her, our home, and memories. It was like our death. Suddenly I remembered the sentence by Roland Barthes. "That this death fails to destroy me completely means that I want to live brutally and insanely" (Sangari 2020).

Sangari reiterates Tuan's (1997, 140) observation that places (and things) are drained of meaning when significant people are absent.¹⁴ Although there are no obvious indications of the artist's mother in this photograph, a female figure is included in the selection the artist submitted (Figure 6). When viewed as a whole, and in the context of the artist's description, this woman adds to the narrative each photograph hints at and breathes life into the other images. Together, they all seem to hold the viewer's attentive *graze* in a tender embrace.

¹³ A haptic viewer is someone with a "predisposition" or inclination to see images haptically (Marks 2008, 399).

¹⁴ Similar photographs by Sangari can be viewed at <https://hamedhosseini.art/>



Figure 6: Hamed Hosseini Sangari, *Untitled* (2020). (photographs courtesy of the artist).

As I already argued above, haptic images invite the viewer to move their eyes quickly across the surface plane – of the film, painting or photograph – before understanding what they are seeing. Sangari’s photographs “privilege the material presence of the image” (Marks 2000, 163). Such material presence is achieved via the image’s textural qualities, and is made possible through such processes as changes in focus, the graininess of the picture, and the visual effect produced through over- or underexposure (Marks 2008, 400). Accordingly, it is precisely when the viewer is not able to distinguish the forms on screen clearly that a haptic relationship to a film or an image is encouraged (Marks 2008, 400) as demonstrated not only in Sangari’s photographs but also in *Towards Telepathy*. The vague, indeterminate, imprecise and indefinite character of these images produce a haptic effect that stimulates a synaesthetic response.¹⁵

Conclusion

As digital technologies and online environments increasingly become part and parcel of everyday life, it is worthwhile reflecting on how such tools allow people to feel connected to others when geographic and bodily distance have become the norm. In this article, I have

¹⁵ This effect, one might argue, leads to the viewer’s awareness simultaneously of the object apprehended – noema – and the mode of its being experienced – noesis. Noema and noesis are concepts used by Edmund Husserl to broaden the phenomenological concept of intentionality as the basic feature of consciousness. See Ferentz-Flatz’s and Julian Hanich’s (2016) discussion of how these concepts are applied in film phenomenology.

shown how an experimental video work and selected photographs in an online exhibition can represent what are often mistakenly assumed to be the irrepresentable memories of people living in exile, isolation or remote locations. The images accomplish this by engaging the senses beyond sight. In these examples, the artists' connection to remote others relied on their ability to imaginatively reconstruct the sensory atmospheres of actual places in virtual spaces. Combinations of image and text were used to tell stories about senses of place in order to stimulate the viewer's sense-based perceptions.

As opposed to those who are sceptical about the potential of digital technologies to lead to deep connection between people (such as Casey and Turkle), these examples showed how empathic connections between people in distant locations might be enhanced by attending to the sensory potentialities of images as they circulate on digital platforms. Such experimental approaches are particularly important at a time when globalisation, diaspora and societal displacements of all kinds have led people to increasingly communicate with each other using digital tools. Moreover, resuscitating the memory of personal and cultural sensory pasts is especially urgent as a rising global culture seems intent on packaging sensory experiences – sounds, smells and tastes – into homogenised categories. The commoditisation of the senses will eradicate the nuances and textures of local and particular sensory perceptions, unless this process is actively resisted. Surely artists (including non-commercial filmmakers and photographers) play an important role in activating sensory pasts and futures by documenting and sharing their experiences of place in the present.

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