

Tom Jeffreys

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The False Memory Archive - an interview with Alasdair Hopwood

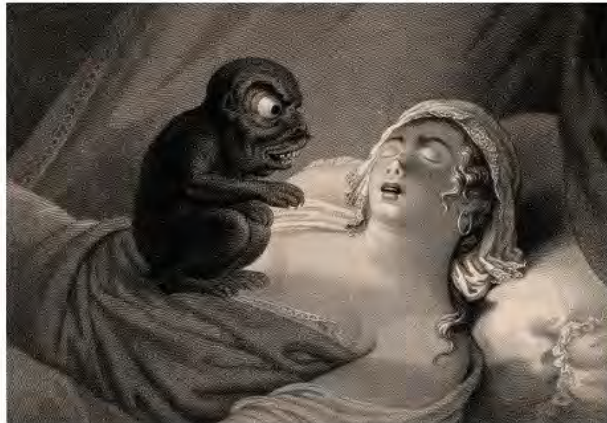
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16 February, 2012
by: Tom Jeffreys

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Alasdair Hopwood is inviting everyone to contribute to his strange new False Memory Archive. Tom Jeffreys meets him to find out more.



Memory's a funny thing. Anyone who claims to be terrible with names or has trouble locating their house keys every morning can vouch for its fallibility, but actually it's worse than we thought. The notion of false memory describes the idea that we can – and very frequently do – have 'memories' that turn out to be completely false. Memory is therefore not so much a filing cabinet or hard drive – fundamentally reliable but harder to access with age – as an occasionally active and powerful force for self-deception. Since the late 1980s false memory has been an extremely fruitful area for scientific research, and now for artists too, as Alasdair Hopwood of the *WITH collective* has set up the False Memory Archive, and is inviting everyone to contribute.

"I've been astonished at the response," Hopwood tells me over a cup of tea in the café at the Wellcome Collection. "It's quite an odd thing to respond to and you're never quite sure what the level of general knowledge will be about something like false memory." It's also quite an odd thing in the sense that Hopwood has some serious reservations about some participatory art projects, in particular: "the idea that protest or activism is akin to art making is deeply flawed. If the two merge it negates both forms I think - it becomes a pale imitation of art-making and a pale imitation of protest." He's also not even sure what will become of the stories collected, although some form of publication is looking likely.

Even so, the False Memory Archive is actually a fairly logical extension of Hopwood's work as art collective WITH. WITH are well known as a kind of pseudo-corporate arts organisation that enact (or claim to enact) a variety of acts on behalf of their clients. In doing so, WITH, in Hopwood's words, "look into the possibility of an entirely imaginary experience being believed to be real. And that led me to the false memory discourse, which, particularly in the late '80s and throughout the '90s, was full of controversy. I was startled to stumble across that body of research. It's been fascinating."

From there, with funding from the Wellcome Trust, Hopwood began an artist residency at the catchily named *Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit* at Goldsmiths, run by psychologist and leading sceptic Professor Chris French. The unit's aim is to investigate paranormal and anomalistic experiences from a sceptical standpoint and Alasdair has used his time there to learn as much as possible in and around the area of false memory. Over the course of an hour and a half, he talks extremely knowledgeably and passionately about all manner of more or less related topics – from Freud's seduction theory to evangelism and quackery, via Richard Dawkins ("hearing him talk about postmodernism is hilarious"), neuroscientist Tali Sharot (who tied false memory to her concept of the 'optimism bias') and Elizabeth Loftus' seminal 'lost in the mall' experiments of the 1990s, in which she showed that therapy could be used to implant false childhood memories into people's minds.

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From the way in which Hopwood discusses these issues, it's clear that this is an area of research of deep interest. Whilst the increasing crossover between the arts and the sciences is undoubtedly a good thing (and much credit must go to the Wellcome Trust for this) too often artists simply use research as a kind of veneer of intellectual substance. But in this case, the interest is clearly not only genuine but long-running too: "One of the things that frustrated me when I was at Goldsmiths many many years ago was the lack of discussion between the two departments, so one thing I'm particularly interested in is to try and bridge that gap," he says, before a pause. "That sounds terribly pompous..."

Even though he admits to being occasionally a little magpie-like in his interests, there's still a consistency about Hopwood's approach that might be characteristic for a scientist but is unusual for an artist. "I've always been interested," he explains, "in slightly confounding my interest in aesthetic theory with empirical, scientific research, and to see how one can negotiate that tension." This is where it gets interesting, particularly in terms of Hopwood's artistic practice: I've always been interested in how one fools oneself," he continues, "and how easy it seems." The False Memory Archive is therefore an extension of this interest, one that "explores what role the fictive plays in understanding the truth about ourselves". It combines, like his work as WITH, something "speculative and satirical" with not only "a genuine interest in psychology and the nature of identity" but also a kind of institutional critique of the very nature of the archive. What kind of archival rupture is created by this ambiguous relationship to truth? If "the archivization produces as much as it records the event" (as Derrida has it) then what kind of 'events' do we have here? If memory is no longer a filing cabinet or a hard drive, then what form might this memorial to these (non-)memories take?

"It's certainly a really interesting archive," Hopwood agrees. "There's an oddness to it, which seems to be really engaging." An oddness that you can be part of, simply by visiting the [False Memory Archive](#) website. Don't forget now...