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Search:

Essays: > [A Case of Misplaced Faith: Photography, Memory, and AR Hopwood's 'False Memory Archive'](#)

Emma Lewis / A Case of Misplaced Faith: Photography, Memory, and AR Hopwood's 'False Memory Archive'  
September 2014

*'All the memory that everybody keeps adding to their computers comes from people. Nobody can remember a damn thing. Every time somebody adds some memory to their machine, thousands of people forget everything they knew.... Eventually, we will all be walking around with a glazed look in our eyes, trying to figure out who it is we live with.'* [1]

Andrei Codrescu's *Memory* is droll pseudo-conspiracy theory that goes on to involve IBM, the Greyhound bus chain, and the stealing of citizens' memories. His sketch of this dystopia is written with tongue firmly in cheek, yet it touches on a raw point about historical amnesia and the role of technology in collective memory. A cautionary tale, it chills because it suggests that as a society, we have become careless about the very thing that is supposed to be what we're made of: memory, our memories – the framework by which we define ourselves, what we believe, and who we believe ourselves to be.

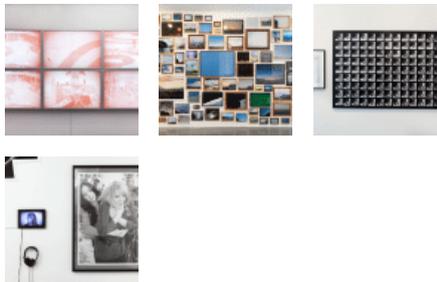
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Ask someone what they visualise when they think of their memory and the image conjured will likely relate to something that suggests order and reliability. Something akin to a library, perhaps, from which we can pluck out an item for reference. Yet the reality is that our memories are far more plastic than this image would suggest. In 1994, research by Elizabeth Loftus and her colleagues at the University of Washington found that under the right conditions, 'People can be led to remember their past in different ways, and they can even be led to remember entire events that never actually happened to them.' [2]

It is research into false memory, the mechanics by which it operates, and its broader implications, which Alasdair Hopwood has taken as his starting point in the *False Memory Archive*, his project as artist-in-residence at Goldsmiths Anomalous Psychology Research Unit. The *Archive* exists in two strains: a pool of accounts of false memories submitted by the public at his invitation, via [www.falsememoryarchive.com](http://www.falsememoryarchive.com), and artworks he has created under the specific name of 'AR Hopwood' in collaboration with a number of experimental psychologists – Loftus among them – responding to their specific pieces of research into different areas of this field. This summer, these collaborative works were exhibited in Edinburgh at Talbot Rice Gallery and in London at the Freud Museum, as well as in a satellite exhibition at Carroll/Fletcher Project Space. Photography, video and sound installations, curated collections of objects, and archival material, were just some of the different media employed by Hopwood to animate these different avenues of scientific research.

Of all these media that Hopwood has employed, though, it is the photographic and video works that seem best able get under the skin of the phenomenon, and what false memory really means for us, as the viewer. A statement in the research paper 'Photography and False Memories' expresses a sentiment that pinpoints why this might be. Paraphrasing the writer Alice Munro, authors Maryanne Garry and Matthew P. Gerrie observe that 'if memory is the way people keep telling themselves their stories, then photographs are one of the ways people keep those stories alive.' [3] So entwined has photography become with memory in the cultural consciousness in the past 150 years or so since its widespread use, that when it comes to our sense of individual and collective selves, they are near-impossible to prise apart.

In contemporary photography, examples of how practitioners have examined this coalescing between photography and memory are as extensive in scope as they are in number. Jeff Walls's tableaux



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reconstructions of everyday moments, for example – which he describes using the term 'near-documentary' – are so precise in their realisation and universal in their subject matter that they give the impression of being able to stand in for our own, personal, memories of the commonplace events that they depict. Or *The Innocents*, for instance, Taryn Simon's 2002 series of narrative photographs in which she criss-crosses between reality and fiction to portray the story of men who were convicted, at least in part as a result of photographic evidence, of crimes they didn't commit. These are just two prominent examples of recent photography in this vein, but they represent a wider tendency by artists to both utilise and to critique the trust placed in the photograph as means of a memory-jogging device that 'keeps stories alive'.

In Wall's case, his work has often been read as representing an impetus to use the camera as means of willing a particular memory into being, to remedy its slippery, nebulous qualities. This is certainly a tendency that continues today in a younger generation of photographer working in this trope, such as the emerging artist Lotte Davies, who uses the narrative mode to the recreate memories, dreams and nightmares that she or her friends recalled. Yet in *False Memory Archive*, Hopwood's photographic treatment of memory is the inverse. These works don't illustrate a memory in order to anchor it, but instead turn the camera back on itself to investigate and expose the reach and limits of both as means of faithfully recording the world.

Kimberley Wade's research into the effect of photographs on the construction of false childhood memories, for example – which found that when presented with a doctored photograph of themselves in a hot-air balloon as a child, 50% of subjects began to report memories of the event – is represented in two different forms that make up the work *False Memory Archive: Hot Air* 2012-13. The first references the research more directly, presenting a large-scale constructed contact sheet of the fake family snapshots that Wade showed to the participants of her studies. The second uses it as a starting point from which to explore something else entirely, and consists of a video projection of a balloon ride that Wade took at Hopwood's invitation, where the footage is from a SenseCam, a device that records events every thirty seconds and is used as a memory-jogging device for patients suffering from amnesia. How the photograph can both support memory and let it down is thus illustrated in one, imaginative leap.

In a separate piece entitled *False Memory Archive: Crudely Erased Adults (Lost in the Mall)* 2012-13, Hopwood has responded to a method used in one of the original pieces of research into false memory, Elizabeth Loftus' 'lost-in-the-mall' technique. This method is represented with a lightbox installation of images of a child alone in a shopping centre, images that are in fact security-camera stills of Westfield Shopping Centre, in which the adults have been digitally erased. The person responsible for this manipulation was the Centre's security guard, to whom AR Hopwood issued specific instructions as means of creating the work after his own images of the mall were confiscated ('Find some stills from your security that feature children; Use Photoshop [or something similar] to erase any evidence of adults from each image (do it to the best of your ability); Convert the images to 'Westfield Red' and get them made into advertising lightboxes'; and so on.) The image of the guard working in this way is a beguiling, if bizarre, one, yet as means of emphasising the malleability of the individual and the image it fits, drawing attention to the fact that trust placed in both can exist in spite, not because, of what we know to be true about their reliability.

At the heart of these works, then, is collaboration. Much like the conceptual, rule-based practice of someone such as Sophie Calle, an artist who has also engaged with narrative and memory throughout her career, in making these works Hopwood has allowed dialogue to open his method up to chance, and permitted chance to shape the outcome of the final piece. It is an approach that feels exploratory, the results sprawling and rhizomatic. His *modus operandi* seems to be curiosity and a will to engage, as though alighting on the methodologies of different pieces of research and using them as mental jumping-off points from which to explore and bring their findings and their implications to life. Although his point of access is often anecdotal, and the results very often entertaining, the more serious implications – for areas from the criminal justice system, to trauma therapy – are never far from sight.

Beyond the somewhat Victorian, wonder-and-curios sounding name of the project title 'AR Hopwood's False Memory Archive' is his own cautionary tale rooted very much in the contemporary: a tale which emphasises that the faith that persists in memory and photography is a faith misplaced, and one that renders the term 'photographic memory' something of a fallacy.

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- text by [Emma Lewis](#)

Full captions for images at right:

A.R. Hopwood *False Memory Archive: Crudely Erased Adults (Lost In The Mall)*, 2012-13  
A.R. Hopwood *False Memory Archive: Erased UFOs*, 2012-13  
A.R. Hopwood *False Memory Archive: Hot Air*, 2012-13  
A.R. Hopwood *False Memory Archive: Professor Elizabeth Loftus and members of her research team recalling the same false memory, as if it were their own*, 2012-13  
(All images courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher)

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[1] A Codrescu, 'Adding Memory', published in MJ.Rosen, *101 Damnation: The Humorists' Tours of Personal Hells*, (London: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002)

[2] EF Loftus and JE Pickrell, 'The formation of false memories', *Psychiatric Annals*, 25, 1995. pp.720-725 version [here](#).

[3] 'M Garry and MP Gerrie, 'When Photographs Create False Memories', *Current Directions In Psychological Science*, Vol 14, Number 6, 2005

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