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Surrogate Memories in Animation and Sound

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Jared Duesterhaus

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MFA Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020

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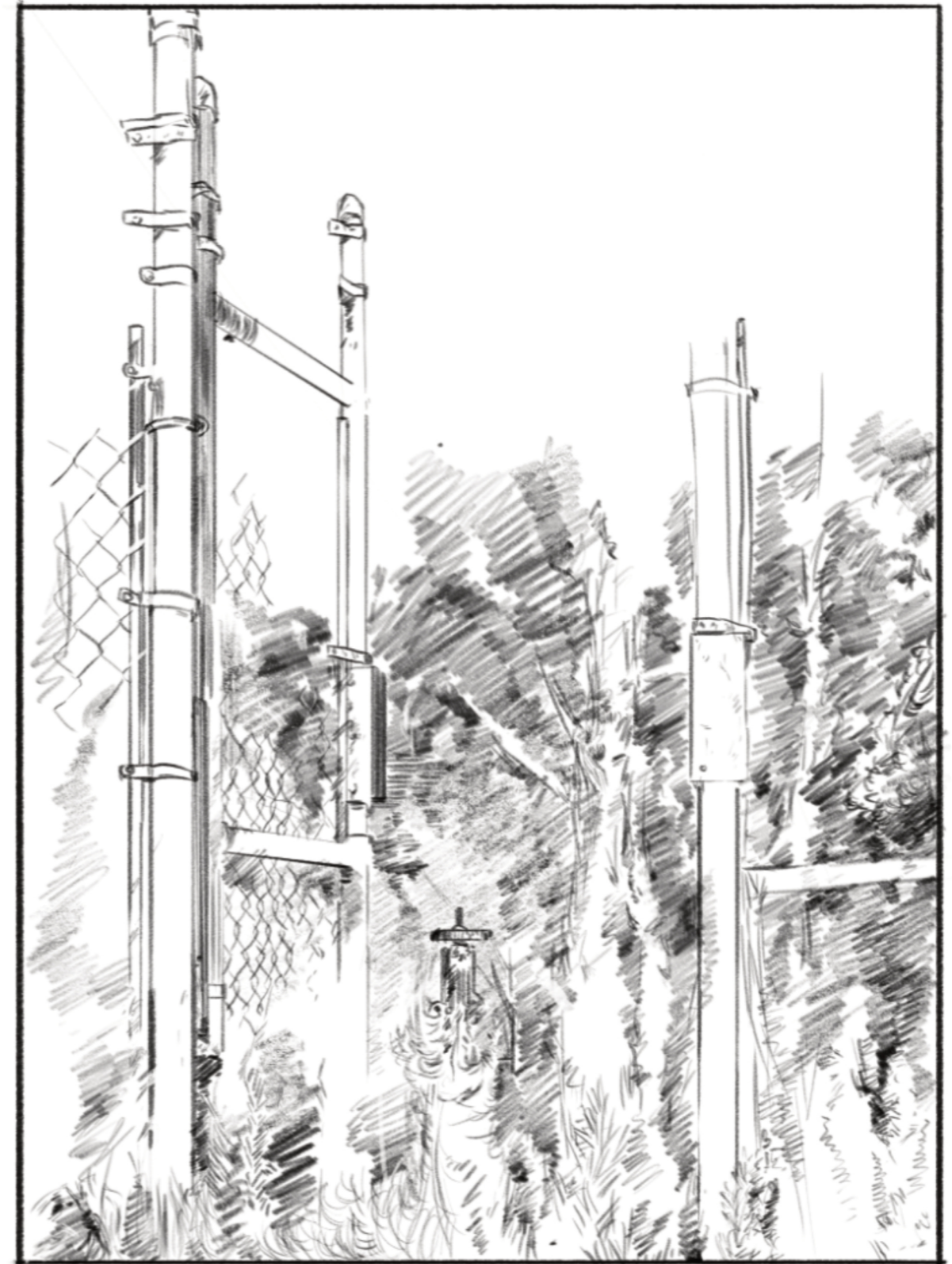
Thesis Committee:

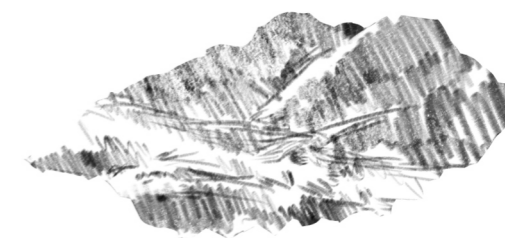
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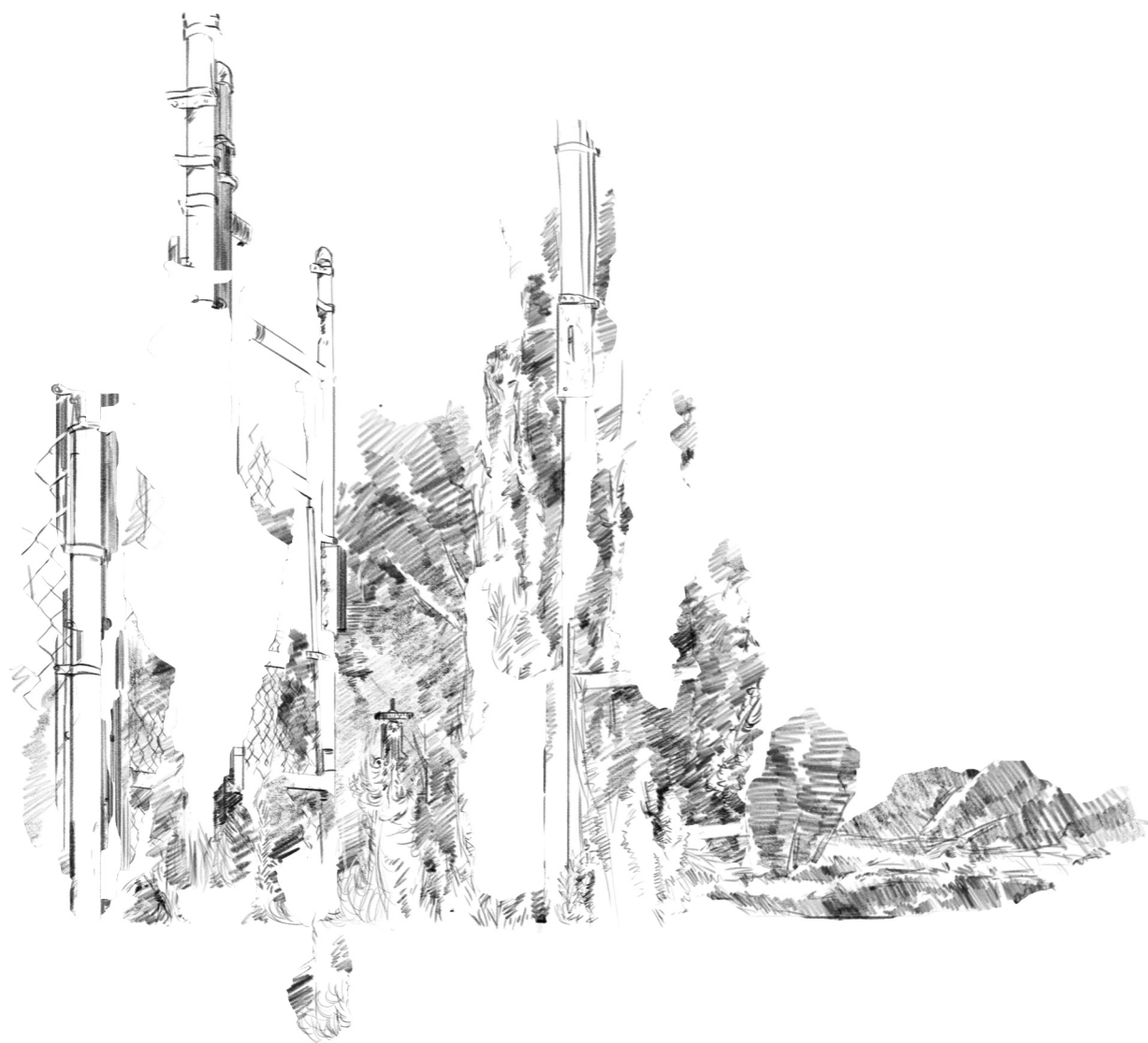
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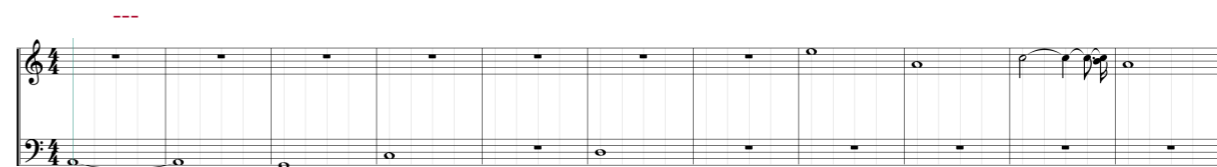




I'd like to thank everyone who supported me up to this point and everyone I've met since I started.^x



NOTE:

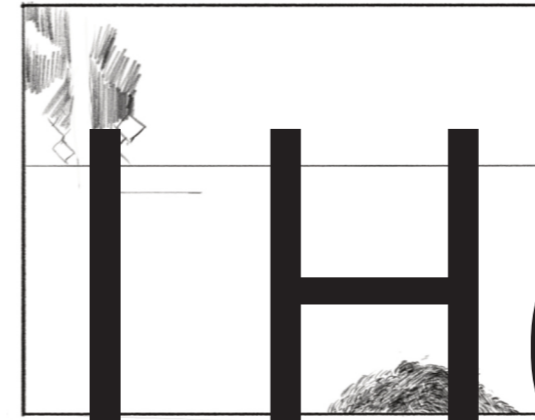


007////////// Chapter I [I HELD ONE LOOK UP TO]

020////////// Chapter II [A WIDER TURN LEAVES IT OPEN]

032////////// Chapter III [STOP MY HAND FROM HELD]

042////////// Notes and references

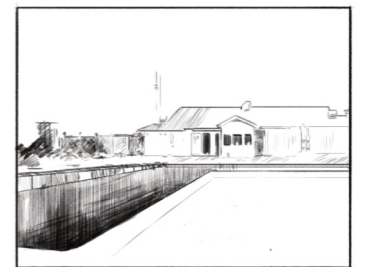


I Held

One

Look

Up t





Stills from *Near a Sink Like This*

An echo is the consecutive repetition of an entity that exists outside of the original. An environment's response to a gesture, an action supported by intent. We have no control over this new copy just like it has no control over its own existence. It is the original reflecting off its environment. Every proceeding copy is slightly softer around the edges than the previous. An evolution of slight degradation, an example of Duchamp's infrathin¹, it creates the imperceptible space of change between copies. The infrathin being a previously undefined gap. These echos travel out and reverberate, constantly intersecting, creating a lattice. The space between these echoes is the delay, the ripple or the time of incremental change that these echos exist in. This becomes the basis for the rhythm of existence. Without the delay or the gap, the echo's form becomes confused with it's preceding copies, a Carpenter-like thing, a smear. This rhythm is the musicality of the delay within echos. The pattern and repetition of the original and its progeny. Rhythm creates the existence of the blanket.

The threshold at which the echo threads begin to erase from perception is the fadeout. Their natural degradation over time marks the beginning of our inability to decipher the moment between existence and non. In music, the decay of a sound. The edge is where we begin to forget these ideas, where threads begin to tatter and memories start to alter. The more gaps within a memory the more it is filled with fragments. It's nearly impossible to stop and acknowledge all of these separate strands of echoes. But as an act of care towards time, memory, and self, we can pause and observe. The acknowledgment and observation of these edges is care, the conscious act of tending to. Japanese Boro blankets are made from scraps of cloth; old shorts, aprons, worn work clothes. Stitched together worked cloth becomes family heirlooms and pieces of art. Scrubbing through the threads, breaking time and pausing on what will now be referred to as the frame, one becomes an agent of care. One twenty-fourth of a second as a singular moment within the thread. Focussing on the infrathin space allows for switching between two modes of recognition, habitual and attentive.²

This frame is an echo.

Surrogate Memories

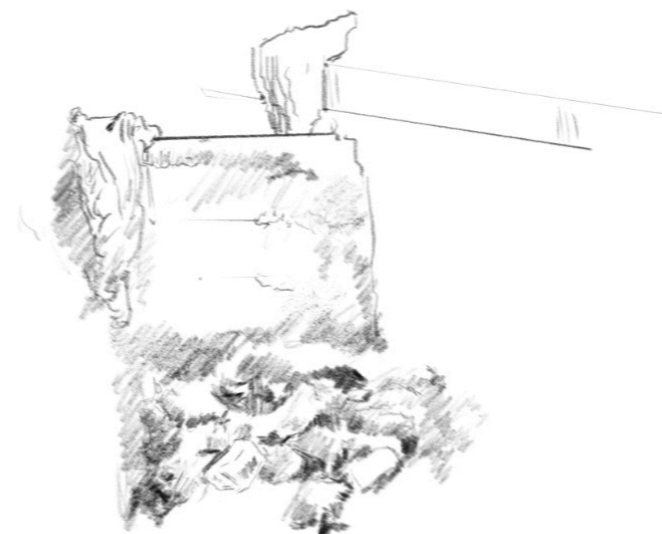


Memories Constructed

Our own personal foundation, the lattice-work of self, is built on the inconsistencies of memory. Memory is both constructing us and being constructed by us simultaneously, like a camera building itself by recording. Just as it's not possible for a lens to ever see itself, our examination of self is painted by our memories. We're only permitted to see through the voids of the blanket threads.

Only with the clarity of hindsight, can we begin to acknowledge these voids that we've built around our perception. Our memories aren't formed in a vacuum and they differ from objective fact. We are implicit to them. We have the ability to build ourselves through attentive recognition and care. We adjust the framework of our perception to sculpt the outer edges of our experiences.

I suppose I should take note here of a difference between my own memories and the ones that I've spent the last two years studying. It's embarrassing to say, but in all honesty it's hard to separate where the gaps are. If I actually do have my own self interest, wouldn't all these things regulate themselves? Instead I find myself asking if what I remember is actually real.



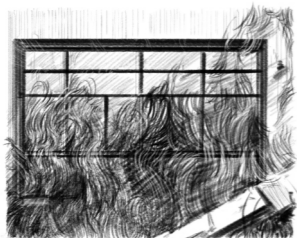
Memories Re-constructed

'Wandering homeless ghosts that take up residence in alien bodies, there to play out repetition that is their destiny'³

We rewrite our memories constantly. This happens both actively and subconsciously. We're required to redraw the frame anytime we want to see it. This method of copying challenges memory as a definitive source; instead memory drifts into subjectivity. A personal ghost. While what we label as important may stay relatively stable within this process, details flow in and out of focus. Most memories are left to the whims of our current state of mind.

Remembering is a process in which those involved actively reconstruct the past. It is a complex, effortful and failure-prone activity, but the demands of this process make it an opportunity for care. It gives countless moments for re-observation and re-consideration. Thus the editable loop, a mechanism for overdubbing within life, is created. A process of repetition and rhythm that we can affect. If we consider ourselves an enclosed system of our experiences, then these are the things that define us. We are all in some way a defined system that reacts fairly rigidly in a short-term capacity, giving us the illusion of being singular static beings.

Though the loop repeats, if one takes a moment, the differences can be experienced in each pass.



Time Constructed

Animation's connection to memory is in construction and reconstruction. Animation is made of frames that are compiled to create an illusion of life and energy. By definition animation is etymologically linked to life, but this animated life is an illusion, and time within animation is a false conception. It is our own constructed approximation of reality, acting through surrogate drawn lines to express ourselves. There will always be a disconnect between the immediate experience of creation and the final product in animation. The space between an original and its echo. The time I put into a frame does not equal the time a viewer spends with it. It creates a time discrepancy and distance in the actual.

Like memory it will always be a convenient composite of all the parts set to the rhythm of 24 frames per second.



I asked him if he knew where
the nearest room was. Did the
bedrooms connect, back to
back, or was it the hallway?

Maybe he said his name,

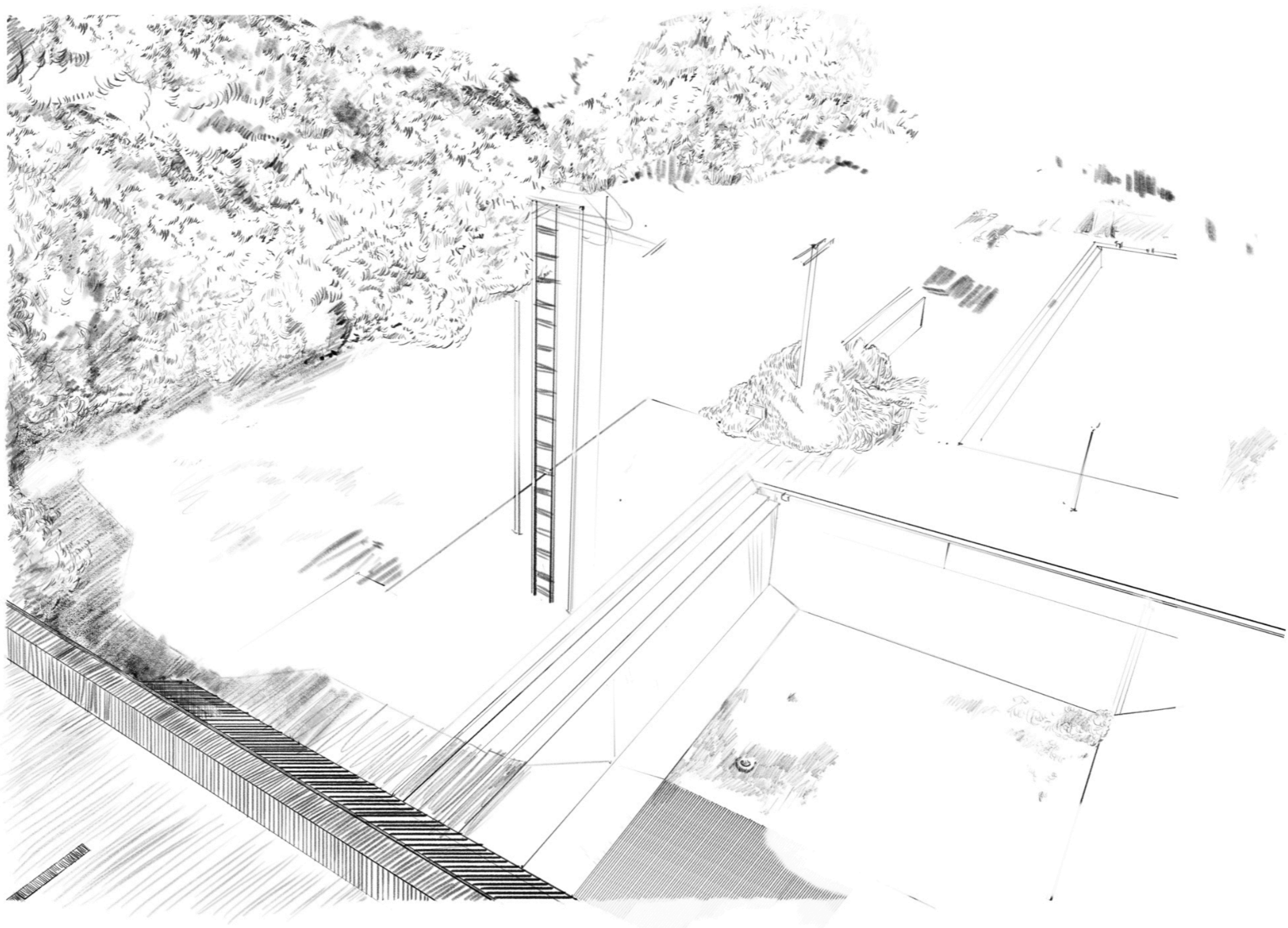
I can hear a neighbor through
the walls and his voice sounds
like someone I used to know,
but forgot

Audience

We are an audience or outsider when interacting with memory. The only agency we're given is within the act of viewing. We are an audience to our own experience, commenting on the past, celebrating or regretting everything that's occurred up to this point. We rewatch everything that's happened before. And while we remain outside, we play a vital role in the accumulation of the work, compiling and reorganizing the frames, standing back far enough to see the blanket form.

"When staring at a flat plane, no matter how compelling the illusion, you are outside the illusion. You're a spectator."⁴

But it's through interpretation that animation actually functions. The medium itself relies on the audience's own perception of time.⁵ Even the animator constructs a false time. It's the viewer who embraces the falsehood that's created. This action brings an animation to life. Only through suspension of logic is animation able to function. Much like memory it requires blind participation. The illusion is shattered when we pull apart the individual frames. We can't tell the difference between one point or another, so we are able to perform memorial resurrections with simple actions. Like a madeleine, a caramel becomes a line from now to 13 years ago.⁶



Temporal Textures

Texture within drawing calls attention to the surface of the object and can be used

as a tool to define form. One of the easiest ways to define planes within a two-dimensional image is using different textures. Shrinking time down to becoming "two-dimensional" within a piece, a texture can create an upheaval of expectation and convey to the viewer a falsehood within the constructed time. Cooperatively we build a faceted time, which exists on multiple planes. On screen writing is a disruption to the illusion. It can be a re-grounding of the frame and an acknowledgement of the audience. Sometimes my writing is hard to read.

My time will never equal yours.

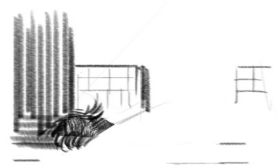


Still from *Tom and Jerry*

Smear Frames

Smear frames are a blur of motion on a single frame of animation. Instead of creating a series of images that outline an action, everything is compressed into a single moment. The delay and gap are deleted. Flashed across the screen, our brains connect everything into one motion. Paused, the smear frame can be seen for what it is, an aberration in objective nature. A stitched together moment of false time. They exist as artifacts of our perception and a reminder of our inadequacies as objective witnesses. They are the visualization of an echo, only making sense in the greater span of a gestural arc. They are beautiful.

Their definition of reality is both false and true at the same time. They depict nothing as it is, but are the truest account of our own perception that we will ever have. Every memory we have is a smear frame. They are violent, they are unnatural, and they are a portrait of our own faults in perception. Within an animated sequence they are a temporally-heavy frame, they contain more time than the surrounding frames within the arc of an action. My animation is built almost entirely of smear frames winding themselves around each other.

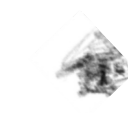


A Wider

Turn

Leaves

It Open

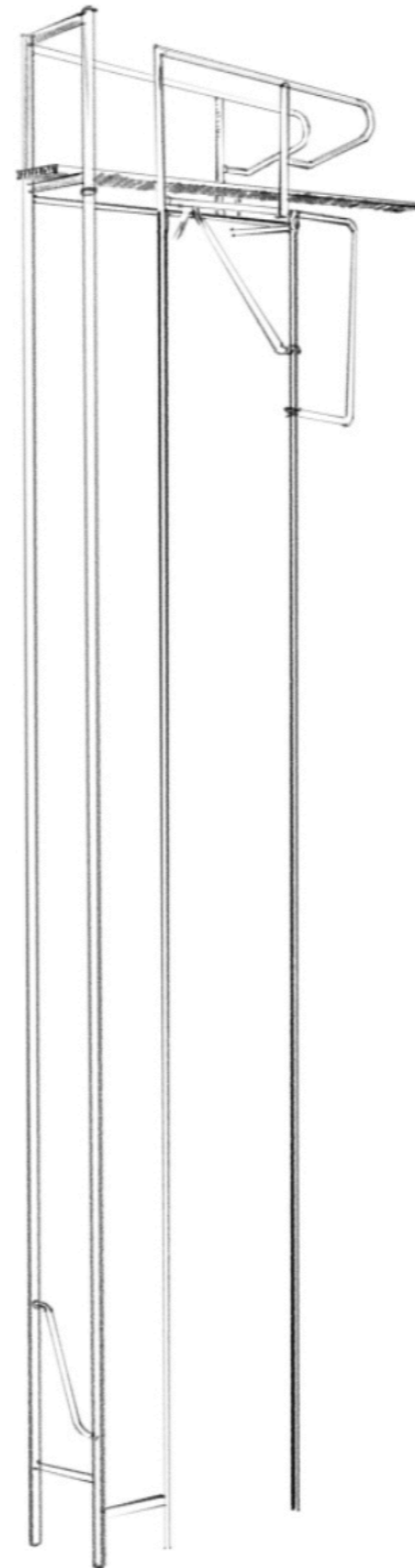


I know the space of being a touch out of one's depth. When your ideas expand farther than your current reach, and you're able to convince yourself beyond your capability. I spent a lot of my summer starting and stopping videos that would act like a postscript on a project I had completed during my first year. All of the talk about memory seems hollow unless I actually start to share mine. So what is my memory?

It's bigger than a grandfather that I couldn't remember, but as they tend to, ideas often eclipse the practical. Was I sharing for me or someone else? My memories are akin to a faded photo, but they don't confine themselves to sitting within the four edges of a slip of paper. I got lost in the process. I wonder what he would say if he saw me doing all of this. A sorry attempt at an incantation to revive him maybe, but more likely I'm just playing with something I don't fully understand yet.

What kind of maintenance and care can we commit to our own memories?

I needed the space to reflect. Why was I forgetting the different pieces? The whole thing crashed up against my actual life.



Dive

Care and Precious Fragments

What the psychologist Marigold Linton termed “precious fragments”⁷ are the moments that don't fall between the cracks of necessity. I think what I'm making is in some way connected to the acknowledgement of these fragments. If I can somehow index as many of these fragments as I can, even though they're small, there might be some greater truth within them. Often categorized as moments that wander up in the course of memory recall, these memories could be written off as flecks of emotion, like dust settled on top of a book. Something to wipe off, collect, and promptly throw away.

Hit in the face
with a bruise of color
Blue giving way to gray
and
swallowing anything up
that isn't strong enough to compete.

A bruise of color
Grey giving way
swallowing everything up



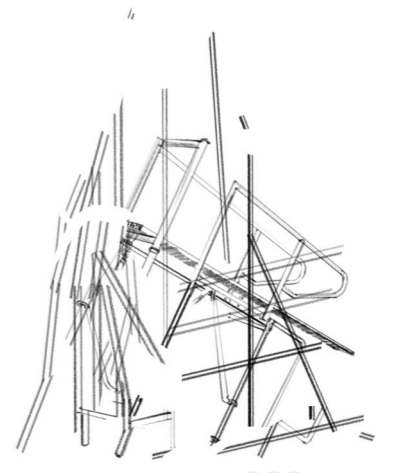
He's falling
Faster than I can see the individual moves
How did people judge this before high-speed cameras

He's falling



He's

Falling



Friitz and Familial Looping

The idea for my album, Friitz, came after I had already composed the first version. An eight minute music track cutting and pasting sections of a written score over and over again. It's mostly in A major.

It takes me 23 minutes and 15.994 seconds to tell a story about the importance of the actions of a young mother. What if we could feel what's happening after our death? What if my grandfather could feel the decisions I make?

A line that runs through time, linking together multiple generations of the same family. A woman who's experiencing her life again through her daughter. An imagining of an afterlife that feels like an echo and allows for reflection on the actions we take.

I'm not a spiritual person, I don't believe in an afterlife. But this kind of absolution, a moment of reflection on the whole picture appeals to me. Without it, nothing ever fully comes into focus, right?

If you can sit in a moment for a little longer then everything can actually start to settle.

Sound is immediate, it's a door to reflection and contemplation.



Still from *Possession*

My Fascination With a Movie Called Possession

Over the course of two years, I made five works that spun off from a 1981 Polish movie called *Possession*.⁸ Created in the middle of the director's contentious divorce, it's a strange beast. Things happen that are never clearly explained or justified. Throughout the movie there's a fascination with the left foot. Characters will wear brightly colored socks on their left foot. They'll lose their left shoe. Scenes will start with characters pausing to tie their left boot.



When I was young my left hip bone died. I fell. My hip became a memory and I worked to make it whole again.



S



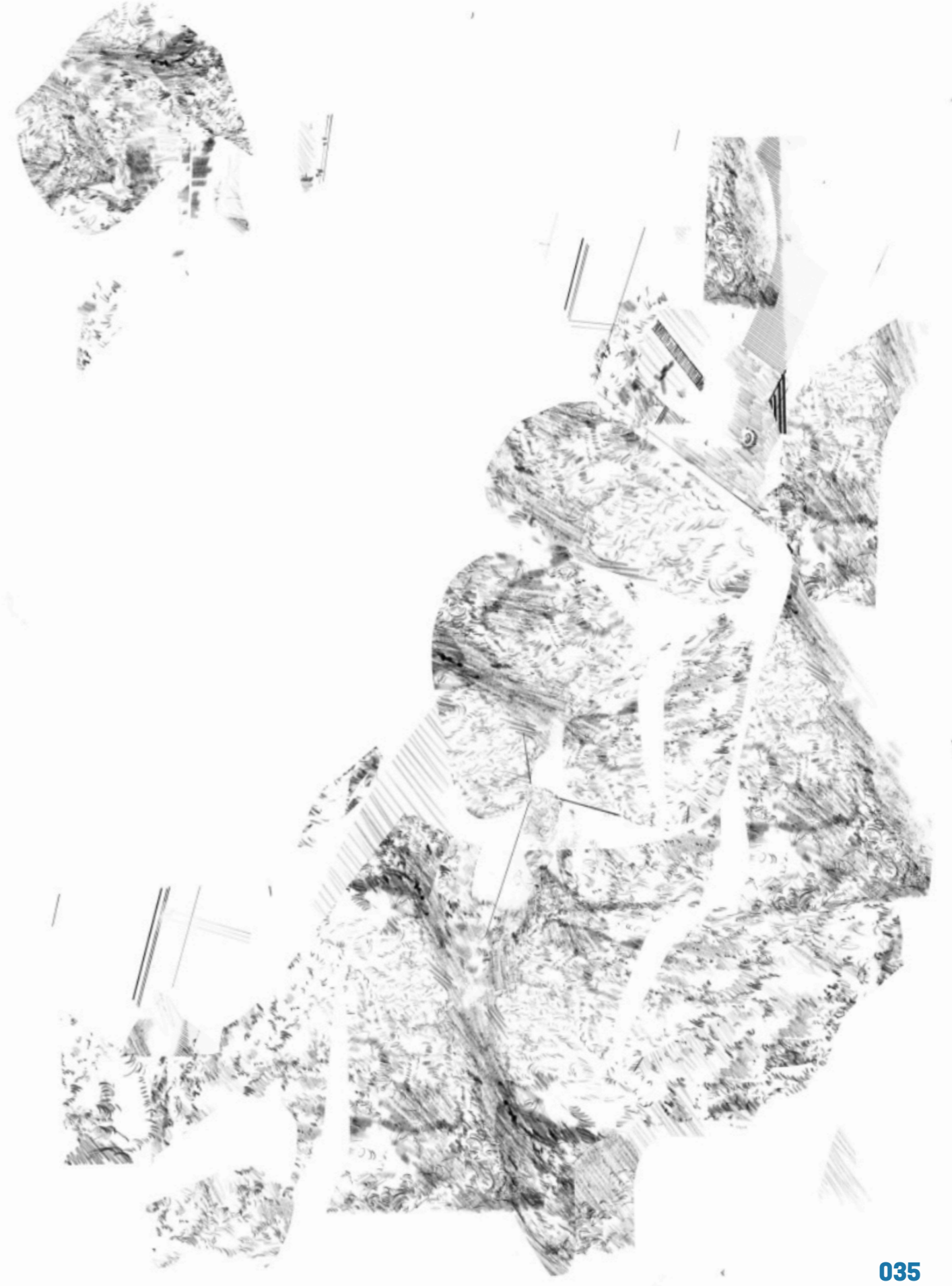
top

My

hand

from

held



Performance

Talking about how memories function without actually calling in the body, its primary source, would be an oversight. Investigating my own body's involvement in memory and the physical aspects of it was part of my candidacy. For which I recreated the sensory memories that I associated with my grandfather. What happens to us when we begin to act out memory in such a direct way? Can we reclaim the immediate potency? Proust's madeleine acted as a time machine, an immediate calling card to past memory⁹. Smell has its line as well, as do hearing and touch. The power of a physical stimulus to call a memory into being is easily felt.

I would hear his voice over and over until I knew what it sounded like.

I would pretend to hug him until I could feel him again.

I would eat until I tasted the memory and was sick from too much.

I would walk to exhaustion.

He had a recipe for caramels that I failed to make,

I start to taste the difference between my mouth then, when I was seven and now, when I'm thirty. It's a subtle and acquired taste. I remember what it was like when I folded my fingers in on themselves and pulled the thought, feeling from the back of my brain, a closed loop, straight to the front. A pulsing idea of gravel, pebbles, small enough that when you squeezed, it hurts. How many different thoughts, from the last two years, didn't make it out of that process? Which ones were worthwhile and which were a complete waste of time? My chest doesn't rise any faster even when I breathe heavy. And I pause to reach out. This whole time I took so many pictures and none of them are going to be in this. There's a park not far from here that I liked to go to when I was writing the script. It was quiet enough that I was never bothered, loud enough I didn't feel alone. Too many people helped to count. When we watched. Maybe we're talking about nothing. We're facing away, so it's only assumed that your mouth is moving, but that's not necessarily the case. They're thinking maybe about the time they took a train. There's a punch of color in the lower field of vision, now reach

Scripting Action

The script is a document of change. It is a piece of proposed action showing where we are and where we're going, what is possible, and also what is likely. It prescribes an outcome, but allows for divergence. The script is a shrinking of sight. I know what will happen now and the next moment. That is it. I live for those two instances only and continue doing so until I run out of time. The script is trying to understand where I've come from in the context of direction. Re-enactment is a form of care and a step toward understanding. It is an observation of the script.

The fastest way I can understand myself is to break the whole thing. We are defined by boundaries and the only way to map that is to reach out.

So I reach out.

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out

Reach out



Theater and Memory

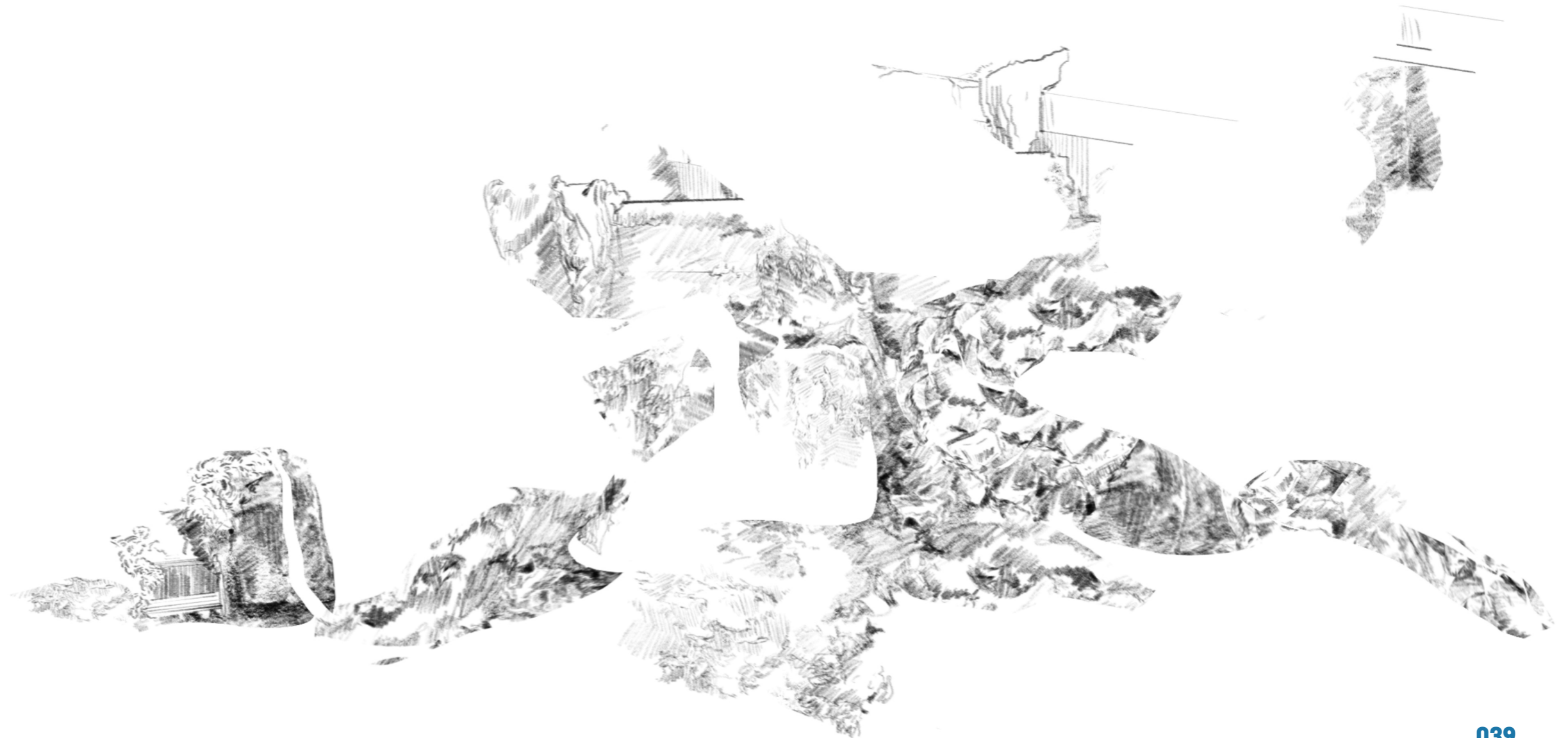
Theater as Space

“Theater is the art of repetition, of memorized and reiterated texts and gestures. A temporal art, an art-through-time, theater also depends on the memoried attentiveness of its audience with whose memory (and memories) it is always in dialogue.”¹⁰

Like Sam Shephard’s *Action* or Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the theater can act as a memory diorama. A small cube where actors are trapped, using a script they’ve repeatedly enacted to the point of internalization. A physical set built for the exclusive purpose of echoing. It is an external practice of memory. A manifestation of a remembered garden, where we can tend and cultivate our own progression. It is a strong recollection for the benefit of the audience. In the translation from writing to acting, it becomes actualized and re-encoded with new meaning.

Mugen Noh

In Noh theater, a character unbound by time and space recalls their life or an event and leads the secondary character through their situation.¹¹ Laying down an internal argument and struggling to understand why they did what they did. The circumstances and context that laid the groundwork for whatever transgression they committed are shared. They are then spiritually freed of that burden and ultimately absolved, by both the second character and the audience. It’s a scripted confessional.



An Ending

It's an echo, with the same pieces as the beginning.

A fade. I'll find the rhythm.

It hurts my fingers less when you reach down to grab it.

Makes it easier to show someone else.

There's always a volatility when you're holding out fresh.

Like it was just dug out from the ground.

It makes more sense now, everything I did leading up to this. What seemed like a guess then just sits in with everything else. Maybe it's why we forget, why none of this is going to stick with anything and why this document was made.

It's less about him dying and more that I'm afraid he never was,

that the whole thing passes me by

and what I feel will somehow become invalidated by the transition.

I went to the funeral, but I barely talked to anyone.

There's a part that I cut out almost completely. The goal at the end was to recover what I found back then, but this is a story.

A conversation with him.



Notes:

1. "The possible, implying the becoming - the passage from one to the other takes place in the infra-thin." A concept coined by Marcel Duchamp. Elaborated on in unpublished posthumous notes. A kind of gap that Duchamp explained mostly with examples. Some examples:
"the warmth of a seat (which has just/been left) is infrathin. When the tobacco smoke smells also of the/mouth which exhales it, the two odors/marry by infrathin"
 2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II*
 3. Lesley Stern
 4. Gregory Barsamian
 5. "Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn. What happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame"
Norman McClaren
"The activity that has taken place between what become the final frames of film."
Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*
 6. "She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory--this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?"
Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*
 7. Marigold Linton, *Involuntary Memory*
 8. Andrej Zulawski's 1981 film starring Sam Neill and Isabelle Adjani. I've heard it described as complete excess filmed. Every Zulawski film I've seen is beautifully unhinged and akin to watching a theatrical dance. Loosely inspired by Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Critic Michael Brooke said of the film, it's a "ultra-confrontational, deliriously overwrought, symbol-crammed approach." Maybe this is why I'm drawn to it.
 9. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (see note 6 above)
 10. Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-theater and postmodern drama*
 11. Daniel Albright, *Pound, Yeats, and the Noh Theatre*
- X. Thank you to my family, I wouldn't be here without you.
Thank you Cat, your support and insight helped more than you'll ever know.
Thank you to my KI crew.

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