

Remembering is a Creative Act
by Indre Viskontas , Ph.D.

Most of us think of memory as a secure database of facts, experiences and knowledge and regard our own memories as fairly accurate representations of the past. Those of us who study memory, however, know that remembering is far from infallible and amazingly unreliable. Deborah Aschheim's work in this exhibition/installation both illustrates how memory works and changes and the way that both her interviewees and the exhibition's attendees remember the Nixon years.

So that our minds are not cluttered with useless information, we forget the vast majority of details within the first 24 hours after an experience. Those details that survive in memory, are either very important, emotionally or otherwise, or well practiced. To recall the past, we string together a series of events, putative effects following from putative causes, into a neat narrative that is easier to recall than a set of unrelated events. When we are in the process of remembering, the information available to us, and the narrative structure that we use to reconstruct the past, are influenced by our current state of mind. If we feel sad, we remember the bleak things, if we are proud, we remember achievements, if we are in love, we remember the object of our affection through rose-colored glasses. The same is true for more abstract aspects of our personality, such as our political or religious beliefs.

This bias in remembering is particularly relevant when the event in question is as politically-charged as the presidency of Richard Nixon. Aschheim has side-tracked this tendency to color memory with political views by creating visual cues that are devoid of politics, and are reminiscent of a forgotten time. This context is a fertile breeding ground for involuntary remembering: those memories that seem to burst into consciousness without the need for effortful recollection. Of all our senses, vision takes up the most cortical real estate in our brains. Unlike hearing, vision creates a series of static images or snapshots which the brain then uses to sort out what is constant in the environment, and therefore unimportant, and what is changing and could potentially be a threat. Our visual field is relatively limited in terms of what is in focus, so the brain fills in parts of the visual landscape that we do not actually see. In the same way that our mind fills in those parts of the visual field that we don't see, our minds fill in the gaps of our memories by spinning a story out of the few details that we do remember. As we retrieve details from the past, and reconstruct them into a coherent narrative for ourselves, the way in which the event is represented in terms of neural activity, is vulnerable: remembering changes memory.

Because of the central role that vision plays in our perceptual theater, visual cues are among the most effective memory retrieval tools: looking at a photograph of a past event makes remembering easy. Deborah's drawings have a nostalgic quality that echoes the fragmented nature of memory. By showing her drawings to interviewees, she provided cues for them that altered the way that they remember the past and forever change how they will remember it in the future. The human imagination, of which memory retrieval is one component process, activates the same brain circuits that are involved in the initial experience. Deborah Aschheim: Involuntary Memories: Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and the Nixon Years encourages this type of memory across a collective of individuals, tapping into a forgotten past that exists only in our imagination.

Dr. Indre Viskontas, a cognitive neuroscientist and professor of music at San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco, CA, works at the intersection of neuroscience and music. An active performer, this soprano has published more than 35 articles and book chapters on the brain basis of memory and creativity. She hosts the popular science podcast, Point of Inquiry, and edits the journal Neurocase.