

EMPTY MEMORY

Written component master thesis

*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (MA)
at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna,
Institute of Fine Arts and Media*

LUCIE BELLE BLANCHE DAVID

REGISTRATION NUMBER: **12140880**

VIENNA, WINTER SEMESTER 2023

PROGRAMME NUMBER: **S 066 776**

STUDY PROGRAMME: **ART & SCIENCE**

SUPERVISOR: UNIV-PROF. **VIRGIL WIDRICH**

Layout: Salomé Erard, Lucie David



di:'Angewandte
Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna

Abstract

This work combines historical science with artistic methods to explore the intertwined realms of memory, history and narrative construction; highlighting the bizarre complexity of the subject of history as a science. By exploring the narrative of creating ceramic vessels as a research methodology, the author analyses the non-linear, fragmented nature of the resulting research. This personal narrative resonates throughout the work. This work also compares the science of history to the water that moulds the vessels and weaves the feelers through the concepts of memory, perspectives of historiography and the role of silence in remembrance. By sculpting the vessels, this interdisciplinary research offers a perspective on the shaping and experiencing of historiography. It presents the inclusion of artistic practice by introducing a sculptural space of memory 'containers' in which (alien) beings come to life and wait to be filled with new memories.



EMPTY MEMORY

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Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the help of these wonderful people!

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Univ.-Prof. Virgil Wiedrich, Martin Reinhardt, Gerda Fischbach, and the previous staff of Art&Science, Brishty Alam, Valerie Deifel, Margit Busch, Aurianne Chevandier and the students of the Art&Science class.

Merci to my mother for being her, for being with me. For her carrier-bag of creativity, bringing the sun into the north, tomatoes, thyme, rosemary, and the Mediterranean sea thank you, *Moumi. Un, deux, trois, Soleil.*

Thank you, Dad (VAV), for the nordic naturalness, "...Die kleinen Dinge des Lebens" (you know what I mean), the *schmack*, and the shared love for musical grooves of the past.

Paolo for your care, our *LG-Life* together, for comforting, for the care, for clearing up behind me, and making me laugh. Merci Pipo.

Gabi and Volker for the *Red Harbor* – [The heart keeps beating].

My teacher and friend, Julia, who continuously believed in us and the tentacle, and shared her ceramic knowledge and many, many *bubble teas* with me.

My friends in Berlin, Julia and Sarah Ama, who are a source of warmth and support. Congratulations on the arrival of the newest member, *Isaya*! Welcome to the world!

To my dear Els, your caring and joyful presence persisted through the ups and downs we encountered during our writing journey. Warmest hugs to you, *my deaaaaaar*.

Cam, my divine resin and *plastic* queen.

My inspiring poetic friend Mala, you shine! I am so happy we met!

Merci to dear Aurianne, for the books, for the fruitful conversation and look-outs at the very beginning of my thesis project – and our shared love for *Agnès*.

A special mention to my beautiful sister, Aisha, whose unwavering belief in me and direct yet warm approach always kept me going. Your sharp and critical thoughts are consistently *on point*.

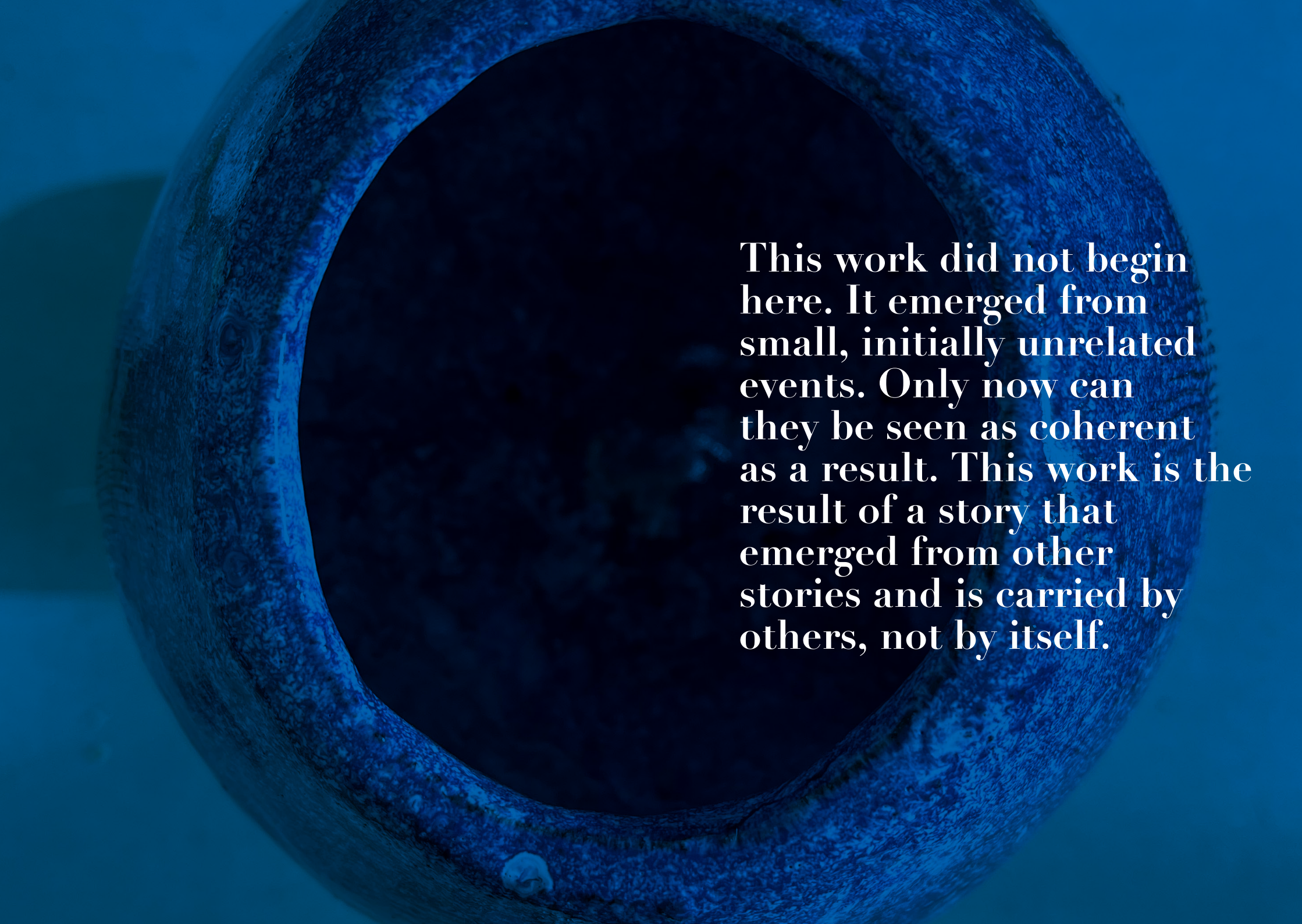
To Birdi for diligently caring for my English grammar and writing. Thank you, *Pioupion*.

Merci ma *chérie* Salomé for your Breton charm, your jokes, understanding me, and the rigorous and beautiful graphic design work you did for the Empty Memory.

I extend my sincere appreciation to you, Professor Anne-Helen Mydland, from the Art University of Bergen, for giving me the right hint for the blue glaze, for the zoom between the cold Vienna and a sunny balcony in Athens. For philosophising about ceramic, women (body) in history, fragmented vessels, animated beings and artistic research. It was my pleasure to meet you during the 'Lost Shape' workshop organised as part of the Peek-Project 'The Brocken Collection' (Institute of Conservation, Angewandte).

Last but not least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Ceramics Studio at the University of Applied Arts and to its director, Sen. Art. Mag.art. Sasha Alexandra Zaitseva, for her tireless efforts in creating a space that philosophizes about craftsmanship and art. The studio is – a place that provides for a caring and creative community. It is a place where one can explore and experiment; a place guaranteed to be filled with the *scent of food* during lunchtime (courtesy of Roman). During my studies, I had many wonderful and fruitful moments there. Thank you to all of you: the team of the ceramics studio, Sasha, Gerald, Sandra, Sascha, Julia, Roman, and all its students.

POUR CLAUDINE

A large, circular, textured object, possibly a piece of wood or stone, with a dark, hollow center, set against a blue background. The object has a rough, weathered appearance with visible grain or texture. The center is a deep, dark blue, almost black, circular void. The background is a solid, medium blue.

This work did not begin here. It emerged from small, initially unrelated events. Only now can they be seen as coherent as a result. This work is the result of a story that emerged from other stories and is carried by others, not by itself.

Introduction

Coming from the humanities and with a strict Western European academic background in French-German intercultural studies and History, my academic work and research has always followed a plan. This plan contains a clear structure that repeats itself and is pressed onto all perspectives like a plaster mould.

Research is usually presented as an "atemporal", sequential, structured process, with defined and dependent stages, such as formulating questions, developing theories, selecting methods, analysing and discussing. Even if this oversimplifies the actual, less linear nature of research, because "our work seems more systematic and authoritative if divided up in this way" (Nyrrnes, 2006, 12).

In order to overcome those limiting factors, I make use of artistic re-search methodologies which allow a more personal, fragmented and non-confirmative narration.

I spread out my work in front of me. It is similar to filling up a vessel with events, thoughts, conversations and observations. When the need arises, it's like pouring out the contents of this vessel.

This knowledge-collection inside my vessels, is an idea that became concrete through reading the essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* by Ursula Le Guin (1986).*

In this short essay, Le Guin writes about the evolution of human culture and the importance of storytelling, referencing Elizabeth Fischers' book *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (1975) and her "Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution". It contrasts the glorified *stories of hunting and heroism*, often dominated by male-centred narratives, as she argues for a re-evaluation of what is considered heroic and valuable in our cultural histories, emphasising the importance of everyday, frequently overlooked activities and objects for the development and survival of humanity.

While Le Guin is referring to the writing of novels and storytelling, I believe that this methodology of gathering things in "... (a) leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient", in order to find new narratives has qualities that can be transposed when dealing with the narration in Historical Science and "post-heroic" narratives.

Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished. Maybe. The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story. (Le Guin, 2019 (1986), 33)

Memory and Collage



I sift through *my archive* of notes, *remembering* thoughts, *selecting* and *choosing* the *fragments*, *quotes* that fit my work. I take individual passages from works by authors who have written entire books about one particular phenomenon, event, object. Thus, a fragment of their thinking appears in my work, as do fragments of very different people — be they of scientific, artistic, intellectual, private or of crafted nature.

Through my writing, fragments form into a "reordered" narrative. This narration cannot be separated from me, as it is based on my interests, experiences, origins, and socio-cultural identity. It is written in different languages: the language of theory, of artistic practice and of craft techniques (Nyrrnes, 2006, 12).

WETNESS

I create a foundation,
I sculpt the clay to a
certain height, carve,
slap and sleek the form
inside and outside.
I leave it out to dry.

DRYNESS

The form is fired.
The sculpting process came
to an end.
The form can now only
change through breaking.

SLAPPING AND FORMING THE THEORY

The vessel serves as both the starting and the finishing point of my thesis. To convey this concept, I liken the scientific aspect to the water I employ in shaping the vessel — whether on the wheel or using the coil technique. The water is what binds the parts of the vessel together, as it also creates clay slip. Simultaneously, water allows me to continually work on the vessel, as it maintains the clay at a wet stage.

Once I have gathered all the necessary theoretical elements, I possess the mass of my written work, and can let it *dry*. In the context of the exhibition, only the fired ceramic pieces will be visible. However, they will remain an integral part of this written work because without them, this work would not exist at all. Thus, the vessels have both inner and outer characteristics that may either be absent or visible depending on the focalisation the viewer puts onto them, just as society has a private and a public sphere of history and memory that is either absent or visible.



Understanding History and Memory

Memory and history are fields of research that are so vast and loaded, depending on the point of focus the scientists adopt, that it seems necessary to specify that, in this work, when we speak of memory, we do so in relation to history.

History and memory belong together. Without memory, there is no history. However, history, in the sense of science, has different qualities to memory.

When historians talk about the scientific aspects of history, the research is based on the consultation of sources, documents (in archives), evidence, etc., leading to a methodological narrative in order to establish facts about the past. The historians make an effort to objectify their research.

Memory, on the other hand, is linked to awareness of the past. It is about re-calling/re-collecting events experienced individually or collectively (remembering individual and collective memory). In this sense, memory is not objective; it is closely linked to what we feel, as Sarah Ahmed has stated in her book *The Politics of Emotions* (2015). Memory has an informal character, which cannot necessarily be "verified" because it is not always systematically documented. However, memory can also be a political act (sensitive to manipulation), through remembering or forgetting.

Perpetual emergence of new narratives matters. As long as we live in an unequal society, we have the opportunity to reshape and reiterate the same concepts over and over again. The same way we can shape the form of a vessel over and over again until we fully – in every detail – understand and feel the form we create.



Writing History: Narratives and Temporality

We perceive History within the prevailing cultural and societal climate of our time. This ongoing shift in perspective influences our interpretation of past experiences. Consequently, specific historical events may seem more or less connected to our contemporary environment, depending on their relevance to the present (Roth, 2020, 9). In this context, what is interesting about the historical sciences is the relationship they have to the past. Historical studies are written retrospectively and yet are significantly influenced by the present. How certain events are interlinked also depends on the historian's ability to convey these connections.

[D]escriptions resist any assimilation to standardisation, at least as would seem to be required for their theoretical normalisation. This does not make the history unscientific. Rather, it implies narrative structure in the very constitution of the explanandum. It marks in this respect a critical difference between how historians constitute what they study and how such events importantly differ from those that, e.g. chemists or physicists examine and explain (Roth, 2020, 19).

Historical sciences are characterised by their scientific independence, as they provide no "normalising factors" for their scientific narrative. A historian has no control over how events happened in the past. They must work with the "material" that people or societies have consciously or unconsciously handed down or preserved in the past.

Compared to the concept of the past in other sciences, the past in historical science is not



a static object about which more and more can be learned. The studied "object" that changes in the historical sciences — that is, through which one learns more — are continually new perspectives on the past (through the future). Thus, the temporal positioning of the author in any historiographical narrative is relevant because it determines the social context from which it is written and analysed. But this also means that we mostly perceive events when they are described by individuals or groups who have an interest in these events (Roth, 2020, 30). This focalisation occurs also through the work in archives on documents and sources. In her book *The Allure of the Archives*, first published in French in 1989, Arlette Farges discusses the way in which an archive, once read, becomes separated from the rest of the documents by the simple act of copying or photocopying. She explains how the approach to separation from the archive can vary according to the object of study, whether it be by bringing together similar elements, collecting information, or isolating relevant elements to research the topic. Farges also points out that this *manipulation* of archives, whether focused on specific cases or on a broader thematic field, leads to a form of accumulation and detailed analysis, while allowing essential distinctions to be made with other subjects of study (Farges, 1989, 79–80).

In his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) highlights that professional historians created "the Past" as a separate entity at the same time as their own practice grew, and that they have effectively utilised this development ever since. Consequently, this way of utilizing "the Past" strengthened the belief that enabled it: it started to take on the characteristics of a "separate world", "the more historians wrote about it". Still, Trouil-

lot claims that we are getting closer to the day "when professional historians will need to define their place in the present more clearly, lest politicians, magnats, or ethnic leaders create history" for themselves alone, since contemporary crises are impacting identities that were once assumed to be long-established or silent (Trouillot, 1995, 152).

The change in perspective on the past is evident not least in how fields of research in the humanities, such as critical race theory and gender studies — to name but two — are changing the metaphysical view of events in the past. They adopt new perspectives that produce a different narrative by rearranging events (e.g. in time, in ideas, in discourses) and changing the focalisation — also in historical science.

At the same time, these "shifts in perspective" are accompanied by changing social structures. Since history was previously written predominantly from a male perspective, a reformation is necessary to address and counteract the influence of the male gaze in historical narratives. Thus, a intersectional feminist-historical perspective on past events can only emerge through the inclusion of female scholars and scholars *of color*.

As Farges has stated, these developments do not proceed chronologically and are not "balanced". They should be understood like a net that is continuously expanding. In this process, ongoing combinations of events and perspectives lead to new understandings that incorporate multiple and *traveling* points of view, but also conflicts.

History is not a balanced narrative of the results of opposing moves. It is a way of taking in hand and grasping the true harshness of reality, which we can glimpse through the collision of conflicting logics. (Farges, 1989, 86)

For the patriarchy limits our perspective on the world, especially on us women, and in intersection with racism, the view on us Black women. (Fajembola, Nimindé-Dundaden-gar, 2022,160)



Historical silence

Historiography can only achieve a "complete representation" by taking into account different historical perspectives in the plural. In this, we have to accept, however, that Historiography can never be complete, as it is in perpetual movement due to the concept of past, present and future and is working through *selecting* (Farges, 1989) and asking questions. And posing one question always excludes another question (Nyrmes, 2006, 17).

In her book, *Les femmes ou les silences de l'histoire* (translated 'Women or the Silences of History'), the French historian Michelle Perot (1998) emphasises various factors contributing to the absence of women in historical narratives (in France). One crucial factor she cites is that women's roles were often not considered significant in the context of History, which was predominantly written by men, thus reflecting a male perspective. She highlights that historical sources from 19th-century France, primarily recorded by administrators, police officers, judges and priests, frequently offered limited insights into women's lives. When women were mentioned, it was often through clichéd stereotypes depicting them as loud or hysterical when they spoke or gestured (Perrot, 1998, 11). This muteness can be linked to a broader picture of a hegemonic power structure.*

Indeed, tracing the history of women is marked by muteness, silence and fragmentation in the historical records. As the historian Bettany Hughes has stated in an interview with Maya Salam in the New York Times: "(There are brilliantly feisty women from history who have made an impact, and whose stories need to be told. For historians it's our job to fill in the gaps in history.) We need to actively

look for women's stories, and put them back into the historical narrative, there are so many women that should be household names but just aren't".

It requires the collection and gathering of information (that was often not originally intended to be part of future historical narratives) and is of a private nature. This also implies re-searching and listening differently when it comes to the differentiation between "private" and public — inside and outside. In the patriarchal system, men decide what belongs in the "political arena" and what belongs in the 'private', i.e. non-political, sphere". "The patriarchy has a vested interest in determining which topics and viewpoints are" and remain unheard. This oversight disregards the reality that women and other marginalised groups, due to political and institutional factors, encounter disadvantages or outright disenfranchisement within the private sphere (Lunz, 2022, 218).

As the private sphere breaks its silence and enters the public sphere of history, silence tells us which realities have been omitted or suppressed, and which perspectives have been distorted. It has then, the power to shape new *social realities* and new methods of remembrance.

Making the unspeakable speakable is not limited to language; it can be extended to various fields. In this *regard*, Art can serve as a catalyst for *ex-pressing* historical facts and events beyond the hegemonic structures of history, as it enables the inclusion of emotional states and multiple perspectives. We need to care in the sense that we are able to *ex-press* in order to *be-long*, with someone, somewhere.

The moment silence ceases to exist, the previously silenced experience gains a certain meaning. When we make the unspeakable speakable, it becomes a social reality with which we can interact. (Levin, 2013, 719)

express: late Middle English: from Old French *expres*, from Latin *expressus* 'distinctly presented', past participle of *exprimere* 'press out', from *ex-* 'out' + *primere* 'press'. (Definition from the Oxford Languages dictionary)

Fragmentation in historical writing

The virtue of synthesis and the negativity associated with fragmentation is deeply ingrained in academic and professional historical culture. Periodically, proposals for new syntheses emerge, but all calls for synthesis are essentially attempts to impose a specific interpretation. In that sense, "fragmentation" is considered a negative term, and "synthesis" a positive one. The synthesis of historical writing was deeply embedded in the concept of a *Grand Narrative* of western historical writing. In 1991, the historian Allan Megill saw a future of historiography and historians outside of this.

In that sense, historical writing cannot operate in isolation nor in a vacuum, because it is directly connected to the socio-cultural time-space in which it is composed. In this context silence is to be understood as an element of narration. If absence in one piece of historical writing actually signifies the presence of another perspective, then silence speaks in a way that it creates an empty space (a space of silence) that can be filled. In that sense it is crucial to determine:

Who is speaking on behalf of whom?
and
From what perspective are certain events
observed at a given time?

I imagine historians who would not in any way think that they were telling 'the full story'. I imagine historians who could turn themselves into economists or philosophers or literary critics, and who could shift easily back and forth between such conflicting fields (for conflicting they most certainly are). I imagine historians who, at the same time, would be intellectuals, speaking within the field of historiography and outside it as well. (Megill, 1991, 697)

To consider historical writing as fragmented allows for a continual reconfiguration of events, which creates perpetual waves of historical narrations that can be conflicting. But in more positive terms, these waves allow for new assemblages of historical narratives and perspectives to literally grow out of societal structures of the dominant groups.*



History as a sculpting material

Understanding history as material rather than science opens up infinite combinations and possible readings that capture a non-linear concept of time far away from the remaining flavour of a *Grand Narrative*. To conceive history as material means means to draw conclusions from privately experienced history to collective history and cultural memory and vice-versa. In this sculpting material of history, we move in a complex field of conflicting priorities between the private, political and cultural natures of re-member-ing. They merge into each other and are to a large extent interdependent. In this context, silence is to be understood as a negative. Because silence does not mean that there is no experience, because silence is talking. We just need the will to listen to it.

Silence speaks.

The collective memory
resembles a vessel.
It is filled and refilled
again and again.
The memory is
collecting.
Forgetting as well as
remembering
are its qualities.



Memory: between private and collective nature

In the context of historiography, memory is as a nexus of past and present that shapes the future by analysing the past (Knapp, 2023, 124).

As mentioned, there is not "one story" and therefore not "one past". Temporalities intermingle as the past continues to evolve. Structures of power exist at the interplay of memory and perception of the past. When we talk about "memory experience", we mean the moment when we recall what we have lived through and how we felt during specific events in our lives. One's current emotional state significantly influences what one remembers. In a positive mood, we often recall pleasant things, while in sad moments, memories tend to be tinted with sadness. This process contributes to the construction of our understanding of our personal memory and history. However this construction is not static; on the contrary, over time, as memory and historical shifts take place, we tend to remember our childhood differently as we age,* influenced by our evolving understanding, the influence of changing societal structures (norms/values) and different historical narrations and their embedded power structures.

This personal memory is in direct linkage to the cultural memory that we are living in and that we are shaping. If we engage with cultural memory, the starting point is to take expressions of memory and work them towards the broader outside (Kuhn, 2007). In that sense, private memory can be a seed, a beginning, when working with cultural memory. There is an inside and an outside to it.

Collective memory has the purpose of not forgetting and thus *fills* a (re-)collecting function. In its positive aspects Collective memory contributes to the preservation of historie(s), as history *survives* through its own narratives and *revivals*. Therefore, remembering is a significant part of shaping history in terms of cultural politics. The question of what collective memory remembers and what role memory should play in an overall societal context depends largely on the inherent power structures. It is formed from different perspectives, which in turn are often linked to private memories and influence each other.

The Historian Pierre Nora proposes that "memory is life, sustained by living societies founded in its name". He contends that it is in constant "evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unaware of its successive deformations, susceptible to manipulation and appropriation, and prone to linger long dormant and be periodically revived". Furthermore, he argues that history is the reconstruction of "what no longer exists". It is always problematic and incomplete. For him, memory is a constantly current phenomenon that binds us to the eternal present, while history is a representation of the past (Nora, 1989, 8).

Nora's *lieux de mémoire* (material sites of memory) can be criticised, as they stick strictly to a nation-state ('container memory'). Nevertheless his comments are interesting to show because they draw a line between history and memory.

Others present a more fluid concept: a *passage, overlapping, traveling* from individual memory to a collective or social one, forming historical narratives. The nature and conceptualisation of memory in historical contexts are subjects of ongoing

"The passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history. The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian. The demand for history has thus largely over-flowed the circle of professional historians. Those who have long been marginalized in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity." (Nora, 1989, 15)

Nora's approach binds memory, ethnicity, territory, and the nation-state together, in the sense of 'a (mnemonic) space for each race'. His old-fashioned concept of national culture and its puristic memory drew criticism from many quarters. (...) Nora's 'Lieux de mémoire' neglected the history of colonialism, la France d'outre mer, and the large immigrant communities of today's France, which is, after all, a multiethnic and multicultural formation. (Erll, 2011, 7)

Memories, being painful or not, do not cease to exist. They can easily take on a life of their own, beyond the control of the individual. (Levin, 2013, 716)

debate and evolution in scholarly discourse. Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie (2022) assert that memory is not a static entity but is fluid, mutable, and often contested. This view challenges traditional notions of (cultural) memory as a fixed and unchanging record of the past.

If we translate this thought into the materiality of clay, we come to an interesting conclusion: a piece of clay that has not been fired remains plastically *sculptable* in its form, which means, I can constantly change it through my intervention. The clay remains in its raw state and is — as long as it is kept moist — continuously changeable.

In that sense, the materiality of the wet clay matches, for me, the concept of memory, as it is constantly malleable. In contrast, the fired ceramic piece is physically solid. I can no longer change the piece in its form – unless it breaks. What is changeable is the view, the perspective, which I *put* on the piece or: how I want to read the piece. Thus, for me, the fired ceramic piece fits with the more "solid form" of history.

In the historiographical sense, historical narratives condition collective memories, and collective memory also influences individual memory and vice versa. The collective memory is an assembling term and different from history, even if it can contribute a significant part to newer historiographies. The French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, who was instrumental in coining the concept of collective memory, describes in his book *On collective Memory* (1939) how the individual relies in his or her memories on cues "that lie outside himself and have been established by society." Remembering can therefore be seen as being socially determined. Thus, the boundary between individual and social memory becomes blurred, as the relevance of our me-

mories only emerges through affects in the given cultural world (Halbwachs, (1939) 1980, 53–54).

When we deal with collective and individual memory, we must assume that the interpretive sovereignty is different than in a historiographical context. In his essay *The Crisis of Narration* (2023), philosopher Byung-Chul Han states that memory is not a "mechanical repetition" of the past, but rather a "perpetual narrative that must always be retold." The memory "is necessarily incomplete" and presupposes distance from the past. If all past experiences are immediately and easily accessible, the purpose of memory is extinguished (Han, 2023, 43).

In a re-constitution through fragments (that often rely on a starting point outside of historical writing), a new configuration evolves. Something new can be created from the shards of a painful past and be embedded in historical narratives. This motive is present in the works of Michael W. Twitty, an African-American cultural historian and culinary researcher, who digs through the influences of South American cuisine, tracing it back to slavery, as he puts the recipes of southern cuisine right back into their historical context.

Certain psychologists apparently prefer to imagine historical events as auxiliary to our memory, functioning much as do the temporal partitions of a watch or calendar. Our life flows by in a continuous movement. But when we look back at what has unrolled, we always find it possible to assign its various portions to the demarcations of collective time. Such temporal divisions are imposed from outside upon every individual memory precisely because their source is not in any single one of them. (Halbwachs, [1939] 1980, 53–54)

So much was lost – names, faces, ages, ethnic identities that African-Americans must do what no other ethnic group writ large must do: take a completely shattered vessel and piece it together, knowing that some pieces will never be recovered. This is not quite as harrowing or hopeless as it might sound. I liken it to the Japanese art of kintsugi, repairing broken vessels using gold. The scars of the object are not concealed, but highlighted and embraced, thus giving them their own dignity and power (Twitty, 2017, 20-21).



Re-member

Remembering and what is remembered do not always refer to the same thing. In "western" society, we remember collectively and also in political ways that do not focus on all of us as individuals, but on the power structures of a nation, which leads us to suffer in our individual narratives belonging to history (Brunner 2023, 753). This gains importance, when we talk about marginalised individuals and groups inside of "western" society.

In a private setting of remembering, the controls of what is remembered lies on the individual's part of that private group (e.g. the family, communities). Conversely when the re-membering is played at a larger societal scale it gets connected to political and societal power structures that can and will leave out narratives of memory in order to secure their power. This leads us to the question of power in the context of remembering and in that context, the absence and its silence are a painful product of the aforementioned societal power structures.

Official archives and public media tend to memorialise the experiences of the powerful. Meanwhile, intersectional feminist research on cultural memory emphasises the political significance of what is remembered, forgotten, or suppressed, by stating that the "practices of private everyday experience (...) are as politically revealing (...) as any event played out in the public arena" (Hirsch and Smith, 2002, 12).

Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think (Harraway, 2016, 38).

Just as we must introduce a small particle into a saturated medium to get crystallization, so must we introduce a "seed" of memory into that body of testimony external to us in order for it to turn into a solid mass of remembrances (Halbwachs, [1939] 1980, 25).

Complementing this perspective, Astrid Erll (2011) introduces the idea of 'travelling memory'. Erll posits that cultural memory must remain dynamic, continually evolving and impacting both individual and collective consciousness, to stay relevant and influential. According to her, in order for cultural memory to remain vibrant and influential, it must continuously circulate and remain active, affecting both personal cognition and societal structures (Erll, 2011, 11–12).

I claim that all cultural memory must 'travel', be kept in motion, in order to 'stay alive', to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations. Such travel consists only partly in movement across and beyond territorial and social boundaries. On a more fundamental level, it is the ongoing exchange of information between individuals and the motion between minds and media (...). 'Travel' is therefore an expression of the principal logic of memory: its genesis and existence through movement (Erll, 2011, 12).



Silence in Memory

In the context of memory, silence inhabits different roles in remembering and forgetting, especially in commemorating historical events linked to a difficult and tense past. By analysing silence in the collective memory and forgetting, the authors Chan Teeger and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi (2010) come to interesting conclusions: because contemporary memory of the "post-heroic" era contains "human rights violations, shameful events, embarrassing moments", silence has an immediate connotation to forgetting, while verbalised language would be associated with remembering. However, they go away from that interpretation and state that silence can be "part of the language of remembrance" and "talk can be found in the language of forgetting" (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 2010, 1104–1105).

They distinguish between overt and covert silence — arguing that both have different outcomes if being employed either in the context of memory or of forgetting.

Overt silence refers to a literal absence of language and narration, it is the tangible absence of communication. In this context, individuals or groups deliberately refrain from talking about certain topics or experiences. Overt silence is usually "visible" and can be observed as a deliberate refusal to talk about certain topics. This silence is often due to sensitivity, taboos or resistance to remembrance.

In contrast, covert silence involves a silence that is concealed or obscured by extensive mnemonic conversations and representations. It is not a complete absence of communication, rituals or practices. Rather, it is characterised by the absence of meaningful content in discourse or representation. Covert silence can be difficult to recognise and criticise because it is not immediately apparent, as it is obscured by the presence of communication and discussion. It may involve the discussion of a topic, but essential details or aspects of it are avoided. Both overt and covert silences can serve different purposes, either to preserve memory or to facilitate forgetting. They represent two dimensions of silence: the visibility of the absence (overt vs. covert) and the intention behind the silence (remembering vs. forgetting)

These dimensions of silence make an interesting distinction. If you want to see the absence, you have to look "the other way around". Whereas if you are interested in the intention behind the silence, you have to look for the reasons behind it. In that sense when talking about different silences in memory, we have to be aware that these are not always very clear and may be incomprehensive.



Memory as sculpting material

Memory can be selective and undergo transformations. This selectiveness and the transformation of memory can result from traumatic experiences or physiological events related to the brain, reshaping not only memories (e.g., amnesia or dementia), but also from the individual explicitly wanting to forget. In this sense, as described by Catherine Malabou in *the Ontology of the accident* (2016), a 'plastic brain' or 'plastic psyche' is characterised by a balanced relationship between adaptability and permanence, between the future and memory, and between giving and receiving form.

Organic matter [the 'plastic brain'] is like the sculptor's clay or marble: it produces its refuse and scraps. But these organic evacuations are absolutely necessary for the realization of living form, which ultimately appears, in all its density, at the cost of their disappearance (Malabou, 2012, 5).

Memory is re-collection by nature. The fragmentation of memory can be associated with the selectiveness of memory (as we cannot recall all our past), the physiology of our brain experience (a metamorphosis) and also possesses assembling qualities. In addition, memory is also about forgetting. This forgetting can occur due to physiological transformations of the brain as described by Malabou. In this case, we refer to it as individual forgetting. Alternatively, this forgetting linked to cultural memory can occur through silence and silencing through a false (non-)remembering, which means that some parts of the collective memory are selectively omitted and added.



Figure 1 Agnès Varda, *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*, 2006. View of the exhibition "Agnès Varda, L'ÎLE ET ELLE."

Agnès Varda (2006), *Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier*: An example of artistic remembrance*

How does the narration of fragments find others?

[B]y artistic intervention, as art is often a tool to bring up a thinking that wasn't verbalised yet or can't be put into language (Levin 2013).

For me, a fascinating example of a fragmented narrative is Agnès Varda's triptych of grieving widows. Varda's video installation *Quelques veuves de Noirmoutier* (2006) is an example of private memory that takes on a collective memory through an artistic intervention. By those means it becomes a historically valuable (female) memory narrative. It is an intervention that includes and displays the emotive patterns of remembering, not only because the subjects are mourning, but also because these women come out of an individual silence and enter a public sphere. As a result, their memories are felt collectively by the audience sitting on chairs in front of Varda's video installation.

When asked about the widowers, Varda stated: "These portraits are silent because society does not hear these widows. That was the motivation behind this work. Lacking, missing is a subject of great importance in our society" (*The Third Life of Agnès Varda*, 2023, 55).

In Varda's installation, the way the chairs are linked together by screens, force the viewer to change seats to access a different story. When the room contains one or more unoccupied chairs, viewer experience a palpable sense of emptiness. This emptiness echoes the silence that reigns in the space, with each viewer immersed in a depicted personal story through headphones and videos. The atmosphere is akin to a collective and individual "memorial service", where viewers are not only connected to each other, but also immersed in their own memories of grief and mourning.

Through her art, Agnès Varda displays silence. We can grasp and visualise silence because we are required to actively put on headphones to listen to the grieving widows. One can observe them all speaking simultaneously, although it is only possible to listen to one woman at a time. Through this intervention, the viewer witnesses a collective as well as individual memories that coalesce into unity through fragments, as they are presented in the form of a triptych.

George Perec (1969), *The Void: Sensing emptiness.*

In his lipogrammatic novel, French Oulipo writer Georges Perec sets himself the constraint to write a novel without using the most frequent vowel in the French language: 'E'.

Perec, who lost his mother and father during WWII, has often been interpreted in terms of his experienced family history and the absence within it. In this sense, one of the most common interpretations of the novel is that the void (*La disparition* in French), is the traumatic loss of his mother and father (these two words have the vowel 'E' in them, 'mère' and 'père' in French). For me, *The Void* is interesting in its conceptual approach of representing emptiness by filling it up with (in this case) other words. 'Filling up' refers to the constraint Perec chose to impose upon himself.

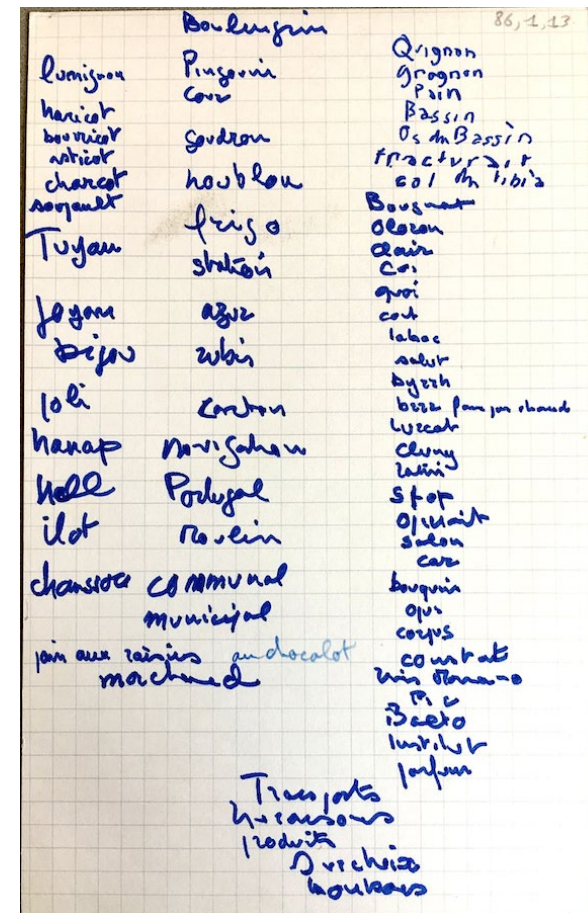
Perec's method has a practical component to it. Because 'E'-less French is a "unnatural" language, the technical challenge was to make it read like one (Bellos, 1995, 699). To achieve this, Perec created a somewhat dictionary in which he catalogued all the words containing the letter 'E' that he required for his novel. He then identified suitable alternative words in French that did not contain the excluded vowel (Salceda, 2017).

When one reads the book in French, it becomes clear that something is unusual. However, pinpointing the exact reason is difficult unless one is already aware of the *lipogrammatic constraint* or happens to realise, during the reading, that not a single 'E' appears in the novel. This seemingly minuscule intervention of banning one letter, has an immense impact the reading of the novel:

It creates a feeling, a sensation of void to the reader throughout the narrative.

These "alternative words", which would have never been chosen in order to narrate, create this effect. Thus, the *lipogrammatic constraint* symbolises a profound absence, not just in its form but also in its content of the story around the main character Anton Voyl, which similarly revolves around the theme of disappearance, absence and void.

Perec's chief experimental aim was to see if e-less French could invent its own story and thus vindicate the potentiality not only of that constraint but of the very principle of constraint. The title he chose for the novel was a self-referential joke: *La Disparition* ("The Disappearance") pushes the reader's nose into the book's design, the disappearance of the commonest letter of the alphabet (Bellos, 1995, 699).



It's intriguing to observe how eliminating the letter 'e' darkens the language, leading to creative discoveries and the activation of brief paradigms. (Neefs, 2018, 138)

Figure 2. George Perec, list without the letter 'e,' by free association.

I fill the vessel with
fragmented knowledge,
stories
connections
that are linked through my
reflections.
And
I pour it out again.



Shaping a new form

In my work, I find myself in a constant in-between: reading, theoretical and artistic conception, as well as craft and learning. Being in between means there is a possibility for translation. While translation is a vast field in itself that I wouldn't dare to dive into in this chapter, I would like to consider the process of translation as being extremely helpful in navigating concepts that are in-between an embodied material reflection and a theoretical one. In our case the question that is most certainly raised is: How are the vessels, or objects, linked to the practice of History. Or more precisely: What does the object have to tell?



The [Empty] Memory

What does a memory look like that is not bound to an historical narrative – be it private or public? I introduce the term of *Empty Memory*. The Empty Memory resembles the cavity of a vessel. It is not tied to any historical event(s), nor to any one historical perspective or hegemonic story. It is, to borrow the term of Marianne Hirsch, an activation of 'multi-directional temporality'. It is a fragmented lacunar memory, detached from an historical understanding of past and present, and thus floating in space:
— it is de-tached.

The emptiness is connected to silence. In this narration, I perceive silence as a soft background noise. This silence resembles a seashell held to your ear. You hear a distinct something, but it's challenging to precisely define what emanates from the hollow space. It evokes the sound of the sea, inherently present and reaching us from the distance. Thus, in silence we can also recognise the *emptiness of memory*.

This emptiness should be understood as something that cannot be verbalised. The emptiness of memory is diffuse; it either cannot or does not wish to provide explanations. This diffusion also means that it cannot adhere to any linear, chronological narrative of history, since there are no specific events in this context that allow for a connection. It represents an alternative form of memory that has neither a collective nor an individual claim. Instead, it exists as a fragmented representation, hovering in between. This challenge is integral to my work — to keep the concept of Empty Memory open and not burden it with a



single narrative. Through this tension, I believe we can cultivate awareness of our process of remembering, whatever it may entail.

How do I hold the Empty Memory here —fixed— and how does it come together with the nature of a vessel?

I want to include the previously mentioned process of translation. We know that translation — in linguistics — is not just about translating a sentence word by word from one language to another. It is about translating the emotive image of a sentence, it is about translating its sense(s). It is to translate the painting drawn by letters, it is to translate a world.

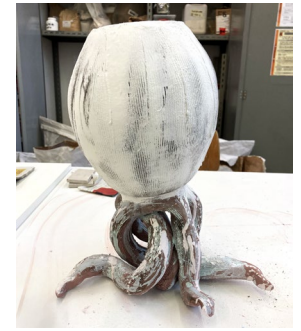
Heidegger* writes in his reflections on the jug that the true 'setting' of the vessel lies in its emptiness, not in the walls or the bottom. Thus, the potter does not form the jug itself but the emptiness that encompasses the vessel. The gathering is one of the pot's qualities. In its scientific sense, the jug does not fulfil emptiness for him. Because from a physical point of view, the vessel encloses air and this air is merely displaced by a liquid (Heidegger, 1957, 170–171). Thus: the vessel forms, freely out into the emptiness, a form. It grasps something —else— in itself.

What is fascinating about vessels is that they function as a universal agent. How a vessel looks, which characteristics it has, is insofar unimportant as long as it fulfils its *use*. But as vessels are such archetypical objects, we cannot help but contemplate and wonder how many perspectives, narratives, metaphors and stories they can disclose to us. Some of them can be integrated into a discourse around memory, historiography and temporality.

Memory

Objects, whether preserved in private, collective discourse, transnational or the national history, can be agents of memory. Consequently, vessels contribute to the formation of historical narratives and contribute to the construction of a (trans)national heritage rooted in the craftsmanship of the past. Emotional values can be associated with these objects. If memory is flexible, so is the process of recalling these objects. The interpretation of the vessel's qualities is in perpetual movement, depending on the person's perspective interpreting them.

In that sense: What do I want the vessel to tell me about memory?

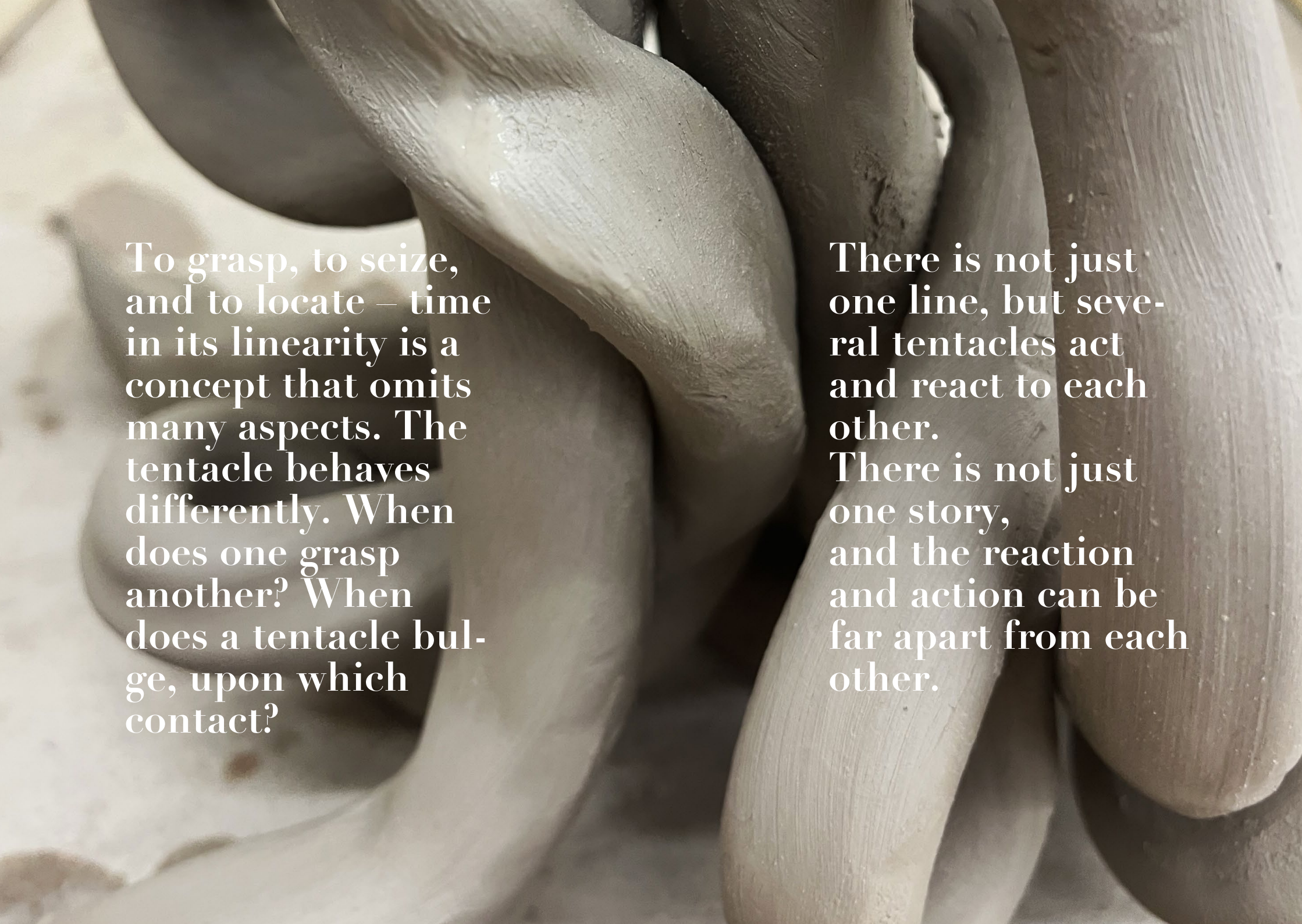


Temporality

The object in its form is an entity that is constantly re-discovered but not re-invented. In this respect, one could say that the vessel in its specific form resembles the time concept of historical narratives. New interpretations of vessels and their forms continually emerge because the present perspective is always shifting towards the future, bringing along elements of the past.







To grasp, to seize,
and to locate – time
in its linearity is a
concept that omits
many aspects. The
tentacle behaves
differently. When
does one grasp
another? When
does a tentacle bul-
ge, upon which
contact?

There is not just
one line, but several
tentacles act
and react to each
other.
There is not just
one story,
and the reaction
and action can be
far apart from each
other.

The mode of absence in the knowledge of craft techniques

In her article, "Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art", Amy Sherlock (2022) highlights the existence of a "slip between the cracks", mirroring the "fault lines of arts and crafts". This implies that when working with clay, you navigate the space between the realms of art and craft. She goes on to explain that we are witnessing a resurgence of the use of clay in contemporary art, and claims that the "medium (clay) has finally achieved unproblematic status" (Sherlock, 2022, 21–22). However, the realms of art and craft are a highly debated terrain as Glenn Adamson states in the very last paragraph of his book *thinking thought craft* (2007).

The ongoing 'discussion' about when ceramics are considered art and when they are considered craft was not the reason I chose clay as the material for my artistic research. I want to feel and have a dialogue with the material — I found this with clay. This is because clay has organic qualities that, in my opinion, can be integrated into theoretical frameworks. Working with clay is, if you will, a grounding practice that allows for an extremely wide range of perspectives and insights, not least because works made of clay — especially vessels or potsherds — are present objects of use and historical artefacts that tell us about the past, with the oldest ones "first emerging in East Asia between 20,000 and 12,000 before the present" (Oliver Craig et al., 2013, 351). In archaeological and historical terms, even a fragment of a pot (sherd), can provide a wealth of data about a specific cultural and time period.

The act of repetition in order to learn a technique does not mean that I deprive myself of the conceptualisation that defines contemporary art. But learning a craft is a form of embodied knowledge that can enhance theoretical thinking within the context of artistic research, as I literally *feel* knowledge slipping, sliding, flowing through my hands. Within the setting of constant (re)search, I can observe both myself and the material, while creating my pieces, leading me to new possibilities of narration within the field of knowledge that I explore here, also through the practical part. Through sculpting with clay, I train my ability to take on and be open for a more unknown outcome and a less standardised research narration.



For the historian, theorist, or critic who is interested in the problem of craft, the challenge is not to subject every crafted object to an equivalent degree of analysis, but rather to identify and do justice to the reality of craft's position within modern culture. Above all, this means resisting the impulse unthinkingly to celebrate craft in all its manifestations. Thinking through craft is a useful exercise, and never more so than when it creates uncertainty (Adamson, 2007, 169).

Techniques in the absence of words

Techniques of clay and clay throwing (as it is perceived even more as a craft than sculpting by hand) are marked by what can be called a form of *embodied knowledge*. Embodied because it is your hands and body that are working in order to sculpt. This means that verbalised language is not the only tool used, to teach or learn techniques for working in the ceramic fields. On the contrary, working with clay demands interactions that are similar to human relationships, because you enter into a dialogue with the clay — it is about listening, responding and cooperating.

Although clay is not sentient, the nature of the interaction, not cognitive abilities, defines the relationship, or to put it in the words of Ingar Brinck and Vasudevi Reddy: it can be qualified as "emotional engagement". Working with clay requires being attuned to it and gentle with it, treating the clay as a responsive entity in a dialogical and open-ended creative process (Reddy, Brink, 2019, 37–40).

This means that we experience movements and shifts when working with the material. Thus, in these *turning points* of the conversation with and about the techniques of clay, we find in-betweens when shifting from verbalized to embodied language and vice versa. There is a minuscule void, a pause, a silence in this in-between. The *signal* of this in-between came to my understanding through the abundance of filler words I encounter while learning about and with the clay.

In the grammatical sense, filler words, also known as "linguistic filler words", metaphorically fill a certain kind of void inside a sentence. Filler words are words or phrases used in a sentence or utterance to bridge a pause or maintain the flow of speech. They often have no actual lexi-

cal meaning or contribute little to the content of the utterance. So filler words can symbolise that something was previously empty and is now filled, similar to how they are used in language to fill a gap in communication. But what is this metaphorical void filled with? The use of filler words serves to connect fragments of a sentence into a coherent construct, and in this respect they are similar to trying to fill a mental pause, searching for...a word, an expression. The emptiness in a sentence is used as a creative means in a mental unit, similar to artistic creation, in which emptiness has a positive quality (I form a thought with the help of material).

When we engage in hands-on work, many aspects of our actions are difficult to convey or describe to others. It is challenging to capture these sensations and experiences in writing, as the creative process involves feelings and nuances that are hard to *ex-press* in words. These feelings can be likened to a kind of 'void memory' — they exist and are experienced, but they are not easily spoken of in a verbalized sense.

During the process of sculpting and learning to throw big pieces of clay on the wheel, I encounter filler words in an interesting way. While my teacher Julia Geissler was teaching and showing me how to throw big pieces of clay, she used a lot of filler words. These filler words were the *signal* that we had shifted from verbalized technical knowledge to embodied technical knowledge that I had to copy and feel with my hands. But as I listened to them, they just became a memory of one of the first encounters I had with throwing big pieces of clay. The filler words mark for me what I remember through my body but cannot put into words. In that sense there is also a void, because things can't be verbalized, you have to feel this embodied knowledge with your hands.

In fact, this is a particularly interesting conversation topic, as I noticed when working at the University's ceramic studio. While everyone has a different technique of throwing and hand-building, the desired outcome is the same: shaping a piece of clay according to a form one is aiming for. In that sense each person has a distinctive dialogue with clay.

I realised that one should perhaps best follow the technique of one single person, before learning the technique of another one. Fragmented pieces of embodied knowledge cannot be put together as they can in theory, and it might not even be fruitful for the end result. In that sense, while remaining open to sharing knowledge, a trust develops in the technique each and every person develops over the years of working with clay. And these techniques are felt simultaneously through the body and the mind.

If you are not familiar with the material of clay, you might find the argument of an entire embodied process behind a single filler word challenging to grasp. But these in-betweens only appear when you adopt this perspective. Perhaps you'll encounter a feeling of an understandable void, which reminds us of the void in Georges Perec's novel mentioned in the first chapter of this text. To frame it in terms of a Perec-like constraint:

On the next page, you will see the filler words outside of their actual space, and then inside the transcript of the recorded dialogue.



Try
way
Thi

Can you see
Maybe

Ah
Maybe

It will

of
sometimes
You can
You kind
Exactly

You
That is

So

few times
That's

Now
I right

you feel
Have
A little more

A

bit slower

start
Do
With the sponge

Do that thing

Hmh

Nice

If you feel

Now this should

As long as

Just a jam

Script of the first lesson of throwing 5 kilos of clay on the wheel, 18th october 2023, Julia Geissler and me at the Ceramicstudio.

JG: The lower part is stuck on the disc, so if it's already stuck you don't have to worry that something will come loose at the top.

The part must now be gradually steadied. But this is a lot of work, i.e. you have to use the palm of your hand more and really press it back together, centre it at the top, press it down a little and press it down a little.

You kind of hug the piece of clay (with your hands)).

Sometimes centring larger quantities is almost easier than smaller things. What is noticeable is that you have to use more water, but that has to do with the fact that you have more clay. And now you can start to move down a bit more or you can start with your fingertips at the bottom and slowly move up again, just so that the surface is smoothed. You don't have to go all the way in with your fingers because the piece of clay has already been well placed in the middle.

Now I would put the hands right and left again and then you are ready to go. If you feel that it starts to ooze a little at the top, lightly press it in again slowly. Gradually touch the piece again and again.

I would actually say that is good enough to continue. You could still centre it perfectly, but I think it would be better to continue. And work out all these fine details later.

Now you have to work with the middle fingers, slowly dive in. If you have problems coming down, you can always open up here.

Ah, I think there's an air bubble...Nah, it'll come.

Keep diving down, it's going to start moving. But that's not always a problem, now it's a question of you seeing that you can cope with the amount. Work on it calmly, push it in further.

Now I would turn it a bit faster, because we have more material and therefore you need more speed.

How do you feel about the bottom ?

LD: I think it can be a little lower

Now it's a matter of working the ground surface back in, you pull it out like this: left hand is there and you can put your whole right hand over the tyre. With the middle finger and the longer one you start to pull it out.

A little more?

Yes, a little more, maybe a centimetre.

Now you work the upper half first. You don't have to start from the bottom again, but you can also start from the middle, maybe make this bead thinner and slowly pull it up. Now everything takes a little while because there is a lot of clay, but try to get this part up first and then look at the lower part.

And if I've already lifted the lower part and I start on the lower part, do I apply a bit of pressure when I get to the part where I've already pressed?

Exactly, you always align the side edges. First you raise the upper part just a little so that it is a little thinner than the lower part. The differences must not be too big. When you lift the lower part, don't keep pressing when you get to the top because it shouldn't get thinner, it should get even.

Now, when it starts to ooze again, make the clamp again (with your hands). I would not leave this edge there. I wouldn't leave it too sharp, it can shift quite quickly and suddenly you have different heights inside.

Can I do this again with my thumbs?

Sure... I was just wondering if it makes sense to tighten it now, but it is still very bulky and the shot can backfire. This tightening is only possible if you have a certain wall thickness. So if you have a very thin wall thickness and you want to print it tighter, you will get wrinkles in it. But if it's too bulky, I'd also go in carefully, rather just repeat what you've just done, bring that upper part up again. The upper two-thirds in that case.

Now I would bring up the lower half when you are ready.

So this part here now?

Yes, exactly, and wait, now I have to think for a moment. So if you look at it and feel it, it comes apart like this. So before you start pulling it up, make sure that you straighten it first and then pull it up. So when you pull it up it is important that there is a slight movement, you mustn't stay too long at one point or it will be too thin. In this case you have to stay at this point a little bit, so that the wall thickness remains similar, do you know what I mean?

hmh

So you push out a bit from the inside and also rather with the palms of your hands, until everything is easier to grip and then you start to pull it up. Don't worry if you lose a bit of mass, that's fine. Exactly and then do it again.

If there's a bit of movement in there now, if there's a bit of a movement, just put your hands against it and I'll give you my thumbs so that it calms down a bit. Nice. If you feel it fits, let it go.

Now do that thing again with the ... yes.

If you do it a bit slower, then this tyre won't be so crazy that it pushes itself up there. Turning the sponge is a great thing in principle.

Now this should actually solve it. When I do something like this, I make sure that I have a clear separation between where the part is and where the disc is. In the beginning it's important to work on it so that the whole chunk of clay is on the disc, but now I want to have a clear definition of where I can work and where I can't, because if it gets frayed sometimes it becomes opaque. Now I would press the whole thing together again.

With things like this you don't have to stress so much that the lower part doesn't have so much wall thickness. You need a thicker wall in the lower part because the wing is at the bottom. Now concentrate on raising the upper half and then we will concentrate on the lower half. You can then cut the upper half again a little.

And you do this as long as the piece can visibly change, but not so long that you are completely thin and the bottom is completely thick. The differences must not be too great.

Now might be a good time to go in that direction. So see what happens when you get it a little tighter at the bottom. So now you adapt the shape to

what you want later. Just a start, we'll do the rest later.

With the sponge you can support the outside and start to press it out little by little. Do this a few times.

That's right and continue.

Now you can turn again. Maybe you should try it with a sponge, at the bottom you press in, from the inside you press against it, the fingers are stretched because it is so high. Can you see that? I pull with my fingertips.

This way and that, pull it up very slowly. Try it out, if you prefer it without the sponge, then do it with your hands.

I think the sponge is quite good because I have such small fingers and hands.

There, you're already looking up quite well. But if you attack it, you still have enough material to pull up.

What you can also do is stand up and make sure that your upper arms are supported by your body and then you start like this so that you can pull yourself up better. And then you start again, first hollow out everything material from below and when you have found this floor surface again, then you can pull both hands up very slowly.

This might be a bit strange, because you feel like you're spinning into nothing. Make sure you start very gently. Here you push in very slowly and pull it up slowly, no sudden movements - then nothing can happen to you. As soon as they are level again, continue slowly. This is what I would do with the sponge, but of course you can try everything.

As soon as you have reached the top, you can finish this part while sitting.

Aaah, now there's an air bubble. It's really deep inside, it's annoying. Now we have to put in suspicion.

But I wouldn't work it too much now. Because if you work it too long, the wall gets too thin.

Now we just cut it off.

The act of crafting: Expanding awareness beyond the theoretical part

Clay experiences a transformation during the process of creating. Through the firing process, a clay piece undergoes a transformation, turning into a ceramic object that is not only stable and water-resistant but can also be functional. The object's form is solidified during the bisque and glaze-firing stages, with the glaze itself having the power — through its aesthetic qualities — to entirely alter the shape of the ceramic piece (Adamson, 2017, 43–46).

Working with clay takes time and periods of rest. This sculpting and metamorphosis of clay into ceramics can be translated to the research and writing process, as you have to work with the material's attributes and you cannot change them. The speciality of sculpting with clay is that the form is partly dictated by the material. This is the same when working with documents in historical science, as we can to a certain extent navigate the research field but are also limited by the materials that we can find (e.g. archives, documents, photographs). Therefore you are not above the material but next to it, you encounter it.

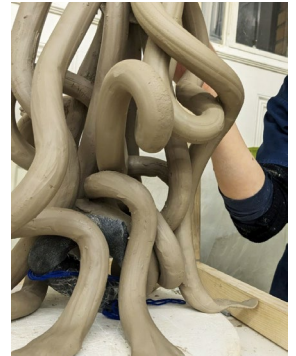
Through a body that exceeds the weight of its standing feet, I give shape to a notion of memory and remembrance that defies theoretical expression because it is a fragmented composition. The tentacle feet, a theme commonplace in contemporary art and subculture, move fluidly and are exceedingly delicate. With them, I work at the very limit of what is possible with clay.



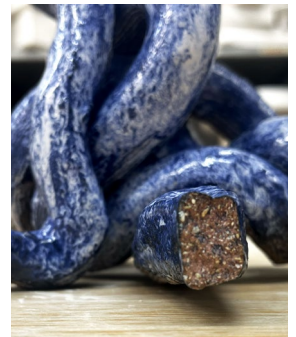
They demand attention and care and because of this, I become attached to them; they come to life, becoming a part of my existence. The tentacle feet are more to me than just the feet of my vessels on the ground; they are feelers for the inside and outside of my research, for the perception of the vessel as an animated being and the room in which they are displayed. Ultimately they are feelers for the observer too, as they attract through an organic shape.

*Soft, in movement,
rounded, intertwined,
interwoven.*

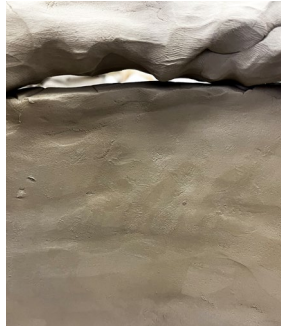
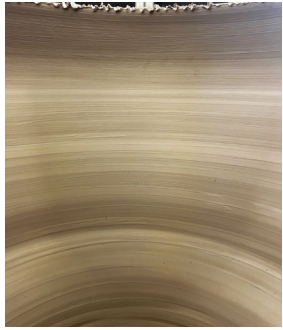
From a technical perspective, they demand a different level of care and technique when compared to the *body* of the sculptures. In order to properly dry out without risking to break they need a frame(work) in which they can hang. But yet alone, this woodbox is insufficient, the clay coils have to be at a certain dryness in order to be strong enough to hold the desired entangled shape and tangible enough to be formed. This process was perhaps the most difficult and risky part of this endeavor because, until I fully understood the qualities I needed — the stage of dryness, the way to sculpt the coil, the amount of water, the texture of the slip, the necessary tools to glue everything together, the time I leave it to dry out... — the tentacles broke repeatedly, leaving me with fragmented bits of my desired shape (and a lot of frustration).



They broke over and over again, in all possible points of the entanglement structure of the individual tentacles.







We could also talk about *assemblage* in this context. The way one puts documents, testimonies and sources together will define the outcome of an historical narration (Farges, 1989). I encountered a similar process of assembling while building the vessels. Some vessels are thrown in two or more parts, while others are partly thrown and partly built up by hand. This means each vessel is an assemblage and a glued piece. After producing the parts, I had to decide which ones to assemble to achieve a form as close as possible to what I envisioned (resembling a creature/being), and which ones to continue working by building up by hand to attain the desired result.

Body of work, situating my practice (a selection)

I want to highlight two ceramic artists who have had a significant impact on my (form) research due to their personal approaches to clay (beyond the context of traditional crafts) and their perception to see their objects as personified beings.



Fig.5: M. Odundo. *Untitled #4*, 1995. Burnished and oxidized clay.

Born in Kenya in 1950 and residing in Britain since 1971, the renowned ceramic artist Magdalene A. N. Odundo defies categorization as a British studio potter or solely an artist of African descent. Her multifaceted practice encompasses clay as well as graphite, bronze, photo transfer, and glass, transcending dualities of art and craft and drawing inspiration from a rich heritage of women's pottery-making. She creates work so closely related to her and to the body that I could literally feel her sculpting hand on her ceramic sculptures while listening to her talk about them. She explores the feminine form of the body through the process of shaping vessels, incorporating traditions from Attic vases (Greece), Jōmon period ceramics (Japan), and Nupe culture pots (Nigeria). I find her process inspiring because of the way she understands her vessels as (feminine) bodies and beings, as well as 'memory containers'. When asked whether ceramicists inherently function as historians of their craft, she responds:

"I think so, because clay as opposed to, say, a piece of stone or wood that you're going to carve is very fluid, pliable and plastic, so it can do all sorts of things. If you're working on a charger and you put on too much slip it will disintegrate, or if you fire it too early it will crack. I think a lot of ceramicists,

a lot of potters, do tend to make references to past work. We work very close to the history of who we are." (Apollo magazine, 2019)

She emphasises form over function, taking time and care in her creations using the coil-technique. While discussing her process, Odundo mentions how she sculpts each piece by closely engaging with it, treating them all as bodies of their own. "I start off with a lump of clay, then gouge and dig a hole from the inside and build the walls using the clay from inside..." She draws parallels between the flexibility and pliability of the human body and the material of clay, reflecting on the nature of being human through her art.

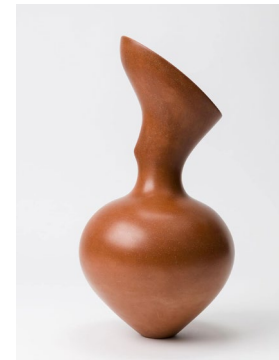


Fig.3: M. Odundo. *Untitled. Symmetrical Series*, 2017. Burnished and oxidized clay.



Fig.4: M. Odundo. *Untitled. Asymmetrical Series*, 2017. Burnished and oxidized clay.



Fig.6: Valentine Schlegel, unknown date/title, photographed by Agnès Varda, Sète.



Fig.7: V. Schlegel, Sculpture on the beach of Sète, 1958, photographed by A. Varda.



Fig.8: V. Schlegel, *Les trois ours*, 1955, photographed by A. Varda.

Through my research on Agnès Varda, I happened to encounter her childhood friend, the artist Valentine Schlegel and with this, the relationship she engages in with objects. Her ceramics are informed by memories of the Mediterranean Sea and southern France, places she longs for after moving to Paris in 1945. She believes that sculpting can solidify memories of absence. Many of her organic pieces feature imagined patterns of the seaside, the vivid colours of the South, and sea creatures. Having grown up in Hamburg, in the north of Germany, always close to the sea, and with a mother from Menton in the south of France, I deeply relate to this process of sculpting through the absence of a memory filled with sensations of a place. It's also about seeing the objects you care about as beings, able to be filled with memories that you either never had (and thus long for) or that you wish to recall the sensation of.

Her organic pieces are integral to her work – like her interpretation of a flowerpot: "I didn't like contemporary pottery. The finest pots were painted in pictures, by Braque, for instance, with a novel freedom. I thought it was up to sculptors to invent pots and I asked myself, How would a sculptor fashion a pot? A pot is designed to hold flowers. Without flowers, it's nothing. To have a life of its own, it must also be a sculpture," she says, reflecting on the fusion of functionality and aesthetics in her work. (*This Woman Could Sleep in Water*, 2017)

What these women artists are doing in their form research, beyond building vessels, is establishing a bodily connection to the material and shape, and through this process, animating their objects into beings. They work from the inside to the outside. While others perceive them as functional objects they both state that they are sculptures.

The vessel itself gives shape to something emerging from emptiness. I link this emptiness to the concept of silence in cultural remembrance. Since the vessel carries universal significance, it can be transposed and understood in every cultural context. Instead of leaving my animated beings, the vessels, to over-interpretation. I will stop now and leave them

to the outside and the echo-chamber of the world to be experienced.

The vessels can resonate like a shell on the beach – silent noise, empty memory – off blue. Here viewers are invited to become aware of our perspectives, to play with this empty memory in-corporated inside these animated beings. Opening up to the vessel and to interpretation(s).

ALIEN OF RE-MEMBRANCE

In my text I have considered history narratives from a scientific philosophical point of view, emphasising its specificity to other sciences, and then directed it into a feminine perspective. Through the vessel collection I have created, a *new carrier bag* of knowledge comes into being, which neither has its beginning in my writing nor stops with the creation of these beings. It will go on.

I have undertaken a word change.

These beings are neither objects, nor sculptures, nor animal representations. They are a *assemblage* of all that has been enumerated: They are a combination of personally fragmented narrative, (crafted) non-linear scientific research, and artistic concept. This is probably not understood in that way if one simply looks at the objects as a viewer. This is intentional. Because the objects have no claim to interpretation or sovereignty. In this sense, they are a metaphor of Empty Memory.

During the writing process, I was asked why I chose the title 'Empty Memory' for this work.

Well, here's the thing: When I first started writing, I wrote in German. In German, the precision of words is both a luxury and a burden. So, when I began translating my writing into English, I encountered a challenge. Suddenly this rich semantic field of silence in German, including words like 'Leise,' 'Ruhe,' 'Schweigen', theorising 'Stille', 'Lautlos' was all converged into the single English word, 'silence.'

This linguistic shift led me to think differently about my work's title.

In reality, the title of my thesis may not be of the utmost importance when you open the book and engage with its written part. This internal discussion reminded me of how English book and movie titles are sometimes translated into German, resulting in bizarre outcomes that have nothing to do anymore either with the words or the emotive nature of the sentence. However, in the context of the artwork of my thesis, the title takes on an important significance, because the title of my artist work is my tool to guide the viewer into a certain way of looking (Greg Peterson, 2006, 29–44).

The words 'empty' and 'memory' are what I would refer to as 'container words.' This means that everyone can *fill* them with something, whether it's

The object is just as real as feeling, emotions sparked by the object, or even the perception of the object itself (Poulin, 2017, 6).

a concept, a theory, or an individual memory, or something else that is out of my sight. 'Empty Memory' was not the first title that crossed my mind. Initially, I considered 'Silent Noise', an oxymoron that encapsulated, for me, attention to listen to something that might not be the loudest (e.g marginalised historical narratives), through the word 'noise,' while 'silence,' in a broader sense, referred to absence, rest, stillness, or suppression. Although I was quite fond of this juxtaposition (which is why I chose to include my reflection on it), I ultimately decided to use 'Empty Memory' for its, as I believe, guiding and *carrier bag*-like qualities.

The empty memory be-comes empty at the moment I 'hand it over' to others by exhibiting, although it remains full to me. In this moment, when I hand over the objects, it is certain that my memory will partly disappear inside of the object, but the reflection and writing of it will be present inside of the part of my thesis you are reading right now.

In that sense, even when I leave my biographical story outside/beyond the vessel, it still affects the outcome of my (re)search. It resonates as the *feelers*—*tentacles*, of my thesis. These aspects are the driving force behind my selection of the fragments included in this endeavour and this might be the most compelling argument as to why my work does not belong in the field of academic science.



Epilogue

While my work follows a methodological structure of artistic research, I cannot deny that some parts of this whole work are, in a way, connected to my own biography. So, this work also represents a mental and emotional picture of my own memories, of where I grew up and where I come from — by the sea. Even if I didn't concentrate on loss, violence, trauma, and repression experienced by humans throughout history in this work, it is essential to acknowledge that the realm of History and Memory is entangled with it. This is the harsh reality that many have to endure, making it all the more important that we are aware of the complicated construction of memory and remembrance — especially when producing new narratives of historical science. We need to be aware of how memory and remembrance are linked to political ideology, forgetting, and the culture of remembrance and what consequences this linkage can have for historical narratives and for historical research. These levels are based on an analytical-scientific approach to various concepts, yet they transcend the notion of rationality. For something inexplicable intermingles with theoretic and scientific discourses between observers and the object. It is about re-valuing individual narratives, while simultaneously creating a *caring* distance from the individual suffering of discrimination through alienation.

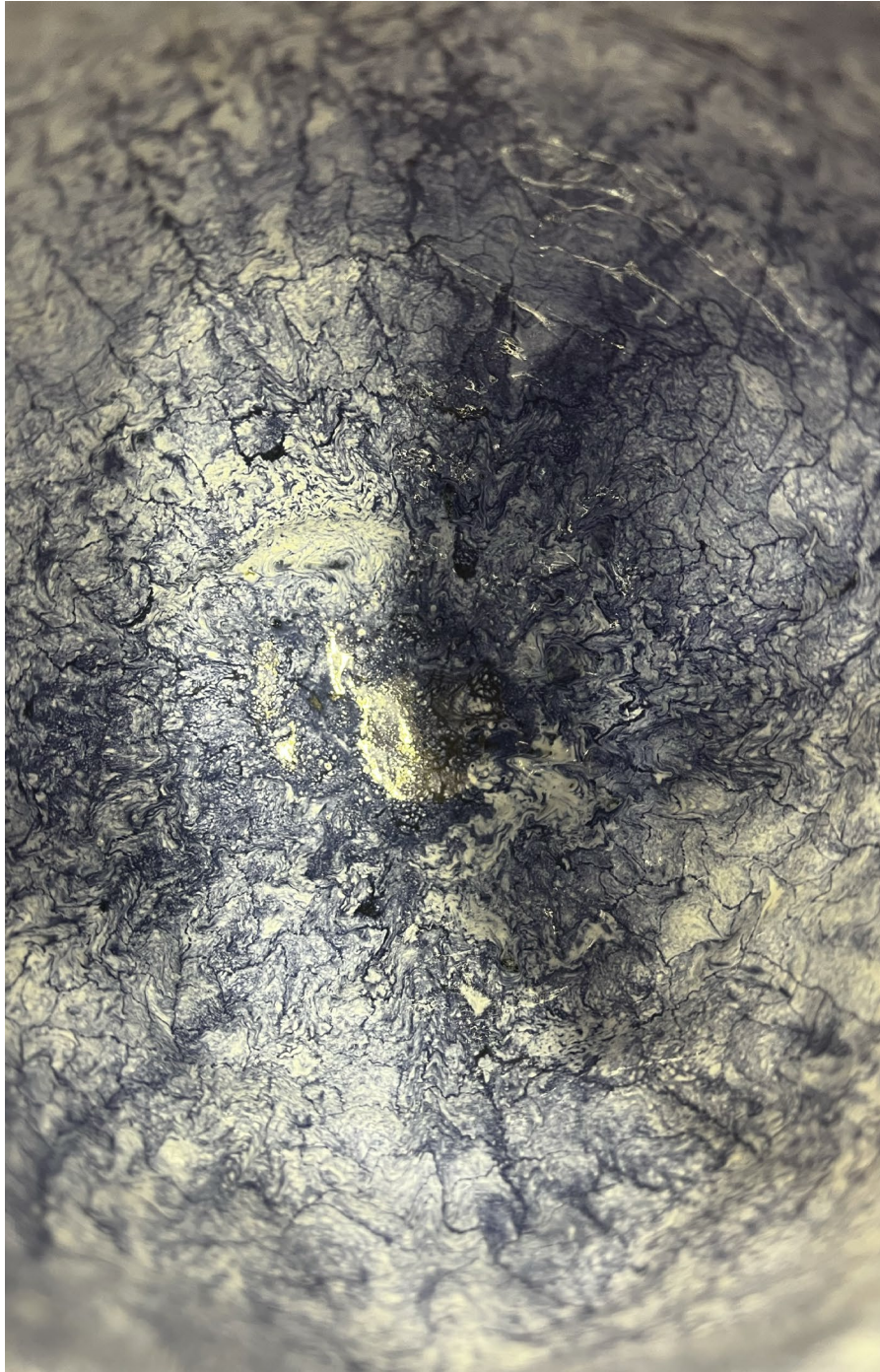
During the writing-part of this thesis, the events surrounding the Israel-Hamas War unfolded. It made me - and I'm sure readers of this text in this time period too - think about the topic explored in this work under a specific, harsh, light. This will continue to happen in the future. As other events take place, they will force me to seek out how these questions surrounding Remembrance, Historical Narratives and Memory get entangled and detangled, while being acutely aware of how they contribute to shaping suffering in the present. This the harsh reality that many have to endure, making it all the more important that we are aware of the complicated construction of memory and remembrance — especially when producing new narratives of historical science.

In my opinion, this is best achieved by moving away from a purely scientific approach and translating narrative elements into other worlds and practices as they enable the use of the senses and the non verbal.

In our context, it's about reflection upon what one should observe, which narration one chooses, and what invites one to linger and therefore think and feel, in the absence of the written body of my work, surrounded by the animated beings.

For an artist and researcher, I believe we must first and foremost be able to orient ourselves inside the field of memory and history, implementing thoughts and emotionalities that are not (yet) part of the academic discourse and not perceived as 'objective'. We can work within the fields of History and Memory, using them as a resonating material that is fluid, entangled, ever changing, traveling – like tentacles and therefore open for discussion.

This combination of animated beings, sculptural installation and scientific work promotes methods of embracing emotionality, that neither begin in text nor end in artistic confrontation. It should be understood as an impulse.



Remarks

- * P.12: I first encountered this book, in the context of clay, during a seminar titled 'Feminist Ceramics in Action,' which was conducted by Alexandra Sasha Zaitseva (the head of the Ceramic Institute at the University of Applied Art) and Maria Bussmann (a philosopher and artist). The seminar took place at the Ceramic Studio in 2022.
- * P.30: For more information look at the Muted group theory (MGT) created by Shirley and Edwin Ardener in 1975.
- * P.32: One well known example is the historians' dispute, (German: *Historikerstreit*) in the late 1980's in West Germany.
- * P.34: In a simple question brought up by Martin Brunner: "Perhaps one's memories of early childhood concerning parental rows might become coloured by one's later knowledge of what divorce is." (Brunner, 2023, 755)
- * P.48: These are examples that cultivated my thinking about the concepts of Vessel, History, and Memory at the beginning of this research, that is why I decided to 'throw them into the body' of this thesis (and into the vessel). In respect, I know that there are many other examples coming out of what has been elaborated. However, in this narration I believe it is important to stay true to how my ideas were formed, which means that I pour out (of the vessel) what I have poured in before.
- * P.57: During my research, and even before, I read Heidegger's essays and thoughts on the jug. Although Heidegger is still widely quoted, and his theory is often read separately from his person, I struggled until the last moment to include his ideas and passages from his essay due to his extremely problematic personal history and his support for Hitler and the Nazi regime. I have decided — not least because of my methodology — to cite him in my work with the condition of referencing his Nazi thoughts and the Heidegger case.



List of presented works

Agnès Varda

Born 1928, Ixelles, BEL

Died 2019, Paris, FR

Figure 1: Agnès Varda, *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier*. 2006.
View of the exhibition Agnès Varda, L'ÎLE ET ELLE, Fondation
Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 2006. Photograph
by: © Patrick Gries

Georges Perec

Born 1936, Paris, FR

Died 2019, Paris, FR

Figure 2. George Perec, *List by free association*, (19.3 x 27.9
cm). Photograph by HN.
© "Indivision Richardson-Saluden."

Magdalene Odundo

Born 1950, Nairobi, KEN

Lives and works in
Surrey, UK

Figure 3: Magdalene Odundo. *Asymmetrical Series*. 2017.
Burnished and oxidized clay, H 24.4 x 12" (62 x 31cm). Loan
from the collection of Franz, Duke of Bavaria to Die Neue
Sammlung-The Design Museum, Munich. Photograph by:
© Hannes Rohrer.

Figure 4: Magdalene Odundo. Untitled. *Symmetrical Series*.
2017. Burnished and oxidized clay.
© Thomas Dane Gallery London.

Figure 5: Magdalene Odundo. Untitled #4. 1995. Burnished
and oxidized clay, 22 ¼ x 11 ¼" (56.5 x 28.6 cm). Eskenazi
Museum of Art, Indiana University, gift of Herman B. Wells.
Photograph by Kevin Montague. © Eskenazi Museum of Art

Valentine Schlegel

Born 1925, Sète, FR

Died 2021, Paris, FR

Figure 6:

Sculpture by Valentine Schlegel photographed by Agnès
Varda. Unknown date, Sète. Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels. © Estate Varda

Figure 7:

Sculpture of Valentine Schlegel photographed by Agnès
Varda in 1958 on the beach of Sète. Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels. © Estate Varda

Figure 8:

Valentine Schlegel, *Les trois ours*, 1955, FNAC 1021, Centre
national des arts plastiques. Photograph by: Agnès Varda.
© Estate Varda

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"Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things." YouTube video, 2:22 min. Posted by HepworthWakefield, April 2019. <youtu.be/7k1vWK6EWXk?si=znZpCZFAowQQiOkF>

Mentionned

Elizabeth Fischer

