

A Place in Time

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Abstract

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Storytelling is rooted in our daily lives, giving individuals the ability to connect and understand the world we live in. These stories are often memorable through one's connection to time and place. In the jewelry field, place is significant in the life of an object because it tells a story that is activated through episodic memory. This causes objects to be an extension of one's identity. Like memory, the body is also significant in the activation of these objects, enabling a multisensory experience to occur in space. This experience creates a simultaneous interaction that is continuous. In my studio practice, I utilize place and storytelling as a therapeutic outlet by incorporating natural materials and mundane jewelry processes to create small-scale sculptural objects. This allows my work to function as an autobiography or narrative. Through focusing on place, I can recreate stories from my past that are activated through experience and create an endless narrative that is transferred to the audience.

Keywords: Storytelling, Place, Identity, Memory, Time, Objects, Therapy, Jewelry, Symbolism

Introduction

Stories are the mark of a human that give personal meaning to one's memory and identity (Scott 204-206). Stories are not just things that people tell, but they are things that people lived. Those lived experiences and happenings become moments that are embedded in time and space. Stories provide insight into human's lives culturally, enabling people to form bonds of belonging with others in their community (Polletta 112-113). In jewelry, objects hold many stories and meanings. These stories are manifested as soon as the object or components are placed before the artist. For instance, an artist's identity can live inside of a copper bowl that has been hammered a thousand times. Despite it being a simple bowl, the artist's emotions and who they are during that very moment are transferred through each mark. Similar to stories, objects also create relationships, allowing the life of an individual to be everlasting. To fully comprehend an object, one must have an encounter with it. This encounter is both tangible and intangible. An object cannot be fully understood without the concept of place. Place is significant in the perception of objects because it deepens the object's meaning and the direct relationship between the owner and the object. Place allows the meaning of one's life to be more precious and valuable. Without place, neither stories nor the life of an individual would exist. This thesis will examine the role of storytelling and the significance of place in objects, enabling its existence and function. These objects then construct the identity of the holder through recollections of place, experience and interaction, allowing for a continuous story to form.

Storytelling

Stories are a precious treasure shared amongst cultures and communities throughout the world. Stories are narratives compressed with events, holding a person's beliefs, values, and their identity. The action of reciting such events elevate stories from narratives to performances.

Although stories are words that are spoken, they require the participation of the body, which includes hearing, gesturing, seeing, and touching. With the body, stories are better understood because of the direct relationship built between the listener and the storyteller. As the storyteller recites his or her own personal account, they claim the role of narrator, character, and listener. Once the storyteller operates as narrator, he or she then becomes the character by sharing their own accounts, finally allowing the audience to relate the experience to their own life. This in turn gives both parties (storyteller and audience) the ability to function in all three roles simultaneously (Langellier 8-10).

Storytelling is a language and a communicative practice that is visual, tactile and auditory, requiring both a storyteller and an audience (Langellier 2-4). It is a language that is not taught but is automatically given to every individual. Through storytelling, memories are relived directly, then are recorded, allowing the listener to become a part of the original history. Despite the origin of how stories were formed or told, stories offer the storyteller the ability to share his or her own experience or reinterpret the experience lived by someone else to the audience or listener. According to historian Hannah Arendt, stories are tangible encounters or experiences that become a part of history once life departs the body. She believes that one's personal account of their own life does not make it memorable; however, a narrator transforms that life into something meaningful. Other historians offer a different perspective on storytelling. Walter Benjamin believes that the best storytellers interpret, but also leave opportunity for imagination. Through imagination, the storyteller becomes a link to the past and acts as co-creator (Scott 204).

Without storytelling, the world would cease to exist because "people make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling" (Langellier 1). As stories are exchanged, they influence one's conception of

what is real; and it also opens the imagination. Although storytelling is serious business for many writers, especially historians, it helps others get a sense of what is possible, encouraging one to revisit and reshape their conceptions of the past. As stories are told throughout history, their survival depends upon context. Deborah Schiffrin believes that stories could not be context free nor live in a vacuum. No matter if a story is non-fiction or fabricated, every story being told or written requires context because it invites the audience to gain a connection with the narrator. As connections are established, the audience gains trust to engage further with the storyteller (Schiffrin 85).

Several elements that a narrative require to function are plot, setting, character, conflict, and resolution. Although these elements are important for a narrative to function, the setting contributes to the general understanding of a story: “Every story would be another story, and unrecognized . . . if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else” (Martin 28). The setting supports the who, what, and why of any story, and it provides vital details, making it authentic despite its nature. According to literary scholars, “much early narrative work privileged time over place in understanding narrative structures, but more recently many scholars have shown that the internal organization of a narrative can be accomplished primarily through references to place” (Schiffrin 85).

Place: Location and Mind

Place is a continual narrative for people, places, and things. Without place, narratives remain unclear and the experiences that one hold are less valuable. Although plot, character, and conflict are also vital elements in narratives, place introduces identity and autobiographical memories. Lucy Lippard believes that “place applies to our own ‘local’ – entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke” (7).

Place is never an empty vessel; it is layered with width and depth, causing it to be “the external world mediated through human subjective experience” (7).

Place is a complex term that geographers have investigated for years. It is a concept that is consistently examined as the society changes. Place has now become an essential idea in other disciplines including arts and humanities, social studies and psychology (Cresswell 1). Despite place being an interdisciplinary issue, it is a universal way of understanding the world. When thinking about place, people frequently define it as a familiar space that one inhabits, which includes cities, counties, neighborhoods, and towns. Within these communities listed, home is understood as the main idea of what place embodies. According to David Seamon, “home is an intimate place of rest where a person can withdraw from the hustle of the world outside and have some degree of control over what happens within a limited space” (Cresswell 24). Although home is the universal understanding of place, the interior structure of a home consists of a series of smaller places (rooms) within that setting (39-40). Behind the door of each home or house, identities are organized, and memories are made permanent. “If one has been raised in a place, its textures and sensations, its smells and sounds, are recalled as they felt to a child’s, adolescent’s, adult’s body” (Lippard 34). No matter the length of time spent in one place, it becomes an extension of the body that can be felt as one passes through the landscape (Lippard 34).

Unlike home, geographers define place and landscape as two separate concepts that can be linked. Landscape is an open space with no isolation but is understood as home to all things that occupy it (Cresswell 17). According to many geographers, place does not refer to places that one travels inside of, rather to the different areas that make up the earth’s surface. Before the 1960’s, region was the most sought-after theme as it related to the earth’s surface. Researchers

wanted to define the differences among countries, such as the difference between the North and South of the United States (Cresswell 31); “today a region is generally understood not as a politically or geographically delimited space but one determined by stories, loyalties, group identity, common experiences and histories (often unrecorded), a state of mind rather than a place on a map” (Lippard 34).

As people interact and live through society, places become well-known and points of interest for tourists or become lost and untold if the stories of a place are never discovered. For memories to form, people and places/landscapes must co-exist in the same space. Time also plays a major role into how those memories and stories unfold. Through time, generations change along with one’s career/job losses, social expectations, political and religious views, communities and homes. With such major changes, place can then be understood as a feeling or a state of mind.

Takashi Horisaki is a New York based sculptor born in Toyoko, Japan. He uses his artistic practice to collaborate with community members, volunteers and organizations to cast homes/architecture that address social and political issues in neighborhoods. Horisaki uses liquid latex and cheese cloth to create a fabric like texture on the house’s exterior structure, which then must be detached carefully once the drying process is complete. The process enables him to capture every crease and mark that constructs the building’s history and identity. Despite weeks of planning and strategizing, production is not the overall goal of Horisaki’s work; it’s the experience and the interaction that occurs between the object and viewer.

In a work entitled *Social Dress New Orleans – 730 days after*, 2007 (Figure 1), Horisaki travels to New Orleans to create a sculpture of a ruined house affected by Hurricane Katrina. The home was a shotgun house owned by an elderly couple, Roosevelt and Billie Johnson, located in

Lower 9th Ward. During the work's construction, Horisaki used 200 gallons of natural latex and approximately 14,000 square feet of cheese cloth. The project took three months to complete and had strict regulations set by the city to demolish the building. Once the project was completed after negotiation, the latex was placed together using pipes and wire. The sculpture became a vessel and a physical representation of Hurricane Katrina, especially since the property was soon demolished. Despite loss and devastation, New Orleans is still made alive through Horisaki's ability to document the history of a building that once lived on the landscape. Though many items were lost, the stories and histories remain present through memory. In a statement, the owner of the house, Mr. Johnson, explained that "Our family has many memories of that house. We'll keep those memories. But there's no way to keep the house in the family" (Theadvocate.com). Place is never abandoned without the trace of memories. No matter the degree of destruction, the soil remembers those who occupied the space. As an artist, Horsaki reclaimed the city's history, enabling its precious memories to travel to other places in the country.

Objects

In relation to place, objects can alter one's state of mind and their identity. No matter how an object is acquired, it affects one's overall relationship with a place. As mentioned previously, a home is a place of intimacy that contain one's identity. Each room is transformed, meeting the needs of the individual or family who occupies the space. With interest in the issue of homelessness, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan believes that the concept of a home goes beyond a built place, stating that "home is a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy a person's real and perceived basic biosocial needs" (Cresswell 109). Although people need food, water and shelter to survive, people also need objects. For many people, home does not become a

place until their possessions and belongings take up that space. Objects allow people to meet their universal need of intimacy (Ramljak 186). Without objects, home for some loses its very meaning, only becoming a place for one to lay their heads.

Objects have many roles, despite the advances in modern life that cause them to go unnoticed. They are a form of communication that is studied in fields such as anthropology, archaeology, psychology, and the arts (Wood 40). Although the fields differ, each share research to conclude the vast meanings and roles of objects. In Latin, objects are defined as something that confronts an individual. They are things that people direct their attention towards that are both tangible and intangible (50-52); “without the grounding force of objects, we would be adrift in a void without measure or weight. Objects provide us with a tangible source of comfort, something to hold on to in a shifting world” (Ramljak 193). Museum scholars consistently redefine the meaning of objects to satisfy visitor’s needs. In fulfilling that goal, scholars characterize objects into an organized system entitled Object Knowledge Framework. The system is formulated to help scholars become aware of the three forms of human encounters with objects, which are individual, group, and material. An individual encounter is one’s subjective experience with an object, while a group encounter is a shared experience that requires more than one person. The material encounter works jointly with individual and group encounter to transform the experience and meaning of each object.

In the art world, objects can be defined as a document, ritual and a metaphor. The objects produced are a physical representation of the creator, permanently holding his or her identity. Through production, the object becomes a record: “The materiality of objects conveys its own history...Every mark left on an object is a record of a decision made and an action taken by the hands that formed it” (Fariello 151). When objects function as a record and document, the artist

causes a transference to take place that first occurs with the artist in the studio, then to the work, and finally the audience. This is parallel to how historians share stories from long ago, giving the historian the permission to become the vessel. Though the meaning of an object is difficult to interpret with intangible properties, such as material, an object as a metaphor gives liberty to the viewer or holder to relate the object to their identity (156). “While the object as document contains a record of its making, the object as a metaphor contains the spirit of creative process” (160).

People make sense of the world and their existence through their encounters with things (Wood 30). Knowing an object requires the body’s senses, memory and emotions. Without these components, objects become universal things rather than a personal experience (24). For example, when a person walks into a museum their entire body is needed to comprehend a work of art. Based upon the person’s cultural understanding, the context of an object will change (11). Museum scholar Elizabeth Wood believes that “the lived experience of something occurs when a person is aware of an experience he or she is having while it is happening. It is however, not something that a person can make meaning of in the moment they experience it” (27). Although experience creates a reflection, place makes the experience memorable. If an object ever disappeared from the owner, its meaning is still made alive through references to place. When a person makes a connection with a universal, mundane object, place is one element that one remembers. Without context, all objects will be the same and have the same purpose.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a visual artist born in Cuba, who became a United States citizen in 1976. Gonzalez-Torres created works using everyday objects and things, such as candy to describe the topics of love and loss, gender and sexuality, and sickness. He allowed his material to act as a metaphor, giving the viewer an expanded view of his works’ meaning

(Fariello 156). As a subjective experience, Gonzalez-Torres' candy symbolized his love life through the sensations of taste and touch. Sensory interaction was the most important attribute to his untitled 1990's reproductions of candy spills (Figure 2). The shiny candy wrapper provoked the audience to either open the candy, save it, or never open it. No matter the decision, the audience was triggered to encounter the candy with influence of other spectators. Despite candy spills existing in a museum setting, the audience can perceive Gonzalez-Torres' work and shift it into a subjective encounter, which is similar to the Object Knowledge Framework. The experience first belongs to Gonzalez-Torres, then it is altered, becoming a collective encounter. As the transfer occurs, the audience can recall a place and time where they indulged a piece of candy.

Memory: Activation of Stories and Objects

Memory is a sensory experience activated by current encounters. Each memory is a participatory form of identity construction that carries context. Because of its contextuality, memory has been consistently refined in order for one to understand both their personal and collective identity (Martindale 197). Despite the diverse views and meanings, people use memory to get a sense of self by recalling life stories.

In contemporary research, personal identity is a facet of long-term memory characterized into two systems, procedural and declarative memory. Procedural memory helps a person obtain motor, perceptual, and cognitive skills that do not involve conscious thought, while declarative memory consists of general facts and beliefs about the world. Unlike procedural memory, declarative memory requires the conscious mind to operate because it relies on direction and guidance. Endel Tulving, a Canadian psychologist, further distinguishes declarative memory into two systems, semantic and episodic memory. Though they are similar, each have been

differences that set them apart. Semantic memory is evidence about the world that is generic or understood by people without knowledge of where it was obtained. For instance, a person knows and acknowledges their birth date and the city they were born in, similar to one knowing that $2+2=4$. Through semantic memory, a person does not have to re-experience such events to know that they were born on a certain day because it was information shared with them through record (679).

On the contrary, episodic memory gives meaning and context to one's life. They are records of events that have been experienced in a particular space and time. These memories answer the who, what, and when of events, similar to recollections about stories, places, and objects. Episodic memories also involve the re-experiencing of events from one's past, which become a part of their autobiographical narrative (Klein 680). In order for such memories to be recalled, the body is required to activate the happening. An odor, texture, or sound can activate the body to return to a former state of mind. No matter how long ago a memory took place, its presence is in the forefront of one's mind when it is triggered (Brockmeier 116). Through episodic reoccurrences, a person can reconnect with their past and younger self.

In the art field, many conceptual artists use memory in their practices to explore concepts of identity. Though each work is personal, artists use transference to transmit their stories to the viewer, similar to how Gonzalez-Torres used candy to establish a relationship. American jewelry artist Melanie Bilenker creates first-person stories that depict her everyday life. The stories are intimate, exhibiting moments of the artist eating chocolate, cooking food, and taking off her shirt, such as her 2009 brooch *Cookies* (Figure 3). Each activity that Bilenker accounts highlights the beauty of life with body gestures and positions. An essential element that she uses in her work is her own hair, which is used to illustrate each moment captured in her life. Bilenker's hair

acts as a written tool that permanently records each action. Not only does her work serve as a written tool, but it also serves as a personal diary and souvenir that can be felt by each viewer (den Besten 101). Once the jewelry is worn against the body, the artist's intent is transmitted to the collector and viewer.

Unlike Bilenker's view of beauty and gestures, other artists express episodic and autobiographic memories through accounts of personal trauma, enabling their work to function as a therapeutic outlet. Tracey Emin, a British conceptual artist, uses everyday domestic objects and other mediums to create self-portraits. Her work is known as confessional art because she relies on her past history to tell each story. Although Emin's work was created in tragedy, her work becomes a scapegoat, where it traps her past. Every memory that Emin records give her the opportunity to resist and restructure the past. In a work entitled *My Bed*, 1998 (Figure 4), Emin uses her bed to symbolize a period of depression after the end of a personal relationship. Visually, the bed was dismantled with stains, and it also had other objects surrounding it on the floor, such as condoms, contraceptive pills and bloody underwear. *My Bed* captures the vivid reality of how depression looks inside the home and how it affects people emotionally.

Despite key distinctions amongst Bilenker's and Emin's studio practice, both artists utilize episodic memory with objects to convey who they are. Each memory made illustrates intimate moments that become a permanent record, similar to storytelling. This in turn allows the object to operate as the narrator and vessel, holding all knowledge about the individual. Without context, objects would remain lifeless and inanimate, causing everyone's understanding to be the same. Place gives objects the ability to be performative and evolve with the owner. Although storytelling, place and objects are different concepts, they are each connected as the body gives

life and meaning to each form. Through the inclusion of storytelling, place, objects, and memory, one's existence will be persistent.

My Studio Practice

Similar to Bilenker and Emin, my studio practice is an emotional and a subjective experience. I utilize my studio practice to capture past experiences that are translated into tangible stories with the jewelry medium. Each story takes place at my childhood home on 607 Summit Street in Petersburg, Virginia. Summit Street constructed my identity for fifteen years, traveling with me into adulthood. As mentioned earlier, Lucy Lippard recognizes that the texture of a place follows a person from childhood, to adolescence, into their adulthood. This causes an individual to understand that place never leaves the body nor does a place forget the person who inhabits the space, making it the foundation to all people and things. Without place, a person would not know who they are aside from the known facts that were given to them through semantic memory. Personally, place is a physical location, such as a home, or a psychological state of mind that results from the challenges that one faces. My work offers a personal understanding of what place is and how it affects the body, especially the mind.

As a child, my parents struggled financially to pay bills, buy clothing and provide food for the household. This burden caused a mental strain as they lived in constant worry and anxiety. Rather than find a solution to the obstacles, my father became pessimistic, relying heavily on alcohol and Peter Popoff's miracle water (to hear from God). This weight transferred into my mind, leading towards low self-esteem. Unlike my father, my mother was submissive and quiet. With much attention on my father, she showed little affection to me and my sisters. My mother's actions made me feel invisible and unworthy whenever I stood before her presence.

Through this and other memories formed, 607 Summit Street became a place that I wanted to escape. Unfortunately, no matter where I traveled, it followed me.

The self is significant in my studio practice because I never knew my self. The only self I knew was the self defined by others. I also never received the opportunity to recognize who I was apart from what my parents, teachers, and peers believed. “You will never have anything” is one of the statements that I remember my father speaking over my life at a young age. The word “never” made me view my self as weak and powerless. Though his words were hurtful, I strived to achieve greatness even while negative thoughts remained in my mind. My work is not created to glorify who I am; but, it is a story and a meditative outlet to help me establish freedom from the past. My work enables me to activate my voice through the carefully chosen materials and forms. I utilize ceramic and wood as a vessel to symbolize my body and personal connection to the landscape. As a child, nature allowed me to remove the weight I’ve carried inside the home. This sense of freedom encouraged me to remain outdoors even as the sun disappeared.

The penttool and flex shaft are two essential tools in my studio practice. The penttool is a ceramics tool used to draw and create texture on clay, while the flex shaft is a tool used in the jewelry industry to drill, clean and polish material. Personally, when I poke and drill holes into the surface of the ceramic and wood, I re-experience the exact moments and encounters that construct who I am. Each hole symbolizes the pain that I’ve never fully released. As my hand consistently moves, I achieve a sense of satisfaction that remain until each form is covered in holes. In my work entitled *Dream* (Figure 5), I cover the entire surface of a tree branch and ceramic with holes. Although each hole is important, the plaster that is inserted into the tree branch transforms the perception of my work. The ability to drill and take away part of the original structure causes me to record a new story that is permanently embedded into the wood.

The plaster also elevates the texture of the wood, making a new path. With the inclusion of ceramic, it becomes a setting (jewelry), where the wood operates as metal.

Electroforming is another element in my studio practice, which acts as a supportive layer. It strengthens both the ceramic and wood, preventing them from breaking or shattering. The copper layer is prevalent in my ceramic forms because of its ability to become a protective shield. *A Place in Time* (Figure 6) represents my body in object form. It characterizes who I am through the properties that make up the ceramics. By utilizing electroforming, the ceramic develops a solid foundation as it is embraced by a copper bezel. As the copper is infused onto the ceramic surface, the ceramic develops a new identity. Each material and layer offer support that cannot be achieved individually. In spite of the lack of support and love that I felt growing up, my work operates as the missing link to fulfill a sense of happiness, joy, and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a communicative practice that involves the performative nature of the body and the imagination. Through recollections of stories, a person's life becomes persistent. Context allow these stories to survive as they travel from inside the body into the world. Once a story is shared, it is made alive through reference to place. No matter where a story is spoken, place enables the soil to record each account. Even as a person leaves the earth, their presence remains alive as each story travels through the land. The body and place work simultaneously to help each other survive. Without one, the other cannot exist. For instance, a place becomes well known through recollections of events or happenings that have occurred. Those recollections are accounted by the people living on the land. Though place is important, one's memories keep it alive, allowing them to travel back to the past. Personally, place establishes who I am. It affects the decisions I make, and it is something I cannot escape. The objects that I create enable me to

revisit my past self and reencounter that familiar place that make up my identity. Each object is an abstracted form of place that has been transformed into a container representing my body.

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Figure 1: Taskashi Horisaki, *Social Dress New Orleans – 730 days after*, 2007. 18 x 12 x 30 feet.

Latex, cheesecloth, remnants of Katrina-damaged house, steel pipe, steel wire cable.



Figure 2: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled* (Placebo-Landscape-for Roni), 1993. Candy.



Figure 3: Melanie Bilenker, *Cookies*, brooch 2009. Hair in resin, gold, ebony, pigment.



Figure 4: Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, installation 1998. Box frame, mattress, linens, pillows and various objects.



Figure 5: Dierra Jones, *Dream*, brooch 2018. Tree branch, ceramic, plaster, copper, sterling silver.



Figure 6: Dierra Jones, *A Place in Time*, ring 2019. Ceramic, tree branch, electroforming, copper, synthetic gold leaf.

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Appendix A: Studio Practice



Figure 1: Dierra Jones, *Calm*; (details), brooch 2019. Tree branch, plaster, ceramic, electroforming, copper, sterling silver, synthetic gold leaf.



Figure 2: Dierra Jones, *Hidden Emotions*; (details), brooch 2018. Tree bark, ceramic, electroforming, copper, sterling silver, acrylic enamel.

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