

MEMORY OF LOCI

SOPHIE DIXON

The following text has been extracted from
an online research dossier created during
my Master's at the Netherlands Film
Academy.

researchprojects.sophie-dixon.com

The objective of this experiment is twofold. First, how to uncover events and places in the past through the perspective of those who remember them - specifically when the physical place no longer exists. Second, how to open these places in memory to the viewer as 'real' spaces which act as a catalyst for creating new and memorable narratives of the past.

This experiment uses the HTC Vive, a Virtual Reality (VR) technology which incorporates Head Mounted Displays (HMD) and a 'lighthouse system' to track the exact position of the viewer inside a space of up to fifteen square feet. The viewer is completely immersed within the virtual environment and can move around the space while picking up and interacting with virtual objects.

INTRODUCTION	//	1
SCHOLZ'S HOUSE	//	3
INTERVIEWEE AS STORYTELLER	//	5
STORYTELLING WITH ARTEFACTS	//	9
VIRTUAL REALITIES	//	13
RE-CREATION	//	16
NAVIGATION AS NARRATION	//	21
REFLECTIONS // EXTENSIONS	//	29
REFERENCES	//	31

INTRODUCTION

Place, commonly perceived as something we inhabit, is also something we experience. As Lucy Lippard describes it, place is 'something seen from the inside'. As a creator, I am fascinated with how places are experienced, both by myself and by others.

*“Space defines landscape whereas space combined with memory defines place”
- (Lippard, 1997, p. 9)*

Place is experienced through narratives which are rooted in memory. Yet memory is fluid and, as a consequence, these narratives are continually remade in response to the present. Place can thus be

a highly subjective experience and it is this subjectivity that I examine in my work.

Place is experienced through narratives which are rooted in memory. Yet memory is fluid, and consequently these narratives are continually remade in response to the present. Place can thus be a highly subjective experience and it is this subjectivity that I examine in my work.

Based on Maurice Halbwach's theory of collective memory, Gerome Truc explains that place is the distinguishing feature between fantasy and reality.

But what happens to our memories of

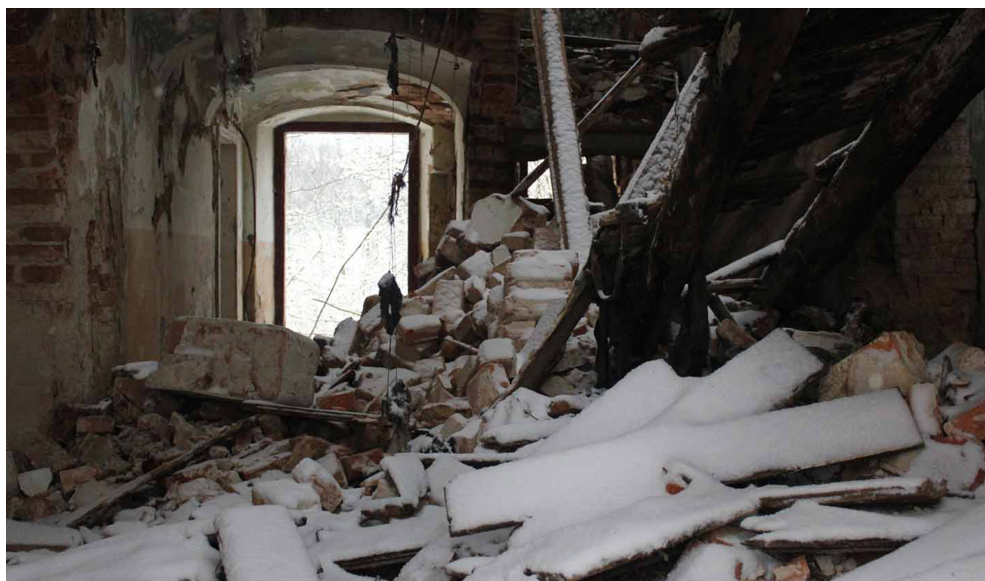


the past when the physical places they reference threaten to disappear? What happens when multiple stories of the past reside in the same place? Which stories of the past can we believe?

The context for this experiment is House No.51 in the village of Srbská, formerly Wünschendorf, in today's Czech Republic. A house with a history of war and exile, interlaced with the everyday lives of its inhabitants, I purchased the remains in 2007 to prevent its complete disintegration. It is my belief that this house, a place I have come to know as 'Scholz's House', cannot be preserved in bricks and mortar alone.

'Scholz's House' is a place in memory, a place which exists within the stories and experiences of those who remember it in the present.

Specifically, I examine Scholz's House through the distinctive yet related stories of two of its former inhabitants, Mr Scholz and Mrs Jiraková: one forcibly exiled from the house as a child amidst the events following World War 2, the other born there later before abandoning it to ruin. It is also, however, an examination which has come to incorporate my own story of the house, which has merged with the stories of those who have occupied it.



SCHOLZ'S HOUSE

A place in memory

“Ruins stand as reminders, memory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruin”
- (Solnit, 2006, p. 20)

How do we remember places in memory? Exiled with his family from House No.51 when he was just six years old, Mr Scholz has spent the past seventy years living in northern Germany. Yet, since 2009, he has returned to the village every year in the company of several other elderly exiles from Wünschendorf who, like him, were also forced to leave their homes in 1946. By returning annually to remember the past as a group, the former residents of the village are engaging in what the theorist Maurice Halbwachs calls “collective

memory”. In his book, *La Memoire Collective*, Halbwachs (1950) argues individual memory is made in relation to our social environment, forming part of a greater group memory which causes us to remember particular events and forget others. Halbwachs describes how this process ‘disconnects such places from their material surroundings and associates them with the beliefs of the group, and those beliefs alone’ (Truc, 2011, p.149). Thus, rather than objective depiction, what is created by collective memory is a ‘symbolic representation’ of reality. Each year the group returns, the village of their past falls further into ruin. Yet, while the place they knew as children fades away physically, the group has maintained a



collective memory of Wünschendorf. In doing so, its members have created an inner model of the village quite distinct from that which exists today. Since 2009, I have filmed and interviewed Mr Scholz and the group as they have explored this symbolic representation—an ‘inner model’ of the village created through a net of references, beliefs, emotions, omissions and fabrications. It is clear from my time with the group that this representation has come to be a robust surrogate against the vulnerability and inaccessibility of the physical site. It is how they protect Wünschendorf from disappearing entirely. Mrs Jiraková, like Mr Scholz, was born in House No.51. A Czech citizen now living 10km from the village of Srbská,

she inherited the house from her parents and was the owner until 2007, during which time she allowed it to fall into ruin. In my interview with Mrs Jiraková in 2016 she explained that after finding her mother dead in the house in the mid-90’s, she chose not to return to the site in ‘order to preserve my happier memories’. Over the years I have tried, through the stories of Mr Scholz and Mrs Jiraková, to uncover the events and memories bound to the place of House No.51. It has been a process of discovery, informing my own unique and constantly changing narrative of the lives and events this house has witnessed, and made me question how we can be sure of any one fixed story of the past.



INTERVIEWEE AS STORYTELLER

“To remember the past, you tell a story about it. And in recalling the memory, you tell the story again. It’s not always the same story, as the person telling it does not always want the same things. Memory fits in with the demands of the present as much as it tries to remain faithful to the facts of what happened. It incorporates new ideas, including snippets of information that have nothing to do with the original events.”
- (Ferryhough, 2012, p. 98)

How can events and places in the past be discovered through the perspectives of those who remember them?

Over the past six years, I have experimented with various interviewing

techniques to uncover the place of Wünschendorf / Srbská through the stories of those who remember it, namely residents exiled from the village in 1946, and the people who later occupied their homes. These techniques have come with their own demands and challenges.

Those who have inhabited the village are now spread out across central Europe and it has been necessary for me to travel to the Czech Republic, Poland and Northern Germany to record my interviews. Additionally, given that most of my interviewees do not speak English, I have had to work with several interpreters and translators.



Mrs Jiraková, 2016

Moreover, the complexity of the history of the village within the greater context of the history of the Sudetenland meant there were a number of specific issues to consider as an interviewer. It became clear, for example, that the question of financial compensation for those exiled from the Sudetenland following the Second World War is still a contentious topic. When interviewing the residents who moved into the village immediately following the deportation, I observed a tendency to skim over or avoid direct questions about the previous inhabitants of their houses. Similarly, I found that the previous inhabitants themselves would often skim over their feelings about a lack

of compensation in order to keep the interview positive. The sensitivity of this issue occasionally presented a rupture in the storytelling of the interviewees. My desire is to understand events and places in the past as they are experienced through the subjective and creative process of remembering. By posing direct questions I have found that rather than eliciting a detailed description from memory, I am presented with a generic, or well-versed answer. Through my research I have sought and experimented with alternative methods to direct questioning.



Mr Scholz, 2014

Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat (2017, p. 315), describe one of the the basic skills and opportunities of oral history work as ‘getting behind stereotyped or non-committal generalisations to detailed memories’. Within his book, *The Voice of the Past*, Thompson presents the the ‘life story method’ in which an interviewee is encouraged to tell the story of their life guided by the ‘active and methodological listening’ of the interviewer. The outcome he argues is a less directed movement through an interviewee’s life in contrast to more structured approaches to interviewing. The method is exhaustive but time consuming— one interview, for example, took nine hours over three sessions to complete. Though this makes the method impractical to film, it nonetheless presents a detailed and insightful story of the interviewee’s life.

When interviewing Mrs Jiraková, I combined direct questioning with techniques outlined in the life story approach. To stimulate her memories of House No.51, I asked her to imagine that she was standing at the front door, and to describe the house to me as she walked through it. As she was telling me about certain points within the house, Mrs Jiraková would give not just a physical description of her surroundings, but also

descriptions of different feelings and events associated with that point. Her memories, it seems, rather than being tied to a place in time, are in fact inextricably tied to the house itself. In walking through that place, that house, a whole host of attendant memories and stories were evoked. Able to draw on many first-hand experiences of the house, the method of asking Mrs Jiraková to describe it was particularly effective in evoking powerful, emotional narratives. But such high quality narratives are not easily uncovered. For those like Mr Scholz who were exiled from the village when they were very young, the method is not as potent. Likewise, when asking the direct questions which are sometimes necessary, they can garner generic or ‘rehearsed’ responses.

The central problem is, then, how can one gain access to genuine perspectives and stories with an emotional resonance about events and places in the memory of the interviewee? The difference between the former and latter is the qualitative difference between a person telling another’s story, and the way in which Marcel Proust (1992, pp. 61-63) recounts a specific childhood experience of eating a madeleine.

“No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me”

To help address this issue in a more systematic way, I consulted the journalist and author Will Storr, known for his work with the physiological science of storytelling. He explained that fresh perspectives can only occur if the interviewee is caught off guard and forced to rethink their existing narrative. He explained that the interviewer must imagine a context for the question and then position the interviewee within it by asking the question in a very specific way. For example, rather than asking a resident who was exiled at the age of two ‘Did your parents talk about their house in Wünschendorf?’ ask, ‘In your childhood home was there anything which came from Wünschendorf?’

Starting with specific details, argues Storr, can open up into a far more intimate and evocative narrative of the past. To this end, I have found that introducing objects, or artefacts, from an interviewee’s past can act as a pathway to open those memories and narratives laden with emotional texture.

“And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane”

STORYTELLING WITH ARTEFACTS

“Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but it’s theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.”
- (Benjamin, 2006, p. 23)

How many stories can an object hold? Residents exiled from Wünschendorf were able to take with them just 50kg of belongings. When interviewing those who were exiled as children, the possessions that their parents chose to take with them—and those they chose to leave—were mentioned explicitly and often. Mr Scholz and his family first returned to the

village in the mid-1950’s. In our interview, he explained their surprise ‘to find the new owners of their house living with the things we were forced to leave behind’. On this visit his mother had asked the new owners of House No.51, the parents of Mrs Jiraková, if they could take the picture hanging above the bed. Mr Scholz recalls they received it only ‘because it wasn’t valuable’ and it was later hung above the bed of his parents in their new residence in Germany. The picture, the detail of which was never described, became a cue for opening an emotional and evocative story from Mr Scholz’s past, thus confirming the insights of Will Storr, who suggested that a more oblique approach to questioning might allow an interviewee more space



Interview with Mrs Jiraková, 2016

to reveal more personally significant memories.

A cue is, by definition, ‘a circumstance or piece of information which aids the memory in retrieving details not recalled spontaneously’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). As with the picture belonging to Mr Scholz’s parents, I have experimented with various ways in which artefacts can act as ‘memory cues’ to evoke stories from my interviewees. I ask the interviewee if they have objects or images which they can share with me, and I have occasionally brought along objects and images to show them which I have collected myself. Prior research into the interviewee’s life means I am able to select artefacts which may

evoke direct memories, yet I have found that even unfamiliar or unrecognised artefacts can evoke serendipitous and deep insights. In a further experiment, I examined how artefacts could become points of connection, joining stories of different residents in the village. For example, a photograph shown to me by Mrs Jiraková which depicted both her grandmother and the grandmother of Mr Scholz standing outside House No.51 in the 1950’s. The same picture evoked very different stories about their meeting from Mr Scholz and Mrs Jiraková and, in doing so, provided an interesting insight into the contrasting perspectives of the German and Czech residents.



Artefacts found in the ruins of House No.51, 2007

The abrupt nature of their departure caused residents and their belongings to be scattered across Germany and the Czech Republic. As a result, what documentation of the village there is exists within the private collections of former and current residents of the village. With the desire to preserve these materials and at the same time make them accessible, I have over the past decade gradually gathered and digitised a substantial archive of testimonies, photographs, documents and objects. This collection, alongside my own films and work, is stored in Srbska.org, an online archive of my own creation. Still in development, Srbska.org is built upon the open source web-publishing platform

Omeka. Users can browse the contents and upload new artefacts and stories of their own. This archive also serves as a repository of artefacts which I have been incorporating into my virtual experiments. The intention of Srbska.org is to directly relate stories to objects. I believe that by attaching stories to artefacts, the artefacts are given an emotional charge, making them more engaging and memorable to the wider public. An example of this can be observed in Emily Spivack's online art project 'Sentimental Value', in which she scours Ebay to purchase objects embedded in other people's stories. From sneakers with air pockets slashed by an ex-girlfriend to sunglasses touched by Michael Jackson,



Splash page for Srbska.org

the subjective and intimate stories invested in them give otherwise ordinary objects a profoundly emotional quality.

Whilst living in Srbská I taught English for four years, during which time I encountered many methodologies for teaching. One of those was to bring real objects or ‘realia’ into the classroom. I observed that by giving my students realia to work with the learning task became more personalised, more engaging and more memorable to them. Of course a digital copy of an object, one which is seen through the pixels of a desktop computer, is not the same as its physical counterpart. Isolated on a flat screen, it

cannot be held or manipulated. It cannot be touched like Mr Sholz touched his parents’ picture. It cannot be walked through like Mrs Jiraková walked through house House No.51. Consequently, one of the main questions which I have grappled with in my experiments is how can the digital, two-dimensional artefacts of Wünschendorf that are stored in the online archive “cue” genuine narratives in a manner similar to their corporeal, three-dimensional equivalents?

Memory of Loci is an experiment in exploring these questions through the medium of virtual reality, repositioning digital artefacts from Srbska.org into the virtual environment.

The screenshot displays the 'BROWSE ITEMS' section of the Srbska.org website. On the left is a vertical navigation menu with links: 'About', 'Browse Items', 'Browse Collections', 'Browse Interviews', 'Contact', and 'Contribute an Item'. The main content area features a search bar and filters. Below this, a grid of eight thumbnail images is shown, each with a caption: 'Old firestation', 'Ruins of farm building', 'Forest border', 'Ruins of house no.51', 'View of Srbska', 'Ruined house near border', 'Graveyard in Srbska', and 'Ruins of farm building'. The website's logo 'Srbska.org' is centered at the bottom.

VIRTUAL REALITIES

“We are always at home in our pasts. We never feel like we are strangers, or we would not feel as though we are remembering. When we visit a past time, we usually look at its events with our own eyes. The memories feel like they are ours, because we are at the centre of them.” - (Ferryhough, 2012, p. 66)

How can places in memory be opened to the viewer, as ‘real’ spaces which act as a catalyst for creating new and memorable narratives of the past?

The Virtual Reality Society defines VR as ‘a three-dimensional, computer generated environment which can be explored and interacted with by a person. That person

becomes part of this virtual world or is immersed within this environment and whilst there, is able to manipulate objects or perform a series of actions.’

However, strictly technical in character, this definition presents perhaps too narrow a view of virtual reality. As Hillel Schwartz (2014, p. 299) explains, virtual reality is not just that which is found in headsets, rather it is ‘any system devised for losing ourselves in another world’.

To create a virtual reality is to trick the senses into an experience of being in a place which doesn’t really exist. This can happen when listening to a story, reading a book or watching a film. It’s a



Group visit to Srbská, 2013

trick that I believe also occurs when we remember emotionally charged memories from the past. When, for example, the German group visits Srbská, I observe them pointing to places which no longer exist. They stand in buildings which are not there, respecting their invisible contents and boundaries. Their experience is derived from their own inner worlds, positioning them in a virtual reality.

Yet, to what extent do the virtual and the real world interact? How does our present reality interact with our past memories? How can this dynamic relationship between memory and place, between internal and external cues, be replicated in

a computer generated virtual reality?

When the German group visits Srbská, they are visiting both the virtual reality of the past and the physical reality of the present. This interaction combines, I believe, to fundamentally change their overall perception of the village. Memories of the past and present collide to form something entirely new.



I have attempted to imagine this dynamic process in my previous work. In my experimental film 'Blood Moon', I used family footage to visually represent my own memories, placing them in the unfamiliar streets of Amsterdam. Attaching a projector to my camera I simultaneously projected and recorded, using a moving camera to subject the images to serendipitous distortions and perspectives as they rolled across the surfaces of the city.

Experiments such as Blood Moon are a way of experiencing virtual reality in the broader sense. They use site specific projections and moving image installations to create 'spaces' in which

different media can coexist spatially. I believe the introduction of cutting-edge VR technology is an extension of this spatialisation, one which offers its own unique possibilities and challenges for creating narratives about places and events in the past. In the cinema the viewer is presented with a narrative space that unfolds in front of them, whereas in VR the viewer is inside a space which unfolds around them. Previously, I have explored virtual reality as an illustrator. With VR technologies such as the HTC Vive, I am able to explore virtual reality as an architect.



With very few visual materials remaining which depict House No.51, I have come to build my own mental representation of it, created through my experiences of visiting its ruined remains and through the stories of its inhabitants, primarily Mrs Jirakova's first-hand memories of growing up in the house. As a maker I question whether places such as these, places firmly located in fluid and malleable memories, can ever be materialised for other people to view and experience.

Could they ever, perhaps, be recreated as computer-generated environments with VR technologies?

To be an architect, one needs to consider the tools of one's construction. With VR technology, photogrammetry provides these materials. Photogrammetry is a scientific means to take spatial measurements from photographs. Using AgiSoft Photoscan, purpose built software, one can use digital photographs of a physical object to create a precise digital 3D replica.

This process is common in both the games and VR industry to create realistic computer generated environments, but it is also used within the field of cultural heritage. In this field, it is employed primarily as a means of reconstruction



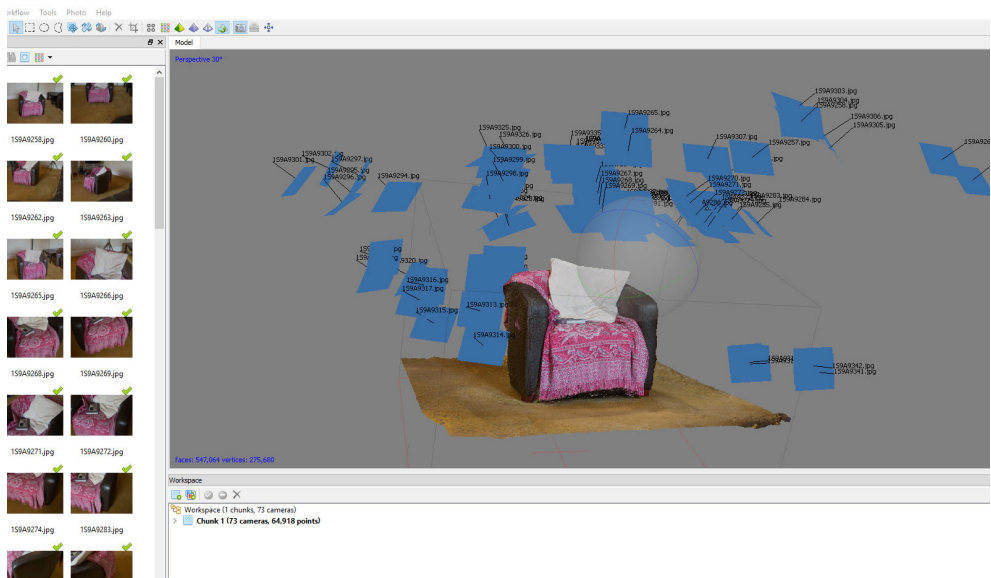
Photogrammetry model of the chapel in Srbská, 2017

untouchable objects. The Rekrei project, for example, uses photogrammetry 'to restore lost cultural heritage through crowd-sourced photogrammetric reconstructions'. To date, the project's best-known achievement is its recreation of ancient artefacts from the Mosul Cultural Museum in Iraq after the originals were destroyed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in 2015. By crowdsourcing photographs from the museum, Rekrei has created digital surrogates for objects whose physical counterparts are now entirely lost. During the course of my experimentation I have investigated the applicability of this form of reconstruction in some depth, examining how digital representations of sites and artefacts can be experienced by

the viewer. Over the past two years, I have co-developed a workshop and a workflow for turning heritage objects into 3D replicas*.

* www.gitbook.com/book/sophiedixon/photogrammetry-guide/details

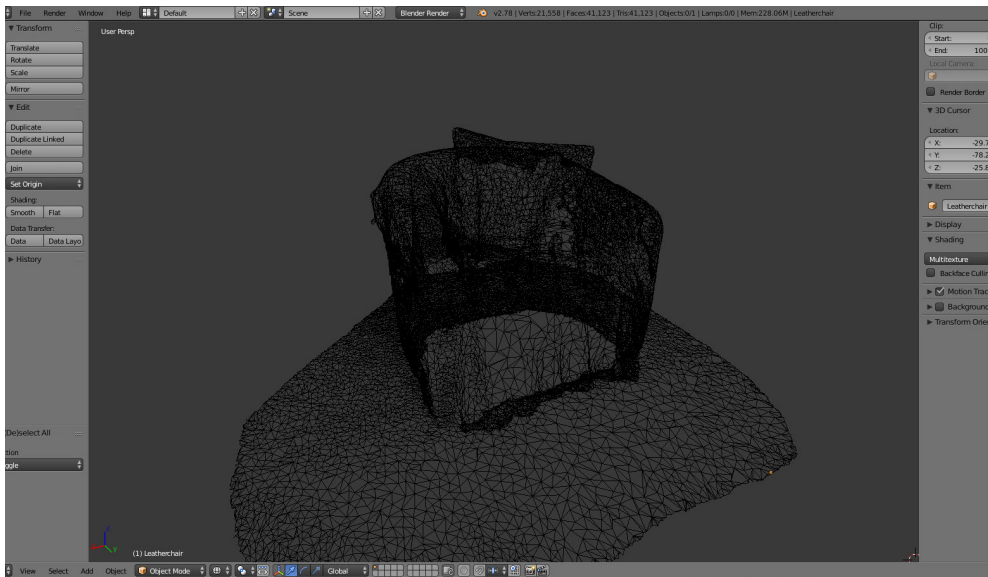
It is with photogrammetry that the actual 3D space of virtual reality is modelled. This is a painstaking, intensive and lengthy process. Given the time constraints of Memory of Loci, I have necessarily had to sacrifice a degree of thoroughness in the photogrammetry process, using fewer photos and rendering them at a lower quality than I would normally.



Photogrammetry process (Agisoft PhotoScan) for Memory of Loci, 2016

Yet photogrammetry requires a real point of reference for a digital copy. It is just that—a copy. How, then, does one recreate a place such as House No.51, where so much has decayed, faded and disappeared? As a visual artist, my research into oral storytelling has led me to reflect upon the construction of visual images in relation to the storytelling experience. In film, one experiences the story directly through the images which the creator chooses to present. In oral storytelling, as with literature, the process via which one experiences the story is less direct, more idiosyncratic and contains an extra step. Through these media, the creator creates the environment where the images are manifested in the listener's (or

reader's) imagination. The richness of oral storytelling cannot be underestimated. Shonaleigh cumber is a Drut'syla, an oral storyteller from the Jewish tradition. She can remember over 4,000 stories, held in what she describes as twelve interlinking cycles, each of which takes four to five days to tell. I have interviewed Shonaleigh and listened to her stories. Like others who have experienced the mastery of her storytelling, I have formed strong and memorable images of the people, places and events she describes, despite never having laid eyes on their physical forms. Though they may lack the mastery of the professional, each and every storyteller must create such an environment.



Photogrammetry process (Blender) for Memory of Loci, 2016

When I ask my interviewees to imagine a place in the past, then I ask them to mentally walk through these places. It creates an impression of this environment in the listener's mind.

When I listen to Mrs Jirakova's stories I can only imagine the places she describes using images from my memory. As I listen to her describe her home, I remember my own. Walking through her memories as she remembers House No.51 intimately, we walk through our own memories of the places that we ourselves remember intimately. Our memories, our stories, become irrevocably entangled. Consequently, when I have come to

digitally recreate the environments of the interviewees described to me through stories of their past, I have been compelled to recreate them with photogrammetry using objects from the environments of my past. When Ms Jirakova describes with full emotion a blanket from her childhood, I create a digital surrogate using photographs of a blanket from my childhood. Through this process I infuse the meaning and sentiment of the interviewee into objects that hold my meaning and my sentiment. The result is a digital object which holds something both old and new. Something as subjective, elusive and changing as memory itself. Thus, in the finished virtual environment,



Scene from Memory of Loci (first iteration), 2016

What is missing from this environment, that of which no impression was given from the stories or of which no physical remains exist, is represented simply by black space. Although my intention was to visualise omission, through researching story, I have come to understand the black spaces as experienced by the viewer as having a perhaps more important function. The philosopher Walter Benjamin (1970, p. 89) once stated that 'it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it'. My interpretation of this is that for story to be personalised, for it to be engaging and therefore memorable, the listener must have space for their imagination. The black spaces in the virtual world of Memory of

Loci are spaces into which I hope each viewer can project their own imagination and memories, making each experience highly subjective and unique.

The nature of memory is that to remember, one must also forget.

Throughout my interviews with the residents from Wünschendorf / Srbská I have questioned the veracity of their memories. As one story changes my impression of the next, and each story creates a new layer of imagery in my imagination, I have struggled to create one fixed image or idea of the village as it was in my own mind. The past as experienced in memory is something which is constantly changing and re-building around you.



NAVIGATION AS NARRATION

'So how is virtual reality different from traditional forms of media? The simple answer is that VR is more immersive. Like console games were in their time, VR is a new genre of media, distinct from existing forms. Well-executed immersive experiences are the next wave on the continuum of narrative storytelling, replacing single-point perspective with one determined by the viewer'

- (Shapiro & Pishchalenko, 2016.p. 22)

How can places in memory be entered into and discovered by a viewer in VR? How does their movement within the virtual space influence their narrative experience?

In Virtual Reality, as with desktop and console gaming, the viewer is immersed in a world of seemingly endless possibilities within another space and time. In VR, the viewer is immersed even deeper in the illusion of that world, interacting with it in much the same way they would their physical environment - turning their head to see it, moving their legs to navigate it, and using their hands to touch it. Given its immersive potential, I was naturally drawn to VR when questioning if a viewer can 'enter into places in memory', yet there are a number of tensions involved in this medium. For example, how does one

recreate intangible memories in an (albeit virtually) tangible space? As discussed above, no matter how vivid the story relaying them, memories are subjective, often diffuse and ethereal.

Additionally, there is an inherent paradox in VR's means of immersion. A viewer navigates the virtual environment by physically moving through their actual environment yet, given that the latter will not correspond to the former, this poses a particular problem. A user may find themselves trying to move through a seemingly real corridor only to find themselves walking into a very real wall (or falling over a very real coffee table). Guiding a viewer through a VR environment and story necessarily involves a 'conceit' in order to transport them to another room, for example.

Finally, the ability for a viewer to freely move within the work has implications regarding direction. The apparent agency that VR presents the mobile viewer with can make an intended narrative more difficult to impose. For example, a VR space may contain 4 rooms, but even if the user were to visit each room just once there are 24 possible permutations in the order that they can be entered. Such considerations raise a host of questions:

How to tell a coherent story to a viewer with this much freedom? How much freedom do we give the viewer? Does the creator restrict this freedom and impose some linearity? If so, how? And what effect do these decisions have on the narrative experience?

Dealing with these tensions, *Memory of Loci* has undergone two major iterations which differ, fundamentally, in the way that participation, or navigation, is opened to the viewer. The first iteration (Authored Narratives) takes a more directed approach. The second, and current, version (Emergent Narratives) embodies a freer role for the viewer.

When I first moved into *Srbská* I was immediately drawn to the ruins of House No.51. Knowing nothing of its past, I wandered into the house for the first and last time (it shortly afterwards became dangerous to enter the ruined building), looking for clues which would reveal its story. Over the years, as I have interviewed those who lived there, my perspective of the house has changed. What I first saw as ruins came to take on whole new layers of meaning.



Inside the ruins of No.51, 2007

In this first iteration of the VR project standing at the entrance to House No.51, the viewer takes on a role very much like I did on that day. Yet, unlike me, the viewer does not move through the ruins of the present day. Rather, they move through the house as it is re-created from my interviews with Mrs Jirakova, a house which exists in many states of time. As they enter the different rooms, they can hear reconstructed extracts of Mrs Jirakova telling me her story and see her relationship with the house unfold. The viewer ends as they started, standing at the ruined entrance, yet hopefully with a different perspective. The narrative is carefully constructed

with high degrees of linearity. The viewer navigates the virtual space by entering transparent spheres placed at different locations, which transport them to another room or 'scene'. Although this navigational interaction allows some limited agency and introduces an element of discovery, the initial and final scenes are always the same and the viewer is required to stay in each room for a certain duration before being transported back to the site of the ruin. In preparing this iteration, I collaborated with a scriptwriter with extensive knowledge of 'site specific theatre' to help me position the linear narrative within the virtual environment. Inspired by site-specific theatre companies such as Punch



The ruin of No.51 in Memory of Loci (first iteration), 2016

Drunk, we discussed how the viewer could experience Mrs Jiraková's story within the different rooms, with each room having its own distinct atmosphere created through ambient soundtracks. This iteration, by directing the viewer around an authored narrative, is reminiscent of the "hero's journey" *

** The Hero's Journey is a narrative pattern identified and described in detail by Joseph Campbell in his book 'The Hero With a Thousand Faces' first published in 1949. One of several common structures underlying a wide range of stories, The Hero's Journey, is the story of a protagonist setting out to find something, undergoing a quest, returning to the beginning*

possessing a new perspective as a result of internal change and understanding garnered through his external journey.

"A journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it."

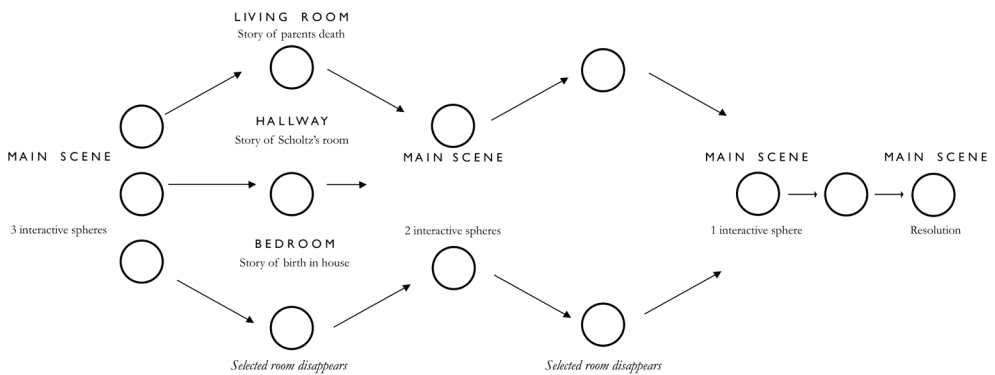
- (Steinbeck, 1962, p. 4)



Scenes from Memory of Loci (first iteration), 2016

When observing viewers inside this iteration I was aware that the way that the viewer interacted with space was not always as I had anticipated. I experienced a sense of frustration that the viewer was often distracted by the spectacle of VR and therefore not attentive to the subtle narrative told through the various interview extracts. I questioned to what purpose I was imposing a particular narrative into the environment - what experience did I want the viewer to have? I had used VR precisely because I wanted to engender an immersive experience, yet I had perhaps overlooked the interactivity that comes with this level of immersion. I came to the conclusion that if I wanted

the viewer to truly enter into places in memory then their process of creating personalised interpretations of the (someone else's) past, their personalised process of remembering, is a phenomenon that I should explore.



Narrative structure in Memory of Loci (first iteration), 2016

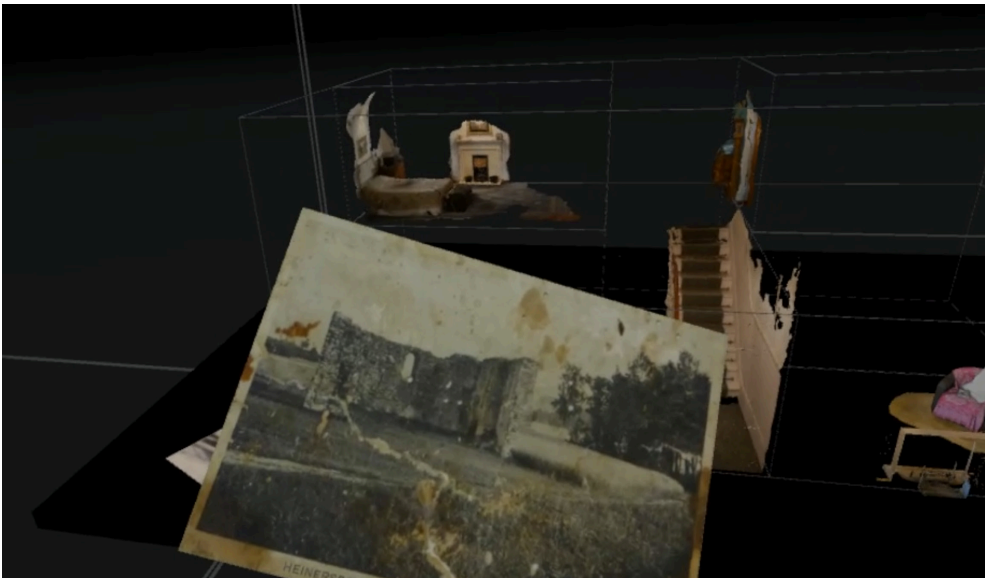
Iteration Two : Emergent narratives

“It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time.”
- (Sebald, 2001, pp. 359-60)

Though poetic, the observation of Jacques Austerlitz, Sebald’s fictitious protagonist, is rather apposite. For most of us, unlike Jacques, we believe that rather than simply arriving at the events of our lives, we are in fact implicated in them. We feel - even if it may be an illusion - a sense of agency. We believe that we can affect how that

progressions turns out through our own thoughts and actions. We may not be certain about the waters we sail in, but we are certain that we are at the helm of the ship. In this interaction, between our agency and the forthcoming unknown, we find an infinite number of possibilities - all of which we’re trying to calculate and influence. Out of this interaction our everyday lives, rather than an authored narrative, resemble a series of “emergent narratives”.

One of the most wonderful things about virtual technologies is their potential to reproduce this feeling.



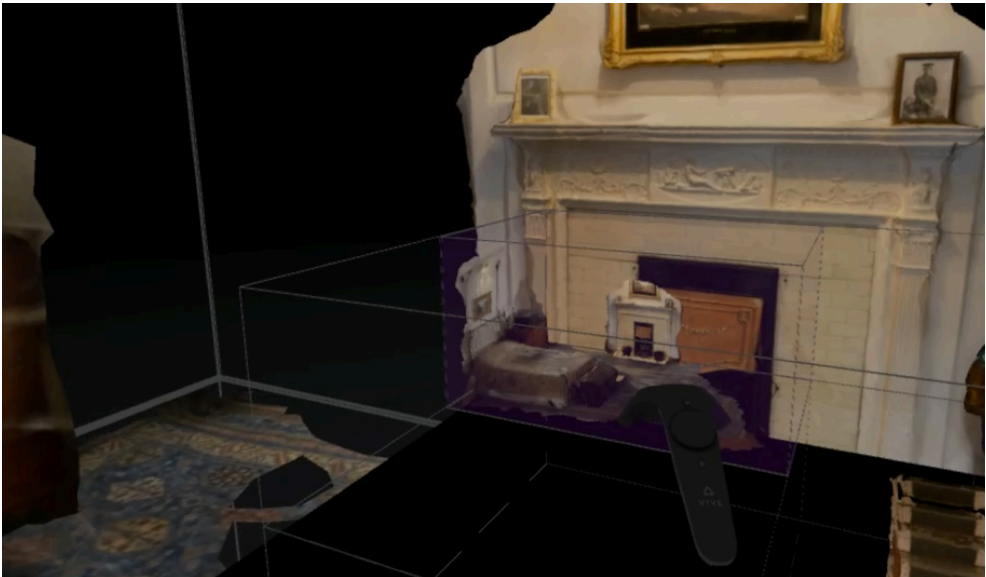
Using controllers to pick up artefacts in Memory of Loci (second iteration), 2017

Shapiro and Pishchalenko (2016, p. 23) explain that computer-rendered VR is 'more often about story rendering than it is about explicit narrative, creating a world or environment that the viewer explores under their own steam'. Like our real lives, VR can draw us into an unfurling of events for which we feel responsible. When deciding to explore greater interactivity in the second iteration of *Memory of Loci*, I wanted to explore VR's potential for this sense of agency.

In the second and current iteration of this experiment I replaced the linear narrative with what I refer to as a 'spatial narrative' for the viewer to discover. This

was done by presenting the viewer with two hand-held controllers, giving them greater freedom than in the previous iteration. Using these controllers, the viewer is able to move around the space in their own time, using a small scale replica of the environment which acts as a 'navigational model'. They are also able to pick up objects and interact with the environment around them as they please. Though they will encounter fragments of video and audio, there is no 'intended' narrative. Rather, the user is presented with fragments which they can, or perhaps cannot, assign meaning to themselves.

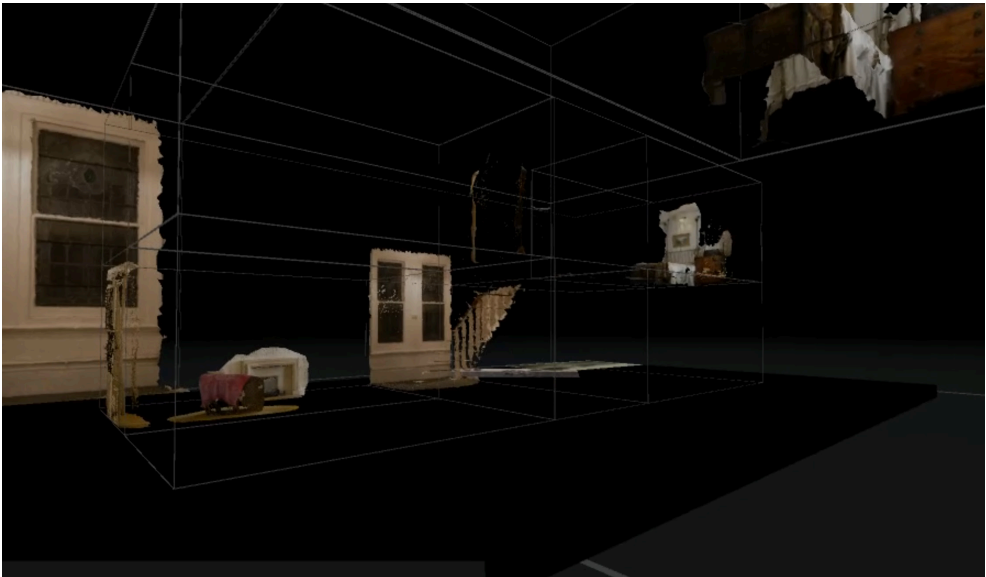
Considering the two iterations, the



Using controllers and a 'navigational model' to move between rooms in *Memory of Loci* (second iteration), 2017

question of how to create effective narrative experiences inside computer generated environments presents a significant challenge. In trying to understand this challenge, I delved heavily into narrative theories and other existing VR experiences but it seems there are no 'correct' methods. Rather, it is a question of understanding what particular experience you want to create for the viewer. I believe both iterations were useful experiments in their own right however. Remembering the past is a process, one in which I wanted the viewer to become implicated through their own agency. I wanted them to create their own unique narrative in the knowledge that it is just one of many possibilities, a subjective

and personalised experience which, in turn, becomes memorable enough to live beyond their experience of VR. With VR, as mentioned previously, the author is more akin to architect. Spaces are created which reflect the nature of memory, spaces where new narratives of the past can emerge. For these reasons, I hold a preference for the second, current iteration and continue to explore and develop its potential further.



View of 'navigational model' inside Memory of Loci (second iteration), 2017

The interviewee is a storyteller - it was and it was not so

The interviewee is a storyteller. Less obvious, however, is that so too is the interviewer. In a journalistic or direct approach to interviewing, I believe that the story of the interviewee becomes secondary to the story that the interviewer, who has ultimate control of the narrative, wishes to tell. In an attempt to minimise this bias, I prefer to take a more creative and open approach to interviewing, one in which the interviewer takes the role of an attentive and methodological listener who embraces the interviewee's story for its own sake. To this end, I have worked with authors and storytellers to understand how best to create a greater space for the interviewer to tell their own story in an organic form with more resonant, and perhaps more meditative, material as a result. The aim is to see the past through their eyes as they experience it.

Artefacts as memory cues

I believe artefacts and places play a specific and powerful role in invoking the past from within the present eliciting a rich visual and narrative response from the interviewee. In this regard I consider the archive which I continue

to develop, srbska.org, as a platform for generating new narratives of the past rather than simply a repository to preserve existing ones. The question of how to further integrate the archive into virtual environments is one which I address further in my MR experiment, *The Chorus*.

An architected space of possibilities

When I set out to discover the village of Wünschendorf / Srbská, I believed that, with enough time and perseverance, I could reconstruct the objective story of its past. I no longer believe this is possible. The village exists as a place within the medium of memory, a place of individual and collective stories. The village is experienced, not formulated, and that experience can shape itself in an infinite number of ways. Chance seems to play a large part. Perhaps this is always the case when we are faced with a history, or an artefact. If we discount the idea that there is a completely objective history, how can we best communicate such nuances of places and events to a viewer?

I believe that immersive and spatial environments such as Virtual and Mixed Reality can present the past as 'possibility spaces', wherein each experience is

consciously unique, heightening the audience's appreciation of the capricious unfurling of events, and building a greater sense of empathy with the subjects who remember them.

Virtual Reality - entering into places in memory

From personal experience and through the observation of others, I do not believe that VR technologies are quite yet ready to create a believable sense of being somewhere one is not. The fact that the viewer is inside a headset tethered to a computer, often with poor vision and glitchy interaction, makes the experience one about VR more than an experience in VR - particularly for those unfamiliar with VR technologies. I do, however, think that this will change in time. VR technologies will improve and with the incorporation of other sensory possibilities such as haptic feedback, the virtual experience could become as transporting and evocative as Proust's madeleine.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of virtual reality technologies is that they are relatively difficult and expensive to develop and that they require high production values. In practice, the effect may be that the creation satisfying VR experiences may

be beyond the resources of small teams. These technologies have, however, raised a timely challenge to our approach to creating cinema. Though like many other technological innovations - including 3D and IMAX - VR may only a tangential effect on cinema, or may even prove to be a dead end. But it is borne of a society which increasingly seeks interactivity and connectedness, and one in which story, history and entertainment are increasingly merged. I think that VR questions to what extent 'connectedness' and 'interactivity' have a place in cinema, and vice versa. I have developed this theme, and hopefully touched on some interesting possibilities, in my MR experiment 'The Chorus'.

REFERENCES

Benjamin, W., 1970. *The Storyteller*. London: Fontana.

Benjamin, W., 2006. *Excavation and Memory*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Blezinger, D. & van den Hoven, E., 2016. *Storytelling with Objects to Explore Digital Archives*, Nottingham: ECCE.

Campbell, J., 2008. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. London: New World Library.

Dilon, B., 2011. A Short History of Decay. In: B. Dilon, ed. *Ruins*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, pp. 10-19.

Fernyhough, C., 2012. *Pieces of Light: The New Science of Memory*. London: Profile Books.

Halbwachs, M., 1950. *La Mémoire Collective*. Paris: Universitaires de France.

Jenkins, H., 2005. *Publications*. [Online] Available at: http://homes.lmc.gatech.edu/~bogost/courses/spring07/lcc3710/readings/jenkins_game-design.pdf [Accessed 20 April 2017].

Lippard, L., 1997. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*. New York: New Press.

Louchart, S. & Aylett, R., 2004. Narrative Theory and Emergent Interactive Narrative. *Int. J. Continuing Engineering Education and Lifelong Learning*, pp. 506-518.

Nabokov, V., 2000. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. London: Penguin.

Païni, D., 200. Le retour du flâneur / The Return of the Flaneur. *Art Pres*, Issue 255 pp, pp. 33-41.

Proust, M., 1992. *In Search of Lost Time Volume I: Swann's Way*. London: Random House.

PUNCH DRUNK, 2000. *PUNCH DRUNK*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/home> [Accessed 25 April 2017].

Rabinowitz, A., 2013. *The Work of Archaeology in the Age of Digital Surrogacy*. [Online] Available at: <https://mediterraneanworld.wordpress.com/2013/11/14/the-work-of-archaeology-in-the-age-of-digital-surrogacy/> [Accessed 22 April 2017].

Realities.io, 2017. *Realities.io*. [Online] Available at: <http://realities.io/> [Accessed 20 April 2017].

Rekrei, 2017. *Rekrei.org*. [Online]
Available at: <http://realities.io/> [Accessed
17 April 2017].

Ryan, M.-L., 1999. Immersion Vs.
Interactivity: Virtual Reality And Literary
Theory. *SubStance*, 28(2), pp. 110-137.

Scanlan, J., 2013. *Memory: Encounters with the
Strange and the Familiar*. London: Reaktion.

Schwartz, H., 2014. *The Culture of Copy*.
New York: Zone Books.

Sebald, W. G., 2001. *Austerlitz*. London:
Penguin.

Shapiro, S. & Pishchalenko, A., 2016.
*Virtual and Augmented Reality : A State of
the Industry Overview*, s.l.: USC School of
Cinematic Arts.

Solnit, R., 2006. The Ruins of Memory. In:
After the Ruins. Los Angeles: University of
California Press, pp. 18-33.

Solnit, R., 2014. *Wanderlust: A History of
Walking*. London: Templar Publishing.

Solnit, R., n.d. The Ruins of Memory. In:
s.l.:s.n.

Spivack, E., 2017. *Sentimental Value*.
[Online]

Available at: [http://www.sentimental-
value.com](http://www.sentimental-value.com)
[Accessed 22 April 2017].

Steinbeck, J., 1962. *Travels with Charley: In
Search of America*. New York: Penguin.

The Last Tuesday Society, 2017. *The Viktor
Wynd Museum Of Curiosities*. [Online]
Available at: Thelasttuesdaysociety.org
[Accessed 22 April 2017].

Thompson, P. & Bornat, J., 2017. *The Voice
of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford
University Press.

Truc, G., 2011. Memory of places and
places of memory: for a Halbwachsian
socio-ethnography of collective memory.
International Social Science Journal, pp. 147-
159.

van den Hoven, E. & Eggen, B., 2014.
The Cue Is Key: Design for Real-Life
Remembering. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*,
Volume 10, pp. 110-117.

Virtual Reality Society, 2017. *Virtual Reality
Society*. [Online] Available at: [www.vrs.org.
uk](http://www.vrs.org.uk)
[Accessed 3 April 2017].

Yates, F., 2014. *The Art of Memory*.
London: Random House.

