

THE CHORUS

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This is a working document for an experiment in progress. I anticipate that the first iteration of this experiment will be shown at the Artistic Research Festival at the EYE museum, Amsterdam, in June 2017.

The Chorus explores how the viewer's physical environment can be augmented digitally to create a 'possibility space' in which videos, sounds, testimonies and artefacts in the online archive Srbska.org can be revealed to the viewer in an intimate, personalised and memorable way. Central to this experimentation is the question of how the viewer can be implicated as narrator of their own unique interpretation of the past.

This is a Mixed Reality (MR) experiment using the Microsoft HoloLens Mixed Reality Head Mounted Display (HMD). MR is an emerging technology in which digital artefacts – three-dimensional objects, static or animated, audio and video, may be projected into the viewer's real surroundings. Unlike Virtual Reality headsets, which exclude the external environment, the visor in the HMD is transparent, allowing the use of the real world around the viewer as a stage on to which artefacts are projects as holograms.

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I REMEMBER

'One thing I have learned about remembering is that it is a social process : it happens in collaboration with other people. Her memories with me may not be the same as her memories with others. The reality of remembering is always contextual.

- (Ferryhough, 2012, p. 238)

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?

It is my understanding that places such as Wünschendorf and Srbská exist as a complex lattice of interwoven individual subjective experiences. I have attempted to understand this village through the stories of those who remember it - namely those who were exiled in 1946, but also through the stories of residents who occupied their homes in the following years.

The Chorus also presents the viewer with the one story I know best. My own. Over my years of discovering the village I have heard many stories, many voices, uncovered many things and yet I can only perceive them through a story which is always

re-created in relation to the present context. A story which is constantly being formulated to incorporate newer fragments of information, making me question the veracity of any one interpretation of the past.



The question behind this experiment is how the viewer can become an active participant in *re-membering* my story of the *dis-membered* village of Wünschendorf / Srbská, forming their own unique narrative from the various stories, artefacts and images which I have discovered along the way.

WHEN WE ARE NO MORE

“Memory is not about the past, it’s about the future”

- (Rumsey, 2016, p. 15)

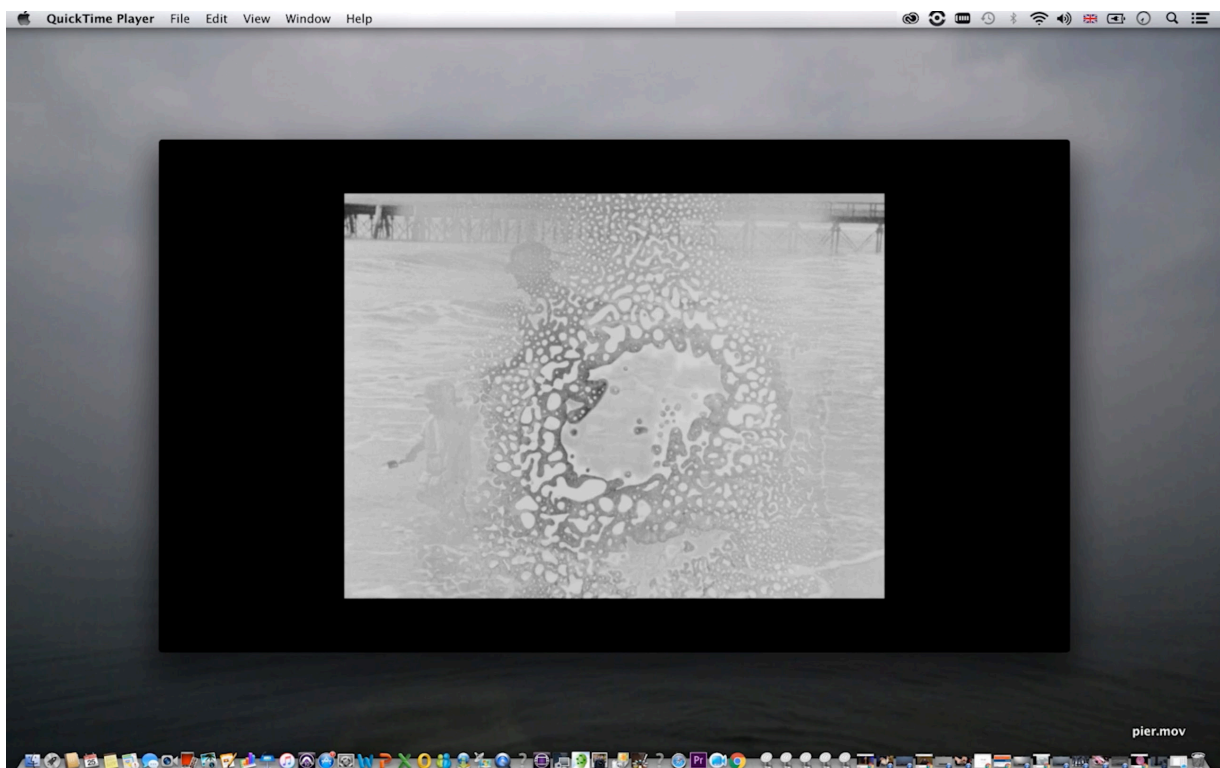
A parallel to the subject of human memory in my research is that of *digital* memory. Since 2007 I have actively sought, documented and recorded the remaining physical traces of Wünschendorf / Srbská and the stories which they hold. In this process the village has been turned from a place in human memory to one in digital memory, residing now in the online archive Srbská.org*.

*Srbská.org is an online archive in development built on the open source publishing platform Omeka. It

contains photographs, documents, video and 3D objects.

Abby Smith Rumsey in her book *When We Are No More* discusses the threats of ‘digital amnesia’. She argues that in an age which promises to remember everything, the fallibility and fragility of the digital medium in which we store our memory stands to be lost, leading us to forget everything. The media of the past - most notably paper ‘hard copy’ will outlast the much more transient media of the present.

Rumsey also goes on to talk about Mr ‘S’, a man whose exceptional condition meant that - like the promise of digital memory he could recall everything.



Each external stimulus he encountered evoked a myriad of memories, the abundance of which meant he was unable to form narratives which in turn he could remember. in Rumsey's words 'he was incapable of making plans for he actually had no sense of how things happened'.

My concerns about digital memory, specifically how meaningful and therefore humanly memorable narratives can be formed in an age which promises to remember everything almost without distinction, was something I explored in the experiment *Untitled 2016*. This is a desktop film in which layers of images, videos and discussions about memory in a digital age become obscured by new layers of information.

Over the past eighteen months I have listened to and interviewed Shonaleigh Cumbers, a Drut'syla - a storyteller from the Jewish tradition - who is able to remember over four thousand interlinking stories. She started learning this skill, traditionally passed down through the female side of the family, at the age of five, from her grandmother.

In the course of my research I have reflected on what makes her ancient stories memorable and what, with regard to storytelling in today's digital age, we can learn from her skill. In my research for the experiment *Memory of Loci* I discussed the necessity for omission, for forgetting in both human memory

and story. So how can storytelling take place in an age which promises to remember everything in the glare of an 'always on' information environment?

The theme of this experiment is not to replicate or illustrate traditional storytelling methods in virtual technologies, but rather to explore how places physically lost to the past can be kept alive in the many voices which tell its story. How the past, rather than something been and gone, fixed in digital representation, can become an evocative and memorable place to be discovered and kept alive by the viewer.

"There are living pasts and dead pasts. Some pasts are the liveliest instigators of the present and the best springboards into the future"

- (Corbusier, 1964, p. 104)

THE CHORUS

Memories in place

Shonaleigh's stories are held in twelve interlinking cycles, each of which takes five full days to tell. She describes each cycle as a 'lattice' of stories, connected and interwoven by events and places. Through listening to her stories I have observed that across a cycle the same place and event may re-occur many times, hours or days apart. Yet, each time it is recalled it is within the story of another character, seeing the same scene from their own unique perspective. It is my experience that witnessing the same event through the eyes of different characters creates a story which is a three dimensional, living thing - a scene which can be imagined from many angles, in many voices gives it the depth and memorability as if seeing it in life itself.

The Chorus is based upon the interviews of five different people, as four voices. I have chosen these voices because their stories left the greatest impression in my memory. Together they represent a diverse range of the groups and perspectives connected to the village of Wünschendorf / Srbská.

The question of how this village was, is, or will be, is something which haunts me. I continue to return, and with each return my own narrative of the place is re-written, an accumulative process of remembering and forgetting in which I am increasingly aware of the co-existence of other people's narratives rooted in the same physical location.

- Extract from personal notebook December 2014

Mr Ressel (b. 1940, Wünschendorf) and **Mr Scholz (b. 1942, Wünschendorf)** were children when they were exiled from Wünschendorf. Today they live just a few miles from each other in northern Germany and each year they return to the village alongside a larger group of former residents. In 2014 I interviewed them in their homes and was drawn to the similarity of their stories. Neither could recall much about the the village from direct experience and both explained their parents didn't talk much about the past. Their stories in my opinion had been 'co-written' with the rest of the group more recently, during their collective return to the site of Wünschendorf.

Ines Müller (b. 1964, northern Germany) is the daughter of Erika Müller, a woman exiled as a child from Wünschendorf, and one of the main organisers of the annual return. Ines has never been to the village but feels a connection through the stories her mother and grandmother told her. She has been my channel of communication with the German group and through her I believe I have been given an insight into the things which have not been explicitly mentioned in my interviews. We continue to stay in close contact.

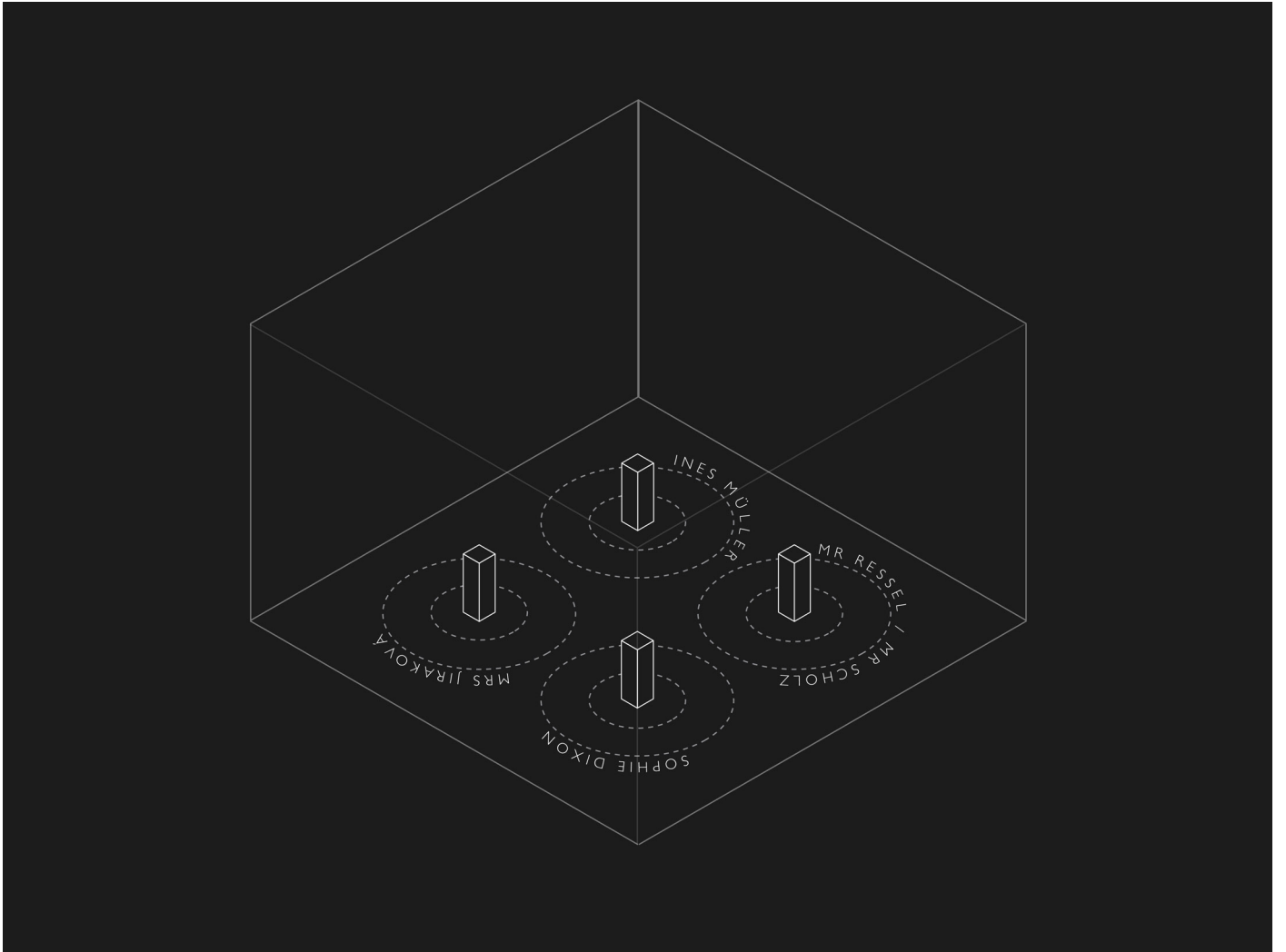
Mrs Jiraková, (b. 1954, Srbská) was born in House No.51 in Srbská, the context for my Virtual Reality experiment, Memory of Loci. Her parents moved into the property after the previous owners, the family of Mr Scholz, were exiled. One day in the mid 90's she discovered her mother dead in the house, a trauma which prevented her from returning. Today she lives 15km from the village in the nearest town, but has never returned to the village since that day.

Myself (b. 1986, UK) After sailing across the South Pacific and living in Australia for a year, one afternoon in an internet cafe outside Sydney I decided with my then partner, a Czech citizen to return to Europe to embrace a new adventure. Knowing nothing of the history of the area, we moved into a large building in Srbská which we discovered had once been an ethnic German school.

I worked in the area, learned the Czech language, and made friendships and acquaintances. One afternoon in May 2010 I first met the German group.



My intrigue in their mutual connection to this strangely haunting village led to my involvement in co-founding an NGO to tell their story in the greater context of the Sudetenland. In 2012 I returned to the UK to pursue my BA in Art and since this time the village has been a central part of my artistic enquiry. As with the other voices, the village now belongs to the story of my past.



Within the space there are four physical plinths. Each voice is assigned to one plinth. The voices are heard as three dimensional sounds and are only audible when wearing the HoloLens MR headset.

Installation plan showing *voices* assigned to plinths

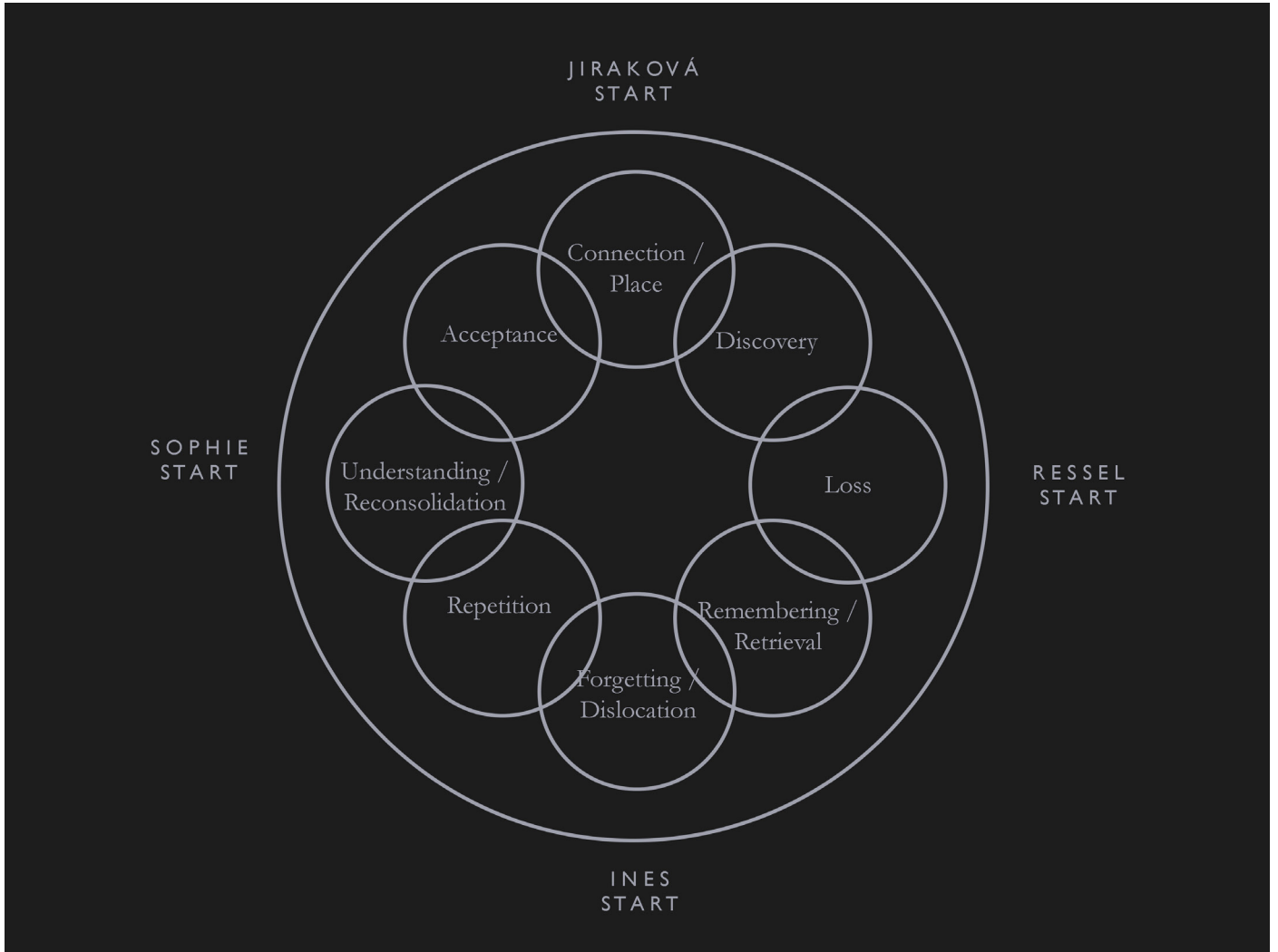
POETIC NARRATIVES

In an interview with Shonaleigh Cumbers she described her stories as being like life, where one story ends another begins so there is no absolute beginning or end. Her stories act as constellations waiting to be connected in different combinations and permutations where 'truth' is not an outcome but a continuous process and growth.

When observing Shonaleigh I've noted how she physically 'steps' in and out of her stories when telling them. In an interview, she explained that for her the lattice of stories which she remembers is spread out like a landscape. It seems to me that her own physical movement across this terrain is an important part of manifesting the story in the environment in which she is telling it.

The arrangement of individual stories to create a greater, three dimensional whole is something I draw parallels to in poetry; as the circulation of words, distanced by spaces to evoke a highly subjective and intimate interpretation. My experimentation with narrative in *The Chorus* is rooted in poetry, in fragmentation, experimenting with the tension between different voices and accounts to see if the viewer can inhabit the in between space of what is not said but what is felt.

The poet 'is concerned not just with exposition, as-say-the journalist is : he wants to make his reader share the experience, to respond to it in the same way he does. To do this he has to use language which works not merely on the reader's understanding of the dictionary meaning of words : he tries to engage total response by working on the reader's intellect, memory and senses. He seeks to realise-to make real-the experience by awakening the reader's recognition, by recalling that which the reader has experienced, by bringing into play the reader's five senses' - (Phythian, 1973, p.14)



The dialogues in this experiment have been structured with specific themes I have identified from my own experience of discovering my story of the village. Each theme resides in a cycle and the five voices, starting at different points, move through the cycles so that there is no discernible beginning or end.

Rather than experiencing a monologue, the viewer is

presented with fragments of texts which are inspired by the themes of: Connection, Discovery, Loss, Remembering, Forgetting, Repetition, Understanding and Acceptance.

My intention is that the viewer will feel something, like poetry: I am not looking for understanding. Rather, I hope for interpretation, to invite them into my story and ask them to participate.

Diagram to illustrate the different themes of the voices

SOUNDSCAPES

“Sound recordings freeze moments in time: music or theatrical performances, the words spoken by the famous or in everyday speech, or the sounds of our environment. When played back, they allow us to understand, to experience, to be immersed in - to relive - those moments.” - (British Library, 2017)

Over the years of returning to the village of Wünschendorf / Srbská I have been making sound recordings using directional, field and contact microphones. My experience of this process has raised my appreciation of sound to shape the way we experience and feel about our environment. In relation to game design, Jesse Schelle (1970, p. 4) describes sound as “what truly convinces the mind is in a place” and therefore sound is fundamental to evoking a ‘real’ sense of place in the viewer, he adds “in other words hearing is believing”.

In VR and MR Sound is fundamental to convincingly transport a viewer emotionally and physically into the virtual environment. My most lasting memories of VR experiences are those with exceptional soundscapes. *Notes on Blindness*, for example, is

based on the experience of the writer John Hull describing his experience of blindness, the emphasis on one’s experience of the world through sound making this experience particularly pertinent.

In the HoloLens Mixed Reality headset, one of the current limitations is a limited field of view. The processing power available in the headset is restricted, and consequently the field of view into which virtual artefacts can be projected is constrained. Close to the artefacts, the viewer must move their head, ‘scanning’ to see the bigger picture around them (much as we do by shifting our gaze - but this requires a head movement at present in MR). Three-dimensional audio, however, as Richard Marks (The Verge, 2015) explains, is “not limited to the field of view of the display and can be rendered to give a ‘complete 360-degree’ experience.” The Chorus is therefore primarily an aural experience supported by visual elements. To develop immersive and evocative sound I am working with the UK composer Colin Riley. Our intention is to create a rich environmental soundscape which evokes a believable impression of space, inviting the viewer to ‘aurally discover’ the voices of those inside it.

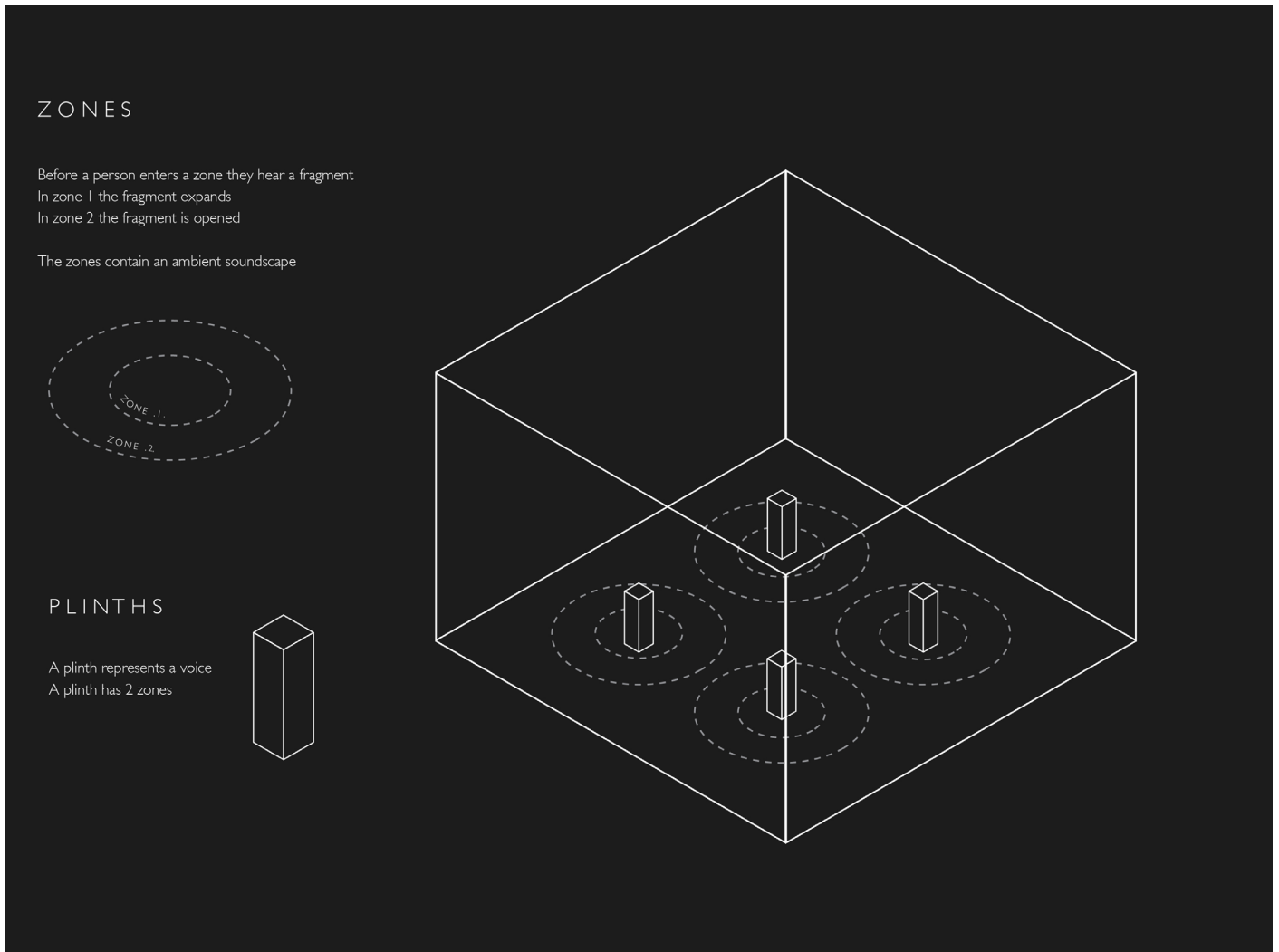
She believed it herself...

She believed it herself...

I think, she spent, all of her life, telling herself it wasn't hard and she got used to that idea.

I think, she didn't want me to think, that it was hard.

That she believed it herself...



The voices are designed to ‘unpack’ so the viewer at a certain proximity from a plinth will hear a short section from a sentence being repeated, for example:

She believed it herself

As the viewer gets closer to the associated plinth the sentence starts to ‘unpack’, for example:

I think, she spent, all of her life, telling herself it wasn't hard and she got used to that idea. That she believed it herself.

And this process repeats several times until the whole sentence can be heard, for example:

*I think, she didn't want me to think, that it was hard.
I think, she spent, all of her life, telling herself it wasn't hard and she got used to that idea. That she believed it herself.*

Diagram to illustrate the *sound zones* around the plinths

THE STORY OF THE PAST

“But man - let me offer you a definition - is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right. Even in his last moments, it’s said, in the split second of a fatal fall - or when he’s about to drown - he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.” -
(Swift, cited in Gottschall 2013)

The village of Srbská, of Wünschendorf was dismembered in 1946. Between 2009 and 2016 a group of elderly ethnic Germans, exiled in that year have been returning to the site to remember it. I believe the motivation of this group to create a coherent narrative around the village and its past is borne from the desire to ensure that - even when though the physical place has disappeared - it can continue to exist in memory. My role, as someone who has become involved in that process, has been to facilitate the creation and sharing of that story. A story which in turn, is now woven into my own life story. My own story, my own cognitive map of the village, was formed not as a systematic investigation,

nor a scientific development. It grew from my own investigation, a series of almost chance collisions of information, sense, habitude, expectation and confusion. I was, and am an active participant.

My Plinth will include my questions posed the interviewees, to the voices as I attempted to uncover a story of the past through their stories.

... What can you see?

Close your eyes. Imagine you are there again.

Now starting at the front door walk me through the house. ...

... What can you see?

ARTEFACTS - LIFE STORY

In the process of discovering the village of Wünschendorf / Srbská I have collected a large number of artefacts which in digitised form are now in my online archive Srbská.org. These artefacts, which include photographs, documents and memorabilia, are categorised and retrievable in conventional ways, for example by description of media. My interest however is in the way meaning is created from artefacts, in their curation and in their implicit and explicit existence within the narrative of the viewer. For me, the artefacts arrange themselves with an emotional and not intellectual resonance, in relation to the places or people from which they originate.

The artefacts are curated as so to be relevant to the voice and through positioning them within a soundscape in relation to cinematic imagery I believe the viewer will experience them in a more natural and engaging way.



IT WAS AND IT WAS NOT SO

I have formed a close relationship with the interpreters and translators with whom I have worked to interview the Czech and German residents of Wünschendorf / Srbská, and they in turn, they have a thorough understanding of my research project. During the interview we establish key areas of enquiry and at intervals the interpreter will convey the key points of what the interviewee has said. What fascinates me is how during this process interesting and emotive 'stories' are clearly identified by the interpreter and conveyed back to me. More specific answers or answers with no definable story arc tend to be skimmed over, ready for me to pick up, in our conversations following the interviews or

the full transcript and translation I have made in the following weeks.

It is my experience that from an interview there are one or two stories which leave a lasting impression, an impression which as I have observed with oral storytelling is formed as a visual image in my imagination. Over the past year I have been revisiting transcripts which are now four years old and despite having forgotten almost everything, it is the stories which were translated to me during the interview which I can always remember.



Still from The Chorus, Mr Ressel



IT WAS AND IT WAS NOT SO // 14

(above) Still from The Chorus, Ines Müller (below) Still from The Chorus, Mrs Jiraková

The persistence of a single image in memory is something which resonates with Shonaleigh Cumber's methods of remembering her vast lattice of stories. She describes her process as one of 'dehydration' and 'rehydration', explaining that a story must be reduced to its essence, into a single image or object which can be rehydrated through a systematic process into a story.

She explains that through this process the details in her stories may change but the underlying moral or meaning is held in place. In a later interview with another storyteller, Giles Abbott, I asked him about the mutability of stories, if through such methods of recalling them, the question of truth was not an

issue. Giles explained that stories can be truthful without being true, that by being freed from precise details they can be opened up to the possibility of metaphor and symbolism which can reveal themes far more deeply and precisely than if approaching them directly.

It strikes me that even when dealing with the an individual voice, or a subjective account of the past, as storytellers we are always dealing with metaphor. As Mr Ressel told me the story of his mother peeling apples, or Ines copying her grandfather's letters, the precise details or truth of these accounts became secondary to their ability to express, metaphorically, a feeling to which we could both associate. These



Still from *The Chorus*, Mrs Jiraková

actions work on a much deeper level precisely because, as Giles explained, when you deal with metaphor, the mirror is angled, you're not looking straight back at yourself, because if you do all you can see is yourself, angle it and you can see so much further.

These stories, images and artefacts are from Wünschendorf / Srbská and belong to specific people but my hope that like all good stories the themes they relate to can resonate on a deeper level. The village itself as something which was and was not, is and is not so.



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REFLECTIONS

This document is a summary of an experiment with is currently in progress, and the first iteration of which I hope to be ready by June 2017. One of the main things I understand from working with VR and MR is the necessity to observe the viewer and to make changes and iterations on the basis of that interaction. The Research Festival at the EYE museum in Amsterdam provides an opportunity to show the experiment to an audience and to use it as

a feedback lab, a basis for developing the work and extending it into the future.

‘The Chorus’ is a first step into my work with Mixed Reality, work which I intend to continue developing, whose direction I discuss further at the end end of my Critical Review.

May, 2017