



Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil.

Walter Benjamin in *Berlin Chronicle* (1932)

In the context of the contemporary urge to produce anew -produce unceasingly- stories of origin become more and more opaque. Abstractly mapless yet physically drawn; memories lurk and history slouches as the lines between remembrance and forgetting become all the more enmeshed. Fragments and silences become essential to stories because they ground the reality of forgetfulness that actively exists, that which lingers after silences; in our attempts to recollect. *Tree of Guardians* interrogates these silences, as well as the antagonisms between memory and history, producing an archive that pushes against the notion of “history as written by its victors”. *Tree of Guardians* lends its origins to the 300 women who were initially invited to participate in a workshop to question: When do Women disappear from memory? Through an imaginative re-working of their memory, participants started to re-write these histories, working against a selected genealogy that was still plagued by amnesia whose lack of proper indicators (visual or otherwise) disabled the process of recollection. Yet the urge to remember still lurked, and finally found itself in the mediated form of the voice recorder at The Ad-Diriyah Biennale of 2021.

When participants were asked to engage with the stand that read “Tell me a story about *your* mother”, they were implicitly encouraged to challenge the immediate associations that frame what would typically be attributed to a mother through the limited gaze of kinship. What their testimonies should unravel is a communal experience of loss, joy, and the mechanisms of storytelling that grapple against forgetting. Anonymity and privacy were approached as strategies that honor the nuances of these narratives, rather than trying to circumscribe them to the realm of “fact” or “categorisation” that eclipses subjecthood. This archive intervenes against that politics of historical archives’ totalising tendency to circumscribe humans to projections, reducing them to ideas or concepts; figures that act as cultural or mythical archetypes. Instead, in these archives, the actors of these narratives are rendered more human, relatable.

Discontinuities in these stories come in the form of silences, interruptions and background noise, they form integral parts of this archive. The importance here is given to partial truths, to interrogate what

suppressed memories might lurk underneath. Such testimonies rely on an open ended and solitary vocalisations of testimony. The mnemonic device at hand (the recorder) does more than just offer a technical-allegorical advantage, it actively engages with the participant, forcing them to remember.

This sort of “uncurated” authenticity, triggers an effect similar to the gesture of sharing secrets amongst friends, it becomes a vehicle for community building. The experience of contextualisation is not denied here, it animates a fragmentary yet continuous artistic practice forged through discontinuity, that can be heard, felt and visualized in the testimonies present.

The audience is invited to look at the gaps in their own memory through this auditory archive, and think about the emotional qualities or affects of an auditory archive. To attempt to draw a line between what is understood as a modern-day constructed personhood and their origins. Negotiate these roots², can they not too, be rhizomatic rather than vertical, unbound to gravity and conceptions of common sense? What needs to be remembered is not the grand, but rather, the minor figures that slip into the subconscious of the subject. In an attempt to contextualize our “Mapless world³”, archives have the capacity to produce interventions against forgetting that bestow upon the living flesh, voice; a resurrection that all at once captures the specter of ghostliness while passively lying there as a witness, awaiting an anticipated unearthing and hopefully, recognition.

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¹ Reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s metaphor “History lurks in it somewhere,’ I had written, but now I think that sentence would have to be revised: History slouches in it, ready to comfort and *kill* in “*Acting Bits/Identity Talk*”. *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4, 1992.

² Reference to Jean Fisher’s chapter titled “Where Here is Elsewhere” in *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture*, edited by Kamal Boullata. Saqi Books, 2008

³ Reference to Jabra Ibrahim al Jabra and Abdulrahman Al Munif’s co-authored novel, “A Mapless World”.

Loulwah Kutbi is a London based freelance writer and current postgraduate student in Material and Visual culture at UCL. She is interested in navigating how visual art can relate to broader social and political contexts. Her research focuses on participatory artistic practices, archival documentation and the relationship between memory and history in the formation of west Asian historical archives and predominant cultural imagery.