

Exhibition Review

On Memory: Deborah Aschheim at the Mattress Factory

September 9, 2006 to January 28, 2007

On Memory, a new installation by Deborah Aschheim, opened on September 9, 2006, at Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory as one of four new works unveiled in the bi-annual *Factory Installed* series. Founded in 1977, the Mattress Factory grants residencies to selected artists, providing a space and as much as two months for the creation of a new body of work installed and exhibited at the museum. For Aschheim, the residency generated an ambitious, autobiographical investigation of the very process of recollection. *On Memory* occupies two gallery spaces. In the first room, a drawing that covers three walls maps Aschheim's family relations. Her memories of these characters are woven as neural networks in the adjoining room.

Since the early 1990s Aschheim has worked where the biological meets the technological. This location is constantly expanding as increasing technological abilities permit an understanding of ever smaller and previously undiscovered worlds. Aschheim uses her work to contend with the uncomfortable knowledge that

systems and organisms invisible to us and often too minuscule to control determine the quality and length of our lives. The phenomenon of memory belongs to one such physically minute but functionally far-reaching realm.

On Memory, however, is anything but microscopic. Using floral grapes, medical tubing, pigmented polyurethane and diligence, Aschheim fabricated approximately 3,000 plastic nodes, the 3-inch dendrites and axons in her theoretical model of the neuronal structure of memory. Ten networks, woven with filament and thin clear rods, glow softly blue and purple, and reach from floor to ceiling throughout the dimly lit gallery. The colors are reminiscent of those used in brain imaging, yet the cool, clinical atmosphere of the installation is countered by the personal content at the center of each network. Aschheim collected home videos, which she describes as prosthetic memories, from the libraries of her father and grandfather. The form of each sculpture follows a map of Aschheim's recollections generated

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Figure 1
On Memory (installation view), 2006–7,
 plastic, light, video. Photo: Owen
 Smith



Figure 2
On Memory (detail), 2006–7, plastic,
 light, video. Photo: Owen Smith

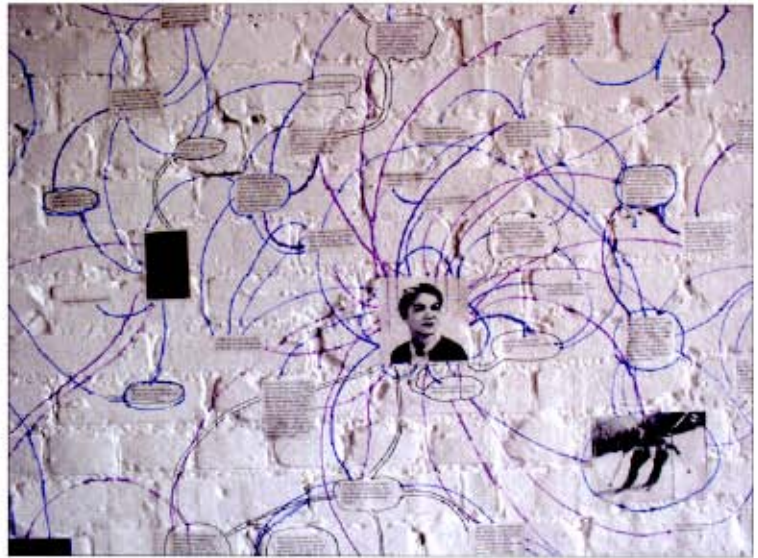
by the film. These videos, like a physical prosthesis, support Aschheim's investigation of familial memory, a personal response to the Alzheimer's that is prevalent in her family. But because the video fragments are commonplace (a woman unlocking and getting into a car, children spinning circles playing ring-around-the-rosy, a

family swimming in a lake), any viewer is offered a chance to follow his or her unique memories produced by the images. As the installation both portrays and stimulates the workings of memory, it is a literal weaving of a personal and schematic collapse.

Neural plasticity, the capacity of neural synapses to regenerate

Figure 3

On Memory (detail), 2006–7, text, photos, acrylic on wall. Photo: Deborah Aschheim



and reroute, gives memory its characteristic fluidity, the frustrating but sometimes merciful ability to selectively or creatively remember. Yet memory is also generative of a life's narrative. Each time an incident is remembered, a new neural pathway is formed, which connects the recollection to the present moment and links it in such a way that the two events surface together upon subsequent remembering. Neural degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's damage the connection and recall of events, destroying an individual's ability to recollect his

story. The videos, photographs and family lore that remain are only abridged versions of a person that can be revisited and replayed, thereby becoming the material for new processes of creative interpretation. *On Memory's* delicately woven neural networks physically depict this fragility of memory. The extensive and substantial web that connects both the generative fragments of family memorabilia and the thousands of ensuing recollections represented by the nodes, demonstrates the persistent, constructive work of memory over generations.

While the processes and functions of the brain are further untangled each year, the specific configuration of neural pathways remains in the territory of the imagined. It is exactly this limited scientific understanding that opens up the biological realm to art. Creative inquiry, whether in a gallery or in a laboratory, can generate ideas and representations that explore the indefinite. *On Memory* gives shape to the meeting of scientific modeling and experienced remembering.