

The Fragile, Constructed, and Repeated: A Study of Memory Practices in the Art that Impacts Us

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ABSTRACT

Art affects us in ineffable ways, and a large part of it is its ability to retrieve and manipulate memory, or put simply, memory practices. Artists work with memory: whether it be personal memory, shared memories, or common memories. There are many different frameworks to discuss and analyze such art. This paper will use the theatre archaeology framework to discuss and uncover the techniques used by three separate artists: Sarah Sze, Lynn Hershman Leeson, and Ragnar Kjartansson. Through analyzing three of each of the artists' principal works, theatre archaeology provides an answer to the factors of an effective and compelling piece of art.

Introduction

Theatre archaeology is the re-articulation of remains as real-time events. It is about bringing the past to the present as an experience, to convey a specific emotion through the action of re-doing, usually involving viewer engagement. Though artists may not consciously create based on the concept of theatre archaeology, most works can be analyzed under the same framework. These pieces create to recreate an idea or experience, not just to imitate. Art that successfully impacts viewers moves beyond passivity into activeness: achieving an immersive real-time event. This paper will cover the ethos of three different artists, analyzing three chosen works from each under the theatre archaeology framework.

Sarah Sze's large-scale installations and artworks toy with the fragility of memory, specifically the tethering of togetherness and apartness. Her work thrives in the liminal space between existence and nonexistence. Lynn Hershman Leeson's projects question memories of self. What does it take to create a character, an identity, and ultimately, yourself? From societal identity to biological identity, Leeson's artwork challenges viewers to reflect upon themselves and the spaces they occupy. Ragnar Kjartansson's video projects evoke strong emotions within viewers through the usage of music, repetition, and temporal elements. Something is repeated, but it is never quite the same. All three artists' ethos relate directly to the definition of theatre archaeology.

Sarah Sze: The Fragile Memory

Art is interpreted in personal ways. Beyond an interaction between two entities (e.g. artist and viewer, artwork and viewer), the pieces that deeply impact us are ones that connect with viewers through immersion by including viewers in the work itself. Sarah Sze's work consistently wrestles with similar themes of memory, change, and liminality. Using movement, everyday objects, and fragmented images, her work maintains an overwhelming nature that invites viewers to venture in and discover.

Triple Point (Pendulum), first exhibited in 2013, features a swinging pendulum that grazes the other objects which make up the art piece. The everyday objects lay scattered around the pendulum, open-aired and tethered together

precariously. The piece thrives in the liminal space of existence and nonexistence, the swinging pendulum both defining the borders of the piece and threatening its collapse at any moment. Even viewers move carefully about the piece. In this way, viewers are immersed and become part of the work. Just as the pendulum threatens the fragile structure, viewers carefully navigate around the sculpture, reaching close enough to observe but far enough to protect the fragile work. Beyond movement, the random objects used in this piece and most of Sze's pieces also continue with the theme of liminality. Insignificant, everyday objects are infused and held together by the given meaning within the container of Sze's artwork. The array of random objects are bursting at the seams, only held together by the borders of the work. Strings, rocks, plastic water bottles, books, potted cacti, and more, scatter the floor; they hang between one coherent piece and many individually random objects, creating a sense of discovery as viewers uncover the layers.

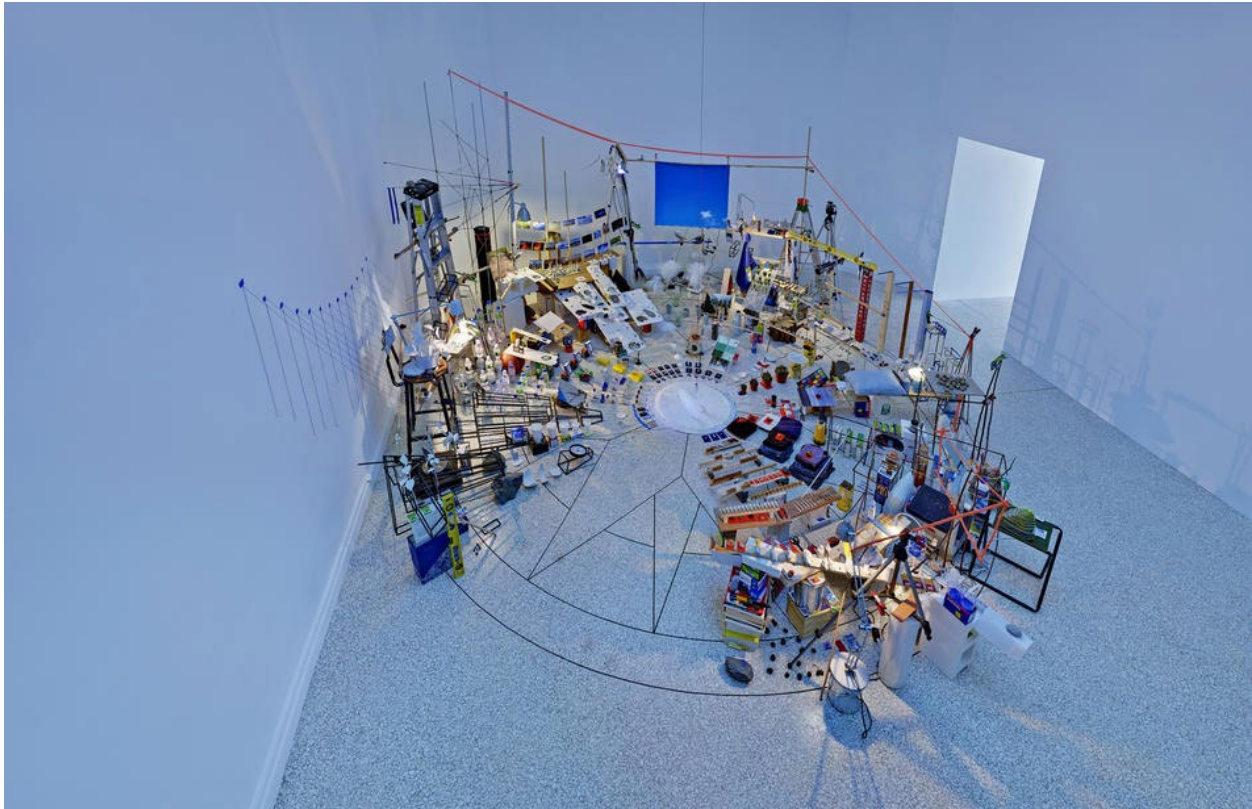


Figure 1: *Triple Point (Pendulum)*, 2013, Sarah Sze. Photo courtesy of the Sarah Sze and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

Centrifuge plays with the same concept of liminality: the in-betweenness of existence and nonexistence. On her approach to sculpture, Sze states in an interview with Okwui Enwezor (curator of the show), “A work should be constantly in a state of flux in terms of how it exists in space, how it exists in time; it should be unclear whether it’s in a process of becoming or a process of entropy.”¹ While the facets and images of the piece seem to explode outward, objects continue to connect in the center, drawing inward. Additionally, the overwhelming nature of the piece, with bright colors illuminating the dark room, draws viewers toward the center like moths to a flame. The images on display glowing in the lights mimic the sheer amount of pictures and raw data the brain contains. As the piece tips between coherence and incoherence, viewers are summoned to piece together fragments to create their own meaning.

¹ Sarah Sze, “Sarah Sze on the Changing Pace of Time and Space, the Ebb and Flow of Information, and How all Art is Essentially Sculpture.” By Okwui Enwezor. *Artspace*, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/interview-sarah-sze-on-the-ebb-and-flow-of-information-the-changing-pace-of-time-and-space-and-56568



Figure 2: *Centrifuge*, 2017, Sarah Sze. Courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery and Victoria Miro Gallery, London/Venice.

In the same vein, there is a force of attraction between the piece and its viewer in Sze's piece, *Timekeeper*. In line with its name, the installation addresses the concept of memory most directly. She speaks about her multimedia work and the importance of art in Guggenheim's collection, calling every exhibition a "timekeeper". Furthermore, art is "a way to have a conversation over time. The show becomes almost like a forensic site for an installation or an archeology site for, you know, a series of works. So you see the process of making—that evidence of that process left over... Live in the space."² The installation evolves from simply an art piece into an experience of discovery for the viewer. Fragments are left by the artist and are simultaneously being put together and pulled apart in real time. Using flickering lights and images, Sze plays with memory and the idea of the "afterimages" saved in our minds. Each puzzle piece facet of the exhibit seems to fit together yet remain isolated and separate. *Timekeeper* barrages viewers with images and information, each of them tethering between cohesive and incoherent. Some images are familiar within personal memory, but Sze recontextualizes them within her piece, provoking a sense of wonder and curiosity for the viewer. Through her own collection of images, Sze evokes many of the viewers' personal images and recollections, allowing them to create personal meaning in reference to a singular piece of art.

² Sarah Sze, "Tower 7: Timekeeper, 2016" recorded March 31, 2023, accessed August 13, 2023, <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/tower-level-7-timekeeper>.



Figure 3: *Timekeeper*, 2016, Sarah Sze. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Sze's art is intimate; it allows viewers to become part of the work. Specifically in *Timekeeper*, Sze invites viewers into her workspace by placing her desk in the middle of the exhibition. It becomes an immersive experience where viewers are able to walk, observe, and discover facets of the piece. One unique aspect of Sze's exhibition is its ability to create and invite viewers into a new space. Sze's work consistently contains a sense of discovery, balancing awe and wonder. The created liminal space creates opportunities for viewers to puzzle piece their own meaning from the fragments provided by the exhibit. The tension between completion and destruction within Sze's pieces speaks to the fragility of memory. This sense of discovery paired with implicit themes of memory and mind simulate the navigation of one's psyche. Sze's artwork imitates the inner workings of a mind with stored free-flowing images and memories.

Sze fulfills the three main keywords in the definition of theatre archaeology: "re-articulation", "remains", and "real-time". The "remains" are most evident, as images from different sources float freely in her pieces. Sze's version of re-articulation includes visitors also participating in the piecing together of a memory. In this way, "re-articulation" becomes part of a performance in "real-time". Sze asks viewers to create their own narrative by inviting them to discover the remains, creating a real-time experience.

Lynn Hershman Leeson: The Constructed Memory

What makes you, *you*? Is it the clothes you wear, the hairstyle you choose? The labels you take on, or the labels that are given to you? Is it the genetic makeup you were born with? Who gets to decide this "you"? Are you the creator, or is it the surroundings that mold you? Lynn Hershman Leeson's work provokes many of these questions through her major projects, all dealing with identity and performance while cleverly utilizing technology to effectively reach her audience.

Hershman Leeson's 2017 exhibit, *VertiGhost*, combines these objectives and makes a statement about identity, performance, obsession, and truth. Inspired by *Vertigo*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Hershman Leeson reinterprets the movie by filming her own version of a core scene that takes place at the Legion of Honor. Along with the recreation of the movie scene, the exhibit includes dialogue regarding the authenticity of Amedeo Modigliani's painting in the Museum's collection and interviews about the construction of realities in life and art.³ The movie *Vertigo* deals with the denial of truth as the main character, ironically an ex-detective, willfully allows fiction and reality to be blurred as his intent for pursuing truth falters. *VertiGhost* is a response to the film, pressuring the same idea of authenticity. It questions the construction of an identity, of what "creates" a person. How does one perform or conform? In modern society, false information is readily spread, and authenticity is often questioned. The question of truth becomes more and more nuanced.



Figure 4: *VertiGhost*, 2017 (still), Lynn Hershman Leeson.

The project itself is a recreation of a movie scene: a reiteration and reinterpretation. This accompanies the theme of obsession and replicas. Hershman Leeson deals with a ghost of the past as she pursues this project, eerily filming in the same location as the original scene. Using sensors, streaming services, and video cameras, live footage

³ Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Recent Work (Since 2012)," Lynn Hershman, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/recent-work-since-2012/>.

from the Legion of Honor is streamed at the De Young Museum. As viewers interact with the exhibit at the Legion of Honor, they are inserted into the narrative and story as they become part of the video project as well. By interacting with the piece, viewers are re-performing Kim Novak's role as Madeleine in the movie: another copy of a copy. Everyone who participates becomes part of the ghostly past, a variant of the original with slight nuances. Hershman Leeson holds an ongoing performance along with viewers throughout the exhibition.

Ambitiously, Hershman Leeson pursued a performance project in which she acted as the fictional character Roberta Breitmore for five years. After the initial "act" of arriving in San Francisco, Roberta Breitmore performed real-life activities such as creating a bank account, visiting psychiatrists, renting an apartment, and more. In creating such a character, Hershman Leeson provided Roberta Breitmore with her own clothing, signature makeup, unique walk, speaking mannerisms, gestures, and handwriting. Through this project, Hershman Leeson constructs a new identity. She turns a character outward rather than inwards, questioning how one must perform in society. Rather than build a character based on internal meditation, Roberta Breitmore is a collection of societal input as to what a woman should be.



Figure 5: *Roberta's Construction Chart 1*, 1975, archival digital print and dye transfer, 58.4 x 43.2 cm, Lynn Hershman Leeson. Found on website lynnhershman.com

Identity is simply who or what a person or thing is; however, there are many dimensions of identity. There are labels we give ourselves, and there are labels that are put upon us by others. Fluid with time, these labels are intangible and subject to change. However, your undeniable identity lies in one's own biology. *Infinity Engine*, exhibited in 2014, explores the cross-section of technology and identity. In collaboration with well-known scientists, Hershman Leeson created a functional replica of a genetics lab. Rooms fill with images of hybrid crops and animals. Additionally, viewers are able to interact in the "capture room", where they are able to uncover their DNA origins through reverse facial recognition software.



Figure 6: *Wallpaper from The Infinity Engine*, 2014, archival digital print, variable dimensions, Lynn Hershman Leeson. Found on website lynnhershman.com

Genes are like instruction books to our being; they can be used for archival functions and reverse engineering in the future. Overall, the exhibit dwells upon questions of genetics and genetic engineering: identity and identity creation. We have an idea of our own identity in abstract terms, but the capture room reflects viewers' scientific

identity: chemicals, DNA, and the unchangeable parts one is born with. The project asks viewers to strip themselves of subjective characteristics and face their genetic origins. Beyond an exploration of identity, Hershman Leeson also alludes to how personal identity can be affected by scientific and technological advancements. As genetic engineering develops, the question of altering one's scientific identity becomes more pertinent. What will personal identity become? How will identity be manipulated, personalized, and constructed?

In relation to the theatre archaeology framework, Hershman Leeson most readily embraces the aspect of performance (real-time events) intrinsic to the "re-articulation of remains". She breaks down identity into multiple ways of performing in society and even breaks identity down into the unchangeable scientific facts of being human. Most importantly, her work is simultaneously reflective and prospective, questioning what it means to construct an identity.

Ragnar Kjartansson: The Repeated Memory

There is something poetic about repetition and something even more poetic when the repeated phrase slightly changes each time. Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson's work revolves around the act of repeating, whether it be through a musical phrase, a cyclical path, or a tradition that happens every year.

Long-term projects and series are common among artists. Kjartansson pursues his project, *Me and My Mother*, under a similar premise, adding a new segment every five years. Every iteration, Kjartansson and his mother, Guðrún Ásmundsdóttir, perform the same sequence: on recording, the artist's mother spits on him aggressively. Initially, Ásmundsdóttir restrains from laughter, but as years go by, she buys into the role more and more fervently. There is discomfort and a provocative comedic shock that viewers can't help but laugh at as the video shows a mother spitting on her own son; upon further reflection, the piece is ironically a display of their relationship's strength and trust. This is performance. Raised by actors and very involved in the theatre scene, Kjartansson notes how actors use "emotional tools in making a composition", including humor and confrontation.⁴ There is a reality, a mother-son relationship, and on top of that, another made-up story inferred by viewers through the connotation of spitting on someone. Performance in the video varies throughout the years. Though it is the same act, the "actors" (Kjartansson and his mother) have different expressions and behave and react differently each time around. The piece is a testament to the artist's relationship with his mother as they form a bond that continues with this every-5-year tradition.

⁴ Ragnar Kjartansson, "Ragnar Kjartansson & his mother on 'Me and My Mother,'" filmed 2016, Louisiana Channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eicurgykZtk&ab_channel=LouisianaChannel.



Figure 7: *Me and My Mother*, ongoing, Ragnar Kjartansson. Courtesy of the artist Luhring Augustine, New York and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.

Consistent with the theme of performance, much of Kjartansson’s pieces revolve around music and video that are then exhibited in specific ways for audience viewing. *Sumarnótt (Death is Elsewhere)* features two sets of twins circling around a central camera repeating the same musical phrase in a field, “in the dark/in the dark/my love/my love/by the stream/by the stream/my love/my love/death is elsewhere”. The song contains a hypnotic, haunting repetition with no beginning or end. Beyond the repetition, there are small changes in phrasing, movement, and overall performance. The theme of “same yet different” is also exemplified in Kjartansson’s intentional casting of twins. Twins are mirrors of each other: identical in some ways yet different in many other ways.

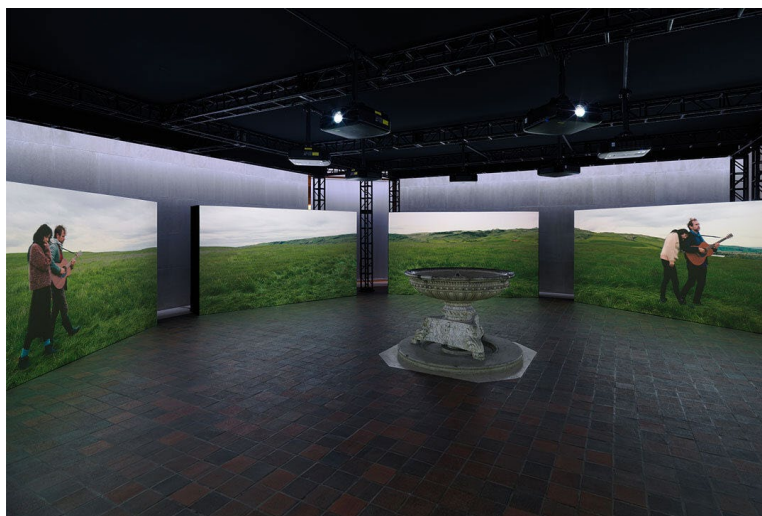


Figure 8: *Death is Elsewhere (detail)*, 2019, Ragnar Kjartansson, seven-channel video installation, 77 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik.

The location of filming is another key component of the piece. In the remnants of the Laki volcanic fissure eruption, the performance takes place in the bright outside despite it being a cold Icelandic summer night due to the summer solstice. Through simply the time and setting, Kjartansson presents to the audience opposing themes of life and death, nature and destruction. Despite it being the dead of night, the sun, a symbol of life, still shines. In the ruins of a disaster, a love song is being sung. Additionally, the title of the piece, *Death is Elsewhere*, recognizes mortality while also pushing it aside. The piece converges two opposing ideas of sentimentality and nihilism. The hymnal song and warm scene are emotionally grounded with nostalgia, while the dystopian aspects of the setting and eerie lyrics convey a dissociative, distant feel. When viewed in an exhibit, the viewers are surrounded by screens as the musicians circle around them, adding to the repetitive, cyclical theme. There is no end, there is no beginning, and death is elsewhere.

Music is an effective tool for evoking emotion. Like *Death is Elsewhere*, *The Visitors* guides viewers through an indescribable, immersive experience. Unlike the other works of the 3 artists, I had the opportunity to experience this exhibit in person. The exhibit is a multi-screen video installation spanning nine large screens that are spread around the room. On each screen is a scene, set with the visual awareness of a traditional painter. Each scene is set up with regard to lighting, color, and movement, creating visually appealing and interesting paintings that viewers indulge in. I found myself overwhelmed throughout the entire hour as I swiveled my head to take in every screen, pacing back and forth the sizable room in an attempt to take everything in. The drummer took a sip of water during his breaks. The pianist smoked his cigar and wandered into the bass player's room/screen, watching him pluck at the piano's strings. The guitarist comforted his topless companion, sleeping in the bed with green sheets behind him. Through Kjartansson's artistic choices, I felt wholly immersed in the house these artists were performing in. I was witnessing living, breathing, and active paintings as each actor played their instruments. I felt as though the four walls of that installation room transformed into the many rooms at the estate in upstate New York. Kjartansson and the rest of the performers achieved a level of intimacy with an audience they'd never even seen before; they invited the viewers to enjoy this experience along with them.



Figure 9: *The Visitors*, 2012 (installation view, SFMOMA; 2022), Ragnar Kjartansson. Jointly owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of Mimi Haas and Helen and Charles Schwab.

There was an ineffable wave of emotion that washed over me as I joined on this 64-minute journey with the other audience members. Another factor to this effect is the soundtrack that played throughout the experience. The musicians' passion and fervor exuded through the screen, infused with the repetitive song that didn't seem all that repetitive. The emotionally charged music seemed to conjure sentiment and nostalgia from nothing. These two emotions are premised on shared memories, and yet, I had no direct relation to these artists having just discovered them. The piece conveys and translates these specific emotions so accurately and clearly. I think the biggest factor in this effect is the musicality of the piece, a bohemian hymn that repeats the same lines in different ways. As the film ended, I was surprised to learn that a whole hour had passed. Time had warped in that room. I stepped outside, feeling as though only 15 minutes had passed.

Kjartansson's work has an impressive effect on viewers' emotions. At its core, his work is not meant to be understood completely, but to be experienced. The artist says himself "I really like pieces that I don't understand myself. It was something that I wanted to do, in this nature, with these people and this material and it just all came together. When I watch this I'm still like 'What is this?' I really like it when pieces are like that. When you're like 'What the hell is this piece?' When you can explain to yourself, as an artist, 'this is this', then it's almost like, why bother making it?"⁵ Kjartansson's work is a testament to the natural creation process in which an artist must trust the fragments in their mind to produce. His work fulfills all of the elements in the theatre archaeology framework, mostly dealing with re-articulations or repetitions that are variants of the original, progressively becoming something of its own nature. Alongside this, Kjartansson's work embodies the phrase "real-time events" in immersing viewers with emotionally provocative music and scenes. All in all, core to Kjartansson's ethos is the inexplicable nature and effect of his work: the challenge for viewers to experience and feel rather than to fully understand.

Conclusion

Artists have the unique challenge and ability to convey inexplicable emotions, and it is often hard to discern exactly what tools they utilized to achieve such an effect. The theatre archaeology framework efficiently organizes each element of an art piece. Sarah Sze utilizes fragmented images and objects (remains) to simulate an uncovering and discovery of her piece, a simulated psyche (in real-time). Lynn Hershman Leeson questions what features, actions, or labels (remains) are needed to construct a person under the premise that existence is sometimes a performance (in real-time). Ragnar Kjartansson's usage of repetition, whether it be through music or actions, can be redefined instead as rearticulation as each iteration is slightly different than the last. Using such tools, he immerses viewers into a real-time experience.

When photography was first invented, artists feared its ability to capture scenes as precisely and detailed as real life. However, the invention of photography actually relieved the pressure for artists to create objectively accurate portrayals of reality and provided freedom for creating art based on personal views of the world. The value of technique lessened while the value of vision increased. As AI generated media becomes more readily available, the same reinvention may occur. The emphasis for artists now lies in concept and depth of meaning. The artworks that impact us deeply contain clear objectives and goals, conveyed effectively to viewers.

⁵ Andie Sophia Fontaine, "Death is Elsewhere: Ragnar Kjartansson On A Summer's Night," Reykjavik Grapevine, June 8, 2021, <https://grapevine.is/icelandic-culture/2021/06/08/death-is-elsewhere-ragnar-kjartansson-on-a-summernight/>.

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