

Amnesia

Elizabeth Jorgensen

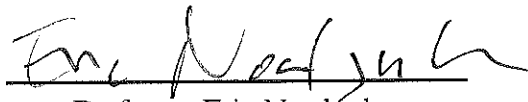
Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2019


Amnesia

By
Elizabeth Jorgensen
Master of Fine Arts

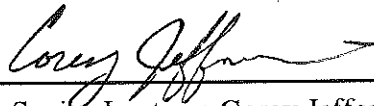
Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University



Professor Eric Nordgulen
Advisor

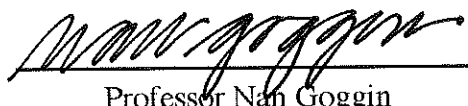


Professor Greg Hull
Committee Member

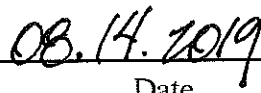


Senior Lecturer Corey Jefferson
Committee Member

Accepted: May 2019

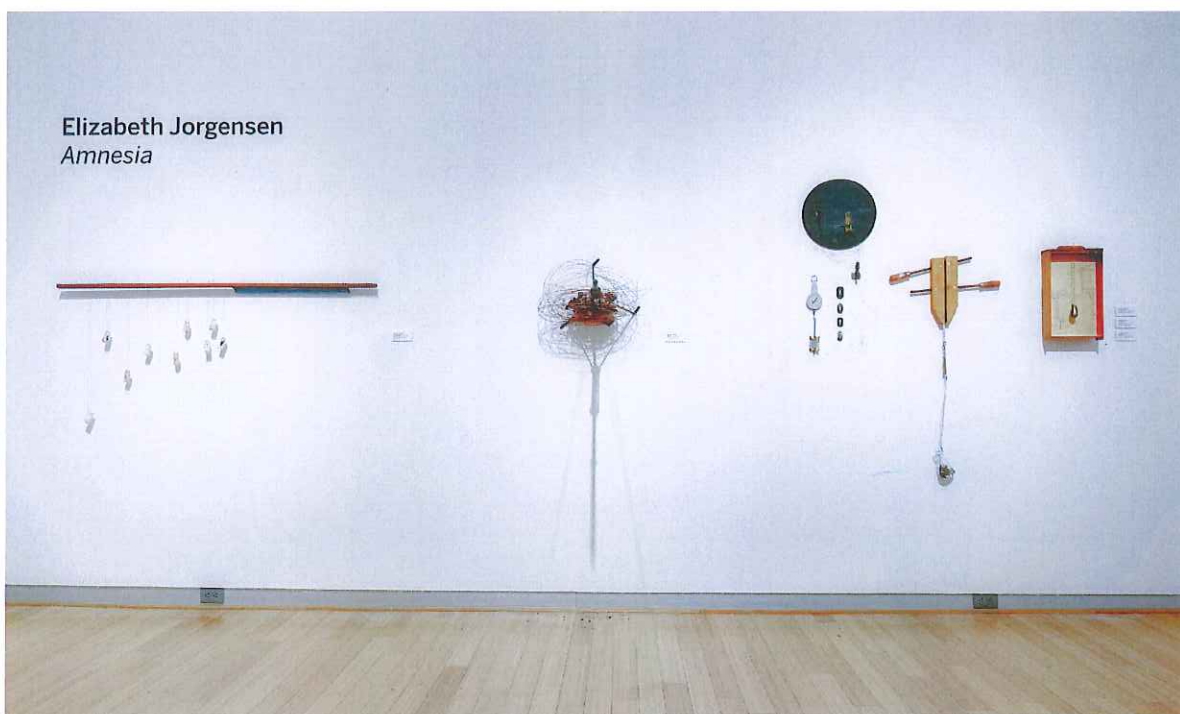


Professor Nan Goggin
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design



Date

Abstract



(Alexander Rodgers, photo credit)

Because of childhood trauma much of my work is inspired by photographs. With my work, I am trying to recover and work through memories and piece together the years that are missing from my memory. Finding the how and why behind my brain and my suppressed traumatic memories has been an ongoing search. Growing up in a toxic, alcoholic and abusive filled home environment my brain developed a type of amnesia. It is with this in consideration that I have started to let my work be inspired by personal events. Working towards feeling comfortable with seeking the truths of my childhood I have begun producing autobiographical work. Mining through my mind to find meaning and identify particular reasons behind my behaviors and struggles I have experienced, have become the driving force behind my work. My found-object assemblage sculptural work examines the aspect of identity through the use of aesthetic experience. The use of found objects, remnants of the

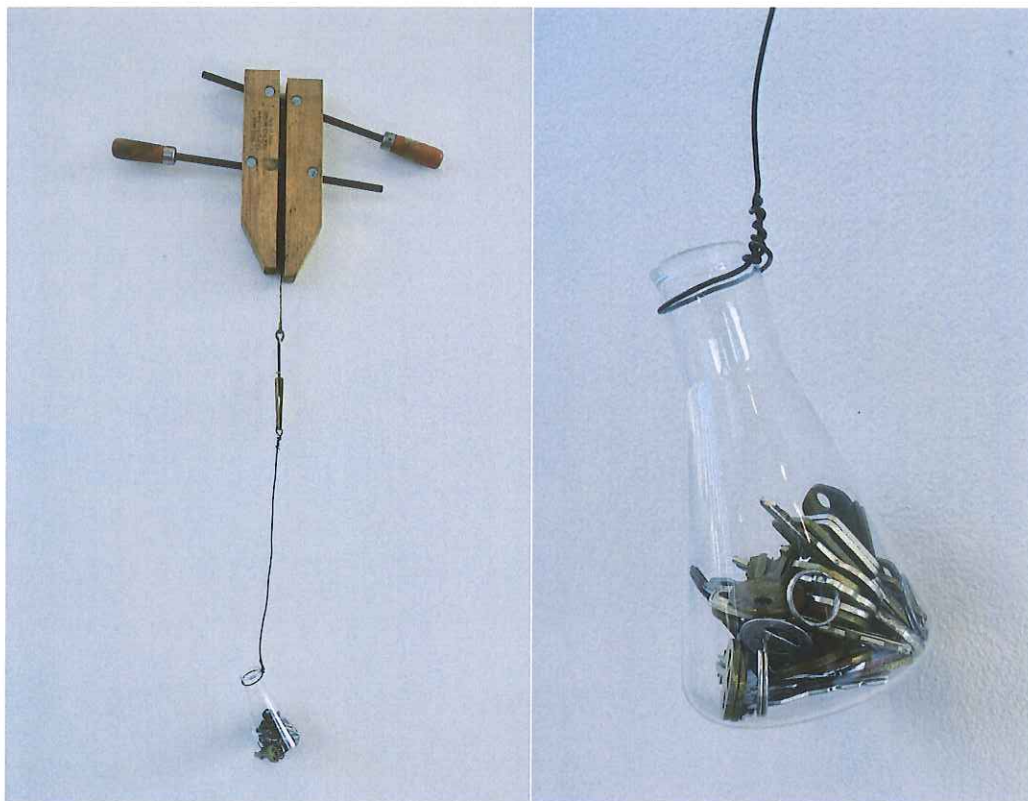
past allows me to examine my memories, while questioning their validity. The work seeks to engage my audience in recalling a memory of their own that may have shaped their identity.

Amnesia

The study of human memory stretches back at least 2,000 years to Aristotle's early attempts to understand memory in his Treatise [*On the Soul*]. In this he compared the human mind to a blank slate and theorized that all humans are born free of any knowledge and are merely the sum of their experiences. Frances A. Yates states in [*The Art of Memory*] that memory is considered a process of recapturing divine knowledge of the ideal world or of recording knowledge. Marcel Proust coined the term involuntary memory in his novel [*In Search of Lost Time or Remembrance of Things past*]. He describes an incident where he was eating tea-soaked cake, and a childhood memory of eating tea-soaked cake with his aunt was “revealed” to him.

Memory or the lack of it has been the focus of my work here at Herron School of Art and Design more specifically my body of work titled [*Amnesia*]. Working towards feeling comfortable with seeking the truths of my childhood I have begun producing autobiographical work. Mining personal memories helps me understand the struggles that I have experienced in my life. Utilizing found-object assemblage I create aesthetic experiences in order to explore themes of identity. The use of found objects, which are remnants of the past, allows me to examine my memories while questioning their validity. Through this work, I seek to engage the audience and prompt them to reflect on their own histories.

Jorgensen



Jorgensen, 2018

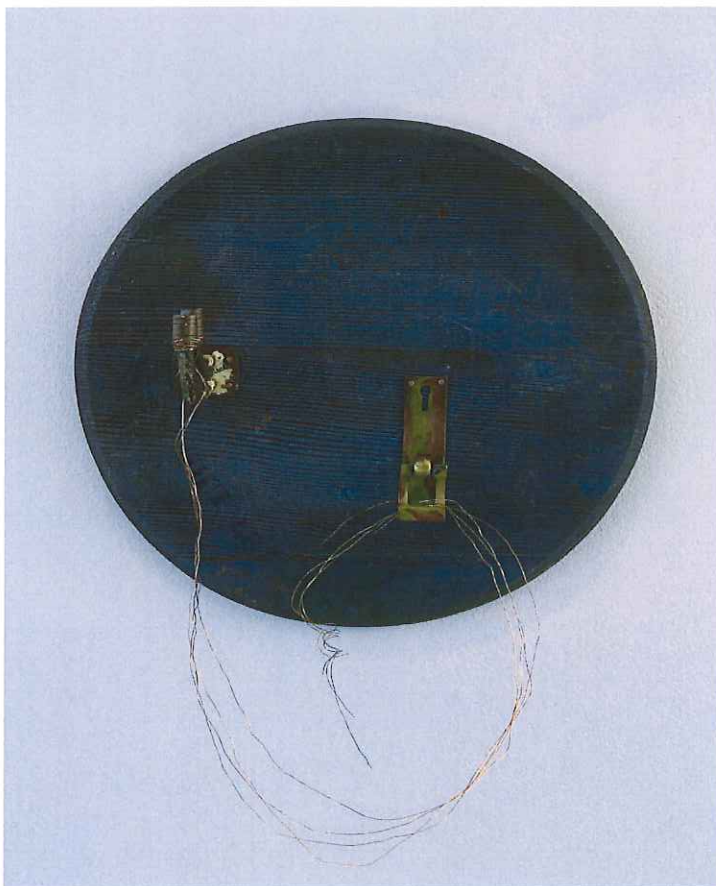
Jorgensen wood clamp, keys from my father's collection, Pyrex beaker, wire, found objects. 12" x 43"

I retrieved the Jorgensen wood clamps from my father's tool collection after his death. The clamp is held partially open and hanging by the threads representing a man always on the brink of anger, a man keeping a firm overbearing hold on his family. It is suspending a jar partially filled with a fraction of my father's key collection. The keys here represent the many locked away secrets that I have yet to untangle for myself about my father and my relationship. The secrets of a man repeating his childhood history upon his own family.

The death of my father William Woodrow Jorgensen was a sudden event. My brother Brandon had the responsibility to call each of us daughters that night to inform us of our fathers passing. I don't remember much of what he said to me I just remember feeling the sadness that my father had died alone.

For many years before my father's death I was unable to speak with him. I had relegated our relationships to written correspondences because the sound of his voice would trigger many of my defense mechanisms. I never knew my father as an adult, I heard he was a very honorable, kindhearted man from his neighbors and friends after his death, while I cleaned out his home. This was not the man I knew. While going through his belongings and the treasures he surrounded himself with I longed to know the man called Billie whom was very adored and valued.

Interconnected



Interconnected, 2018

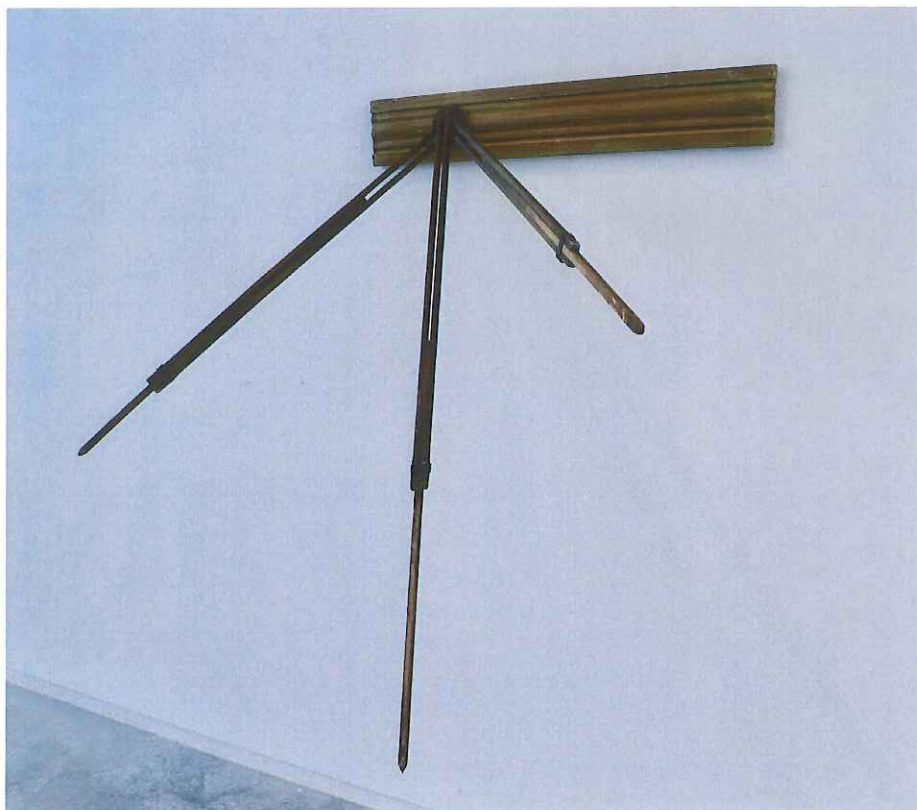
Rain barrel bottom, metal drawer pull, curtain rod, bronze wire. 13" x 12 ½"

Aristotle believed that past experiences are hidden within the mind. A force operates to awaken the hidden material to bring up the actual

experience. According to Aristotle, associations is the power innate in a mental state, which operates upon the unexpressed remains of former experiences, allowing them to rise and be recalled.

Much of my work is informed from family photographs. *Interconnected* was roused from a photograph of me and my brother that I recently came upon. “*Interconnected*” with its cool blue of the rain barrel base represents the calmness I experienced when gazing at this photo. I connected the metal window rod holder to the brass handle precariously with the wire to suggest a connection between the two recipients but as you may notice one bond is stronger than the other. This relationship is based on hidden truths and the ever so graceful dance I find myself continuously being a part of while trying to sustain a relationship with my brother.

Pointed Truth



Pointed Truths, 2018, Wood tripod, wood baseboard. 33" x 5 1/2"

The brain in general and memory in particular, has a distinct negativity bias according to human-memory.net.:

It pays more attention to, and highlights, unpleasant experiences. The brain typically detects negative information, faster than positive information, and the hippocampus specifically flags negative events to make doubly sure that such events are stored in memory.

Pointed Truths is a cautionary reminder of such negative and possibly dangerous events. A simple sculpture consisting of only two components, a wood baseboard stained a mustard yellow color and a wood tripod. It is the light directed onto *Pointed Truths* that extends these wood tripod legs out away from the central viewpoint provoking a moment of tension.

With my work, I have realized that memory and remembrance is a running theme throughout. My work is associated with autobiographical visual art that embodies emotional subject matter for myself.

First defined by Outi Remes:

confessional art is a form of contemporary art that focuses on an intentional revelation of the private self. Confessional art encourages an intimate analysis of the artists, artist's subjects, or spectators confidential and often controversial experiences and emotions. It is my desire for the viewer on encountering my work to be able to access a memory or a connection that possible can elicit a visceral response. (Remes 2005)

Because of childhood trauma much of my work is inspired by photographs. With my work, I am trying to recover and work through memories and piece together the years that are missing from my memory. Science tells us that our brains hide or suppress traumatic memories from our conscious minds to protect us. Finding the how and why behind my brain and my suppressed traumatic memories has been an ongoing search. With growing up in a toxic, alcoholic and abusive filled home environment my brain developed a type of amnesia. It is with this in consideration that I have started to let my work be inspired by personal events. Through my work I am beginning to work amidst these photographs and recover and repair impression that have been left behind.

According to Christine A. Courtois, PhD, when abused by a primary attachment figure children tend to suffer with great distress which may lead to conditions of gross insecurity and instability. A child does not have the opportunity to create conditions of protection and security within their relationship with their primary attachment figure. When abuse occurs by a parent it often times becomes a repeated occurrence and in many cases such as my own will escalate over time and become chronic. Living in a constant state of vigilance, anticipation and anxiety it became very difficult to regain emotional equilibrium between occurrences of abuse for me.

Since childhood I have not let myself be vulnerable or exposed, I have kept my secrets locked away. Working towards feeling comfortable with seeking the truths of my childhood I have begun producing autobiographical work. In this exploration, I am investigating my behaviors and the things over the years I have struggled with. Mining personal memories helps me understand the struggles that I have experienced in my life which, have become the driving force behind my work.

Nesting



(Alexander Rodgers, photo credit)

Nesting, 2018, Lightning rod, 50 Polaroids, .035 welding wire.

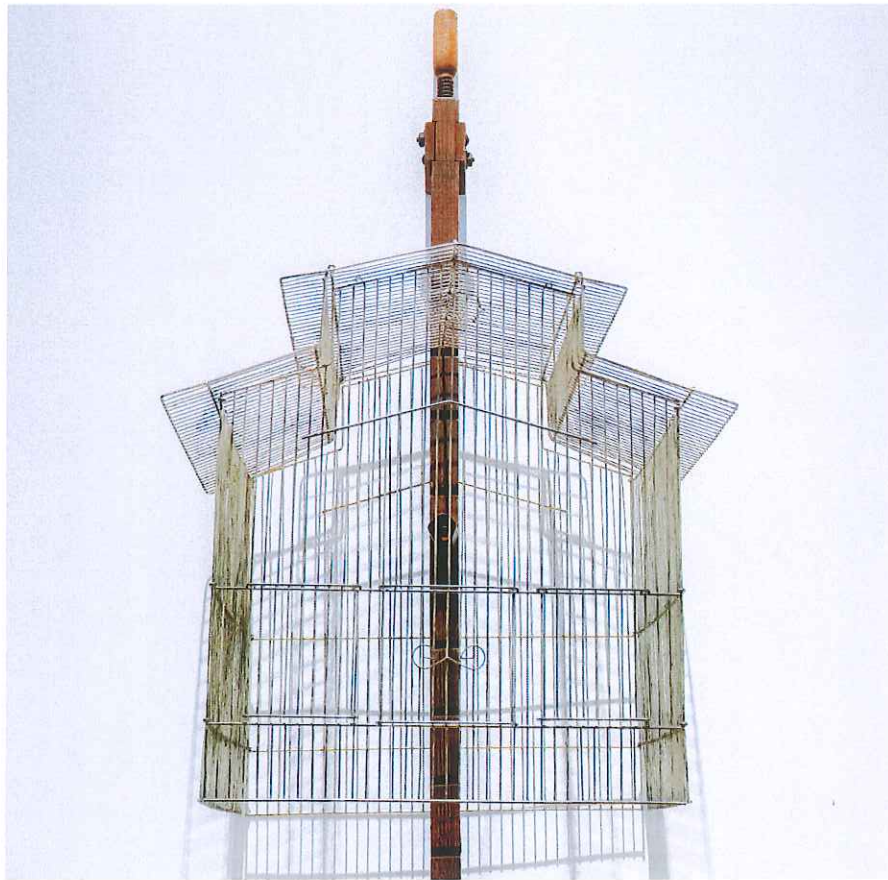
67" x 17"

Nesting: A ritual performed by pregnant women and expectant fathers in ridding the house “the Nest” from anything potentially harmful to the soon to be born child. With

Nesting I am trying to touch on the entangled memories of truth and lies of pain and happiness and how skewed they are. What is true? What is held onto that are lies? The lightning rod here is used as a protector for the nest but assumes an ominous appearance, the nest built out of wire a known conductor of current forming a type of protective home and nestled inside the nest are polaroid photographs that have been set on fire with the charred remains escaping the nest below. Nesting was an attempt to erase a time period of my life, 8 months to be exact. Although the moment was therapeutic for me it did not however erase this time completely from my memory.

Breathless Canary





Breathless Canary, 2018

Wooden quilt stretcher, brass antique peephole, birdcage, yellow LED.

59" x 21"

In my most recent work *Breathless Canary* I use a birdcage to represent a home, but I am also using it to represent a device for protection. The light casted onto the cage is used to indicate a silhouette of a coat another form of protection. The birdcage is supported by a fragment of an 1800 quilting stretcher and hiding within the quilting stretcher is an antique brass peephole. While inspecting the peep hole closer one will notice the dim, subdued yellow light shining through. There are many underlining thoughts behind this piece. It was inspired by a music box from my childhood, a graceful yellow dancing canary in a delicate glass dome. I remember gazing into the canary's world and its gleeful dancing and letting my

mind wander to a quieter place. The glass globe trapping the canary in the environment chosen for her always very mindful of the performance. I chose these domestic pieces, the birdcage, the quilting stretcher, the peephole to represent a home an environment of carefully hidden secrets. The cage that becomes the fortress of protection built up around myself. The quilting stretcher of strength and simplicity and the peephole wanting to have a voice but unable, a light fading away under the pressure of an abusive environment.

American Philosopher Charles Peirce with his contributions to semiotics, states that the notion of the sign is three-part representamen/interpretant/object. In producing my work at this moment in time I am continually thinking about the objects I am using and the signs that they can or may hold for my viewer. I am striving to potentially use these objects to invoke a feeling or an idea to the viewer without being obvious.

Preservation of Self

Preservation of Self, 2019

Metal stand, wood cabinet, fabric from childhood clothing, brass opera glasses, brass hinges, found objects. 57" x 16"



The piece I would like to end on is a work in progress, with this piece I would like to focus a bit on my process. *Preservation of Self* has been unfolding its truths to me as I have been working with it. It was not until I was painstakingly sewing and hand stitching these birds did I focus on the pieced together, fractured nature of my mother and I's relationship. With each hand stitch, I made I had pain that would pass up through my wrist into my fingers making it very difficult to do much stitching during one sitting. The fabric of the birds clothing is from my childhood that I chose to cut apart from a quilt that my mother spent hours hand sewing. The fabric itself was very fragile and needed extra enforcement from my hand stitching. The

assemblage of the birds with their own distinctive details are slightly different from each other but also similarly holding their wings in a broken manner.

There are many times I gravitate towards a found object but am unsure why. With the base of this piece this is very true. I found this blue base just focusing on its height and width at the initial encounter. When I began cutting off the bottom shelf and working on aging the metal legs, I realized why I needed this piece. The unique stature of the legs lends themselves perfectly to the symbolic nature of my mother's overbearing and outreaching qualities and the blue was a remembrance to the fabric of my childhood. I remember first encountering this piece and am still astonished that I did not recognize or initially find the blue paint of the base to be important. When I analyze these decisions, I realize that my subconscious seems to be playing into my art practice much more than I have realized.

From the very beginning of this vision I have seen this piece of art as having an automata mechanics included within it. I have been studying and working with models to nail down the final design for the automata. As I finally settled on a design and started to build

the automata I began to realize the truth to this addition. I realize that I am focusing or bringing attention to the manipulation of my relationship with my mother. She herself was a very manipulative parent while I was young and at times she can still be, but I've also realized I now have started to be a bit manipulative as an adult in an adult relationship with her. I have at times blocked her completely out of my life and controlled the time and access she has had with me, thus becoming just like the manipulator I once despised. It is my desire with the automata to encourage my viewers to become yet another influence on this relationship, because most often it is the outsider who can see the truths. In conclusion Rosalind Krauss, American art theorist once stated, the artist is not a master in control of the process of creating and viewing so much as a force who releases unconscious drives and desires through represented seeing (Krauss, 1985).

With this recent body of work, I am delving into lost memories and trying to exam almost decipher each moment in time, but in doing so I have been observing that I am only the force and not the master. It is with anticipation and trust that I hold onto the possibility that my work will possibly effect, inspire or encourage my viewer to have a glimpse into their own memories.

References

Aristotle, A., Smith, J. A., & 杨丹, 杨. *On the soul*. [S.l.]: Alex Catalogue.

Yates, F. A. (1992). *The art of memory*. Pimlico ed. London: Pimlico.

Proust, M., Scott-Moncrieff, C. K, Kilmartin, T., & Enright, D. J. (2001). *In search of lost time*. London: Everyman Publishers.

Human-memory.net. (2019). Psychogenic amnesia. (Accessed on February 10, 2019)

http://www.human-memory.net/disorders_psychogenic.html

Remes, O. (2005). *The Role of Confession in late twentieth century art* (PHD Thesis).

Reading: University of Reading.

Coxon, A., & Bourgeois, L. (2010). *Louise Bourgeois*. London: Tate Pub..

Helfenstein, J. (2002). *Louise Bourgeois : the early work*. Champaign, Ill.: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Lorz, J. (2015). *Louise Bourgeois: structures of existence: the Cells*. Munich: Prestel.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hartman, G. H. (1966). *The unmediated vision: an interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Gibbons, J. (2007). *Contemporary art and memory: images of recollection and remembrance*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Saltzman, L. (2006). *Making memory matter: strategies of remembrance in contemporary art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Prefrontal Regions Orchestrate Suppression of Emotional Memories via a Two-Phase Process Brendan E. Depue, *et al. Science* 317, 215 (2007); DOI: 10.1126/science.1139560

TED2010. Daniel Kahneman, The riddle of experience vs. memory. (Accessed on January 12, 2019):

https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory/transcript?language=en

Krauss, R. E. (1985). *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.