

REPLACING THE BODY WITH A PAINTING. TRYING TO CATCH THE PATH OF THINGS FROM MATTER TO MEMORY

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THE SORROWFULNESS OF THINGS

For seven years now, I have studied the relationship between people and things. I have documented several hundred stories of human-thing relations. I have had a number of meetings with people of different ages, representing different backgrounds and world views¹. In this way, an archive was created containing photographs of things and audio recordings of conversations and monologues reporting on the relationships between owners and their things, which I call:

- anthropomorphized and personified – including toys, artifacts and ecofacts which have not been made or meant to serve as toys but have become them according to the intention of the owner, for example a pestle-like club for mixing cake batter becomes a doll during the war, a rock is a friend and confidant of a lonely person;
- sentimental – souvenirs, fetishes, artifacts and ecofacts evoking associations with important moments in the life of the owner;

¹ My interlocutors included, among others, residents of retirement homes, residents of day homes for the mentally handicapped, artists (mainly writers, translators, plastic artists), housewives, representatives of many professions: accountants, foresters, kindergarten teachers, schoolteachers, theatre instructors, salesmen, etc.

- those that make the dead present – for example a typewriter, a cane and a radio make someone’s father present, contact with specific objects gives a sense of contact with those who are absent;
- documenting the passage of time, events, emotional states;
- remembered – no longer existing as matter, but only as its images in memory;
- still existing but doomed to destruction, to be destroyed intentionally by the owners.

What touches me, hurts me, what is interesting in the thing and its relationship with the human? I can assume that each thing has a certain human dimension in it because of its presence in the human world. This means that the world of things is a *theatrum* which reflects the world of what is human. I am interested in what is human – that is what I want to do in my work. However, I choose the thing to be the protagonist of my works – rooted in the documentary. Why would I do that? Because I consider the sense of tragedy caused by the images of things to be equally – if not more – moving than that manifested directly by human fate and the mortal body. The tragedy of the thing seems to be that it extends someone’s or something’s life by just a few steps. A thing that is experienced by its owner becomes their representative, but also each thing that perpetuates the past eventually dies. But before the matter is destroyed and disintegrated, it remembers, symbolizes, makes present. Speaking about the spiritual through the material, about the living through the dead, treating the thing as a protagonist more often visible in the matter of the work than the human themselves – as an equal protagonist – I can talk about it without the pathos resulting from the directness of the representations.

HUMAN-THING RELATIONS EXAMPLES FROM THE ARCHIVE

Thirty years ago, a wooden bead was a dog, walked on a thread-leash, groomed with a tooth brush, bathed and fed regularly. The bead’s name is Sonia. I use the word ‘is’ instead of ‘was’, because the owner, who was allergic to fur and for whom the bead took the place of a dog when she was a child, still calls it that. Today the bead is no longer ‘animalized’, but is still treated with attention, as evidenced by the way it is stored – in a decorative box with a soft lining.



Fig. 1. Bracelet-fork. Archive documenting human relations (photography by the author)

The bracelet used to be a fork, which in turn used to be a comb, which also served as a tool for pulling out noodles cooked in a kettle. World War II generated absurd conglomerates of applications of things: ‘We combed our hair with a fork and cooked noodles in a kettle’, mentions the first owner of the fork. ‘If one of us – there were four of us – didn’t comb her hair in time, she had to wait until another one pulled all the pasta out of the kettle with our comb. When the kettle stopped being a noodle pot, that’s when you just water on the tea². The bracelet made from a fork belongs to the woman’s granddaughter today.

Soaps belonging to the translator of theatre plays take part in a ritual dictated by her obsessive-compulsive disorder. Each of the forty-two soaps is used to wash only one of the forty-two parts into which the translator symbolically divides her body. There are soaps used only on Tuesdays, only on Thursdays, only on Saturdays. The fact that a bar of soap belongs to a specific day of the week determines its taste: some taste like Sunday, others like Wednesday. Being assigned to specific days of the week can also determine the constantly changing shape of soaps. The translator’s relationship with soap mixes disease with poetry.

Dried, used tea bags on which notes are made about dates, times of day and events adjacent to the tea drinking are a kind of a diary. Used tea bags,

² The quote comes from the statement by the granddaughter of the first owner of the fork.



Fig. 2. On the left: tea bags-notebooks. On the right: a fragment of the work *People with Whom I Drank Tea* (own technique) (photography by the author)

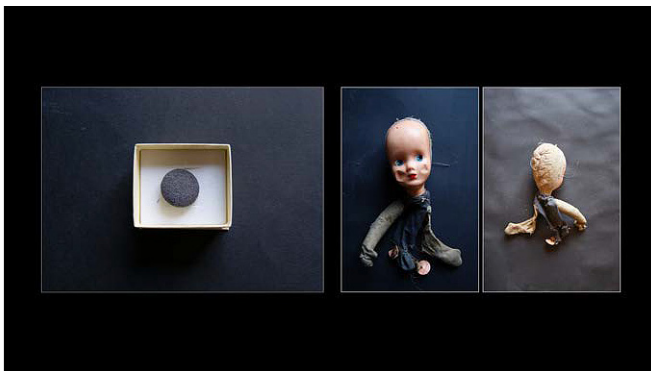


Fig. 3. The button from a dead mother's coat. A doll hugged in a tomb. Archive documenting human-thing relations (photography by the author)

emptied of the old tea leaves and filled with photos of people with whom one drank tea, become an aesthetic document of meetings.

The navy-blue button belongs to a ninety-six-year-old woman. When she was nine years old, she turned it in her fingers at her mother's funeral. The woman claims that touching the button ripped from her late mother's coat helped her to survive difficult moments, not just those associated with the death of a loved one. A similar supportive function was served by a doll hugged by a girl who, together with her sisters and mother, waited out

a bombardment during World War II in one of the tombs of the Kielce cemetery.

The empty cabbage roll jar has imprisoned the painter's 'demon' for twelve years now. The photograph placed in the jar shows the artist's face from the period when she was 'possessed', i.e. she led an intense life with an unbearable emotional amplitude. Closing the image in a jar was then a symbolic end of a certain stage, a sign of stabilization. Today, when the painter needs stimulation, nourishment for her work, an emotional eruption, she lightly unscrews the lid of the jar. The jar 'with the demon' can be called an inspirational force regulator.

THINGS DOOMED TO DESTRUCTION

In my research, on which my artistic works are based, I pay special attention to things that end up as matter and begin to live as memory, thus moving from massive matter to ephemeral image. This group includes:

- toys which, despite sentiment, should be disposed of, because it is not appropriate for an adult to have them;
- various things belonging to deceased relatives; these things are destroyed for various reasons, the most common being the desire to be cut off from the pain associated with the passing of a loved one;
- things whose destruction is a symbolic break with the past or liberation from an undesirable relationship.

I've watched the owners part with these things. Regardless of whether these partings were carried out by throwing, burning, or burying in the ground, they usually took place with the participation of emotions, followed by cycles of memories focused around the destroyed things. Reminiscences appeared long after their dematerialization, showing great strength and frequency, regardless of whether the owner looked at the things just before parting with them or rather preferred to remember them as they had seen them before.

Collecting memories of things that no longer exist or were about to cease to exist, I began to search for a method of depicting the path from matter to memory. I was looking for a medium capable of documenting things, proving their existence, shape, texture, color, type of matter they were made of, and at the same time a medium reaching deeper than photography or film recording. This is why I decided to scan a group of things doomed to destruction using X-rays in a computed tomograph scan.

TOMOGRAPHICS³ OF THINGS

The tomography scans included various types of old toys and other things connected with the childhood of their owners; things from the dead – their bags, suitcases, shoes, bags with clothes, shelves with trinkets the configurations of which had not been changed in the slightest way when put into the CT scanner; things constituting equipment for old houses and flats (abandoned by the owners for various reasons); things that once belonged to old partners, spouses, friends of the owners.

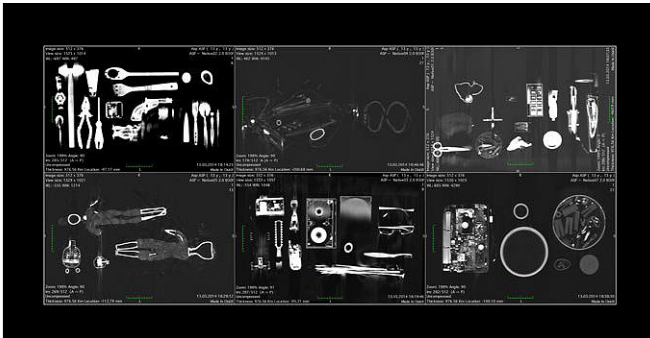


Fig. 4. Things doomed to destruction. Tomograms. Author of the tomographics: Bronka Nowicka



Fig. 5. 3D reconstruction of scanned items. Tomograms. Author of the tomographics: Bronka Nowicka

³ ‘Tomographics’ – a neologism I created for the purpose of describing the static images acquired through the appropriate processing of CT scans.

For several reasons, the images of things obtained through computed tomography seemed to me adequate for building a narrative about both the existing matter and its memory. Thanks to CT software, a three-dimensional reconstruction of the scanned object can be obtained from every matrix scan of matter, both organic and inorganic. These images speak not only to the appearance of things, but also to the reality of their existence, confirmed by examination with a medical device. Thanks to the CT scanner, it is possible to precisely determine all sizes of the examined object, and also – on the basis of the characteristics of the obtained image – to distinguish the types of matter which make up the object: plastic, wood, metal, paper, etc.

What was important to me was that an image of a thing generated by a CT scanner never loses its documentary value. Documentation, a reference to real life, seems to me to be particularly important when the resulting artistic works concern the human condition.

The X-rays penetrate through matter. The penetration capabilities of the device make it possible to stratify every image of matter obtained by means of the device. Thanks to the possibility of stripping the image of successive layers, I could build associations connected with the degradation of memories, the process of forgetting.

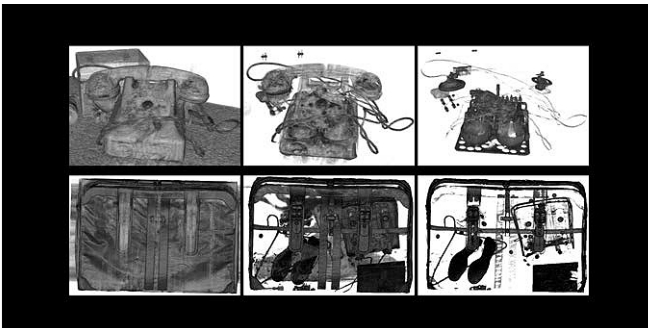


Fig. 6. Destruction of matter. Tomograms. Author of the tomographics: Bronka Nowicka

CT software has a number of functions used to diagnose individual parts of the human body. Using these functions to shape images of inorganic matter, I was able to achieve a variety of image poetics: from those evoking

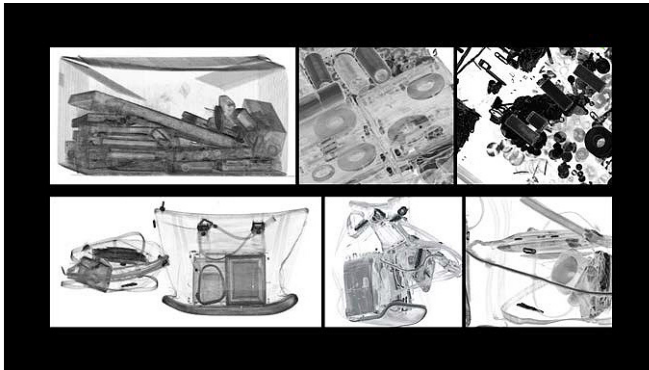


Fig. 7. Things doomed to destruction. Tomograms. At the top: a box containing, among others, tape recordings, fairy tale films. Downstairs: a bag belonging to a dead mother. Author of the tomographics: Bronka Nowicka

associations with multicolored, strongly contrasting pop-art, to delicate, sketchy ones, evoking associations with classical illustration techniques.

The penetration capabilities of the CT scanner also contributed to the expansion of my collection of memories collected from the owners of the scanned items. Each group of artifacts to be destroyed was transported to the radiological laboratory, scanned and returned to the owner, who, as was intended, destroyed them. The characteristic feature was that the owner no longer wanted to have contact with things in their physical dimension, but they did not mind looking at their scans. It was as if the corporeality of things, for example things left behind by the dead, would cause more pain than images of the same things. Thanks to the possibility of visualizing the interior of objects that stored things (packs, bags, drawers, crates, suitcases, etc.), the owners viewed the contents of boxes hiding childhood artifacts or the contents of suitcases belonging to deceased relatives for the first time in many years. The scope of moving memories expanded as a result of contact with the image of things – forgotten and now remembered crayons, tapes with favorite songs, film with fairy tales once projected onto a screen by means of a projector, toiletries found in the bag of a deceased mother who, carrying them with her before her death, had to be aware that she could be hospitalized at any moment.

Thanks to putting the owners in contact with images of destroyed things I documented further memories. The words expressing them are (as an audio recording and graphically transcribed text) one of the layers of my works.

TOMOVIDEO⁴

The chances for a suggestive depiction of the thing's path from matter to memory became even greater when I discovered the cinematic possibilities of a CT scanner, which in medical diagnosis is used sporadically and for purposes other than narrative building. With a CT scanner and accompanying software, moving images of scanned matter can be obtained: their smooth rotation around any axis, removal and overlapping of individual layers corresponding to the layers of the scanned objects can be recorded. Some of the operations that can be performed within a scan are similar to cinematic staging: invasion of an object by a camera, use of a zoom, movement accompanying an object in motion, horizontal, vertical and transverse panoramas, recording an object with booms or a steadicam.

A moving image captures the transformations that occur over time better than a series of static images. This is because it contains the recorded time, which is one of the components of such an image. A sequence of moving images also seems adequate to convey what is remembered – images in motion or film are the current metaphor for memory. Current, because these metaphors have changed over the centuries: a clay tablet, a wax tablet, a magazine, a phonograph, a photograph, etc. (see: Draaisma 2000)⁵

Thanks to the movement of the image (and inside the image) I was able to create stylistic means inspired by the processes taking place in memory: the repetitiveness of a moving motif while introducing some variables into its area can refer to the principle of evoking memories. Most psychologists who study memory claim that when we remember something, we do not refer to the prototype of the recalled image, but to the last copy that was created by the remembrance.

⁴ 'Tomovideo' – a neologism I created for the purpose of describing moving images and sequences of images obtained through appropriate processing of scans (by means of a CT computer program).

⁵ Douve Draaisma dealt with the issue of the variability of metaphors in the book *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas about the Mind* (2000).

Remembering something, we create a neural trace, and the next time we seem to remember the same thing, in reality we activate the latest trace. Memories, including the oldest ones, travel in our cerebral tissue as time goes on, but they are always accompanied by new copies. According to this theory, when we think back to the first memory, we make the neurological circuit of our memory close in a peculiar way – for a moment, the oldest one becomes the newest, the first becomes the last (Draaisma 2010: VIII-IX).

So if someone has thought 200 times about a childhood doll, their next memory of this toy will be the 201st copy of the originally recorded image, which with each memory has undergone some kind of modification, depending, for example, on the emotional state in which the reminiscent person was at the time of remembering.

Having a moving image with a poetics evoking associations with the image of memory, the act of remembering, and what is remembered, I was able to introduce into the tomovideo monologues of the owners who remembered their things in a way based on a logical basis.

The use of language as a principle organizing the sequence of images corresponds to scientific facts confirming the coincidence between language and memory. When a person (a child) becomes a linguistic being, memories begin to take on a different character, closely related to the inner monologue and verbal communication. Memories are no longer just images, they begin to take the form of scenes and episodes (the terminology related to the psychology of memory is identical to the nomenclature used in the field of cinematography) (see: Draaisma 2015).

THE IMAGE OF A THING REVERSES TIME

Thanks to my research and my interest in computed tomography, I was able to pass between matter and its image in memory in the opposite direction than the one discussed above. For my first CT session I brought my old toy – a teddy bear. X-rays showed sand in its ear. This sand could only come from two places – the yard of my grandparents' house or the yard of my parents' house.

I thought: These houses are gone. And most of the people who lived in them aren't there either. Those sands are gone, but in the ear of my 30-year-old teddy bear, there are grains from one of them. Getting them back is



Fig. 8. At the top: a teddy bear with sand in its ears (photographed by the author). At the bottom: the author with the teddy bear; household sandboxes (photography from family collections)

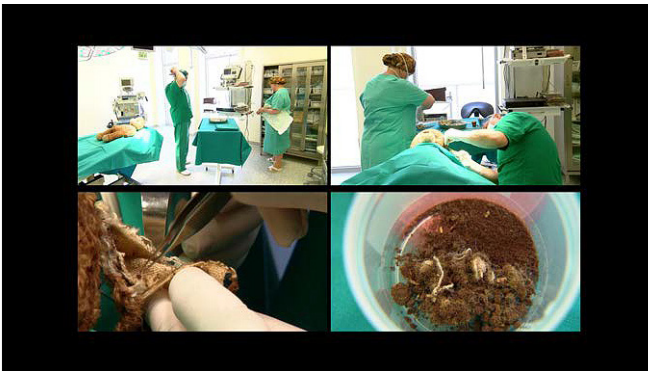


Fig. 9. Teddy bear operation. Frames from the video I Found My Sand (photography by the author)

like going back in time. I had surgery performed on the teddy bear by a professional plastic surgeon. The doctor extracted solidified dust from the teddy bear's ear, wood – probably coming from a sharpened crayon – and a dozen or so grains of sand. In this way, what existed only in memory was again manifested in the form of matter.

Learning about the possibilities of the CT scanner, having the ability to prepare tomograms independently thanks to mastering the specialized medical software, looking for inspiration in the field of memory psychology

and neurology, I discovered a new medium in the field of video art⁶ and poetics adequate to narrating about the transition from material to memory.

Bibliography

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Summary

I study the relations between people and things: *sentimental, embodying the dead, kept in mind* – nonexistent as matter, merely as its image; *still existent*, but condemned to annihilation by their owners. In my studies, which serve as a basis for my videos, I pay particular attention to the last category of things. I attempt to illustrate their way from mater to reminiscence. In order to do that, I use a CT scanner, X-rays.

CT allows me to obtain moving images of the scanned matter that will soon undergo destruction. The operations that are possible to perform within the scan resemble film production techniques: tracking in towards an object, using the zoom, panning. Moving images perfectly illustrate transformation processes that take place in time because they contain the captured time. It's their component. Images in motion are appropriate for expressing *the remembered* – the film is one of the current metaphors of memory.

⁶ The following artists, among others, use X-rays in the area of art: Nick Veasey – British photographer, who X-rayed over four thousand objects, including a car, a bus, a Boeing 777 (currently the largest X-rayed object); Satre Stuelke – an American, who X-rays everyday objects and organic matter with a CT scanner: a toaster, a razor, a chair, a lamp, a hamburger, a fast food dinner set, etc. In Poland, Grzegorz Banaszkiwicz uses this method of imaging in his stereoscopic works. None of the above artists, however, uses moving images obtained with a CT scan to build complex narratives of a cinematic nature. Because of this fact, I feel entitled to say: 'I have discovered a new medium in video art'.

I can obtain 3D reconstructions of the X-rayed item from the master scan. The images testify not only to the appearance of things, but also to the authenticity of their existence proved by a test with a medical device. They are the thing's ID.

X-rays pass through matter. Their penetrating abilities enable each CT image to be stratified. By removing the layers, I form associations connected with memory: the deterioration of recollections, the process of forgetting.

A CT scanner has numerous functions applied for diagnosing particular body parts. By using these functions to shape images of inorganic matter, I can obtain various poetics: from ones having associations with hyperrealistic drawings to ephemeral ones, reminding the fleeting, thus *the recollected* too.

I edit the tomograms myself – I have mastered the ability to operate a CT scanner. In this way I have discovered a new medium in the area of video art, and a poetics that is appropriate for spinning a narrative about going from the material to the recollected.

Keywords: X-rays, 3D reconstructions, reminiscence, memory, things, matter