

## Of making food and making sense

'Who on Earth is talking on the phone using the speaker inside an art exhibition?'. Had I not curated this show, this is what I would probably be thinking if I inadvertently walked into UNSW Library's main exhibition space to visit 'About Closed Doors: Isolation and Art'. The phone conversation from Emma Harbridge's artwork 'At Home With you Again' pervades the venue and leaks throughout every room in the gallery. It involuntarily activates the sense of hearing. It triggers a sort of reaction. Reactions are responses to an action based on past experiences. Past experiences form an invitation to explore memory and identity in Emma's piece.

The dialogues in the 3 audio soundscapes which make Harbridge's artwork, take place at the artist's kitchen amidst the background noise of dishes, cutlery and kitchen utensils. Water running from the sink's tap and the sounds of her housemates talking and walking around the room. The homely atmosphere intended for the piece is thus set up. Everything is recognisable and familiar although we are not too sure who the characters, players or locations are as of yet.

On the speaker, Emma's mum is talking to her over the phone. Passing down recipes of dishes the artist has grown up with. On the menu are, mum's Scallion Pancakes, mum's Beijing Noodles and mum's Tomato Egg. Just like that, with the word 'mum' in front of every dish name. Implying that those recipes belong to a particular universe.

Mum has got a thick Chinese accent to her English. Emma sounds as Aussie as can be. Two worlds are present. Two generations are in conversation. Trying to make sense of each other through the trivial act of learning family recipes. A quest for identity through the passing down of memories that so many of us living in these unceded lands are striving to pursue.

Emma Harbridge is interested in the interpretations of food practices as a self-constructive tool for diasporic identity<sup>1</sup>. This way, 'At home with you again' inserts itself in the artist's practice as well as in the broader curatorial context of the exhibition 'About

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<sup>1</sup> E Harbridge, 'About' in *Emma Harbridge*. Viewed on 22 June 2021, <https://emmaharbridge.myportfolio.com/about>

Closed Doors: Isolation and Art' which happens between the 31st of May and the 6th of August, 2021 at UNSW Kensington campus in Sydney, Australia.

This art show brings together the works of 11 undergraduate students from UNSW created during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Sydney. Experiencing isolation as an artist during the pandemic is the focus of the curatorial narrative.

The conversations between Emma and her mum were recorded during this period and are an exploration of homemaking through digital connections. A bond making mode which became part of half the world's routine after the Coronavirus, through our Zoom meetings and home office circumstances. (My meetings with Emma during the curatorial process were, themselves, mostly using these artifices.)

They document Harbridge's attempt to recreate traditional family dishes for the first time on her own. Being forced to isolate ourselves catalysed many processes long overdue to many. Revisiting her infancy is the artist's subterfuge for a homemaking process which reconnects family and identity through the ritual of making food. Meals part of a particular universe, which, at the same time, relate to our common condition of social beings in search for connectivity. The private context of a family's legacy synthesised in the form of recipes, paradoxically, weaves a common fabric to which everyone can relate.

We are not presented with the final result of these attempts, though. We receive the vestiges of the process in form of sound. Nothing could be more subtle and intangible. Everything takes the shape of pure memory. Maybe because of that the work evokes a homely sensation, at the same time warm and lonely. Much like our feeling of being isolated at home during quarantine. Trying desperately to connect with our loved ones remotely. Some times through technology. Other times via remembrance.

By revisiting these recipes, Emma is confronted with these memories and they sometimes arise not quite accurately. In an informal conversation between us, she recalls that in the process of creating 'At Home With you Again' she remembered her mum cooking elaborate dishes which would take a good day in advance to prepare.<sup>2</sup> To her surprise her mum informed her that she never cooked those dishes for her because she

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<sup>2</sup> E. Harbridge, personal communication, 20 May 2021

simply doesn't know those recipes. If she ever had that meal at home when she was a child, it must've been take away.

**Image 1** Material elements of Emma Harbridge's 'At Home With you Again' on display at the exhibition 'About Closed Doors: Isolation and Art'. UNSW Main Library Exhibition Space, Sydney Australia.  
Photograph: Fábio Marques Ferreira. 2021

<sup>3</sup> *Words on works: Objects of war* by Lamia Joreige, Online video, Saradar Collection, 22 May 2018. Viewed on 23 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KD32vEwSCU>

In 'Objects of War' the memories not always befit reality. It is much more about the individual experience and how it was perceived by the subject rather than hard truth. The mistaken memory of Emma in regards to her mother's cooking goes a lot in the same way. Exploring memory is tricky. It is formed by the combination of three elements: story, emotions and place.<sup>4</sup> It is often one's view of the past rather than the actual past itself. A puzzle put together through one's experience. According to neuroscientist Elizabeth Phelps, "50% of the details of a memory change in a year"<sup>5</sup>. So what is the purpose of memory, then?

Emma's work for 'About Closed Doors: Isolation and Art' is formed by other elements as well which help on triggering the artist's vision of her past. In the process of curating the exhibition, both Emma and I wanted to add an immersive element to the piece, but due to limitations in the space, many of her ideas and proposals were rejected. She ended up setting up a coffee table against the wall where the speakers which reproduce her sound piece were. With two low plastic stools around it and a myriad of objects which resemble the artist's kitchen, home and ultimately her identity. There is her mum's first Chinese-English dictionary which she brought with her to Australia when she immigrated. There is Emma's English-Chinese dictionary. There are jars with rice and flour. A rolling pin, tea boxes and spices. This way, all senses are invited into play. The spices add the element of smell to the piece, the objects excite the eyes and the sound is all over the space, creating an artwork very sensual, and how else are emotions formed if not by the senses? All parts of memory are present: story, emotions and place.

Artists like the Brazilian Ernesto Neto also delves into these blurry spaces between art and life activated by sense. In Neto's work, the smell functions as an involuntary and instinctive activator of the sensual. The viewer experiences the piece with the whole physical body.<sup>6</sup> We wanted to bring this into the piece, and it suited the work really well since kitchens have this inherent element of fragrance and eating is also visual.

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<sup>4</sup> *Memory, Explained*, Vox, Online video, 12 September 2019. Viewed on 23 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d95dOH-7GHM&t=711s>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> AGNSW, Ernesto Neto, 'Just Like Drops in Time, Nothing' 2002, in *Collection*. Viewed on 23 June 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/276.2002/#about>

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When I met Emma for the first time in person at the exhibition space to set up her piece, she was wearing baggy paints, just like the ones I used in the late 90s as an early teenager. Memory has some funny ways of showing up.

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But Emma Harbridge's practice has another background note which is crucial to her and also my own practice and which might be even more subtle than the smells present in her piece: Decoloniality. According to Gurminder K. Bhambra, in its attempt to interrupt Western narratives, Decolonial practices will interrogate the past initiating new dialogues which will bring into being new histories from which new presents will make possible new futures<sup>7</sup>. Isn't it exactly what is at stake in this audio piece?

By revisiting her mum's recipes and trying to replicate them at her own home in the present, Harbridge invites us to interrogate her own past as a third culture kid growing up in Australia. It is more about the present action than the past remembrance. It is a never ending process. As a religious leader whose name I can't recall (oh memory!) once said, "the searching is the finding" or something in those lines. So really, it is all in the process. The sound registers of the act of making food are the core for 'At Home With you Again' rather than getting a final meal out of it. The real interest lies in the process of looking at memory itself, not the account it tries to retell.

Maybe memory's purpose isn't remembering after all. This shifts our idea of identity as well. Phelps explains that, the same areas of the brain are engaged for both recalling and projecting thoughts of the future.<sup>8</sup> Through our past experiences we prepare for what's to come. That's what it is about. Making sense of ones identity is not merely connecting with the past. It is how we will propose new views and possible futures for a shifting world

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<sup>7</sup> G.K. Bhambra, 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues'. *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 17 no. 2, 18 December 2014, pp. 116-117.

<sup>8</sup> Vox, op. cit.

by using it, as Bhabra reminds.<sup>9</sup> In the context of a global pandemic it might be important to realise that a trauma lived collectively builds a sort of empathy between those who been through it. Revisiting our experiences of the past might help in finding new narratives to a reality which demands inclusion, diversity and, hopefully, remind us that we are all in this together.

## References

AGNSW, Ernesto Neto, 'Just Like Drops in Time, Nothing' 2002, in Collection. Viewed on 23 June 2021, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/276.2002/#about>

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<sup>9</sup> Bhabra, op.cit., p.117

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