Helen Varley Jamieson. Photo: Andrea Ass

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Boxes and Clouds

I come from a family of 'Rememberers'. My maternal grandmother had a photographic memory and was so good with names and faces that she got very upset with herself when, at age ninety-nine, she couldn't recall the name of an interesting person she had sat next to on a plane almost fifty years earlier. A large wooden chest in her dining room was filled with family memorabilia: photos, documents and objects, including a school exercise book from 1837 belonging to Henry Phillips, aged seven - my great-great-grandfather. There are wedding veils and christening gowns and family letters almost two hundred years old, barely readable cursive handwriting on thin paper. As well as all these physical artefacts, there are the inherited memories, the stories passed down through the generations, embellished and evolving as they are retold.

In comparison to my grandmother, my memory is poor. Never mind who I sat next to on any plane over the decades, sometimes I can't recall who I talked to last week. But I am genetically wired to archive: I diligently keep an appointment diary and a personal journal, and, on my website, I update lists of what I've done and where I've been, more for my own reference than anything else. Years later I can follow these breadcrumbs back to a spark that rekindles the memory, albeit a replacement memory, reconstructed from carefully preserved fragments and clues. As an artist, feminist and activist, I accept the need to document. It will help my career, my ability to get funding, to be visible and heard, to correct history through herstory. I fill boxes with festival and theatre programmes, flyers, posters, scripts, photos, ephemera and various formats of tapes and discs which I no longer have the equipment to play. I have hard drives dense with photos, screen-grabs, videos, audio files, text files, emails and more. Now that we can digitise everything, there is the impulse to scan and save EVERYTHING on 'the cloud'.

'The cloud' implies that this enormous crowd-sourced digital repository is, like our memories, light as a feather, a nothingness that could dissolve into the ether with a gentle puff of wind or the onset of old age. We know, of course, that it's the opposite: an energy-hungry, ever-expanding network of massive air-conditioned server farms, colonising open spaces and pumping carbon emissions into the atmosphere; and mostly full of digital detritus, backed up in multiple places to ensure it's available 24/7, that almost no-one (apart from machine learning algorithms) will ever look at. What are memories when no-one revisits them?

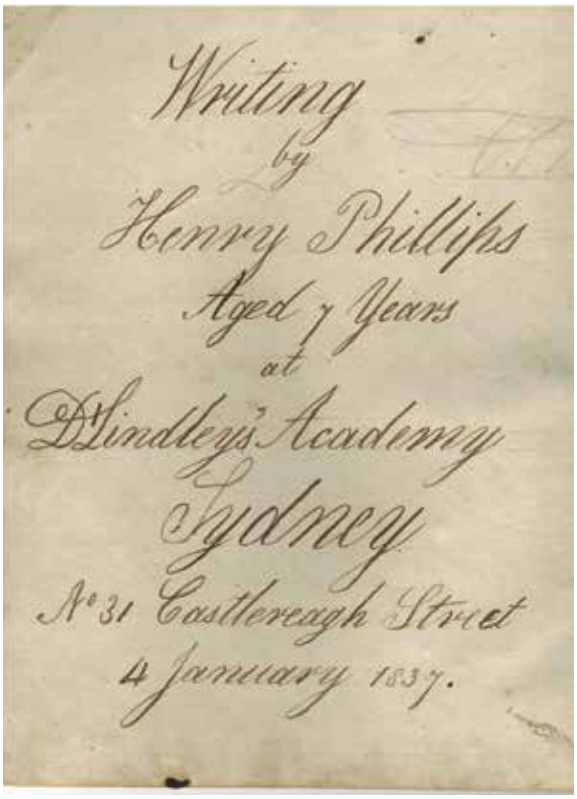
Theatre is ephemeral, and digital performance even more so, as its traces consist primarily of pixels, zeroes and ones, fragments of data that can disintegrate and float away into cyberspace. Much of my own work is barely visible. The pandemic revealed how easily a whole swathe of digital work can be eradicated, when established theatre companies suddenly claimed to be inventing theatre on the internet, breaking new ground with online performances, doing things that had never been done before. Of course artists have been experimenting with online performance since the beginning of the internet, years before I got into it myself. Enraged by this erasure, I initiated the video *Before the First* in collaboration with Suzon Fuks and Annie Abrahams, to provide a quick glance back into the wealth of pre-pandemic cyberformance (networked performance / online theatre), to inspire others to share their own work and reclaim the memory of this threatened history. (https://vimeo.com/503467731)

Recently I came across *The Portal*, a project that also claims to be a 'first-of-its-kind' using the internet and a shiny round screen to connect public spaces in two cities. It's basically a public video conferencing interface in a sexy package. The concept is identical to *Hole in Space*, created in 1980 (yes, 1980, that's not a typo) by Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway, using satellite technology. Their screen was not round, nor was it colour, nor as good quality as today's technology, but the concept was the same. The people behind *The Portal* are actively de-remembering '*Hole in Space*'. Like the tree falling in the forest that no-one hears, did something actually happen if the internet doesn't remember it?

We might begin to see the effects of digital technology on our memories as we exchange more and more of our mental agility for its promise of convenience. We wield our phones to capture, upload and share digital artefacts, which social media platforms then re-present to us as 'memories', algorithms deciding what's worth remembering or not. Perhaps the memory part of our brain will atrophy if it's not exercised, and future generations will be unable to remember anything without a digital trigger. Some things may well be best forgotten, but we are not in control of the selection process and the digital archive might not let us forget. Having worked so hard to be seen and remembered, now we talk about the right to be forgotten.

Last year my siblings and I emptied our mother's house after her death, handling each of her memory-objects and making decisions as to whether to discard or keep them. I was surprised to find that she had kept photos of and postcards from the boyfriend she had in London in the 1950s, before she met our father. This man, who we had only known as a name from Mum's distant past (and as the intriguing giver of the intimate gift of a flounced net petticoat), must have held an important place in her memory; she chose not to forget him. Yes, I kept those photos and postcards (and claimed the petticoat decades ago). Now we have a face to put to this inherited memory of, perhaps, our mother's first love.

I diligently photographed Mum's many photo albums and carefully packed up boxes of loose photos, letters, diaries and other documents. We found large



School exercise book of Helen Varley Jamieson's ancestor Henry Phillips.

envelopes of letters and cards with our names on them; ever the librarian, our mother had kept and filed every missive we'd sent her, ready to be handed back on her death. We found the even larger parcel of letters and cards that she had written to her mother, that had been similarly filed and returned after our grandmother's death. My sister reluctantly agreed to store these boxes temporarily at her little house; she's trying to declutter, to let go rather than hold on. I thought of the bundles of ancient letters in my grandmother's chest, now in boxes in an aunt's cupboard, and imagined the mountain of correspondence growing unstoppably into the future. Perhaps it's not a bad thing that the digital age has reduced letter-writing to a trickle.

My grandmother, whose letter-writing was always a steady high-volume flow, used to say jokingly that she had a website and show people an extensive spider web complex near her front door. She was also fascinated, almost hypnotised, by the screensaver on my laptop, which cycled randomly through my photos. Had she been younger, I've no doubt she would have approached the digital world in her typical practical-yet-critical manner, and bent all available tools to her activism and archiving projects. My grandmother was not an artist or a theatre-maker, but she was a guardian of memories and a great storyteller. My mother, a good letter-writer and complete technophobe, continued this tradition to a lesser extent in her own way. And now, here am I, with boxes of archives and an array of digital tools, making my own decisions about what to hold onto and what to let go.