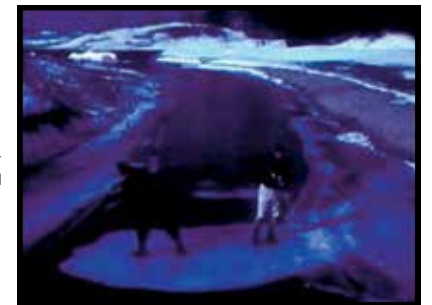


## THE FAMILY OF THINGS

Catharina Kahane

*What catches the eye right at the start of the exhibition is a peculiarly mottled and smeared image rendered in muted tones of blue and gray (pp. 57, 73). Or is it a mirror, reflecting visitors in a schematic blur as they emerge from the stairwell and reach the foyer? An explanatory text clarifies the matter: on view, framed behind glass, is a photographic image purporting to be an Ancestor. And, indeed, in among the streaks and spots we faintly discern a painted portrait of a gentleman: his face, turned in three-quarter profile, gradually materializes, as though from the depths of murky waters; his hair, his neck, and, finally, something that at first appears to be a shapeless black over-painted zone but under more careful inspection reveals itself to be his suit jacket. This newly won likeness, however, is strangely resistant to being pinned down: persistently it threatens to diffuse again into general ambiguousness, sinking back to the depths of the picture's ground.*

*The effect has nothing to do with obscurity in the photograph and everything to do with the physical condition of the object it reproduces: one of those watercolor miniature portraits on ivory from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [itself executed in all probability after a photograph] that were traded—as souvenirs, memorabilia—in well-situated society among an intimate circle of family and friends. The surface of this particular portrait, however, is badly damaged: distinct traces of rubbing and wiping suggest that someone has taken water and sponge to it, for reasons unknown. The state of the image gives the impression of being the direct consequence of a damnatio memoriae; as if, with the destruction of his effigy, someone has sought to extinguish any lingering memory of this individual, an endeavor that was aborted just at the point where ample evidence remains of the act of erasure itself—for even a damaged portrait is yet a portrait and says what all portraits ultimately have to say: that a given person existed.*



*And thus it is the damage itself that sets the viewer's projections in motion, permitting a profusion of metaphor: the ancestral persona, is it not of necessity vague, hazy? Even when a predecessor's looks are handed down in photographs or painted portraits, his quirks of character recorded in anecdotes, one nevertheless never quite knows who he really was. Appeals to his past remain essentially, and perpetually, groping and imaginative in nature. We calibrate the images bequeathed to us against anecdotes and memories; we search for resemblances and dissimilarities within the family circle and what we find probably has more to do with wishful thinking and fantasy than with the history of concrete individuals. And so the aforementioned picture—despite its vagueness and soft focus—proves, when all is said and done, to be rather a precise one after all: in our observance of this photographic appropriation of an ancestor's damaged image it is less a personage than the very process of referencing itself that comes under scrutiny. Oscillating as it does between forgetting and remembering, this process generates a prospect of the past whose contours remain of necessity fluid because they are constantly being re-formed both by present consciousness and future expectations. In short: memory is as individual, dynamic, and, at times, unfathomable an activity as life itself.<sup>1</sup>*

*The portrait of the Ancestor is both prelude to and emblem of the exhibition. For each of the images and objects assembled here under the title Archivaria by the American artist Michael Huey has to do, in its own way, with the systematization and phenomenology of memory. Huey's hard-won competence in this field is aptly illustrated by a weighty tome, *The Place of Beginning. On the Huey, Mautz, Lebzelter, McGowan Families and Their Kin* (2001), in which he reconstructs, in a painstaking project spanning decades, the intertwining biographies of his forebears, laboriously assembling them into a family history narrative. To this end he was able to rely not only on a rich cache of source material—thousands of photographs, films, inventory lists, letters, paintings, furniture, etc. (each and every one of which nevertheless had to be conscientiously tracked down and evaluated to begin with)—but additionally upon a whole slew of aged relatives who stood at his side*

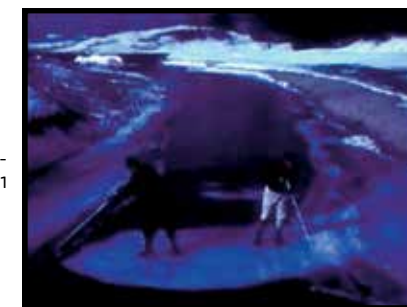
<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the complex relationship between the past, the present, and the future in current memory research see Harald Welzer, "Vergangene Zukünfte und zukünftige Vergangenheiten" in Jens Groh and Sophie Neuenkirch (eds.) *Erzählte Zukunft. Zur intra- und intergenerationellen Aushandlung von Erwartungen*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2011, pp. 19-26.

*to assist in coaxing the documents to speak and—evidently—gave them such a degree of texture that an undertaking of this scope could even be attempted in the first place. And yet, the uncertainties of the material record—incomplete annals, damaged objects—thereby join forces with those of the oral record: the handing down of generations-old conflicts and animosities, taboos and idealizations that cloud and block the view and from which there can scarcely be, as a descendent—(art) historian or no—a means to remain untouched. Nor ought one, indeed, persist in being untouched by them, as the emotional responses are a legitimate part of the full inheritance, the wider legacy one is called upon to manage; they compel, all the more emphatically, careful reflection of one's own standpoint.*

*While the majority of images and objects placed loosely within the four rooms of the exhibition space originated in Huey's family archive, what they describe is not necessarily his own family history—none, at least, that could be easily deciphered outside the family itself. How could it be otherwise? Ignorant of their various origins and original functions—information in the captions is kept to a minimum—one may find oneself, when first confronted with the image of a partly-decayed biscuit from the 1930s (p. 83); strips of shredded documents in a paper shredder (p. 87); or a flickering 16 mm film (p. 89) as perplexed as when facing the fragments of a dream from which, upon awakening, one can only construct a meaningful reading with some difficulty. And so one wanders back and forth between these things, strives to draw connections, create visual order, identify implications and thereby wrest a narrative from the artifacts. For although the pieces stand isolated and without any apparent narrative logic in the space, one thing cannot be overlooked: that a story is unfolding here.*

*This derives not only from the objects themselves, but also from the site of their display and, as it turns out, their quite deliberate placement within that space: one finds oneself in a vacated flat, utilized since coming into the possession of the Sigmund Freud Museum as an extension of the museum library and for temporary exhibitions. Unlike the usual white cubes that hover in the spheres of the contemporary art scene as allegedly presuppositionless, quasi-ahistorical space*

ice floe, still 2001



capsules, in this apartment history seems to drip from every crevice; it has been left entirely in its un-renovated state. In the floor plan, which allows the previous functions of the different rooms to be perceived, in the worn parquet flooring, the split tiles and flecked wall-coverings, the lives and everyday comings and goings of the former inhabitants take shape in minor ways, even as they remain, of course, utterly ungraspable.<sup>2</sup> As a framework for the exhibition these rooms are therefore anything but neutral; they tinge everything they touch. As an architectural unit they are like parentheses, holding together, as they do, the family—or anything else—that comes to inhabit them. One might add that the images and objects scattered through these rooms are presented neither as furnishings nor, indeed, in the way artworks are customarily presented: they give the appearance, at least at first glance, of having been positioned somewhat randomly. In fact, Huey intentionally staged them in such a manner that one almost feels they were left behind here, or are awaiting later retrieval. In this regard it is difficult to suppress the thought that they are shards of a larger entity, members of a once-intact ensemble of objects.

The displaced and indeterminate nature of these things is precisely what makes them such fertile ground for projection and for one's own memory work. And at some point one begins to tell oneself a little story with them: this photo of a fish on the ice of a frozen lake (p. 79)...could have been taken a few decades ago on that lake we all skated on as children, on one of those winter days as bitterly cold as it was thrilling. And didn't a similar paper shredder stand in father's study, the cause for much wonderment—what was it really for, anyhow, what dire secrets did some papers contain that they couldn't simply be discarded but first had to be rendered entirely illegible? And anyway: how many episodes of childhood now exist in memory only as the flickering, stuttering films and yellowing photographs that have superimposed themselves over what was once firsthand experience and thus now stand ineluctably between us and those events?

Unawares, these objects and images become vehicles into one's own past; the private and personal remembrances already inscribed on them are simply overwritten with new ones. Washed up on our shore, they become like flotsam

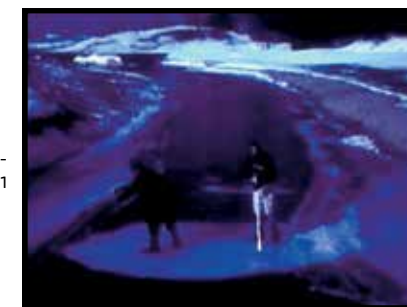
<sup>2</sup> The history of the building at Berggasse 19 and the fates of its individual inhabitants has been studied in detail and made available to a wider audience in Lydia Marinelli Freuds verschwundene Nachbarn, Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2004.

and jetsam that belongs to no one and can therefore be commandeered by anyone for his own use. That Huey has this sort of reception in mind is borne out by the aforementioned image Ancestor, which, as it turns out, is not actually his own forebear but someone else's.<sup>3</sup> Precisely whose ancestor is portrayed here and who the owners of these other things once were appears to a degree to be irrelevant; Huey seems rather to be addressing broader questions about the dispositif of history's transmission as well as what that apparatus is capable of setting into motion.

Remembering means collecting. Collecting means putting into order. And ordering means—among other things—being doomed to failure. The texture Huey was able to give these objects within his family history is at once stable and unstable, as are all ventures to tell a new story of one's own from them (a story, one has to admit, that isn't perhaps as 'new' as it might seem). Nevertheless, and in spite of the intrinsic inevitability of defeat, a go must be had at order. For this there are systems, and one room contains such a system:

...it is a faux-bois wooden cabinet (p. 63), upon the roughly painted backside of which the numeral '40' was long ago wiped into still-wet pale green paint. The manner in which the back of the cabinet is presented lends this number a conspicuous significance, naturally posing the question as to what might be meant by it. Has not forty always been considered a transitional number? Forty days and forty nights was the duration of the flood, forty years were required for the Jews to reach the Promised Land, Jesus spent forty days in the desert, and what came afterward was in each case a new beginning. If one walks around the cabinet—still grumbling about the meaning of the number—one finds in its open front a series of glass-covered drawers into which typewritten labels have been neatly pasted: Indische Biene, Apis indica peroni Latr., vom indischen Festland [Indian Bee...from the Indian mainland] or Schwarze afrikanische Biene, Apis mellifica unicolor unicolor Latr., aus Madagaskar [Black African Bee...from Madagascar]. What we are looking

<sup>3</sup> To the upper right of the blurred likeness is a family crest and an inscription that is just barely legible, identifying the sitter as Adolf Bachofen-Echt.



at here is a specimen cabinet from the local Natural History Museum, its contents—bees and insects of all kinds—long ago transferred or lost, leaving behind only labels and pins. But not unlike the portrait of the ancestor, which, despite its ruinous condition, nevertheless remains a portrait, here 'order' survives as a form, even if what was put into order is gone. And this relationship is inverted again with the cabinet itself. For the number 40 simply refers to the fact that the cabinet's purpose was not just to order things, but that the cabinet, too, was part of a higher order that today no longer exists in this form.

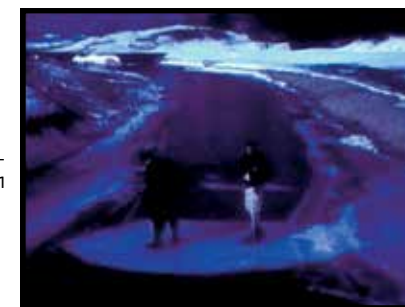
That there is a past is proven not by our recollections of particular experiences and events but rather by the fact that we can remember at all; consequently, therefore, by a structure that is wired into our thought, which seeks—for the benefit of its own orientation—to discover in any vestige both design and narrative. It is no coincidence that the words zählen [count] and erzählen [recount] have the same stem (not only in German), a constant reminder of the close relationship between discursive and numerical knowledge. Each adheres to the basic principle of structuring, a subject taken up in many of Huey's works.

On the wall in the vicinity of the wooden cabinet hangs a photograph of a sheet of tracing paper irregularly marked with combinations of letters and numbers (p. 75). Here, too, something is being counted out or counted down—but what? Is it a map of the heavens? Or one of those drawing exercises where lines connect one number to the next and thereby produce, in the end, a coherent image? (If one tries this out in the imagination one ends up with a completely erratic web of lines.) Once again, a glance at the text offers aid: "Music Room, based on a page from a 1935 inventory album." So a further inventory is the topic here, or rather: this image reproduces the cover page once attached to a lost photograph of the music room at hand. The annotations in the form of numbers and letters were meant to designate objects (that were) visible in the photograph underneath the tracing paper, but, in addition, they indicated positions on a separate list describing those objects in detail. Without knowledge of the original function of this sheet, the picture it produces is impossible to decipher, in part because it makes no bones about standing outside

prevailing compositional conventions. The sheet is thus obsolete as a referencing system and as such 'without value'; moreover—who knows?—in addition to the lost photograph of the music room all of the items depicted in it may themselves very well have since been strewn to the winds. Relieved of its original function as an inventory, however, the sheet develops other qualities. The marks on the paper, dancing to their own unknown melody, generate a form of musicality solely their own and thereby an aesthetic appeal that imbues the sheet with an entirely new value.

This kind of aestheticization, arrived at through transposition, is characteristic of many of Huey's works; in this context the aesthetic valorization that occurs in the piece Untitled (Fourteen Years of Checks) (p. 77), in which 5,683 checks are clamped into two wooden frames in such a way that they become a single 70 cm long, building-block-shaped object, merits explicit mention. The checks themselves are, once again, archival materials—more precisely, financial instruments signed by the artist's grandfather, Arthur S. Huey, and discovered many years posthumously in a locked filing cabinet by the grandson. Tied up in this object, then, is not just a big pile of spent money, but also compressed time itself, time made manifest: nothing short of fourteen years of grandfatherly financial transactions. Were one to go to the trouble of examining the concrete amounts and the recipients of each check, a great deal could presumably be learned about this grandfather. The historian Huey has most likely done so. The artist Huey, on the other hand, seems less interested in the historical and monetary value than in the aesthetic value: bundled together in this way and fixed in a frame, the checks with their yellowing edges reveal a subtle array of colors that is, of course, more than just that: the varying color values created by differences in the paper over time, as well as unequal yellowing, allow processes of aging, of expenditure, and depreciation to be measured and captured in both a real and in a figurative sense. One has a dim awareness, without its exactly being obtruded into one's vision, that the accounts for some sort of loss are being balanced here.

The metamorphosis of an everyday object into an aesthetic one is especially evident in this example, where the principle act seems to have been the framing. And if



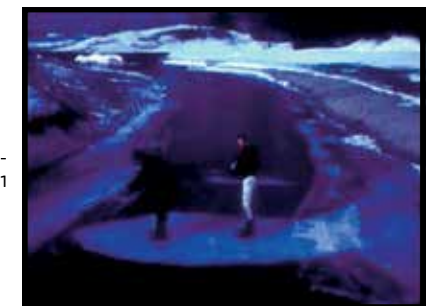
framing is taken literally here (as with other works in the exhibition such as *Sky Library*)—the checks were simply squared up and placed in a set of frames; this action withdraws their original function from our view, even as it reveals their aesthetic value—in other cases the act of framing is metaphorical. With 'frames' are then meant new contextualizations as well. When an object is displaced into a different context—as with the removal of an inventory from the archive and placement in the artistic realm—the significance of the object also necessarily shifts. In this sense, photography itself can be considered a kind of framing. Only seldom does Huey introduce an object (unframed in either sense) into a space, simply as a found object. He could, after all, have hung the damaged miniature portrait of the ancestor itself onto the wall, but precisely that is what he does not do, presumably because he seeks a certain distance from origins in order to make visible a hiatus between experience and memory, and this can only succeed through highlighting their differences: the photograph of the painted miniature portrait that itself is based—so it would seem—on an older photographic source, separates us one step further from the concrete individual who is the root of the portrait. Only through medial jumps of this sort and other types of 'estrangement' such as enlargements or the tinting of a photograph, the slowing of a film, etc. can the repetition be grasped and through this slight adjustment made visible as an artistic appropriation.

Before the things became artworks, they were archival artifacts and before they became archival artifacts, they were participants in particular social arrangements. Huey's relatives seem to have occupied themselves quite early on in reassuring themselves of their own existence, and they did this by cleverly duplicating it: in photographs and films they recorded each other, in inventories and lists they recorded their possessions. These are more than just administrative practices. They play an important role in identity formation and in reinforcing an idea of the self over time: symbolic gestures and actions that are meant to hold families—along with their material and immaterial 'valuables'—together over generations. By

collecting and archiving the scattered remains, Huey becomes a custodian—not, usually, of the things themselves, but at least of their *Doppelgänger* in lists and inventories—and of the family's memory. In this way he keeps the tradition of his predecessors and proves himself their worthy heir; at the same time, however, he moves beyond this by questioning the entire apparatus of tradition formation, as well as the formation and standardization of the value systems behind it: what do the categories mean, upon which criteria are they based, what do they include, what do they leave out, and what do the individual items say about the whole? It is no coincidence that Huey usually selects borderline cases from the transmitted record: obsolete, antiquated, and brittle systems of classification or, alternately, things that resist any classification whatsoever and therefore can only be filed under *varia or—voilà!—archivaria*. In this way he articulates the extent to which the transmission of the past is contingent upon both things and narrative accounts: because things partake of life they wear out, get lost, become auratic, and because narratives are constantly taking place, others are being forgotten, while others still are being embellished, becoming more colorful with each telling than the actual events themselves ever were. If the archive is the place where Huey tidies up a past set into motion long before his own time—through classification, sorting, and musing on the residue, material and immaterial, of what is bygone—the art context is the place where he bestows upon these things and himself a future: here he puts private-things-turned-aesthetic-objects not only at others' disposal, resurrecting them from the storeroom of his own history, but also allows them to manifest their dream visage in the imagination of others.

If the work *Ancestor* acted as a kind of prologue to a story told of and in among the things, *Ice Floe* (p. 89) can be read as its epilogue. This fragment of a 16 mm film from the 1950s, transferred to video format, shows a looped sequence, slowed to around three minutes, in which two men standing on an unsteady sheet of floating ice attempt to free their unusual conveyance from the shoreline ice. The episode takes place in what is clearly the crisp cold at a small feeder stream to a Great Lake.

ice floe, still 2801



First one watches as the men occupy themselves in the foreground with freeing the floe from the frozen shore by means of long poles, only to become wedged back into the ice again and again; slightly later one sees them liberated from the ice for a brief moment as they slowly float toward the lake in the background. But before they reach that lake the film abruptly comes to an end and, after a short pause, the sequence begins anew: once more the men are stuck fast between floes, again they try to free themselves. The artist has submitted the two men—from their ages they might be father and son—to a Sisyphean punishment that holds them eternally captive: caught in the ice, caught in the film loop, caught in a never-ending repetition of time.

Even without an explanation of the circumstances surrounding this peculiar incident we can imagine what may have excited the artist's interest. The image of two men on an ice floe registers as an existential metaphor: the raftsmen, stemming against the ice and thereby against the freezing up of time's flow, strive toward an open horizon and so to a future that is, however, simultaneously a disappearance, a death, a forgetting—"Lethe! brich die Fesseln des Ufers..." ["Lethe! break the shackles of the shore..."] (Nikolaus Lenau, 1822). The short exposition thus develops that oddly paradoxical temporality of the future perfect, the completed future—the "it will have been" that so preoccupied Roland Barthes in ruminating on old photographs.<sup>4</sup> For in this contradictory instance ancestors gradually withdraw into a future that (from today's viewpoint) has already played itself out. The film itself exhibits—not just in its narrative, but also as a medium—Charon-esque qualities; just as in its own progress each single image on the reel gives way to and is covered up by the following one and thereby removed from our view, so does Charon ferry the ancients across the river and into the hereafter, beyond possible visibility. The price—the obolus—is the draining away of time.

Time is the pre-condition for motion; progress is motion's promise; the product of progress is said to be history; but in his film Huey disallows all of this, thereby creating a kind of emblematic counterpart to the Ancestor. In the latter, through an incremental sloughing off of reference points, the ancestor slowly disappears

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes Die helle Kammer. Bemerkung zur Photographie [Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography] (1980), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989, pp. 105-107.

behind the veil of decay, allowing us to experience not only temporality but also the variability of objects in their relationship to the past; the ancestors in Ice Floe, on the other hand, are denied this means of gliding over into a past and into memory itself. The video is a demonstration of the danger of making an absolute of the past and disassociating it from the present and future: time freezes up.

Naturally, the basis for a modality of referencing would seem to lie one floor down, where Sigmund Freud once trolled his patients' psyches for it. But it is not so much to be located in the mezzanine of the building at Berggasse 19, where the Sigmund Freud Museum hazards a reconstruction of the life and working world of the renowned psychoanalyst with scant objects and, inevitably, falls short of this pretense: the meager furnishings, books, and autograph manuscripts alongside an ivory-handled walking stick and plaid tweed cap are meant to be vessels for an authentic history, yet they fill up primarily with dust—that Freud's hand grasped them is no substitute for an analysis.<sup>5</sup> No, the basis for a modality of referencing lies yet deeper, in a spot where fears, wishes, and appetites drive—or blot out—expectations and memories.

Rendering this visible appears to be Huey's accomplishment in Archivaria. The exhibition lays no claim to transmitting truths; facts about family history are revealed at best exclusively to its own members. For all others, the exhibition offers a setting that can transport us into a state of evenly hovering attention, animating us to listen closely to the language of things, and, on the other hand, to the echo that same language produces within ourselves. It offers itself up as the demonstration of a method revealing a deep-seated need and a keen personal desire for historicity that at the same time opens up a path toward it.

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of this installation as 'lieu de mémoire' see Heidmarie Uhl, 'Berggasse 19. Lesarten eines vielschichtigen Gedächtnisortes' in Lydia Marinelli, op. cit., 2004 pp. 89-103.

