

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Memory and History

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I don't really remember 2004 even though it was only a few months ago. I think I can recall an event. Then I realize that the event occurred in 2003. Or it happened this year but is an aggregate of two events. I do not think it is because I have a bad memory, even though sometimes when it comes to events, I do. It is because of the way that the past becomes past. I have come to accept that my memory—after all, it is the only memory I have—does not retain a reliable sequence of rigid, linear information. In the case of non-personal events, I need confirmation, a record of some kind such as a newspaper or, more than likely in recent years, a web source.

Edra Soto is interested in this intersection between memory and history. She has stated that the visual re-presentation of history was her concern in *Documentation 2004: A Year in Review*. Soto has chosen the newspaper, the banal catalogue of events, as her source and inspiration. The newspaper has been the primary means through which the becoming of history has been textually and visually displayed for nearly the past three centuries. As news outlets have shifted from print to the virtual realm, what was a rigid linear means of recording history has become more uncertain, as if it has been thinned out. For example, in the instance of bloggers, one of their primary devices, in addition to their opinions, is linking to a news story or lifting quotes in a manner that allows the reader to shift back and forth between harsh or praiseful opinions and make their own judgment. Or go another route and even start their own blog. *Documentation 2004* also works in a similar way, reassembling images from recent history...making connections between them...

Edra Soto's exhibition, *Documentation 2004: A Year in Review* is composed of two parts. The first is titled *Ornamentos*, which occupies the galleries of Gallery 400 with a series of small metal engravings and a corresponding series of wall drawings. The second, titled *Landfill*, is represented by a video inside the gallery and an actual landfill outside. In *Ornamentos*, an archive is created by Soto's monthly organization of historical images culled from the periodicals *El Nueva Día* from her native Puerto Rico and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, from Soto's current home. In this part of the exhibition, the images are literally imprinted into metal, a technique inspired by the *milagro*, a Mexican folk art form. A *milagro*, literally 'miracle' in Spanish, is sometimes created to commemorate deaths and are usually engraved into silver,

bronze, copper, or gold. They mark a passing and a memorial. Soto's images are pressed into golden, silver, and copper colored metal. The color-coding in the reduced contour drawings designates the section of the newspaper from which the image was drawn.

The second part of *Ornamentos* is defined by monthly groupings of the same images, similarly color-coded as collaged large-scale wall drawings. In some of the collages, an image from Soto's personal life, marked by their black color, manifests itself next to national or international figures such as John Kerry or Ed Paschke. Some individuals may be more recognizable than others and some, such as the ones of soldiers, have become so familiar, their specificity is lost. Soto's isolation and combination of the images replicates a divide within memory between the textual and the visual. In both parts of *Ornamentos*, Soto separates images from text and translates them with her hand. The headlines are gone and the story becomes obscured by the fragmentary grid of images.

Even though G.W.F. Hegel believed that history was moving toward a rationalized whole, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he described the "becoming" of history as "a gallery of images." This "gallery of images" is the external expression of history, which by its nature is at first fragmentary. These two concepts, a gallery of images and fragments, apply to Soto's exhibition, whether in evenly spaced grids of imprinted metal or painted monthly wall groupings, though they do not fit the tidy end that an Age of Enlightenment thinker would seek.

Located outside the gallery, the long-term installation *Landfill* resembles a small hill and contains beneath it a year's worth of decaying and deteriorating newspapers, the same newspapers that were the sources of the images inside the gallery. Inside of the gallery, video and photographic documentation of the landfill's installation shows Soto and colleague Rodger Colley wrapping and interring the used newspapers. In *Landfill*, Soto buries history, creating a metaphorical act of memory similar to the conventional sayings "bury the past" or "leave the past behind." Burying or leaving are odd designations, for the past tends to exist *with* us in some ethereal simultaneity.

Even for pasts that were not a direct part of our experience, such as a national or international event, a readily accessible image often remains. Or as Jean-Paul Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, "the past is present and melts insensibly into the present." Edra Soto provides a document of the past in which she buried the year. What remains are her translations of their contents littered throughout the gallery.

Soto's evidence is similar to the single images that occupy columns of newspapers, but hers are injected with bits of manipulation, translation, and an ever-helpful assertion of the individual. Soto's assertion of an individual, herself, in the scope of a year's journalistic history provides an element of proper perspective.

The presence of history can always be felt, though sometimes it is difficult to decipher. It is how it is present that can be mystifying. In that sense, it is like a ghost that one can feel but cannot pin down as the source or result of actions. Hegel, in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, attempted to reconcile memory and history by writing on Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the muses, including the Muse of History. In the scope of the *Introduction* is Hegel's attempt to pin down through dialectic the objective and the subjective experience in the definition of history's narrative. For Hegel, of course, it is easier to conclude the auspicious State is necessary for History. Hegel does address the individual by referring to "family memorials" and "patriarchal conditions," but they do not enter the "prose of History." Soto lets history (what we could call historical experience, if not history) represent itself, leaving room for free access to memory and to acts of memorializing. With the reference to *milagros* and in using images from her personal life, Soto juxtaposes establishing personal histories with the reportorial accounts of newspapers.

In the myth of the Muses one of the statements attributed to them is, "...we know, when we will, to utter true things" (1). This statement evidences the truth telling we have believed the Muse of History to inspire. It could be said to further the hegemonic claims of news media. An argument on the other side could be that the Muse of History can inspire anyone to speak truth, or to expose truth, outside of the locations that claim a monopoly on it. Inspiration by the Muse of History becomes crucial when those monopolizing locations cease to represent the course of events for individuals and communities. By juxtaposing the hegemonic and testimonial, Soto trumps history with memory, be it collective or individual. Soto encourages the frame of history to be adjusted in another way, a way that permits potentiality, reconsideration, generosity, and, perhaps most importantly, access.

1. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Mentor, 1969), 37.