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'A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'

The Meeting of Poetry and History.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

at Massey Univeristy, Wellington,
New Zealand.

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2014

Abstract

I never met my great grandfather, Frank. He died decades before I was born. Consequently, the image that I have come to hold of him is not a memory, but a construct; crafted through the combined forces of an established history, memory, fiction, and my own bias.

There are very few definite facts that I can attribute to Frank's memory. I know that he was born in Patea, and attended a Catholic boarding school in Wellington. He fought during the First World War, serving in Egypt, Gallipoli and the Western Front, and was wounded three or four times, depending on the source. I have been told that he loved poetry and had many books. And there is a story that he once caught two of his children, my grandfather and his older brother, carving their initials into the side of a public building. He told them that the names of mugs were written on plaques everywhere.

My humble collection of details holds but a minute fraction of the memories that have arisen from Frank's life. As in all of history, there is much of Frank that has been lost to time, and my picture of him is littered with gaps.

The artwork discussed in this paper, *For Us There is Only the Trying*, has essentially been made in response to my experiences with the elusive memory of my great grandfather, and the history that serves as a backdrop to his life. My artwork therefore deals with Historyⁱ and memory, however, my aim is not to comment upon, or uncover the past, but to reveal one's experience with that which is indistinct and uncertain, and the poetry that surrounds these concepts.

i History as a proper noun will apply the objective and academic pursuit of the past, whereas history (regular noun) will be used in a much less definitive way. In this document, it will simply be used to describe that pertaining to the past.

Acknowledgements

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Lastly, thanks must go out to all my most loved ones who have supported me through my studies: Michael, Mum and Dad, my siblings and friends. To my extended family, the McKenna's, thank you, as Frank is of course your relative too. Thank you for sharing your memories with me.

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Chapter Outlines

The subject explored in this essay is a complex one. Consequently the discussion to follow throughout this document will often meander, and concepts may overlap and contradict one another. The divisions suggested by the following chapters therefore act more as guidelines.

Part One (*Subject*) explores the multi-faceted nature of my subject matter, and the varied conceptional and emotive responses that have arisen from it.

Chapter One (*There is No One to Bury*) explores the cognitive or conceptional experience of remembrance, and revolves around the broad question of what is it that I am remembering when I concentrate on the life of a family member against the backdrop of the Great War. Focus is placed upon the instability of historical memory through the analysis of the personal and social structures that define it. In particular, emphasis will be placed upon the tension created through the opposite, yet related, forces of History and memory, the individual and collective, and the factual and the romantic, so that I may illustrate the ambiguous, yet fluid terrain that is often explored in History and memory studies.

Chapter Two (*Only the Knowledge of Dead Secrets*) places an emphasis upon the emotional experience of remembrance, and looks to address the question of why I am drawn to a memory that is distant and elusive. Building upon the complexity discussed in Chapter One, I will explore the poetic spaces that resonate throughout the ambiguous and unknown. My investigation will particularly concentrate on the 'gaps' that litter our notion of history.

Part Two (*Method*) concerns itself more specifically with the methods that I have employed in making my artwork, in response to the complex subject matter discussed in Part One. This discussion will extend out to include the methods of other artists whose interests reflect my own.

Chapter Three (*The Intolerable Wrestle with Words and Meanings*) explores the way in which the written word and performative gesture may be used in an artistic response to history. In particular, I will look into how these methods may be used to explore the 'gaps' discussed in Chapter Two. Case studies will include the discussion of poetry and fiction that arose from the War, and the artists Francis Alÿs and Mario Garcia Torres.

Chapter Four (*The Sharp Compassion of the Healer's Art*) explores the various responsibilities encountered when looking into and representing the past. In particular, I will touch upon the way in which our understanding of the past can help shed light upon the present. I will also look into the politics of aesthetics surrounding remembrance. Can beautiful imagery be used in relation to past traumatic events, or is a different aesthetic necessary?

All chapter titles, the title of my artwork, and of this document, have been taken from T.S Eliot's poem 'East Coker'; a work of art that I consider to perhaps best express my own experiences with the memory of another.

...while it was true that time heals bereavement it does so only at the cost of the slow extinction of those loved ones from the heart's memory which is the sole place of their abode then or now. Faces fade, voices dim. Seize them back...Speak with them. Call their names. Do this and do not let the sorrow die for it is the sweetening of every gift.

To a generation removed.

Part One *Subject*

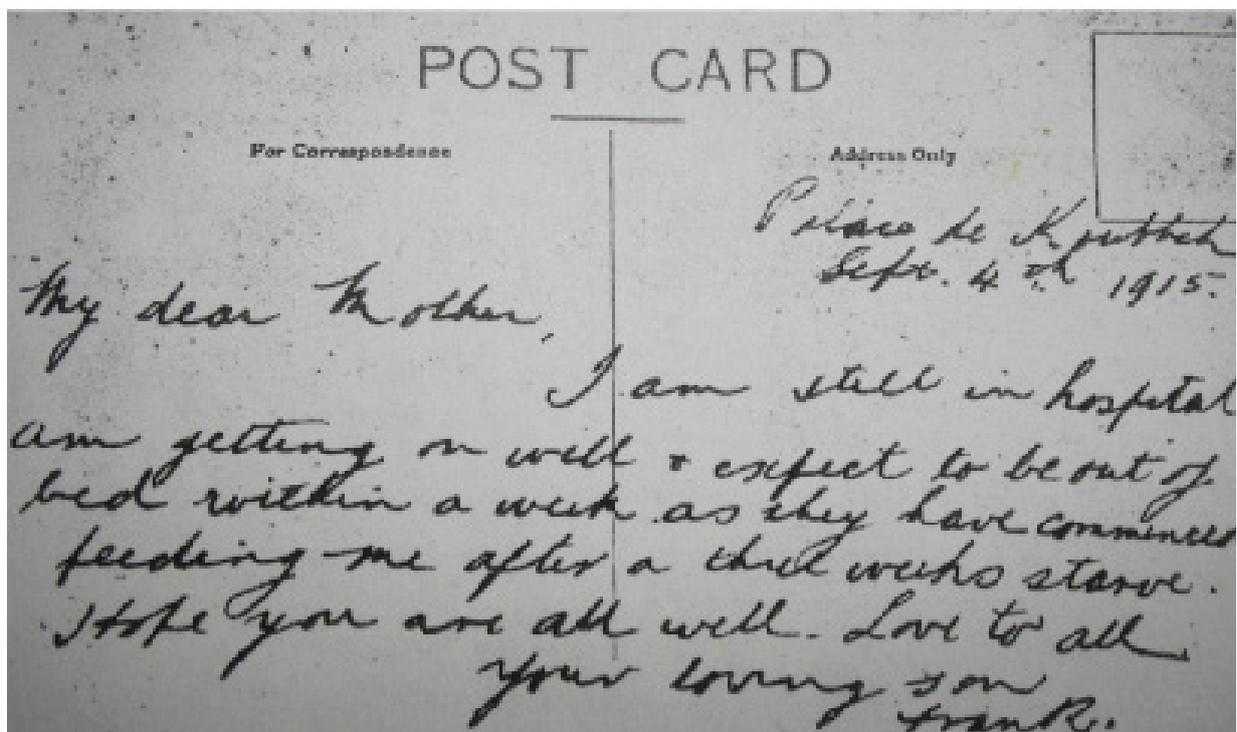


Figure 1: Postcard from Frank (1915)

Chapter One

There is No One to Bury.

Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme*¹ opens with a personal anecdote regarding the memory of his grandfather. According to family legend, Dyer states, his grandfather was too young to enlist when war broke out. Like many of his era however, he was impatient to serve, and decided to fake his credentials so that he would appear two years older. Although a minor, he was accepted into the army. This story was often told to Dyer by his mother, and he had never thought to question its authenticity. It was not until he came across his grandfather's death certificate that he realised the tale to be false: in actual fact, his grandfather was aged twenty when war broke out. 'He could be anyone's grandfather', Dyer wrote. This anecdote serves as an introduction to the way in which the beliefs and recollections that inform our concept of the past can become mistaken or distorted. To use the words of historian Pierre Nora, when we work with history, we are therefore dealing with that which is 'always problematic and incomplete'.

Through my own experiences with the distant memory of my great grandfather, I have individually come to the same conclusions as Nora. Very early into my research into Frank's history it became clear that this was to be an investigation characterised by uncertainty. Indeed, when I first read the story of Dyer's mistaken family history my instinct was to laugh, as this very anecdote had also wrongly made its way into my version of Frank's biography. In my case however, this belief was not one spawned from family legend, but had found its way into Frank's story through the persuasion of popular culture. 'We used to know whose children we were; now we are the children of no one and everyone', Nora wrote.

My investigation into history is therefore also an investigation into the unknown. As I reflect upon the elusive details of Frank's person, and the history that surrounds his life, I am struck by the poetry inherent within these intangible, indefinable forms. The way in which I perceive Frank as a person, is difficult to categorise. He is, to me, both a stranger and family member, and his memory is something that I simultaneously hold personally close, yet view from a distance. As I never met Frank, in order to remember him I have had to rely upon the memory of others. I have spoken to family members, trawled the archives, and gazed into the History of which he was part. This has all been conducted through the lens of my personal experience, imagination and bias. 'We take shreds of the past and try to glue them together in the hope that the history that we reconstruct might seem more like the history we experience', Nora wrote. Although based upon (or aspiring to) fact, the Frank in my mind is not real, but my own product of historical fiction. Despite this however, his story means so much more to me than the average work of history or fiction ever could. He is a part of the foundation upon which my life was built, and the pursuit of his person is something that I have lived and breathed.

In first approaching Frank's memory, I began in the usual places. Through family members I obtained photocopies of a postcard and a portrait of him in uniform. In government archives, I found his service records, and mention of him in old newspapers articles (see **figures I, II & III** on pp. 4 & 7). With regards to History however, Frank is not an important man, and there are very few official facts pertaining directly to him to be found. Consequently, my research began to extend to the greater history of his era: the History of The War. In committing to this approach however, I began to see the loss of Frank's individuality to the bigger picture. In order to avoid this, It seemed evident that a more personal

¹ *The Missing of the Somme* is an extended essay that concentrates on the history of the First World War through the lens of Dyer's thoughts and experiences of remembrance.

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PERSONAL ITEMS.

A cable message states that the Rev. R. J. Campbell, of the City Temple (London) is retiring, and will return to France, if his health permits, to resume services for soldiers.

Mr Faris, of the Patea railway staff, has been appointed stationmaster at Turakina.

Dr Harvey left Waverley on Wednesday for Wellington, en route for Egypt. Dr Harvey has offered his services to the military authorities, and will (the Patea Press understands) take up duty at the Fever Hospital in Egypt.

Mr and Mrs J. A. McKenna, of Patea, have received a letter from their son Frank, who is at present in the firing line in the Dardanelles, stating that he is "all well." The letter, which was written in July last, stated that Private Reid, of Patea, had been mentioned in despatches for conspicuous bravery.

Mr W. Williams, R.N., who visited New Zealand as chief engineer of the late Captain Scott's Antarctic ship

HISTORY SHEET

Service No. 10764

Name: *McKenna, Frank*

Rank: *Private*

Occupation: *Land agent, Patea, N.Z.*

Last employer: *E. B. Davis, Patea, N.Z.*

Name, relationship, and address of next-of-kin of next of kin resident in New Zealand (insert short name and address of nearest relative in New Zealand):

J. A. McKenna, Patea, N.Z.

also address: Mrs. J. A. McKenna, Patea, N.Z.

also address: Mrs. J. A. McKenna, Patea, N.Z.

also address: Mrs. J. A. McKenna, Patea, N.Z.

DECEASED

Country or Territory	Date from	Date to	Total	Months of Office making Form	Home Service
<i>Foreign</i>	<i>1884</i>	<i>10 10 14</i>	<i>30 10 14</i>		
<i>Foreign</i>	<i>10 10 14</i>	<i>10 9 17</i>	<i>10 9 17</i>		
<i>Foreign</i>	<i>10 9 17</i>	<i>10 9 17</i>	<i>10 9 17</i>		

Wounds: *None*

Sick: *None*

Decorations: *BRITISH WAR MEDAL, VICTORY MEDAL*

Periods of Service:

Period	Years	Months	Days
<i>In New Zealand</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Overseas</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Total service</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>41</i>

Theatres of Operation:

- Amiens 1916-17*
- Egypt 1916-17*
- Galatia 1916*
- Western Front 1916-17*

Discharge: *18 9 17*

Figure I (above) Mention of Frank in the newspaper (detail).

Figure II (right) Frank's service records (detail)

Figure III (below) Connah Podmore, Letter to Frank, March 8 2013 (detail I)

graphs capture New Zealanders in Egypt, Turkey and France. It is the photographs of the troops in Gallipoli that excite me the most. I suppose this is because I know this is where you were. I keep an eye out for you always, but I haven't had any luck yet. Did you know Denniston at all? Many of his photographs are of Captains, so I presume he may have been

approach to his memory would be necessary.

I therefore began writing letters to Frank. I found that addressing him directly helped to single him out from the greater history from which my investigation was taking place. In these letters I would tell him of my search for him, and of my own life (see **figure III** on p. 7). One by one, I posted them to the return address written on the postcard he sent to his mother in 1915: 'New Zealand General War Hospital, Pont de Koubbleh, Cairo, Egypt'. As in my experience of viewing Frank through collective history however, it became evident that Frank's individuality ran the risk of becoming obscured by the projections of my imagination. The way in which I was addressing Frank was beginning to feed back and influence my picture of him. It was at this point that I came upon the decision to start making his blanket. I shredded up the carbon copies of the letters that I had sent, and wove them back together with the idea in mind of making a sheet of paper fabric big enough to cover his hospital bed. This process literally wove together the details of my search for his traces, and the fictitious man that had been forming in my mind. The blanket worked as a compromise, and offered an alternate answer to the difficulty that I was experiencing in the categorisation of Frank's memory.

My experience reveals that history is more than just the objective study of the events of the past. I have come to see that in order to understand human history, we must take into account not just the facts pertaining to *what* happened, but also the varying of subjective interpretations of these facts. With regard to our perception of history, Nora notes that our view of it runs the risk of being stifled by a 'linguistic deficiency' present in the both the English and French language. 'There is only one word to denote both lived history and the intellectual operation which makes it intelligible', he states, '...the changes in our lives are of the same nature as the changes in the way we represent our lives.' Our perception of the past is therefore relative to the context in which it is viewed, and History does therefore not remain static, but shifts with the changing present. Indeed, this theory may be applied to not only distant pasts and second-hand memories, but memories of our own. Contemporary artist, Christian Boltanski, reflects upon this in interview with Tamir Garb: 'In my early work, I pretended to speak about my childhood, and yet my real childhood had disappeared. I have lied about it so often that I no longer have a real memory of this time and my childhood has become for me some kind of universal childhood, not a real one.'

Our notion of the past is therefore not built upon a straight road of progression, but exists in a constant state of flux. This is due to the way in which the opposing disciplines of History and memory continually inform one another, thereby causing our picture of the past to warp and shift. In response to this very problem, historian Saul Friedlander has proposed a continuum of representation of the past. Occupying either pole of this continuum are the extremes of History and memory in their most concentrated forms. In these extreme states, Friedlander notes that the definitions between History and memory seem clear-cut however, 'the closer one moves to the middle ground', he writes, 'the more the two areas...become intertwined and interrelated'. This middle ground is descriptive of the experience of attempting at a general interpretation of a group's past, and it is my belief that all forms of historical representation will be built upon some degree of general understanding. Throughout the discussion to follow I will therefore demonstrate the uncertainty inherent in any experience with the past as one navigates through this unavoidable and indefinable middle ground. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, we will, from this point on, explore 'the twilight-zone between history and memory...[the] no-man's land of time.'

A common place in which History and memory can become readily confused is within families. As shown earlier through the experiences of Dyer and myself, family memories are often passed down over generations and reside within this 'twilight zone' between History and memory, fact and fiction. In relation

to this phenomenon, is Miriam Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory'. Hirsch describes postmemory as a structure over which traumatic or powerful memories can be transferred between generations.² Indeed, postmemory delineates not only the method by which memory is passed on, but is also descriptive of the emotional response that many will feel towards particular histories. It is a phenomenon, Hirsch explains, in which descendants of survivors 'connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory'. There is a contradiction inherent in Hirsch's conception, found within her seemingly irrational use of the word 'memory', which according to semantics should infer impressions that are derived from direct experience as opposed to transmission.³ In response to this particular obstacle however, Hirsch convincingly supports her decision by evoking the poetic force of the word 'memory', stating that postmemory 'approximates memory in its affective force.' To support this idea, Hirsch turns to the work of Holocaust historian, Eva Hoffman; who as the daughter of Holocaust survivors fits Hirsch's criteria of one of the 'second generation' in which the effects of transferred memory are at their strongest. Indeed, Hoffman writes convincingly with regards to the powerful effects of family memories. 'The paradoxes of indirect knowledge haunt many of us who come after.' She writes. 'The formative events of the twentieth century have crucially informed our biographies, threatening to overshadow and overwhelm our own lives'. While Hoffman's relationship with the past is certainly an extreme one (given the uniquely terrible nature of the Holocaust) her comments stand as a testament to the way in which the past may act through the present.

The open slipperiness of Hirsch's conception inevitably results in the creation of representations of the past that are contradictory in nature. Indeed, like Friedlander's middle ground between history and memory, Hirsch's postmemory is dependent on the amalgamation of two seemingly opposing disciplines. The first is a generalised and distant History, and the second is a history that relies upon subjective, specific and personal memories. Hirsch uses the family as an example of a situation in which these two disciplines can become readily confused. She again turns to Hoffman who speaks of inheriting her 'memory' of the Holocaust, through what she terms 'the language of the family'. 'In my house', she writes, '...the past broke through in the sounds of nightmares, the idioms of sighs and illnesses, of tears and acute aches that were legacy of the damp attic and the conditions my parents endured during their hiding'. History, for Hoffman was therefore first discovered through the familiar and intimate spaces of her family home. While the Holocaust remains an event beyond her experience, it has nonetheless effected her life. A personal claim to this history may therefore be made. While Hirsch finds herself in agreement with Hoffman, she also reminds us that even the most intimate of family memories are mediated through more generalised, public understandings of the past. Support for this statement can be seen through Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Like Hoffman, Spiegelman is one of the 'second generation' following the Holocaust and this novel recounts the author's memory of his father's retelling of his experiences during this period. In a scene poignantly familiar to the descriptions of Hoffman's childhood memories, Art and his wife, Françoise, hear his father moaning in his sleep. 'When I was a kid I thought that was the noise all grown-ups made while they slept', Art tells Françoise. For Spiegelman, History therefore shaped his understanding of his memories by giving weight to these otherwise innocuous behaviours. Furthermore, History's presence also works to transform these behaviours witnessed into important symptoms of not only individual experience, but of a collective past. It is therefore here where we may witness the blurring of the definitions between the specific and the general. With this thought in mind, I would like to return to the subject of my great grandfather's biography, a

2 Hirsch's article focuses on what she calls the 'second generation' following the Holocaust. In particular her article concentrates on postmemory as seen within the children of Holocaust survivors.

3 With regards to this belief, Hirsch quotes Gary Weissman who has expressed that 'no degree of power or monumentality can transfer one person's memories into another's.'

story that I place personal significance upon, yet know almost nothing about. To what extent have family and social structures contributed to my notion of Frank, and how have I reconciled these competing influences of the individual and collective within my picture of him? What is it that I am remembering when I think of him?

Before I begin the discussion of Frank's memory, it is important that the difference in the way in which I have inherited his memory and the methods of inheritance typical of the second generation are outlined. In her essay, Hirsch limits her discussion of postmemory to that witnessed in the children of survivors. Her reasons behind this are naturally due to the temporal and emotional proximity to which this second generation are placed in relation to the primary event. In response to this idea I would therefore like to raise the question of whether the effects of postmemory can effectively persevere over time. How may we explain the personal importance that certain generations, of which Dyer and I are included, have placed upon histories that long preceded them? Unlike the likes of Spiegelman and Hoffman, I was of course not raised in the direct shadow of the trauma of the Great War. Rather, as a New Zealander, born four generations after this event, my notion of its history has grown from concepts that are decidedly more holistic and vague in nature. Indeed, my memory of the Great War began with, to quote Dyer, the 'organised cult of Remembrance'. I can recall the annual proceedings at ANZAC Day, the wearing of poppies, and the steady scattering of memorials throughout the highways and parks of my home before I learned what it was that I was supposed to be remembering. It therefore seems that my interest in this history has stemmed from not the role that the memory of the Great War has played *in* my life, but *around* my life.

By way of explaining this phenomenon, Hirsch divides postmemory into two subcategories: *familial* and *affiliative*. Familial postmemory describes the transmission of memory through 'the language of the family', and is characteristically found in those of the second generation. Affiliative postmemory, on the other hand, extends out to those associated with the second generation, and accounts for the way in which the memories belonging to a particular group can become socially significant as they permeate into the cultural fabric of a given society. My memory of the Great War may therefore be described as inherited through my affiliation to a culture and heritage that has been derived from, and continues to support the memory of this history.⁴ Yet, it is not only the Great War that I am remembering, but the life of my family member within it. My notion of Frank also resides within the spaces of the family and, although this link has been diluted by time, the emotions that one associates with the family will resonate still. My inherited memory is therefore derived from both familial and affiliative sources, and my case may be seen to mirror that of Spiegelman, who through his statement 'my father bleeds history', intimated as the blurring of collective and individual histories into one.

Within my artwork, this phenomenon can be most plainly seen through the video on the left⁵ in which I read one of my letters for Frank, to not his portrait, but a statue of a ubiquitous soldier of one of New Zealand's many official war memorials. The role that official memorials and public rituals of remembrance have played in our perception of the Great War has been discussed in length by Bob Bushaway in his essay 'Name Upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance.' In this essay, Bushaway explains that the Great War may be considered unique to the course of British (and by extension, colonial) history through the unprecedented number of volunteer soldiers who served and died. The sheer scale of loss, guaranteed that the effects of the Great War were felt by the entire nation, and individual desires to remember

4 Indeed, with the Centennial of the First World War arriving this year, this is a time in which national support of the memory of the War is particularly strong.

5 The processes behind my work are realised through two videos, which have been made to read alongside one another, in the video installation *For Us There is Only the Trying*. The second video is of the blanket that I have made for Frank, and will be discussed later on in the essay.

built upon one another to create a collective expression of mourning and recognition of sacrifice.⁶ Interestingly, it has been argued that this collective drive ultimately worked to dispel individual losses, 'crosses stretch away in lines so long that they seem to follow the curvature of the earth', Dyer wrote. 'Even the names on the crosses count for nothing. Only the numbers count, the scale of loss.' What is more, in New Zealand, the memorial's association with ANZAC day, means that its referents include not only those of the First World War, but 'all New Zealanders killed in war and... returned servicemen and woman'. Indeed, Bushaway has even gone so far as to argue that the unique symbols of commemoration that have arisen out of the First World War, of which the memorial (as opposed to the monument) is included, have become 'axiomatic of remembrance itself'. My address to Frank is therefore infinitely more general than I could have imagined. As I address a memorial in his place I am remembering not only him, but the history of his era, and the history of that which has followed. Through reference to his past, notions of mourning, pride, tragedy and sacrifice are evoked, and this gives way to other, perhaps personal, events not directly associated with war. I am, in short, remembering remembrance.

As I have made the work, I have found this lack of specificity to be in my favour. As stated before, this work is not about history, but my experience with history. It is about the uncertainty and helplessness that I feel when I look back upon events outside of my control and understanding. At the crux of this work is the futile expression of a desire to empathise with that which I will never truly know. This concept is one that may be applied to many different circumstances, and I welcome its broad application as my aim in making the artwork is not to instruct, but to elicit affective response. In order to allow for an open interpretation of a narrative based artwork, I have had to find relative balance between the specific and general concepts alluded to through my story and the wider history implied. The artwork is quite clearly autobiographical⁷, and this prevents the piece from becoming too general or abstract. However, the address between the specific figures of myself and a named World War One soldier could perhaps be construed as exclusive. It is therefore here where the ubiquity of the memorial may be used in my favour, as in addressing him, I address everyone's grandfather. To further promote this idea, I have also chosen to include in the video the natural sounds of the life that surround the memorial. In the background of my address, the sound of cars, birds and a distant sports game can be heard, bringing the community into my conversation with the past.⁸

6 For a diagram showing more information regarding this, please see **Appendix 1**.

7 My name, face, voice and handwriting all feature in the video on the left, and I make it clear that I am speaking of my own experiences.

8 On a side, I would briefly like to mention the work of Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller who use soundbytes to stimulate memory. An excellent example of this is in their sound installation *For a Thousand Years* (2012), 'a time-based aural experience' which featured at documenta (13). Sounds captured ranged from intimate to explosive. The juxtaposition of, for example, a quiet conversation between mother and child, and the sounds of bombs dropping overhead, allowed for both personal and historical memories to be evoked. In my own work, sound also plays a role in evoking memories, thereby linking past and present. The rustling of paper, and the mechanical grumble of vehicles moving in the distance are noises that are familiar from our own lives, and from what we would imagine from the past.

Chapter Two

Only the Knowledge of Dead Secrets

My view of Frank, and the events of the Great War, are most certainly removed from reality. From the comfort of my peaceful existence, it is easy to perceive this era as something other, and with otherness will often come detachment or romance. Although I hate to admit it, there is certainly an element of romance or nostalgia that has driven my interest in Frank's experiences in the War. I see this most plainly through my bias towards certain parts of his life's story, but not others. Specifically, in my attempts to know (or know of) Frank, I have wilfully ignored the bulk of his life, and have concentrated on only his stories relating to the War. Despite my distaste for the way in which many public forms of expression have reduced the actions and effects of war into a repertoire of lofty, abstract notions (such as that of honour and sacrifice⁹) I am therefore also guilty of this romantic oversimplification. I have chipped away at the complexities surrounding Frank's person, until in my mind he appears as only a soldier. Here, I again find myself to be in the company of Dyer, who has confessed, with humour, to exhibiting a personal bias towards certain parts of the War's history, particularly the most epic battles of the Western Front. 'With a cloudless conscience', he writes, 'I skim the same parts of each: the war at sea, air raids on London, anything on the Eastern Front....It is not until the great battles of attrition that I am content to move at the pace of the slowest narrative...Essentially, then, mine is still a school boy's fascination.'

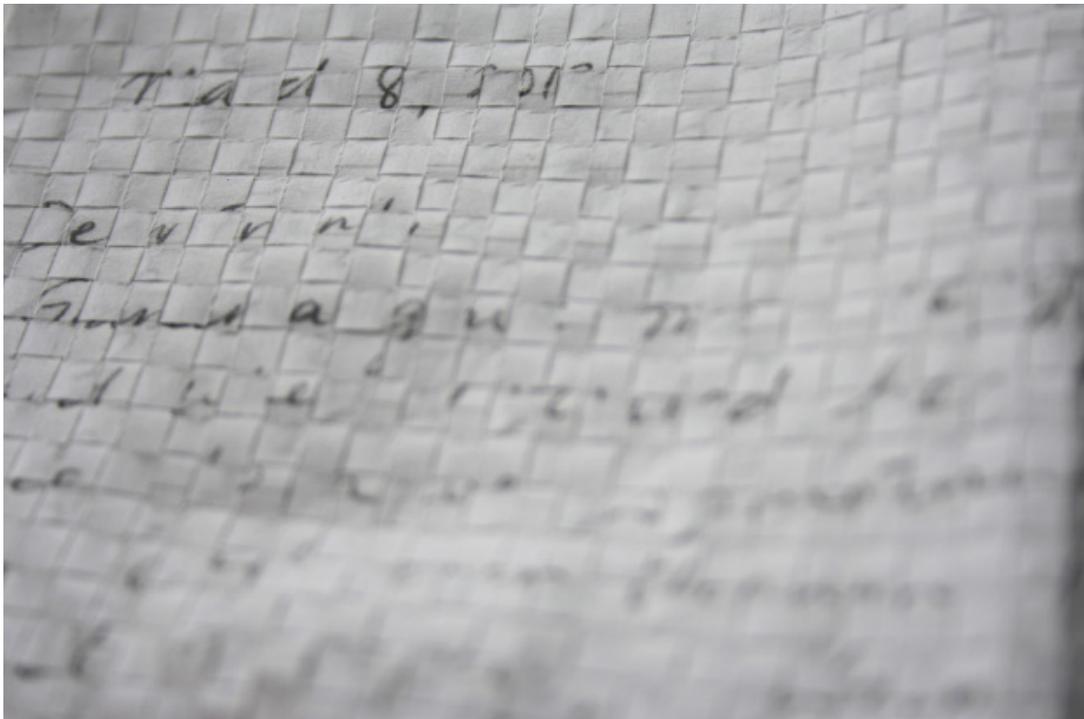
In regarding the history of the War, it is not so much the 'great battles of attrition' that have captured my attention, but the silence that has been witnessed in the veterans. 'Men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience', Walter Benjamin wrote. Within my own research, the most memorable encounter with this observation was found in Maurice Shadbolt's wonderful series of interviews with New Zealand veterans, conducted in the early nineteen-eighties and published in the book *Voices of Gallipoli*. This book has made a profound impact upon me, as what I discovered in reading these interviews, is that it is less the details of the battlefield that affects me, but the points at which veterans seem to falter in their expression (see **figure IV** on p. 13) Their struggle to communicate has opened up a series of gaps throughout this history, each indicating an experience with phenomena beyond all comprehension. While I can not understand what exactly lies behind these gaps, I can imagine the loneliness that must accompany it. In these small moments of empathy, the concept of the war affects me the most, and I must admit that I find the experience rather beautiful. And it seems that here I am not alone: Shadbolt more than once comments upon his experiences in encountering these gaps in expression. In his commentary preceding the testimony of Vic Nicholson, for example, Shadbolt notes that 'the gaps in his narrative were not due to failure of memory. Recall became too painful, and, at times, too tearful for him to continue'. Again, with regards to his experience in interviewing George Skerret, he writes that 'his vocabulary was seldom adequate to his experience: he choked again and again on words like 'frightful' and 'terrible' and shook his head helplessly'. These observations have haunted my imagination, and while I do not know if this response was also true of Frank, the connection that I feel towards these gaps makes it difficult to entertain the possibility of a different kind of reaction to the memory of the War. While my outlook is therefore perhaps tainted with bias, it is an outlook that I nonetheless wish to portray through my art. Perhaps this could be viewed as self-indulgent, however, I stand by this decision as my aim for this project is

⁹ Both Bushaway and Fussell have written in depth about the romantic portrayal of this history. Figures from their research have been included as examples in **Appendix I**.

Figure IV (above):
Connah Podmore
Letter to Frank June
25th 2013 (detail)

Figure V (below):
Connah Podmore
Blanket (detail text)
(2013).

veterans whose sentiments echo
Burgis' words. It is clear that
this experience was not an
uncommon one, and I imagine
that this reality would have
been in some way true for
you as well. I am sorry
that you had to live with
these memories alone. When
thinking back from the
present, knowing what I
know, I wish that I could
travel back so that I could
ask you what it was like.
But even in writing these words
I can feel my confidence
slipping. If I had the



not to uncover the past, or establish fact, but to illustrate my experience with history. These gaps make this history mean something to me.

The poetry that I perceive in these gaps can be likened to Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, as explored in her essay 'Nostalgia and its Discontents'. In this essay, Boym powerfully argues for the place of certain types of nostalgia, thereby challenging views held by the likes of Michael Kammen, who described nostalgia as 'history without guilt'. Boym's argument begins with her dividing nostalgia into two different sub-categories: *restorative* and *reflective*. Restorative nostalgia, she states 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home... [it] does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition'. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, does not attempt to reconstruct, or realise the unknown parts of history, but rather seeks to dwell upon the gaps offered by their absence. Those who are disposed to this sentiment therefore do not want to establish closure as this will stop the particular emotion that accompanies it. It is to be 'enamoured of the distance, not the referent itself', states Boym, citing Susan Stewart.

With regards to the concept of remembrance, an argument for a History that resists closure is also seen within the writing of contemporary historian James E. Young. Indeed, with regards to contemporary practices of memorialisation, Young has argued in favour of forms of expression that adhere to, what he calls, the goal of 'perpetual irresolution'. Specifically, in his essay 'Germany's Memorial Question: Memory, Counter-Memory and the end of the Monument', Young discusses the importance of this goal with regards to the memory of the Holocaust.¹⁰ In order to illustrate this idea, Young describes a submission made by artist, Horst Hoheisel, to the 1995 German National Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. This submission proposed the destruction of Berlin's iconic Brandenburger Tor. 'Rather than filling in the void left by the murdered people', Young writes, 'the artist would carve out an empty space in Berlin by which to recall a now absent people'¹¹. Hoheisel's concept deals with the notion of evoking memory through negative spaces, and is reminiscent of the gaps in understanding created through survivors' inability to articulate. In both cases, the gaps created, whether physical or conceptual, work to open up and prolong the possibilities that surround the memory of an event. In the case of my own work, these gaps are most simply evoked through the steady, methodical interruptions to the text of my letters, as separate strands are woven together into the blanket (see **figure V** on p. 13). As these interruptions are blank, they can be likened to the negative spaces of Hoheisel's proposal, or the gaps in the stories of war veterans. In all of these examples, these gaps prevent closure, and in the eyes of Young, greatly assist to the continuance of memory. Completed objects, he states, run the risk of becoming the carriers of memory, thereby divesting us of the need to remember. To ensure a continual engagement with memory, or the avoidance of what Boym sardonically terms a 'guilt-free homecoming', Young therefore argues for irresolute forms of expression. 'Only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory' he states.

In the eyes of Boym, perpetual irresolution need not always be achieved through 'gaps', but may also arise through contradiction, a trait characteristic to History itself. In a manner strikingly similar to Friedlander's 'twilight zone', as discussed in Chapter One, Boym invites us to partake in an exploration of history that is not directed forwards or backwards, but sideways: '...[into] side shadows and back alleys, rather than the straight road of progress'. An artwork that I feel perfectly exemplifies this approach is

10 I would like to acknowledge the many differences between the events of the Holocaust and World War One, however I will nonetheless unite these events under the banner of 'trauma', and apply Young's arguments concerning remembrance to my constructed memory of Frank.

11 Among other examples of the use of negative space in memorial based artworks is Rachael Whiteread's *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial*. While I would like to acknowledge the shared concerns and methods employed by her and myself, discussion of this memorial will not feature in this essay.

T.S. Eliot's poem 'East Coker', which explores the virtues of not knowing, and places an emphasis upon the journey made as opposed to conclusions gained.

*I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But faith and love and hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

Through my experience of writing to Frank, I have discovered many new thoughts. With specific regards to his life however, I am no surer now about his person than I was when I started this project. I have now been writing to him for nearly a year, and have not received an answer in reply. I have spoken to a statue in his place, but it was unmoving. However, I would prefer it to remain this way. I do not want answers, as in the suspended stillness of not-knowing, I can see the 'dancing' that Eliot refers to. There is beauty to be found in that beyond our reasoning.

Part Two *Method*

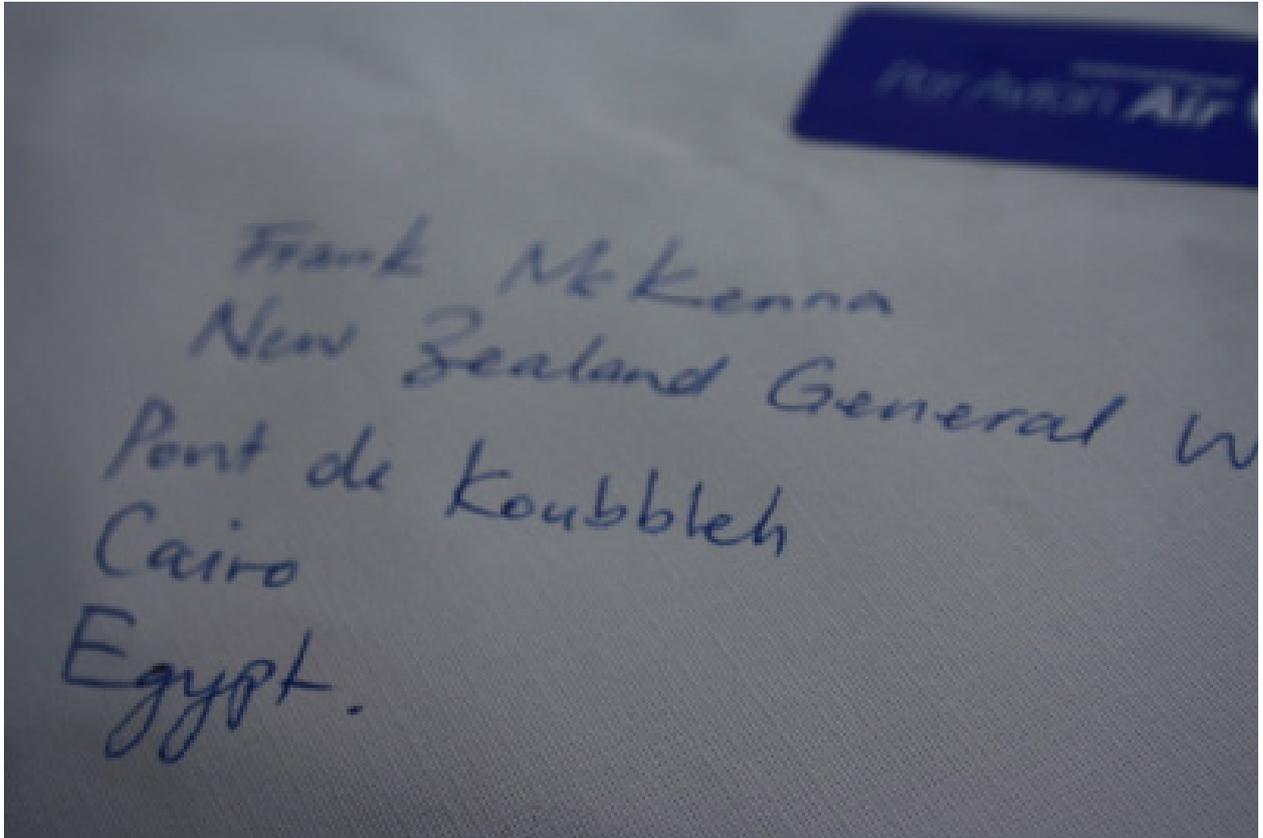


Figure VII: Connah Podmore, *Letter to Frank* (2013)

Chapter Three

The Intolerable Wrestle with Words and Meanings.

The artwork discussed in this essay could be described as multi-disciplinary in that it employs multiple devices to communicate its underlying concepts. In particular, *For Us There is Only the Trying* is a work that greatly relies upon narrative. At its most basic level, this is the story of someone who wrote so many letters to her (dead) great grandfather that she was able to weave their carbon copies into a blanket for his hospital bed. In order to relay this story, I have employed the devices of the written word, performative gesture, and the moving image. In this chapter, I will explore the first two of these devices, and offer an analysis of the way in which they have contributed to my artwork, and the artwork of others.

For Us, There is Only the Trying, began with the act of letter writing, and finds its beginnings in the written word. Indeed, my first encounter with Frank's memory was through the postcard that he had written to his mother from hospital in Cairo, and my interest in the Great War began through novels and poetry. With regards to my specific interest in the unknown and incommunicable aspects of the War, poetry and fiction have been noted for the key role that they play in the expression of the traumatic memories surrounding this history. Indeed, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell directly connects fiction and myth to the events of the War by way of the many strange rumours that circulated around the army at the time.¹² These rumours, Fussell notes, 'resemble much of the formal literature of the War in that their purpose is to 'make sense' of events which otherwise would seem merely accidental or calamitous.'

Fictitious narrative may therefore be seen as a means by which one may approach indescribable experiences from a relatively more comfortable distance. Indeed, many of the most celebrated novels that arose directly out of the war, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Ernst Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, relay autobiographical experiences through the voices of fictitious characters. Within my own work, the distant narrative that I turn to is not created through my letters, or the extended performance of making the blanket, for objectively speaking, these show true and real events. Instead, my fictitious narrative is the story of the War, and its protagonist is of course Frank. Perhaps I am using 'fiction' a little too loosely here, and I should state that I don't mean to imply that these events and people are any less real than my letters and blanket. Rather, like Remarque's fictitious character Paul Bäumer, whose experiences were based upon fact; Frank began as a historical figure, but has become unreal in my mind. This break from reality has been integral to my expression, as during the process of 'creating' Frank, I have unwittingly projected my own thoughts upon him, and more often than not; these thoughts point to the unspoken things, the 'gaps' in expression that I carry within me.¹³

With regard to the memory of the War, I believe that poetry and prose not only promotes self-expression in the face of the incommunicable, but also allows one to depict trauma in a dignified manner.¹⁴ Specifically, the extended nature of many of these written forms allows one to effectively conjure abstract phenomena, without reducing the subject to abstraction. This very idea can be

12 An example of a particularly farfetched rumour from this period was the legend of a spectral German spy who would appear in the British trenches just before an attack. This ghost spy was commonly blamed for failed attacks.

13 More will be discussed on this idea in Chapter Four.

14 I would like to equate 'dignity' to respect. More on this shall be discussed over the next two chapters.

supported by the following passage from *A Farewell to Arms*, in which Hemingway expresses a distaste for the generic symbols and learned expressions of the War:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them on proclamations that were slapped up by bill posters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was to be done except bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.

In the above, Hemingway's open rejection of common forms of expression works to demonstrate the importance that he places upon the events of which he speaks. Indeed, I would argue that his refusal to summarise in words the nature of his experiences works to paint a picture of phenomena beyond common understanding. Likewise, in T.S. Eliot's 'East Coker', a similar approach is employed, but in this case, words are rejected through the frequent use of contradiction. For example, statements such as 'in order to possess what you do not possess you must go by the way of dispossession', appear nonsensical. It is as if the opposing terms cancel one another out until nothing is said. With regards to that written in my letters to Frank, contradiction and rejection do not appear as strong statements, but are implied through a constant tone of uncertainty. In particular, this can be seen through my description of the blanket in my letter to Frank: in one paragraph I proclaim to be beautiful, and in the next, I list its failures. As in the case of Hemingway, this uncertainty is directly linked to the indescribable nature of our subject matter. For both of us, the events of the Great War are too significant, and too sad to be expressed. He can not find the right words to portray this history, and in both words and images, I can not find an appropriate aesthetic with which to recognise it.

In *For Us There is Only the Trying* writing has therefore assisted in the creation of an aesthetic of uncertainty. I believe that with regards to the history of the War, this aesthetic offers the most appropriate and respectful way to respond to its memory. As stated before, this work is about the experience of history from a distance, not a proclamation regarding the-way-things-were. I have no desire to impose labels upon this history, and consider a confident and singular view of the past as both arrogant and naïve (see **figure VIII** on p. 20). In bearing these thoughts, I find myself in the company of many of my peers. In an essay on contemporary expressions of remembrance, for example, James E. Young has stated that due to the many unknown or incommunicable aspects of history, many contemporary artists have found the only thing that they can be sure of, is the 'gulf' in understanding that divides past and present.

Contemporary artist, Mario Garcia Torres, is another such person whose attitude towards history reflects my own. In the 2011 *Artists and Archives* symposium held by the Getty Research Institute, Garcia Torres spoke about history within his own artwork: 'I am really interested in communicating my interest in history,' he states, 'but at the same time I am really opposed to saying "this is history", of being too proud of my findings...I am more interested in saying: "this is what I have found and this is my experience". Indeed, Garcia Torres and I share more than similar opinions regarding history, as in his work, he too creates one-way conversations with a historical figures through the act of letter writing. An example of this can be seen in his artwork, *Open Letter to Dr. Atl* (2005), which featured at the 2007 Venice Biennale. This work focuses upon a letter written from Garcia Torres to the deceased Mexican painter, Gerardo Murillo, who he addresses under the pseudonym of 'Dr. Atl'. This artwork comprises of a video piece featuring a hand-shot panorama of a landscape often painted by Murillo, over which Garcia Torres' letter

And what about his chosen caption
'Dead Turk at Hill 60'. It is as
blunt as the photograph itself.
Does he not care at all for
this man, or is he making
a conscience decision not to
romanticise war? I must admit
that I hope that it is not
the former, but please
believe me when I say that
I know that I can not
judge from this distance.
I have been making
down... from this

Figure VIII: Connah Podmore, *Letter to Frank March 8, 2013* (detail II)

appears as subtitles. In speaking specifically about his choice to use letter writing as a means to approach history, Garcia Torres has stated that he views this form of communication as a means 'to share something in a very personal way'.

Regarding the role that letters have played in my own work, I am quick to agree with Garcia Torres. Letter writing has allowed me to express my thoughts in the first person, and the letters that I have sent to Frank have been written in my voice and with my handwriting. However, it is not only the content and style of the letter that allows both Garcia Torres and myself to approach history in a personal way, but also the *act* of letter writing. In taking the time to write, one demonstrates a desire to connect with the person to whom the letter is addressed. The letter is therefore both a product; a finished article from which information may be extracted (or denied), and a personal gesture. In *For Us There is Only the Trying*, the act of writing and sending letters makes up only half of the gesture upon which the work is built. The act of weaving the blanket of course makes up the second half. This action also readily evokes a personal approach, as during the War homemade textiles were commonly sent to soldiers abroad as a gesture of support. Within my artwork, there are therefore many things said through not only that which is created, but the processes, or gestures, that have determined their creation. To conclude this chapter, I would therefore like to focus upon these gestures, and determine the effect that this almost performative, process driven approach has upon an artwork. What is more, how can this approach contribute to an artwork that concerns itself with memory? I shall begin this discussion through the work of contemporary artist, Francis Alÿs.

Alÿs has made a career out of seemingly pointless, irrational gestures that resist simple explanations. Many involve actions that require substantial effort, but do not achieve tangible results. Consequently, his actions have been described by many critics as 'futile'. For example, his videoed performance *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, captures Alÿs as he pushes a large block of ice through

the streets of Mexico City until it melts and evaporates away to nothing. Another such example of a seemingly pointless action is carried out in his 2002 piece, *When Faith Moves Mountains*. In the sand dunes of Ventanilla, Peru, he and a group of volunteers moved an entire sand dune over by a few inches, using nothing but spades.

Unlike Garcia Torres and myself, Alÿs' poetic gestures are not driven by history, but are instead often rooted in political observation. Indeed, one of the Alÿs' collaborators, Cuauhtémoc Medina, described *When Faith Moves Mountains* as a 'metaphorical political comment'. Despite the differences in our subject matter however, there is a strong common element that runs between Alÿs' work and my own. Both history and politics involve people, and by commenting upon either subject matter, both of us reference the lives of others. With specific regards to *When Faith Moves Mountains*, the 'metaphorical political' gesture that Alÿs employs revolves around the notion of wasted human labour. What could be more of a waste of time and energy than the manual displacement of an entire sand dune over by an imperceptible distance? On the surface, Alÿs' gesture seems entirely pointless, however the 'point' of this work is not to be found within the results of the action, but in the message that it sends.

The message behind *When Faith Moves Mountains* can be realised when the gesture is placed within the context of its location. Alÿs' gesture was carried out on a sanddune bordering an impoverished traditional labouring community on the outskirts of Ventanilla. With this knowledge in mind, the act of moving the sand dune therefore seems to speak to this community. *When Faith Moves Mountains* reflects upon what Medina calls 'the Latin-American principle of non-development'. With regards to the politics of Latin America, if labouring communities could afford to modernise, the economy of the region would grow. However, thoughts such as these are futile: in a world where one needs technology to make money, and money to purchase technology, many Latin American countries have found themselves trapped. When considered in this context, the action of moving the sand dune, which has been described by Medina as 'a huge endeavour whose major achievement is no achievement at all', begins to gather weight. The strenuous and futile task of moving a sand dune by hand becomes representative of the efforts of a whole group of people. His seemingly absurd gesture now functions as a portrait. What I find most wonderful about this idea, is that by devoting his own time and energy to a futile action, Alÿs is effectively equating his artwork to the lives of those that he seeks to represent. This I feel, shows empathy and a sincerity of motive, which in its own way works to dignify the lives of those represented through his art. 'The only wisdom that we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility', Eliot wrote, 'humility is endless.'

In many ways, Alÿs' inconsequential actions closely resemble Eliot's seemingly nonsensical statements. Both avoid easy answers and resolution. And in both, poetic spaces are created through gaps in our reasoning. With regards to my own project, the importance that these approaches play in the illustration of complex and intangible phenomena cannot be underestimated. As I strive to portray significant experiences which lie beyond my understanding, representation must not only be open and irresolute, but humble and sincere. When it comes down to it, I am appropriating and distorting the memory of another, and if I were to become overconfident and proud in my views pertaining to this memory, I would effectively be imposing upon it. The only way to compensate for any potential damage that I do in using this memory, is therefore not to inhabit and build upon it, but to exist alongside it. My artwork must therefore express both the vulnerability of my subject and of myself, and I believe that this is achieved through the great effort that I have made to reach out to Frank, and the 'failure' that has resulted. Letters have been sent to no response, and the blanket that I have made is imperfect and falling apart.

If I am to learn anything at all from Aljys, however, it is that the fruits of our labour are not always found within the result, but the journey. In a fifteen-minute film that documented *When Faith Moves Mountains*, many of the student volunteers commented upon their impressions leading up to and following this futile gesture. One student recalls his first impressions of the gesture as being 'silly.' However, later he continues to say: 'I got more involved... It's about doing something with a bunch of people.' The gesture in *When Faith Moves Mountains* can therefore be seen to extend beyond simple metaphor through the way that the experience would have altered, even if only in some small way, the consciousness of its participants. Futility and failure therefore have much to offer us. However, before you begin upon the journey, it is difficult to imagine what that may be. In making *For Us There is Only the Trying*, I have come across many of these 'offerings', and they shall be discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter Four

The Sharp Compassion of the Healer's Art.

As already alluded to in Chapter Three, I have found that a natural reaction to history's gaps is to project into them, and these projections will be largely determined by one's idiosyncrasies. It may be said that the shape that Frank has taken in my letters therefore greatly reflects myself. The experience of contemplating the past may therefore be viewed as an indirect way of considering the present. This very notion has been discussed by Svetlana Boym in her paper on reflective nostalgia. Boym notes that by longing for a past that one cannot realise, one may discover that the source of these sentiments is not actually without. Citing Henri Bergson, she continues that instead of remaining dormant in History, the past 'might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows vitality'. Likewise, these ideas are also explored by Nora, who points out the way in which history is constructed through combining the traces of the past into something that can be understood through the lens of our own experiences. 'One might try and sum this up by coining a term like 'mirror memory'' Nora states, 'but the problem is that mirrors only reflect identical copies of ourselves, whereas what we seek in history is difference – and through difference a sudden revelation of our elusive identity'.

The notion of self-examination through history can be seen in the early work of post-war German artist, Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer was born in Germany, in 1945, and may therefore be considered one of the 'second generation' following the Second World War. Unlike Hoffman and Spiegelman (see Chapter One) however, Kiefer's upbringing was not primarily carried out in the shadow of trauma, but as Andrea Lauterwein describes it, in a 'climate of simultaneous amnesia and guilt.' Unlike many of his era, however, Kiefer did not shy away from his country's past; he did not disown his national inheritance by ignoring its history, or blaming his predecessors. Instead, he chose to turn this history upon himself.

In 1969 he created a series of photographs of himself, alone, dressed in shabby military attire and posing in a Hitler salute. These photos were taken in various tourist destinations throughout Switzerland, Italy and France, and the series took on the name *Occupations*. During those years of intense German shame and regret, this series was, for the most part, not received well. Indeed, in presenting these photographs to his professors as part of his final degree, he was greatly criticised for doing so. The negative reaction to this work is of course, understandable, as in a society that is working to redeem themselves, the appropriation of the Nazi salute appears as both frightening and obtuse. Kiefer's aim however, was not to simply shock but to embody his country's recent history, and thereby implicate himself in the events of the past. Indeed, in later years, he would ask himself the question: 'Am I a fascist?' Explaining further still, he stated that 'the authority, the spirit of competition, the feeling of superiority... these are aspects of me just as they are of each and every one of us. One must choose the right path. To say that I am one thing or another is too simple. I wanted to depict the experience before the response.'

By inserting himself into the perspective of the past, it could be said that Kiefer gains a greater empathy with those of this era, and this in turn helps him understand something about himself. In a way, we could refer to this as an exchange, a *conversation* between past and present, where each informs the other. Within my own work, I am quite literally engaging in a conversation with the past. My conversation expresses a desire to show the personal concern and interest that I feel towards the life of a distant family member. In particular, the personal concern that I feel towards Frank's memory of the War was sparked by the likes of statements which expressed the loneliness that many veterans

felt in living with their incommunicable memories:

I went home to a mother, father and four sisters and no one ever asked me what it was like. For seventy years no one ever asked me what it was like.

In reading such statements, I feel regret that these men were made to feel this way, and in turn, this regret creeps up to my own actions. I am made to consider instances of carelessness or complacency that continue in my present. My blanket has been made not only for others, but for myself. For others, I hope that it will express care and comfort, and for myself its creation is undergone in the feeble hope that it may partially atone for all those times in which I have failed to act. Offering support to Frank reminds me of missed opportunities that I have had in the past, and the conversations that I could be having in the present (see **figure IX** on pg. 25).

History therefore brings with it a fair amount of responsibility. We feel a responsibility to remember the past and learn from it. With regards to my experience of responding to history through my artwork, I have found that the most difficult responsibility to resolve surrounds the question of how should history be represented? To conclude this essay, I would like to briefly discuss the politics of aesthetics and history, and how this has influenced the way in which the concepts driving this project have taken physical shape.

An inherent difficulty in my project, is that I find beauty and poetry residing within the unspoken things, the gaps throughout my great grandfather's history. The problem is that the presence of these gaps were most likely brought about by traumatic experience, and if I were to celebrate the perceived beauty of these gaps, I would therefore also be celebrating the terrible events behind them. Needless to say, I find the idea quite troubling. This problem concerning the aestheticisation of traumatic histories has been discussed a great deal. Those most opposed to the marriage of poetry and history, are often those who have directly experienced the event, or have followed closely in its wake. Theodor Adorno's famous expression regarding the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz stands as testament to this. Today, Adorno's statement could be perceived as a little excessive, but even from the comfortable distance that I find myself in relation to the Great War, I still have experienced points of discomfort during my own attempts to respond to this history through my art. The problem with the poetic, is its pleasantness. It could downplay or romanticise the nature of the event. Furthermore, many have expressed alarm at the idea that art could be used to redeem traumatic events of the past through rendering them beautiful.

While these are ideas that I certainly agree with, and take seriously, I can't help but think that traumatic history, as in any other kind of history, is multi-faceted and complex; and to restrict our methods of depiction surrounding such memories would be risky indeed. Limiting the palette used to portray this history may render it one-dimensional. Beauty may therefore have a place in the depiction of terrible histories, even if it is only to punctuate and enliven our thoughts regarding such events. Furthermore, perhaps the true tragedy behind traumatic memory is not solely the terrible events in themselves, but the juxtaposition of those events against what may have been a happy life that preceded it. In the preface to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, Remarque states that his story is of 'a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were *destroyed* by war' [my emphasis]. Here, the word 'destroyed' implies that before these events, these men must have been whole to begin with. Trauma may therefore be understood in terms of loss, and this loss may refer to beauty.

Figure IX (top):
Connah Podmore,
Letter to Frank, August 19th
2013 (detail)

Do you think that it's wrong of me
to spend so many of my thoughts
on a black-and-white past when
there are things in my present,
that exist in full colour and
are craving to be seen? I
don't think I have ever told
you, but I have a cousin
who is in the marines. He
has very recently been at
war in Afghanistan. I know
Steven. I like him a lot, and
I think of him regularly
whenever I turn to the 'world'
section in the newspaper. But
it is you, who I have never
met, that I continue to
write to.

Figure X (below left):
Connah Podmore,
Blanket (detail, rip I) (2013)

Figure XI (below right):
Connah Podmore,
Blanket (detail rip II) (2013)



*Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning,
The wild thyme unseen, and wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
Of death and birth.*

In order to reconcile my desire to portray the traumatic memory of the Great War in a beautiful way, I have made an effort to ensure that the aesthetic employed in my artwork points to a complicated as opposed to tranquil beauty. The beauty that I wish to depict is imperfect, laced with anxiety, and sure to fade. As stated earlier, through my writing and gesture, I have worked to create an 'aesthetic of uncertainty'. Here, the obvious sincerity of my gesture, and the pictures painted by words, renders the work beautiful. This beauty however, is paired with obvious feelings of unease: I make it known that I am unsure as to how I should best address this history. My aesthetic is therefore, to quote Young, an 'aesthetic that remarks upon its own limitations'. With regards to the object that I have created, the notion of limited beauty can be seen through the obvious fragility of the blanket. Through the images and words that I have used to portray the blanket, one can clearly see that it is unravelling (see **figures X & XI** on p. 25). Unlike the stone statue to which I speak, it is not an object that has been made to last, but will degrade over time.¹⁵ While it remains however, it is truly a beautiful object. In viewing it however, one gets the impression that their encounter with the blanket is fleeting. Its beauty is limited by time.

The decision to make a video of the blanket was made out of consideration of the control that I could employ in capturing this object.¹⁶ It was important to me that any imagery of this object would add to the poetics of my letter, rather than directly illustrate the pictures evoked. The idea of blanket as metaphor is therefore of great importance. To support this notion through film, I have worked to create an almost dream-like quality, through the use of soft focus and early morning light. In saying this however, I have remained weary of the potential for romantic imagery to creep into these dream-like shots, and to counter-act this, I have also included points of focus, where attention is drawn to details, both beautiful and imperfect within the blanket. Ultimately when capturing the blanket, I have looked to do so with honesty, and I feel that my rather naive photographic style reflects upon my relationship with the history that has informed it. Shots are therefore technically imperfect, and rather than using bright lights and big shadows to achieve a permanent, monumental feel, I have opted to shoot the blanket in simple conditions that would not alter its character. Soft light was used, and this helped to create a quiet and humble portrayal of the blanket, an aesthetic that was further promoted by the soft greys and off-whites captured throughout the object. Rather than the 'perfect whiteness' that I describe through my letter, this is clearly an object that falls victim to the imperfections of every-day life. Furthermore, video has assisted in offering a temporal component to this piece, and thereby directly points to the notion of a life-span, and beauty lost. This is further accentuated by the many shots which concentrate on the rips that run throughout the blanket and point to the beginning of its degeneration.¹⁷

15 Indeed, the paper used to make this blanket is not acid free, it is the cheap kind found at stationary stores, and the fibers in this paper will quite literally break down over time.

16 I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the help that I received in making this video. Recent Massey graduate, Rebekah Leah Chong assisted in the filming of the blanket and offered her advice in the editing. Likewise, local film maker, Sandy Burton-Davis filmed my performance to the statue in the first video.

17 I would briefly like to recognise a potential contradiction in my work, in that by choosing to document the blanket through photography, I am in a way preserving it. While there is truth to this, this does not prevent my video from acting as a messenger of impermanence. While impermanence is clearly portrayed by the subject matter, photography also plays a role in promoting this idea. Roland Barthes perfectly sums up this notion in his seminal book *Camera Lucida*: 'What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once.'

In comparison to the likes of Garcia Torres and Alÿs, who present their extended gestures through more of a documentarian approach, and often with a 'low tech' aesthetic¹⁸, the attention to beauty that I have placed in my video, may seem inappropriate given my subject matter. With regard to this idea, I would like to conclude through turning to one final artist whose contribution to the portrayal of traumatic memory has greatly influenced my own. Doris Salcedo is a Columbian artist, who makes object-based installations in response to the recent memory of trauma that haunts her country. Salcedo's objects seem simple at first, but are in fact built through layers of subtle details. From a distance, one of her objects may appear self-evident, but perceptions will change the closer you get. For example, at first glance, the piece *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic* appears to be the simple combination of two tables: a wooden one and a white one. However, upon closer inspection, the white table is not wood painted white, but is covered with a thin layer of silk stretched taught over the table top and down its legs. Closer still, sewn into this table are hundreds of human hairs which stand upright and poke through the silk.

Despite my interest in the memories surrounding the Great War, it is not the depiction of trauma in Salcedo's work that interests me the most, but the sensitivity in which she approaches the memories that she endeavours to represent. She does not parade the traumatic nature of these memories, but exposes them quietly, and with subtlety. Like Alÿs, the effort that is put into making her work is also evident. To attach the hairs to the table in *Unland*, hundreds of individual holes had to be made into the table's surface by a minute drill. Each hair was then stitched in by hand. In Chapter Three, I equated the effort inherent within physical gestures, with sincerity of motive, and I demonstrated this through the work of Alÿs. I would now like to apply this notion to not only gestures, but physical objects, like those created by Salcedo. With regards to my work, the effort that has been put in to making the blanket is clear. In viewing it, no one could deny my sincerity of motive. However, the blanket is not the only component of my artwork, as *For Us There is Only the Trying* has been sculpted out of a much larger extended gesture. In order to portray the extent of the entire effort therefore, it was important that this same interest in aesthetics and craftsmanship could be discerned through the entire video installation through which the story of my efforts is portrayed.

Finally, this artwork has not been made in response to events, but people. *For Us There is Only the Trying* relates to many lives, each of which I wish to recognise in a humane way. In an interview, speaking on the importance of memory in her work, Salcedo confessed that she found the notion of aestheticizing trauma 'perverse'. However, she went onto say 'If you want to dignify a human life, then you have to come back to beauty'.

18 The 2007-2008 presentation of *When Faith Moves Mountains*, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, for example, consisted of a documentary film, made up of interviews and original footage from the performance. Alongside this, was a table laid with photos taken from the event. Likewise Garcia Torres has been noted to display a preference for a low tech, and even 'banal' aesthetic. In an article on Garcia Torres, Craig Burnett described the artist as displaying a 'sensual intensity of thought', yet 'trades in pretty dull images'.

Conclusion

In response to this history and my present – to the things that I cannot fully realise or hope to fix – the only option that I see is a humble grope towards an unachievable cause. A sincere, yet futile gesture. An endless poetic struggle.

*There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.*

Notes

p. 2 'while it was true that time...' McCarthy, C. (1993, p. 600)

Chapter One

- p. 6. 'He could be anyone's grandfather...' Dyer, G. (1994, p. 3)
- p. 6 'always problematic and incomplete' Nora, P (1992, p. 1)
- p. 6. 'We used to know...' Ibid. p.12
- p. 6. 'We take the shreds of the past...' Ibid. p.13
- p. 8 'There is only one word...' Ibid. p. 1
- p. 8 'In my early work I pretended...' Boltanski, C. (1996, p. 11)
- p. 8 'The closer one moves...' Friedlander, S. (1993, p. vii)
- p. 8 'The twilight-zone between...' Hobsbawm, E.(1987) Cited in: Friedlander, S. (1993, p. vii)
- p. 9 ...postmemory as a structure... Hirsch, M. (2008, p. 103)
- p. 9 'connect so deeply to the...' Ibid. pp. 105-106
- p. 9 'approximates memory in...' Ibid. p. 109
- p. 9 'The paradoxes of indirect...' Hoffman, E. (2004) Cited in: Hirsch, M. (2008, p. 106)
- p. 9 'the language of the family...in my house...' Ibid. p. 112
- p. 9 'no degree of power or monumentality...' Weissman, G. (2004) Cited in: Hirsch, M. (2008, p. 109)
- p. 9 'When I was a kid...' Spiegelman, A. (1986-1992, p. 234)
- p. 10 'organised cult of Remembrance' Dyer, G. (1994, p. 32)
- p. 10 'familial and affiliative...' Hirsch, M. (2008, pp. 114-115)
- p. 10 'my father bleeds history' Spiegelman, A. (1986-1992, p. 3)
- p. 10 '...the Great War may be considered...' Bushaway, B. (1992, p. 138)
- p. 11 'crosses stretch away in lines...' Dyer, G. (1994, p.102)
- p. 11 'all New Zealanders killed...' Ministry for Culture and Heritage (2013)
- p. 11 'axiomatic of remembrance itself' Bushaway, B. (1992, p. 137)
- p. 11 'a time-based aural experience' Scott, K. (2012). In Sauerlander, K. (2012, p. 334)

Chapter Two

- p. 12 'I skim the same parts of each...' Dyer, G. (1994, p. 76)
- p. 12 'great battles of attrition' Ibid.
- p. 12 'Men returned from the...' Benjamin, W. (1969) Cited in Olick, Jeffery K., Vinitzky-Seroussi, V. & Levy, Daniel (Eds.) (2011, p. 98)
- p. 12 'the gaps in his narrative...' Shadbolt, M. (1988, p. 88)
- p. 12 'his vocabulary was seldom adequate...' Ibid, p. 50
- p. 14 'history without guilt' Kammen, M. (1991) Cited in Boym, S. (2007, p. 9)
- p. 14 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction...' Boym, S. (2007, p. 13)
- p. 14 'enamoured of the distance...' Stewart, S. (1984) Cited in Boym, S. (2007, p. 15)
- p. 14 'perpetual irresolution' Young, J. E. (1997, p. 854)
- p. 14 'rather than filling in the void...' Ibid, p. 853
- p. 14 ...completed objects...run the risk of becoming carriers of memory... Ibid, p. 855
- p. 14 'guilt-free homecoming' Boym, S. (2007, p. 9)
- p. 14 'Only an unfinished memorial...' Young, J. E. (1997, p. 854)
- p. 14 'side shadows and back alleys...' Boym, S. (2007, p. 9)
- p. 15 'I said to my soul...' Eliot, T. S. (1940, p. 180)

Chapter Three

- p. 18 'resemble much of the formal literature...' Fussell, P. (1975, p. 121)
- p. 18 ...as in Remarque's Paul Baumer...' Murdoch, B. (1994, p. 212)
- p. 18 ...an example of a particularly farfetched rumour... Fussell, P. (1975, p. 121)
- p. 19 'I was always embarrassed...' Hemingway, E. (1929, p. 184)
- p. 19 'in order to possess what you do not possess...' Eliot, T. S. (1940, p. 181)
- p. 19 ...the only thing that they can be sure of... Young, J. E. (1997, p. 858)
- p. 19 'I am really interested in communicating...' Garcia Torres, M. (2011)
- p. 19 ...this work focuses upon a letter.... Burnett, C. (2007, p. 71)
- p. 20 'to share something in...' Garcia Torres, M. (2011)
- p. 20 ...during the war, homemade textiles... Baird, K. (2013, p. 394)
- p. 20 ...his actions have been described by many critics as 'futile'. Kester, G. (2009, p. 414)
- p. 20 ...his videoed performance Sometimes Making Something... Alÿs, F. (1997)
- p. 21 'metaphorical political comment' Medina, C. Cited in Kester, G. (2009, p. 416)
- p. 21 ...revolves around the notion of wasted human labour... Kester, G. (2009, p. 414)
- p. 21 ...on the outskirts of Venitilla... Herbert, M. (2011, p. 86)
- p. 21 'the Latin-American principle of...' Medina, C. (2007) Cited in Kester, G. (2009, p. 414)
- p. 21 'a huge achievement whose...' Ibid, p. 415
- p. 21 'The only wisdom one can hope...' Eliot, T. S. (1940, p. 179)
- p. 22 'I got more involved...' Unnamed volunteer, Alÿs, F. (2004)
- p. 22 ...altered....the consciousness of its participants... Kester, G. (2009, p. 414)

Chapter Four

- p. 23 'might act, and will act...' Bergson, H. (1988) Cited in Boym, S. (2007, p. 16)
- p. 23 '...coining a term like mirror memory...' Nora, P. (1992, p. 13)
- p. 23 'climate of simultaneous amnesia...' Lauterwein, A. (2007, p. 23)
- p. 23 ...in presenting these photographs...he was greatly criticised... Ibid, p. 31.
- p. 23 'Am I a fascist?...' Kiefer, A. (1987) Cited in Lauterwein, A. (2007, p. 37)
- p. 24 'I went home to a mother...' Burgess, C. (1985) Cited in Pugsley, C. Barber, L. Mikaere, B. Prickett, N. & Young, R. (1996, p. 161)
- p. 24 ...Theodor Adorno's famous expression... Young, J. E. (1997, p. 856)
- p. 24 ...art could work to redeem traumatic histories... Ibid, p. 857
- p. 24 'a generation of men who...' Remarque, E. M. (1929/1994, p. v)
- p. 26 'whisper of running streams...' Eliot, T. S. (1940, p. 180)
- p. 26 'remarks upon its own limitations' Young, J. E. (1997, p. 856)
- p. 26 'What the Photograph reproduces...' Bathes, R. (1980/2000, p. 4)
- p. 27 ...upon closer inspection...poke through the silk... Huysen, A. (2000, p. 100)
- p. 27 ...Each hair was then stitched in by hand... Ibid.
- p. 27 '...if you want to dignify a human life...' Salcedo, D. (2004)
- p. 27 The 2007/2008 presentation of When Faith.... Kester, G. (2009, p. 414)
- p. 27 A preference for a low tech... Scharrer, E. (2008, p. 75)
- p. 27 'Pretty dull images...' Burnett, C. (2007, p. 71)

Conclusion

- p. 28 'There is only the fight to recover...' Eliot, T. S. (1940, p. 182)

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Appendix

1. Diagrams illustrating the transformation of the War's history into romantic ideals:

Figure XI (right):
Bushaway, B.
'The Transformation of the Sustaining Ideologies' (1992).

Figure XII (below):
Fussell, P. From:
The Great War and Modern Memory (detail) (1975).

1914	→	1919
Specific war aims (defence of Belgian neutrality)	→	World peace
Patriotism	→	Supranationalism
Service/duty	→	Sacrifice
Heroism	→	Sanctification
Casualties	→	The Fallen/The Glorious Dead
Comradeship	→	Fellowship
The soldier's experiences	→	Christ's crucifixion
Victory	→	Expiation and redemption
Battlefields	→	Holy or sacred ground
Defeat of Germany	→	Defeat of war

TO ATTACK IS TO	<i>assault</i>
To be earnestly brave is to be	<i>gallant</i>
To be cheerfully brave is to be	<i>plucky</i>
To be stolidly brave is to be	<i>staunch</i>
Bravery considered after the fact is	<i>valor</i>
The dead on the battlefield are	<i>the fallen</i>
To be nobly enthusiastic is to be	<i>ardent</i>
To be unpretentiously enthusiastic is to be	<i>keen</i>
The front is	<i>the field</i>
Obedient soldiers are	<i>the brave</i>
Warfare is	<i>strife</i>
Actions are	<i>deeds</i>
To die is to	<i>perish</i>
To show cowardice is to	<i>swerve</i>
The draft-notice is	<i>the summons</i>
To enlist is to	<i>join the colors</i>
Cowardice results in	<i>dishonor</i>
Not to complain is to be	<i>manly</i>
To move quickly is to be	<i>swift</i>
Nothing is	<i>naught</i>
Nothing but is	<i>naught, save</i>