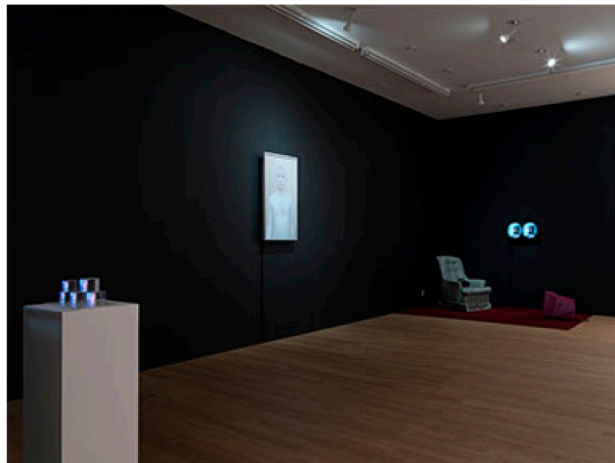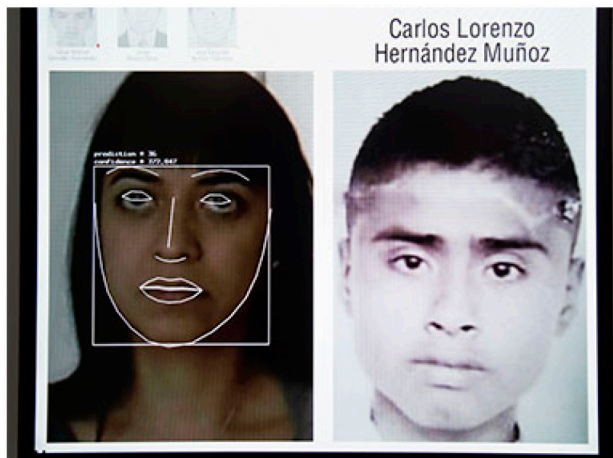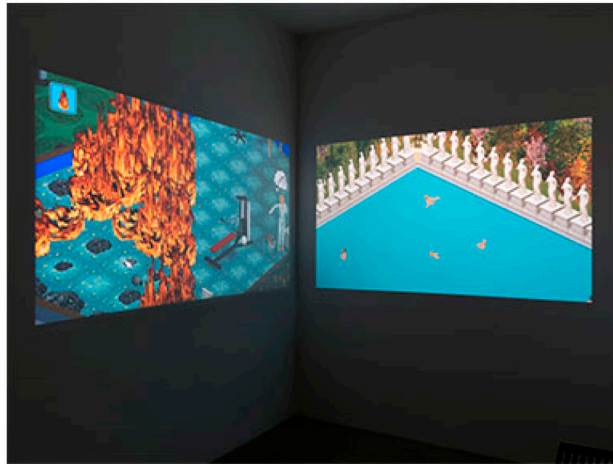POST

MEMORY BURN

by Melissa Ray | August 10, 2015

Are we digitising our memories in an attempt to avoid our mortality? Chris Romero's group exhibition 'Memory Burn' at Manhattan's bitforms gallery explores the digitally simulated spaces that we inhabit, questioning the way we seek to preserve our identities with recording devices and online networks.
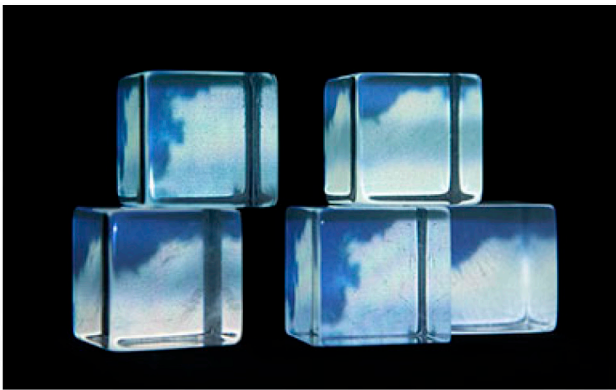
Inspiration for the exhibition arose from Romero's reading of Adolfo Bioy Casares' 1940 fantasy novella *The Invention of Morel*

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Invention_of_Morel).
Strikingly prescient in its voyage into
virtual realities, the novella tells the
story of a fugitive on a deserted island
who becomes emotionally attached to
the lifelike projections of a recording

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device. Its looped, simulated reality
drives him to despair. At bitforms
gallery, curator Romero immerses
visitors in a similar environment through
the exhibition's virtual counterpart, an
abyss-surrounded island that can be
explored online. Dealing with loneliness
and madness, Casares' protagonist
prefers to integrate himself within the

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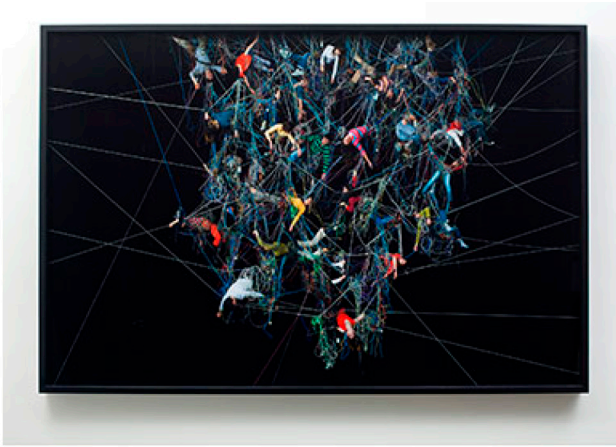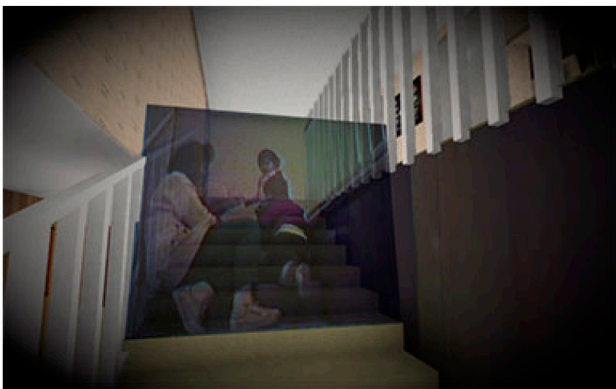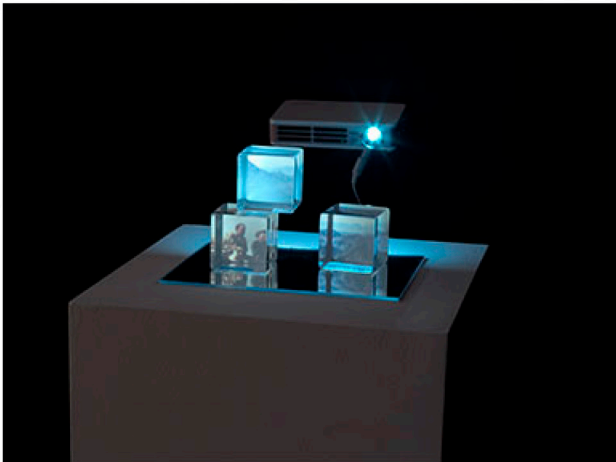
memory of the machine rather than continue in physical reality. By reminding us of the integration of our memories into machines - in phone-stored notes, selfies, profiles and games – the artists exhibited in 'Memory Burn' prompt us to recognise ourselves in this fantasy.

In Andrea Wolf (http://www.andreawolf.org/)'s, 'Unsolicited Memories; Archival Exercises', personal clips are projected from found super 8 films onto a stacked

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collection of Plexiglass cubes, appearing and disappearing at random like the act of remembering itself. 'Enredos 1', a photograph showing a host of bodies strung up and entangled in a network of wires by Daniel Canoger (http://www.danielcanogar.com/), hints at the intertwined nature our physical death and virtual lives. And in Sarah Rothberg (http://sarahrothberg.com/)'s 'Memory/Place: My House', viewers are able navigate a stranger's memories in a simulated experience that questions the meaning that we attach to memory. Presented together, they form an exhibition whose effect is at once provocative and lingering with a self-reflective sting, mimicking the very qualities of a distant memory.

POSTmatter: Memory Burn observes mortality and death in relation to recording devices, referring to memories recorded in the mind and memories recorded digitally. To what extent do you see the act of curating as another form of recording, documenting, and archiving the human experience as a means of preserving it?

Chris Romero: I think curating can observe preservation, recording, and documenting – but exhibitions are often temporary moments. The memory of them then gets preserved through documentation or a visitor's memory, which is important. Hopefully the concept is remembered and creates some interesting ideas in the future. When I was working in museum studies, part of my time was focused on media art conservation, and so some of my thinking comes from that.

Also, as a curator, an exhibition might be thought of as "in the present", but there is also a history of exhibitions, and what those exhibitions say about certain beliefs, ideas, or times. If you

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look at exhibitions of the 70s, they are sure to have different characteristics than those of the 80s, 90s, and so forth. Of course they have similarities too, but I think it is important for a curator to realise how their exhibitions will be remembered and also influence other exhibitions in the future.

Creating an exhibition allows you to archive certain parts of the human experience, and preserve a concept or combination of ideas (in the form of artworks, or exhibition materials). At the very least, anyone visiting an exhibition also has a record in their memory of the event. When I look at "Memory Burn" it makes sense as an archive too; the works capture the concerns and thoughts of a group of artists influenced by recording devices, and the way that they affect our lives.

PM: The participants of your conjunctive virtual space find themselves isolated on an island with only a short loop of Seinfeld and a virtual manifestation of your exhibition for distraction from the abyss that surrounds them. In terms of the themes of mortality and death, how do you respond to this world and what do you hope it will elicit in other viewers?

CR: The virtual space, created in the exhibition by Sarah Rothberg, becomes another way of remembering; for those who did not see the exhibition, it becomes a way of getting somewhat closer to an event that transpired.

However, we must remember that virtual reality constructions are just representations, and not exact replicas. The island is funny and quirky. We omitted many details about it on purpose, so it functions as a fragment.

PM: What is it that you find compelling about video games, virtual realities and internet culture in the context of the gallery?

CR: This might be a generational thing. I've spent a lot of time in those worlds, but when I made a decision to go into curating and art history I didn't think much about them. However, those spaces were asking to be interpreted and analysed as I saw more artists discussing them. I really like working with artworks that utilise these concepts because they don't always fit with the notion of a gallery or a museum. Determining the layout of the show, and talking with the artists on how a viewer interacts with a piece are exciting. They disrupt our common thought process of what a gallery should or can do.

PM: In Casares' novel, the protagonist tries to cope with loneliness and gradual madness by integrating himself into the memory of the machine. Do you see our contemporary experience with recording devices, virtuality and electronic networks as a similar response to loneliness and madness or vice versa, as a producer of loneliness and madness?

CR: I think that in many ways they are. Of course, a lot of other emotions are wrapped up in it too. Focusing on loneliness and madness though, we use these devices to seek something. A recording device like a camera for home movies helps us remember what our mind stored somewhere far back. Virtuality, especially in a lot of recent projects, is trying to create a new world or escape from what is around us, or

even replicate it. There are groups now trying to 3D-scan galleries, which have openings in real life and in the virtual realm simultaneously. And electronic networks, I would suggest that many of us go to sleep with our devices beside us. We are coping with the growing pains of our new partners.

PM: Has the ability to digitally burn our memories altered our ability to sentimentally remember?

Our ability to remember sentimental moments has been enhanced, altered, changed, and certainly more than just that. It allows us to store things we might see as fuzzy. I think of it as an appendage or a prosthetic.

Think about the sound of your grandfather, or the size of your childhood dog. They might be easy to conjure up, but having a record changes the vantage point. Now we record a lot more than we used to, and we have more options for doing so.

Digitally burning memories aids us in creating the archive, and it also increases nostalgia. Without it, we don't always completely forget something, but we do have more empty space on the picture plane. That can be good or bad; does it remove elements of the imagination, then? How does it confuse or solve multiple perspectives or retellings? It complicates matters… what about the parts that aren't recorded or stored? We might not have the slightest clue because we only now remember the recording we just witnessed. The mundane can also be recorded, and not just the special or nostalgic. What do we do with that, and all of the junk mixed in with the "important" stuff?

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PM: The work featured exists at the intersection of art and technology, which you then junction with literature.

How is the discipline of literature and fiction useful for translating an exhibition to an audience?

Often art and technology is thought of as a new exploratory frontier, which it is in some ways, but we should also consider writings of the past that opened up these possibilities and ideas. In cases like *The Invention of Morel*, there are predecessors. Artworks that utilise new technologies may be groundbreaking but they have deep roots.

This allows a viewer to really think about the intention and origin of the work. Did the artist read this text too, or is it just a coincidence they discuss similar concepts? As time passes we find ourselves still asking the same questions but from different perspectives and in different ways. So it is important to acknowledge literature and fiction as a kind of alternate way of viewing these concepts.

PM: What was your experience of reading Adolfo Bioy Casares' The Invention of Morel?

CR: Despite understanding how things will end, it was incredibly enticing. To see the protagonist pine over someone that isn't there was painful. And then he goes further, altering what a future visitor might see. This fugitive is mad and confused, but also relatable. As he reaches his end, living forever or controlling someone else isn't necessarily what he wants — he wants to feel connected and feel a part of something again.

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I felt a lot of confusion, but also sympathy when reading the novel. The comparison to photography and film was also strongly apparent as events transpired. Casares' text made me feel the power of recording devices, how drunk we can get off of them, and how confusingly painful they can be when tangled in love and obsession.

Memory Burn (http://www.bitforms.com/exhibitions/memory-burn) is on display at bitforms gallery until 16th August.

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