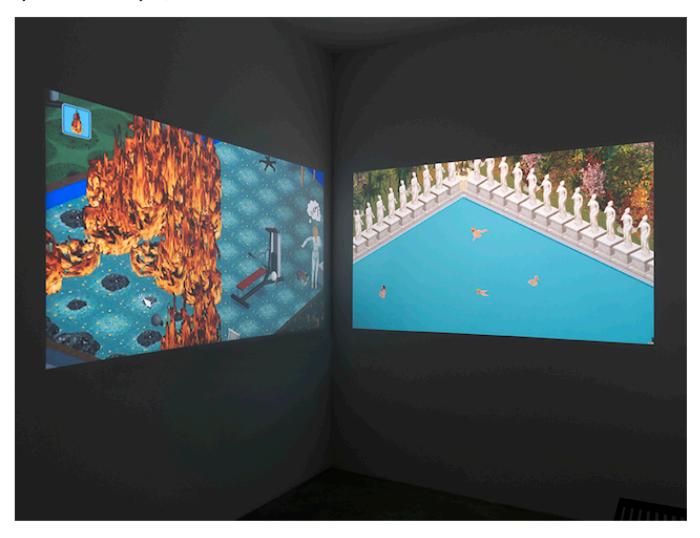# Inhabiting Other People's Recorded Memories

by **Alicia Eler** on July 29, 2015



Angela Washko, "Womanhouse (Or: How To Be A VirtuousWoman)" (2014) from the series 'Free Will Mode' (all images courtesy of bitforms gallery)

"I turned the computer on and began to write — all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory," writes the author dubbed **Elena Ferrante** in her book *My Brilliant Friend*. This is how the narrator begins her four-part story about a lifelong friendship: with the fascinating concept of dumping out all of one's memory. Is it possible? The group exhibition *Memory Burn* at bitforms gallery, curated by Chris Romero, explores the devices we use to record our lives as we confront mortality and death, and reveals the moments we document to be greatly different from those we just remember, for reasons we cannot control.

Like a distant memory, the work in this show is beautifully curated but not always the easiest to

connect with. At the entrance of this Lower East Side gallery, which boasts lovely floor-to-ceiling windows, viewers encounter Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's piece "Level of Confidence" (2015) about **the mass kidnapping of 43 students** from the Ayotzinapa school in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The viewer stands in front of a yearbook-like collection of photographs of the students, and steps onto two footprints that recall the moment before going through an airport metal detector. After that, a facial recognition detector scans the viewer's face, attempting to match his or her facial features with one of the missing students.

**Facial recognition engine:** Fisher, Eigen, LBPN   **Detected similarity score:** 334.692 points
**With the face of disappeared Ayotzinapa student:** Alexander Mora Venancio
**Level of confidence:** 16 %   **Result:**



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Level of Confidence" (2015), face-recognition algorithms, computer, screen, webcam

This action always fails, of course, instead causing one to both recognize one's own privilege (while experiencing up close creepy facial recognition technology) and the sadness of the families who continue to cope with the disappearance of their loved ones. If this piece is purchased, all proceeds will go directly to the families of the missing. It's a heavy piece to start off an already complex exhibition, setting the tone for "memory" as a concept that brings up mixed emotions, a sense of loss, and a profoundly deep experience of mourning for the disappeared.
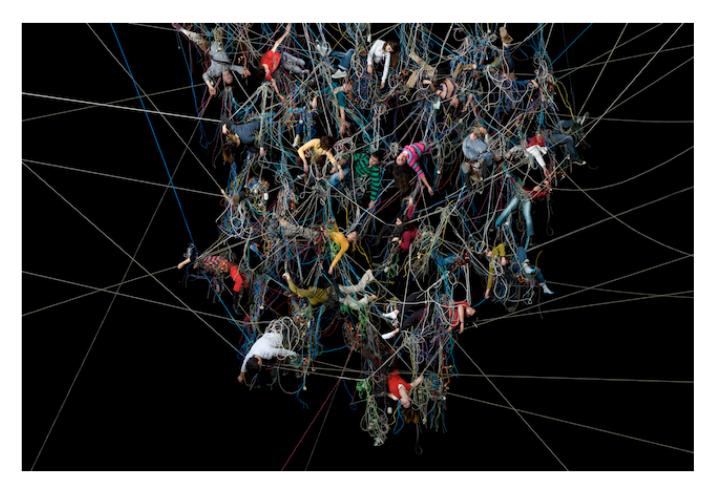


Andrea Wolf, "Unsolicited Memories; Archival Exercises" (2014)

While that piece was searing, Andrea Wolf's series *Unsolicited Memories, Archival Exercises* (2014) lingered. Mimicking the arbitrary experience of triggering memories, Wolf's piece randomly projects found super 8 and 8mm films onto a stacked collection of Plexiglas cubes that actually look like enlarged ice cubes. These images, with their grainy and physical, filmic quality, flicker and shine onto the cubes, offering a fleeting, ephemeral quality, as if the images of people and hazy landscapes will soon escape and fade away, like gentle wisps from late-night memories.

In the Japanese artist duo exonemo's "Body Paint," a man's face and white-painted torso are projected onto what appears to be a painting; it is entirely still save for the moving eyeballs that evoke a creepy painting in an old, haunted mansion. In the literal sense, this piece could discuss what it means to *look* for a memory, to be a fly on the wall — the book ***Perks of Being a Wallflower*** comes to mind — but it's also about being an everyman, about the sense of blending in as a blank face, body, canvas.

**Angela Washko**'s video "Womanhouse (Or: How to be a Virtuous Woman)" (2014) is part of the series *Free Will Mode*, which is made from the video game **The Sims** (year 2000 edition), where the user plays with, operates, and controls model humans in a virtual world. Washko's chaotic world, however, is nothing like the game; here, women live alone in dangerous conditions, wandering about in confined spaces, and only speak when they need something like food, sleep, or a door through which to exit. Stoves burn, women take naps, and have nervous breakdowns, banging their heads against walls like rats in a cage. In one of the videos, a woman sits next to a pool that's surrounded by Greek sculptures; inside the pool, men "swim" a few laps, drop under the water, then get up and perform this brief motion again and again. In this alternate Sims reality, everything is absurd and charming, maddening in its repetition.

In Sara Ludy's series of .gifs *Beaches* (2014), she documents her vacation-like visit into the online virtual world ***Second Life*** by hanging some paradisiacal landscapes on the wall, accompanied by an audio installation of recordings from her "trip." The internet is real life, and we're living through screens whether we're surfing the web or just vacationing in a second life, tropical environment. The concept is fascinating, but the actual imagery and sound don't quite take you there; instead, Ludy's project is more like a photo album of visual souvenirs from a trip that she took by herself to a virtual world. Similarly, Daniel Canogar's large photograph "Enredos 1" (2007) which shows an array of people literally caught in the "network" — a series of wound wires and cords that dangle from some invisible ceiling — is a bit literal in its execution. But that's OK — sometimes internet virtual life is pretty boring.

Daniel Canogar, "Enredos 1" (2007), Kodak Endura photo mounted on aluminum

In Sarah Rothberg's "Memory/Place: My House" (2014–15) she takes a memory that would otherwise seem innocuous or uninteresting and makes it both physically and emotionally intense. By having viewers wear an **Oculus virtual reality headset**, she pulls from archival photographs from her childhood to create a tour through her family home. This is both a journey through someone else's memory and a detached commentary on the nature of memory itself, which solidly ties up the show's concept. The viewer sits in a cushy armchair that could actually have been in the artist's family living room growing up and becomes a "player" in the artist's memory, navigating around the constructed landscape using an arcade stick controller as if playing a game. But moving through the rooms is a weird, stilted, emotionally uncomfortable action — much like the process of mining one's memory for a story, fact, or narrative. The piece — which can also physically nauseating — is a metaphor for such solitary self-reflection and the search for meaning in slices of memory.

**Memory Burn** *continues at bitforms gallery (131 Allen St, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 16 .*

**Andrea WolfAngela Washkobitforms galleryChris RomeroDaniel CanogarOculusRafael Lozano-HemmerSara LudySarah Rothberg**

Sarah Rothberg, "Memory/Place: My House" (2014–2015), virtual reality environment, Oculus Rift headset, swivel chair, CRT television monitor