

Inside the box

A TALE (1951-2014)

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**RESTORING MEMORIES.
ABOUT PRIVATE ARCHIVES.**

VALERIA FERONE

ABSTRACT

This project started last year. The focus has always been on exploring both digital and analogue mediums to engage with an archive created by my father in our house in my hometown Napoli, in Southern Italy. My father was an 'Arte e Immagine' (Arts and Image) teacher for middle school. In this archive, there are not only books but a mixture of paintings, notes from his educational program, and magazines that he had; mostly everything is related to arts and design. In engaging with my father's archive, I am working towards building a multimedia installation that includes two parts: a series of videos and a publication. The publication contains a curation of selected material from my father's archive, which I started digitalizing four years ago. The video works are developed as an attempt to represent my memories of my father through written and performative experiments. The two works explore memories and ways of defining myself and my identity through studying my father's art collection. The editorial project is titled 'Inside the box' and is an exploration of creating a catalogue of a not-yet-existing exhibition that includes a selection I curated from my family's private archive. In the video series titled 'Restoring memories', I am enacting an imaginary conversation with my dad by using this archive as an inspirational tool for directing choices.

I need to mention that I lost my father when I was 19 years old, before starting my bachelor's in graphic design. In a way, I was influenced by him. For instance, he suggested I contact one of his friends who was teaching at the Art Academy in Naples. This helped me to choose this pathway for my professional career. I was interested in photography but I always had a practical side on my mind and graphic design was reflecting and matched my expectations for the future.

1. STARTING FROM A LIBRARY

I need to divide or sequence this discussion into four main parts so that someone that is not emotionally involved in this archive can still understand the process and experience of visualising my memories as moving images.



1. My father, Naples, undated photograph, photographer unknown.



1. Me, in the Netherlands, 2022, video directed by me, photographed by Iliana Michali.

It is worth bringing in an example to explain how I decided to represent memories:

In the first video of the series 'On the soccer field' (3" min) the scene is set up on a soccer field, I am in the middle of the field and I am looking at the camera. During the three minutes, I am wandering around. The location where the short video is set up was inspired by one picture that caught my attention while browsing through my dad's collection of memorabilia from his youth. In this selected photo he is standing on a soccer field, posing for a group picture. He's almost in the middle of the image, around him there are six or seven more men, each crossing their arms and proudly looking at the camera, waiting to be captured by the film. They all looked cocky, including my dad. While looking at that photo I realised I did not know of this other life my father had lived and I wish I knew more.

Nonetheless, I will discuss this more in-depth in the last part of the thesis when talking about the realisation of the video series titled 'Restoring Memories'.

"It's a period of time on the threshold between historical and the contemporary; somewhat too abstract when taught in high-school history classes and too immediate when it was on the news."¹

Sophie Berrebi is a writer, art historian and occasional curator she discusses the role of documentary material in contemporary art. She explains how it changes the way a family picture can be misinterpreted by the editors of her book as a mere source of information. She sees it as a family picture and they view it as information. This is interesting for me in the sense that what I am doing is trying to find the history behind the archive as well as trying to keep it personal.

I am interested in the Napoli of the 70s, but at the same time, I also want to know more about why my father was looking different from what I imagined. In shooting the video I was fantasising about my father's past and in doing so I decided to recreate the photo into an artwork and place myself in it.

I tried to revisit the archive by using different methods. I will divide this thesis into four parts that describe the main

methods of how I carried out the research. I will first explain and introduce my father's archive. I will mention some of the objects so as to analyse some of them and give an idea of my reaction to the material. Also, in this way, I will contextualise my relationship with the archive, that I have been using as a tool to discover my father's past.

In the second part of the thesis, I will go more depth into the meaning of the emotional memories brought by the archive. I will also further explore how my way of engaging with the archive changed after the conversations with my closest relatives.

Subsequently, in the third part, I will define and describe the process of writing down my memories in the form of a film script. The script was then utilized so that I could follow it to translate my memories into images. The process of writing helped me to select the parts that I wanted to keep in the narration. An example of this methodology of how I worked towards restoring the memories brought by the archive is the soccer field video.

I have been dealing with the process of writing at different moments which were constantly informing the project in different ways. I wanted to be able to find the focus and the main plot of the story. I initially wanted to focus on the theme of Naples in the 70s and early 2000s. The historical approach felt cold, so I decided on a more abstract and open approach that was still keeping the history of my hometown in the South of Italy as a background while adding myself to the project. That's when — while working on the sequence of the editorial project — I decided to use the video format.

Later on I intend to go deeper into the description of the video process and the relation between the digital and the physical realisation of the project.

In this sense, the whole project and this thesis will speak about how the archive worked for me as a conversational tool with my dad and with myself. And in this last part of the thesis, I will analyse how the series of videos that compose the project has been shaped by this tool.

The editorial project, the conversations and the videos can be considered three different ways of revisiting the archive. Each part of the project has been informed by the other during the research. I consider the need of making videos coming from the mental process of remembering and the aim to visualize it. Writing helped me to define a script to follow for the narration of both the editorial and the video project. It helped me to select what I want to remember from

the archive and what is important for me to share with the viewer.

Basically, writing defined the relationship of which private part of myself I wanted to share with an unknown public. I would like to conclude this introduction by pointing out that I tried to discover my father's past by working on the same material but approaching it in different ways.

2. SCANNING MY MEMORIES

In the beginning, I started scanning my father's archive, mainly from a box that contained a lot of pictures and postcards. Then I realised that I didn't know much about them, and therefore I wasn't able to understand where they were coming from. So, in the process of digitizing during these last years, I began to think about their origin. *add reference*

I started talking about the project with my brother as I consider him one important character in this process. We are the only two siblings in the family and he is just one year older. He is also in the field of art as a screenwriter. As you will see in this thesis, part of the research includes a series of interviews and discussions that I have been developing with him since last September (2021).

The only way to communicate with him about the project was via video call. During those talks, I showed him a draft of the publication. I designed the first version of the publication in a way that the people I was addressing could look at all the content in an accessible digital form. Through the editorial project, I was able to ask my brother questions. Our conversation made me realize that there was a difference between what came to our minds by looking at the editorial project. here, I need to make another side note: people, when they go through family archives, are highly curious (or at least this is how I felt). My brother, on the other hand, had a very different way of reacting to the material I was investigating.

For instance, I was interested in where the Venice Biennale catalogue (1982), present in my selection, came from. My brother did not have this fascination with uncovering where everything was belonging to or the story behind each object.

However, I was really curious about the catalogue's story, I questioned myself about how did it get to my father. I was asking myself whether that was a gift or not if it was something that my father bought or not, since he was around

his thirties and maybe he couldn't afford to buy such an expensive publication.

*

In this part of the process of the project, I realised that in a way I had a sort of investigative approach. Since it is the object that is raising questions, I am, while looking at it, trying to define a line between my thoughts and facts, that can give me a chance to find common lines.

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In this way, I was exploring the archive in a different way than only looking at pictures. I was extracting and selecting content in an intuitive way. Finally, during the last phase of the digitalisation process, I asked a photographer to take pictures of the paintings made by my father and magazines collected by him. The photographer is also the cinematographer of the series of videos that I created.

In organising my father's archive, four years ago, I was including only book covers, photos of his youth and his important documents. At the beginning for me, it was a great surprise to observe how the graphic elements changed over the period of 20 years. As a second curatorial principle, I thought of chronological order for the archive so that people could follow the changes in the style and in the socio-political context by having a guide to follow. Annet Dekker is an independent researcher and curator as well as an Assistant Professor of Media Studies: Archival Science. Her book *Lost and Living in Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories* influenced me a lot in the way that I finally approached the archive. "It shows that archives are not simply a recording, a reflection, or an image of an event, but that they shape the event itself and thus influence the past, present and future." This opened up my mind to new ways that I deal with my family archive. My approach was not focusing only on my personal memory but also on the events happening in this era. With this idea in mind, I found a way of gaining knowledge from the archive and sharing it with the public.

I was immediately not satisfied. The first choice, the theme of Naples between the 70s and the 2000s from an artistic and political perspective was still appealing to me. However, it felt too big to do so "only" through the character of my father, thus without enough knowledge. The second chronological principle was too distant and missing the voice of the daughter engaging with the material. The most reasonable option was to combine then the publication format, a more

classical and conventional approach to a more abstract form of narration: the video series. The non-linearity of my memories and feelings that I experienced while discovering the archive needed more than the bi-dimensional editorial format. So, the video would allow me to overlap with sound and images my questions about my father and my father's documents.

The library itself where the archive is placed is actually not of big size. How it has been made also has a short story behind it. The structure of the library was has been built by an architect, a friend of my father, following his directions in order to make it fit the narrow staircase leading to the mezzanine in our house.

At this stage, it is evident how the theme of archives in this research includes relationships as part of the discussion and the impossibility of knowing everything about the material. I didn't consider my father to be a sociable person.

Regardless of how close my father is to me, my mom and my brother, it is inevitable that many questions remain unanswered because we cannot address him directly. I cannot know everything about my dad's life. Part of the archive itself is the library structure that contains it. The structure itself brings us to another person, an architect whom I only from my friendship with his son. I used to play with him at his house, several blocks away from my house, in the streets of the historical centre of Naples.

*

A magazine, Interview (1982) published by Andy Warhol, made me wonder how he was able to get a hold of that copy in Napoli. Or, something else that I found and that caught my attention, this sort of poster-like big format catalogue, from 1989, from Miquel Barceló's exhibition at Lucio Amelio's Gallery (Napoli, 1989).

I found another booklet about the same size, from M. Paladino's exhibition (1989), that I assume my father went to visit. Other than art and design publications, my father was collecting articles from magazines by cutting out pages with advertisements that caught his attention. A United Colours of Benetton campaign is hanging in a frame next to the library with the portrait of 'James', an ape that was the face of one of the controversial campaigns from the label, photographed by James Mollison for Fabrica in 2004. To end with the listing of remarkable relicts (wreck): he was a member of the communist party, for that reason, I



Miguel Marcelò. Lucio Amelio, Napoli 1989. Leaflet of the exhibition included in the project "Inside the box (2022).

found the membership cards that he eventually collected, in total eleven (1976; 1975; 1972; 1973; 1924/1974; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1921/1981; 1982; 1984).

*



Communist party membership cards. From "Inside the box (2022).

The next sequence of images in the editorial project shows postcards sent to my dad by his sister, his students, some travel pictures with his friends, and other group pictures with the classes he was teaching to. The two ending chapters of the editorial 'Inside the box' show his paintings and sketches that my mom decided to put in frames. I designed the very last part of 'Inside the box' as a collage of the above-mentioned art catalogues and magazines creating a reinterpretation of the folders in which they were stored.

3. ON THE PHONE

The second archive material recreated came out of the reflections from the conversation about the project with my mom and my brother and how they fed the project. In this section, I will formulate the ideas raised by the discussions with my mom, Rosaria, and my brother, Ivan. I will give more details about the communication being held with my mum in the next paragraphs.

As previously mentioned, in talking with my brother, I realised how memories are driven and how they are carried by an emotional value. We remember things that are either connected to a negative or positive memory, in this sense they need a grip on something that brings back the memory. In this section, I will mention how different the perspective of my mom as a wife and my brother as the oldest son is and how this is related to the definition of memory.

In addition to the exchange with my brother, an alternative view on my reading of my father's archive was introduced by my mom. With her, I had a video call without showing any material from my collection. I was trying to understand how I should present my dad in the project, as an artist or as a teacher. This reflection phase is aimed to present my dad and has been brought up by the process of reconstructing his character. At the same time, I was giving an interpretation of his life that I aimed to be truthful and honest. I consider this part of the research that helped me in defining whether my dad was an artist or a teacher filled with ethical values. This conversation phase helped me to re-interpret the archive narration through the conversations' results.

Ivan has had a more realistic memory of my dad. He associated and recognised my dad as a teacher by connecting him with that. On the other hand, Rosaria was instead referring to my father as an artist. The previously mentioned comparison of different opinions reflects how different remembering positions are leading to different definitions of the same person.

Above all, these contrasting positions helped me to clarify that my mom and brother couldn't answer the questions I had about my father's identity. Should I present my dad as an artist or as a middle school teacher? I had to accept that the narration defined by my brother and my mom had a different focus from mine.

In engaging and researching my father's past through the archive, I realised that I couldn't answer these questions, not even by including their opinions. I am still asking these questions through the thesis and this project. I'm trying to design a possible way to portray this part of me. Although I cannot change the fact that I will still have doubts, so I had to move to the final stage of the project and accept that I couldn't define my father's story in one word. I was not figuring out whether my dad was an artist or not.

Having introduced the complexity of memories, it is worth mentioning how the concept of memory was analysed by the deconstructivist philosopher J. Derrida in *Archival Fever* (1995). Derrida states the impossibility of separating the two concepts of *mneme* (or *anamnesis*) (the interior or the truth of being) from the *hypomnesis* (the exterior) (p.11) the memory that is repeating in a mechanical way. From this perspective we can understand the editorial project as the *hypomnemic* memory of my father given as result of the experiment of revisiting the archive.

I have been striving to look into, whether I should have analysed the memories through a more objective perspective or a more subjective one. I further moved on, focusing on my ways of remembering, through the practice of writing down my own memory, which is going to be, in the end, a combination of both what I could see in the library and what I assumed from my position as a daughter.

Still, I'm not taking into consideration the video, which is a further result of those ideas. I had a more detached approach to the editorial. My intention is to give a more

personal interpretation of the video, in opposition to tracing his life. In the video series, I'm expanding on this theme: why am I doing this, what do I want to tell him? Furthermore, I'm trying to stay away from my sentimental engagement while working on the archive and visualizing all these feelings when I'm portraying myself in the video. For this reason, the editorial project is more curated while the videos are more impulsive.

4. SHARING THE ARCHIVE

Having established the editorial project and the exchanges with my brother Ivan and my mom Rosaria, I am now considering the implications of making public the work. Equally important is the turning point of experimenting with the video format in the project. The video gave me the chance to include myself in the scenes as the only person present (other than my dad).

Also, it gave me more freedom in selecting the parts of the story that I wanted to mention. In this part, I was able to connect the two desired ambitions of sharing the personal story and making it public. It is not easy to share intimate and personal material. I want to talk about how and why I am interested in investigating and recreating the past, and why I wanted to put these memories into a book.

In looking at the French artist, photographer and film director C. Boltanski's work *The D. Family Album* I was impressed to know how in 1972 he presented his work in the section "Individual Mythologies" at Documenta in Cassel. I am looking at his work in which he gave monumental importance to amateur family pictures by building an installation that occupies a huge wall in the MAMC+ museum in Saint-Étienne. I can see myself in the definition of which Boltanski was part of coniated by the swiss sociologist and curator H. Szeemann: "the expression designate the inclination of artists of the time to pursue a quest for identity, to bring intimacy and memory into play."

This aspect of intimacy maybe reflects my concerns about sharing the personal life of my dad in such a public sphere. Talking about him makes me feel like talking about someone that is not in the room. I personally feel uncomfortable doing it, this is why in the video I don't talk to the camera. My father was a reserved person as he didn't like to show too much about himself. I felt he didn't like to be at the centre of attention. That's when I acknowledge that the project is



3. C. Boltanski, *Album de photos de la famille D.*, 1939-1964. MAMC+, Saint Etienne.

Atlas. Atlas is as well the name given by the art historian A. Warburg to one of her panels' works linked to the same school of study. The methods of synthesising found archive material make me smile because I reflect on how outdated and yet still present this way of tracing relations between images and one someone's life was one of my first methods to find order.

The German historian B. Buchloh in the essay *Anomic Archive* observes how the term has been used throughout the 19th century in the scientific fields, used as a way of displaying "systematised" knowledge — In the map, I mentioned before referring to the approaches of art historians dated before the 21st century, I was spreading these elements and finding connections between them to find some sort of information and document online that was more collectively recognised as a valuable source.

From the archive material in which I was placing one object next to each other, I was attempting to trace the origin and to visualise in front of me where each of those was coming from.

This more analytical and informative way resulted to be way too cold and it was not the outcome I was aiming for to explain and tell my line of thoughts. By using this mapping technique still, a lot of the questions that I had were not brought in.

So, back to the text again, and facing my inner voice, instead of trying to find online news and giving information through a really analytical and documentarist voice.

5. 'HOW I REMEMBER MY FATHER'

In this part of the thesis, I will go more in-depth into the process of shifting to video. As I have said before, the editorial project did not feel enough to convey the story. I was also trying to deal with a medium that I have not mastered and that compared with graphic design techniques gave me more freedom to experiment further.

I started to talk about it with a close person of mine that is a photographer and cinematographer. The idea we came up with was to create a series of video memories. The videos helped me to bring out a deeper level of the research in conjunction with a more honest interpretation due to the limitations of technical skills.

In this way, I was not focusing on the final result but rather on my feelings. Together with the video, I worked toward building the multi-media installation. I gave physicality to the archive by printing spreads of the editorial project 'Inside the box' and placing them next to the screen showing the video 'Restoring memories' in which I was embodying the archive. Finally, the output of the project is composed of two different media which better define the line of my thoughts.

Connected to the fact that I was feeling uncomfortable with sharing the story and the memories that I was writing about my father, I tried to record myself talking about the project and what it meant for me, but it didn't work out. In a second attempt, I decided to ask the photographer Iliana Michali to help me in recording myself. While starting the shootings, I realised that talking was not helping to explain myself. Instead, I wanted to construct the images.

After introducing the library, the archive and the topic of memories, in this part of the thesis I think of the way how I remember things. I was wondering how archive material can be useful for collective memory since my archive consists especially of art and design material which are giving insights into cultural studies. The research shifts into the psychological sphere when writing about my memories.

The book 'Inside the box' is reflecting the way I curated the archive from a designer's perspective. The book connected to the writing exercise gives a more introspective look at the way I am engaging with the archive. The writing is more impulsive and non-edited, and the editorial project has been heavily re-edited and re-worked.

In the chapters "Starting from the Library" and "Scanning my memories" the topic I wanted to tackle was the political and artistic environment of the 80s in Southern Italy. This shows my interest in the social and political environment that was surrounding him. While I was still working on the storyline of the photobooks I didn't want to have a historical and analytical approach.

The first actual text, meant to be both the backbone of the editorial and the script of a video, was written by collecting in a pretty natural and intuitive way my most pressing memories. I selected parts of the text but the memories were not structured in a linear timeline. Bringing in the method of working of the swiss artist Batia Suter gave me strenght

in her work *Parallel Encyclopedia* (2007) she “lead the viewer on a voyage in images, through pages of dozens and dozens of books of all origins and educational purposes.” She then utilizes those composition into installation. At the same way, I want to let the viewer having their own plot among the archive material I am reproducing.

Choosing to use a multimedia installation allowed me to give the feeling to the viewer of me being absorbed by those thoughts, instead of directly recreating memories into moving images. And that’s how after a few attempts in shooting the video-series, I am in from of the camera, thinking about the conversation that I would like to start with my dad and that would constitute the digital part of the project.

6. ON THE SOCCER FIELD

In the scene where I am on the soccer field, part of the video series ‘Restoring Memories’, after scouting around to find the location of the video, I realised how it was connected to one photograph of the archive. The photo I am referring to represents my dad with a group of soccer players standing in front of the camera waiting for the picture to be taken in a confident and proud pose totally unexpected for me. That picture was witnessing something that I didn’t experience.

In my reproduction of the memory, the soccer field, in which I am now materialising, is empty and I am at the centre of it, looking around, in a contemplative way.

The field in which my father was is now lived by me in a possible realistic set-up but in an impossible scenario.

The scene has been in the end, after many overlapping layers of editing (in the written and video format), taking inspiration from the original archive material. The representation of the text or the interpretation, as in the silent acting of the text, is abstract since in the scene you are looking at me thinking of and imagining how that place would be.

In a second attempt, which I then didn’t consider, I was setting up a preamble, more explanatory scene, in which a green screen is on my back and in front of the camera again me, in the present, before entering the chosen memory.

The whole process of making a video series started from the desire to record and look at me while going through

memories, creating a new method of remembering what I was writing down as memory notes, but now through performativity. In this new and more experimental way of working, for which I was not trained, I could allow myself fewer restrictions. The editorial project alone was still not enough. Nonetheless, there is a stage in which of course the book and the images needed a voice-over that was more eloquently telling the story. For this reason, in the beginning, I considered having someone else act in my place.

7. SOFTNESS

The making of the video work came from the necessity of finding my voice and listening to my feelings. Creating the moving images is helping me to find a way to explain the ups and downs of the project, in a synthetic way and to involve the audience in the interest I have for the archive.

The mentioned soccer field scene is followed up by a second video in the series that I consider to be more of a mourning moment in which I allow myself to sorrow. The 'mourning video' is shot in a wheat field, in which I walk through some puddles. This second video is permitting me to admit the fact that I miss my father and that sometimes I feel there's no connection with him. Sometimes you can just take your phone and tell your parents what are your achievements, especially if sharing the same interests and want to know what is their opinion about things. Before starting this project, I was giving for granted the support from my family, as something not to worry about, that would come naturally. To realise the need for support that I was missing, I had to go through multiple editing phases. This meant working on my inner self and on the project at the same time.

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I cannot forget that one day I didn't help him with carrying the bags of groceries. I felt, later on, like I didn't care and I was only focusing on my life. I didn't pay enough attention to it and now that I'm older, I feel that I missed the chance to be there for him and show my appreciation with small things.

*

I didn't want the whole project to be depressing from the very first beginning. That's also why I was wearing really bright colours in the soccer field video and wanted to give a sensation of softness. I wanted to create a contrast between

research and project might turn sad. I am not trying to eliminate all of these emotions. Even though, one part of the script describes how for me it has been hard to cry, to share and show those emotions, also to my father. I remember nice and happy things and I don't want to turn them into sad stories.

Everything I mention related to his death produces a reaction that is in a way biased. And that's why I wanted to make an aesthetically pleasing video, and create images that would embrace the feeling of softness and tenderness which justifies the direction choices that are aiming to create a feeling of ambiguity. It is a trauma in a way but it is still bringing comforting feelings. Sometimes, I hardly achieve to make people understand what is going on in the videos and how this is even related to what I'm talking about as the gap between what is happening in the video and the archive is apparently too big.



Extract from "Inside the box"
(2022) take from the Newspaper
La Repubblica.

I use videos that show in a way what happened. I am there in the video thinking about him and this is it. I am doing it by simply being silent. For me, acting when silent, is a way in which I feel that I can keep the viewer's focus on watching and on me acting. The repetitions in the video are mainly these silent scenes of me slightly moving around. These movements are meant to suggest a flowing of thinking. I look paralysed by my memories until the scene where the camera follows my walk. The length is 3" min each.

It is still a collection, of a series of memories, and each of these components stands as a necessary voice of the story that has to be shared. The archive has found its resolute place as a prop and an inspirational object.

Looking back at the past four years I realised how my relationship with the archive, the space in which it was located and what I have been shaping after that, have been constantly evolving and changing. Each and every time that I am looking at the pictures, I could tell a short story that makes sense in the bigger picture. There was an advertisement, cut-out of a newspaper page stating "Ok, the orthographical mistake that became a global world". The word "Ok" comes from "all correct", it is an abbreviation that was re-used and shortened in a different form ending up becoming a new word, a new

expression that we use nowadays. Understanding images and photographs as documents that we can re-read in our ways has been one of the main struggles in this research. Memories differ from person to person, they shape people and identities and I have been able to fantasise about them in order to construct a new story, that is neither the story of my father nor the story of the flourishing artistic period of my hometown. It is my story, seen through my eyes and through what I try to remember of it.

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