

## **Encoding [quiet memories]**

BY

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Master of Arts.

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The Thesis Committee for Elena Brebenel  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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## **Encoding [quiet memories]**

### Abstract

I go along the tramway. I am the eternal traveler throughout my own past. Each time the rails are going somewhere else. I am now in Iasi: my grandparents' city, the city where my school was, the city of the evergreen parks.

Faraway stories of some forgotten days are quietly brought into the present by seemingly "aged" pieces, made of fabric and paper.

Mapping and invented coded imagery are an inherent part of my personal language. An amalgam of found objects, like: old library punched cards, discarded book spines and circuit boards, help me translate vestiges of the experiences that persist across time, and together tell the story of who I am.

I am immersed, as in a dream, in recent and distant memories that lead me to the tramway again. I walk the way back and I return in the present.

**“...The shadow was walking towards him slowly, and a forgotten scent came back to his memory... I have been waiting for you for such a long time...”<sup>1</sup>**

Our memory system is fashioned so that we remember what is most important to us. What we encode depends on who we are. Though elusive and inaccurate in some situations, memory still forms the foundation for the strong beliefs we hold about ourselves. *Encoding [quiet memories]* is a fiber art installation that illustrates the ways in which I encode remembrances, the sacred value that memories have for me, and the importance of preserving them.

Human existence is transient. I believe we feel powerless and incapable of facing and confronting the omniscient passing of time. This irreversibility of time has always caused some distress for me. I am frightened by the simple idea that in conversation, the spoken word becomes part of the past as soon as it is articulated. In my work, I am driven by the desire to control the passing of time, and to find a way to recreate life sequences that have left an impression on me. Working with memory offers me the possibility of displaying past moments, feelings, emotions, colors, scents and allowing them to exist without the boundaries of time.

Recollections are abstract expressions of past experiences that bear associations to specific thoughts, feeling and emotions. The pieces in my installation serve as examples of precious memories that have the innate quality of taking me to the past, offering the possibility of re-living my experiences, and releasing me from the irreversibility of time.

At the same time, my memories are interchangeable with the memories of others. I provide codes for the viewers to enable them to explore personal memories of their own. Fragments of paper and fabric are carefully pinned on the wall, in an effort to express the fragility of memory as well as their vital importance. I am referencing places through the coded language of maps. The obsolete computer punch cards are helping to create visual archetypes of memories. Feelings and emotions are preserved and travel with me through time, affecting and enriching my life.

Reminiscences make up a complex network that includes very specific memories and more general and abstract moments from the recent and distant past. Within a system of conflated time, new personal stories begin to unfold in unexpected ways as they are juxtaposed along a memory track (symbolized in my work by the abstract representation of a tramway map).

Born and raised in Romania, I decided to leave my motherland and venture alone to a new territory. The experience of leaving the familiar environment and moving to a foreign country acted as a catalyst for this body of work. Once I arrived in Kansas, I started exploring the ways in which I could bring my ‘home’ close to me by introducing the familiar to the unfamiliar. I began to investigate the ways in which the environment shapes one’s personality. A collection of carefully preserved memories served as subjects for my research.

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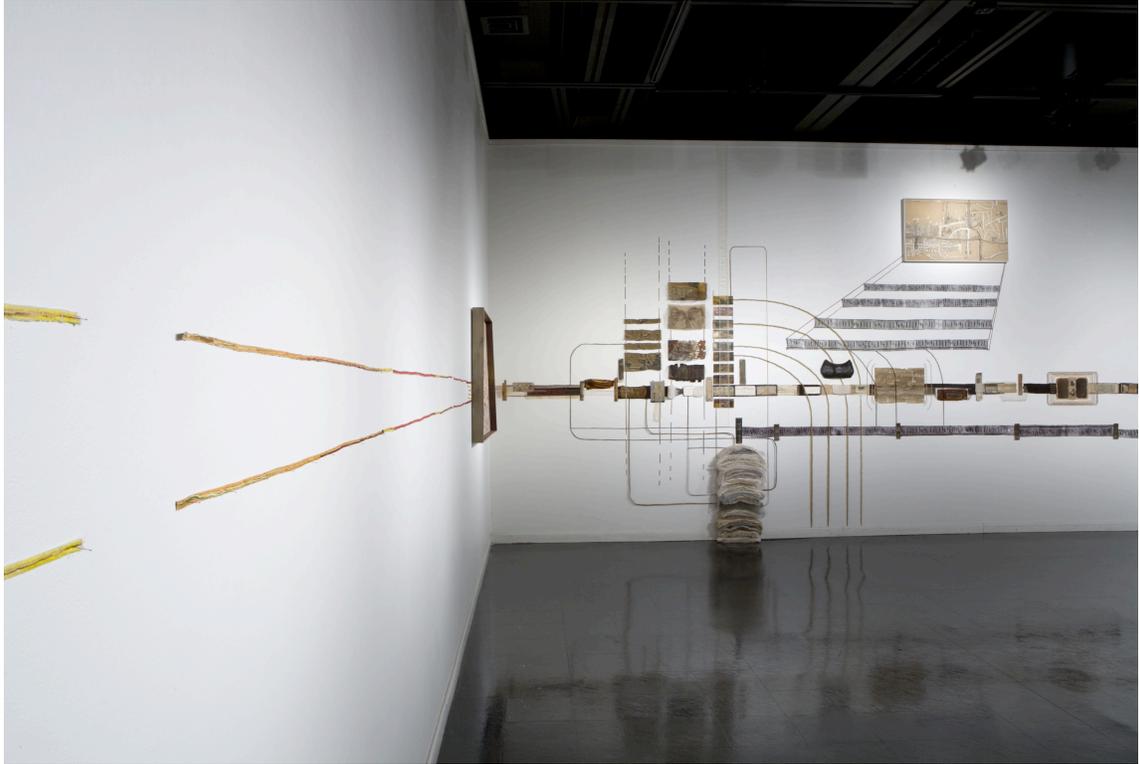
<sup>1</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *With the Gypsy Girls*.

*Encoding [quiet memories]* is an installation comprised of three sections that together form a personal narrative and function as a whole or as individual parts.



### **Memory Codes**

I created the installation as text, with the intention that it will be read from left to right. In the first section, consisting of small objects, faraway stories are quietly brought into the present by seemingly aged pieces made of fabric and paper. The story unravels slowly along a 'tramline' made of machine-stitched strips of canvas. The color of the thread changes gradually from yellow to orange, then to green and bright red until it reaches the map of Moreni, my childhood home. The map, an aerial view, represents a blurred image alluding to the passage of time. The vibrant colors used to hand-paint it suggest the idea of childhood.



From here the network starts developing and branching off. An amalgam of found objects, like old computer punch cards, discarded book spines and circuit boards, as well as hand embroidered pieces of fabric and paper, knitted swatches of mohair, monofilament and copper wire help me translate vestiges of experiences that persist across time, and together tell the story of who I am. When we encode, we transform what we feel, think or see at a particular point in our life, into memories. I use a variety of materials and processes to transform these personal feelings and sensations into reminiscences.



Even though there is a sense of chronological order in the placements of the elements, the arrangement of the fragments is rather intuitive. The entire installation represents a map; a network of channels and paths. But the cartographer's rationale is replaced with an absurd inventive system with an unlikely combination of fragmented memories. This allows one's mind to ricochet between unrelated places and associations.

Screen-printed and embroidered pieces of fabric and paper that reference the time spent in Kansas are placed next to images that symbolize valuable moments from my life in Romania. At the top of the column referencing my life before this transition, is a collage representing a traditional Romanian house. Under that is a stylized fabric photograph of me and my family. The figures in this image have a golden halo, like the figures in byzantine icons, symbolizing the idea of a sacred family. Next, a visual representation of the path in front of my grandparents' house. The last image, illustrating a block of tall apartment buildings, on a very dark background, alludes to a very sad event that affected my life from then on. These four fragments have a layer of knitted monofilaments placed in front in an effort to make the image unclear. The knitted swatches resemble a fence and take the role of protecting the memories. Whether happy or sad, these are the memories and experiences that made me who I am.



On the floor, a stack of knitted swatches serves as the source of the memories. For this purpose, there are lines connecting the fragments on the wall to the pile of swatches made of knitted monofilament, copper wire, mohair, linen and silk yarn. These strata feed the reminiscences.



*Encoding [quiet memories]* alludes to an underlying architectural structure in the placement of the artwork. The fragments are not framed. Instead, they are mounted directly on the wall in order to reference a low-tech museum exhibit that displays specimens. To emphasize this idea, I used entomology specimen pins for the placement of the intricate fragments, to exemplify fragile memories.

Invented coded imagery is part of my personal language; library punch cards, barcodes, DNA structures, data matrices, Braille alphabet and brain scans are important resources that help me build my visual vocabulary. I decided to use the obsolete library punch cards as a predominant resource. The cards are important because they represent part of a system through which data is encoded; a type of data that cannot be deciphered without the machine that reads it. In psychology terms, *encoding* is the process through which our experiences are transformed into memory. I choose to assimilate the pre-existing coded system and to give it new meaning. I aim to transform the objects that encode information (like the library punch cards) and use them to express abstractly my own emotions and feelings.

From psychology's point of view, with respect to the way memory works, it is known that "our mind does not store merely snapshots of our past experiences"<sup>2</sup>. But rather, it stores what is important, namely the meaning, the feeling and the emotion that these experiences evoke. Thus, I rarely use figurative imagery and make only subtle references to people and places. Instead, I choose to express the feelings and emotions associated with these memories by designing rich surfaces and complex combinations of textures and materials.

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<sup>2</sup> Schacter, Daniel L. *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind and The Past*.

## Mapping the Memory

Mapping is an inherent part of my personal language. The coded visual language of maps is one we know. But when we make maps of our own, we each have our own dialect.

The second section, an installation of screen-printed sheer silk, rayon, and canvas panels, is representing the map of Tatarasi neighborhood in Iasi, Romania, where my grandparents' house is located. In this section, I explore the idea of memory of place; a place charged with emotions. The large scale of the piece references the importance of the place in my personal history. Juxtaposed to the previous section of random memories, this section is a close-up; an exhaustive, elaborate view of a memory fragment.

The map is comprised of vertical strips bearing the same image superposed and hung far from the wall. The layering references the complexity of human thought; different layers allude to traces of a memory history. This also helps to create a blurred image similar to clouded memory over time.



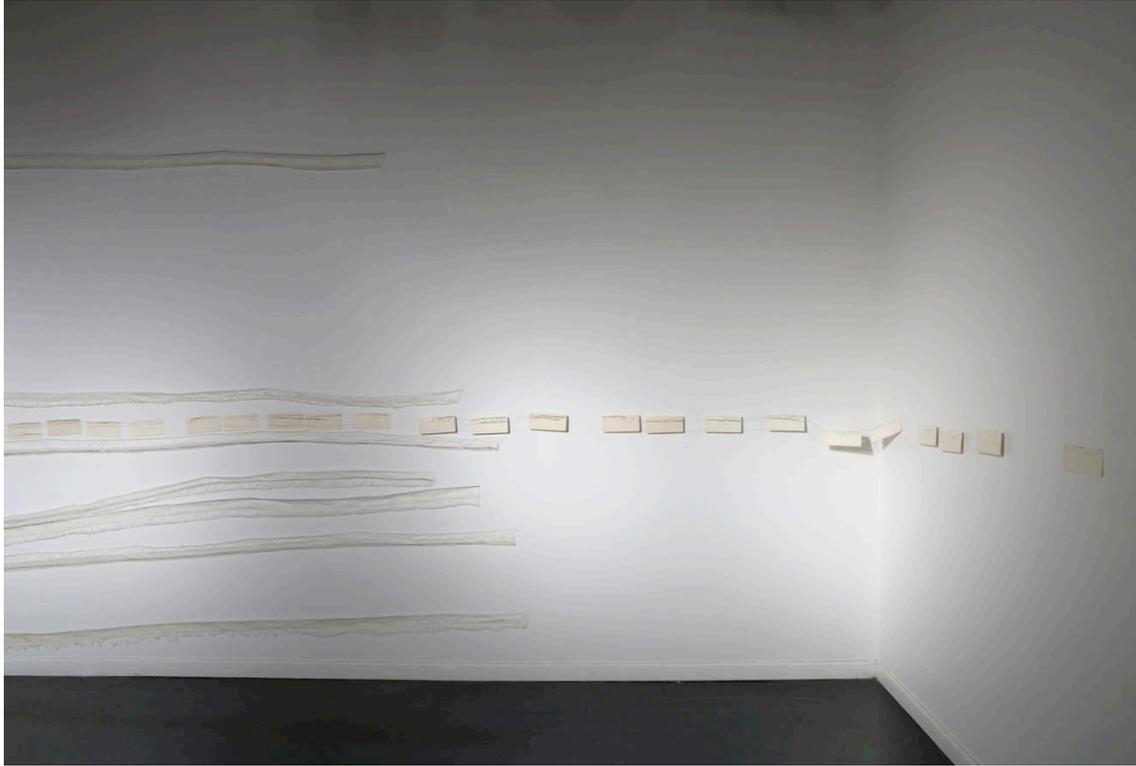
The map is not complete. Parts of it are missing. Knitted monofilament fills the empty areas, playing the role of one of memory's malfunctions, namely, blocking. In psychology, blocking happens when we cannot retrieve information that we know well, that has not faded from our minds and that we can unexpectedly remember. Even though a reliable source to our past, memory can sometimes forsake us.

The colors are those of old documents that bear traces of passing time and create a feeling of nostalgia. More recent images from the memory have bright colors: red, orange, yellow; while far away ones have pale colors, until color gradually disappears. The colors are fading in the same way that our memories fade over time.

### **Materials for Memory**

The third section is comprised of strips of silk gauze ranging between eight and ten yards long that have had threads drawn out patiently one by one. I have painted them with shellac to change the appearance and give an aged look. The missing threads are a reference to the information that once was there but has been removed. The library punch cards in this section of the installation do not carry any information and are unaltered, leaving their surface open to endless possibilities. There are stories to be written, and this setting offers the context for them to exist.





My work routine has almost the same importance as the metaphors that are vital to my creative research. *Encoding [quiet memories]* emphasizes a meticulous transformative process, a meditation on the transient nature of reality, chance and control. Throughout this process, there is a metamorphosis of fabrics and papers that are painted, printed, stitched, cut, drawn on and embroidered as a metaphor for the transformations that occur throughout time. By altering pre-existing materials and shifting their function, new and unexpected roles emerge. By recreating the cards, I invent new territories.

Many of the fiber processes used involve a repetitive action, such as, knitting stitch-by-stitch or hand-stitching rows and rows of thread. These recurring processes, used to execute a design, are meditative and soothing, which allows me to slow down. This way of working gives me time to clarify my emotions so that I can make formal decisions and attain a visceral understanding of the piece.

*Encoding [quiet memories]* marks a new and exciting direction in my work that deals with space and large-scale drawing. I am interested in further exploring the architectural dimensions of drawing. I plan to continue using walls as pages and a variety of drawings and building materials. I aim to create installations resembling large-scale drawings consisting of networks on paper and fabric, paper cutouts and objects relating to one another physically and symbolically.

With this installation, I have provided the viewer the opportunity to decipher connections or to create new connections, to assemble and re-build the stories, to invent or infer new structures. *Encoding [quiet memories]* creates the context for externalizing the story from the mind, allowing memory to be read in a new way.

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