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On Tradition and Cultural Memory in Contemporary Art: Theoretical Considerations

Abstract:
This paper starts with a detailed analysis of Jan Assmann's qualitative distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight both the strengths and the limitations of this seminal distinction, and to also reflect on what cultural theorists and contemporary artists could learn through Assmann's distinction since artistic production also employs cultural memory formats that do not exclude cultural traditions in their materializations. In line with these considerations, this paper aims to disentangle what "tradition" means to contemporary artists. Following Edward Shils and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of "tradition," the paper argues that cultural tradition does not necessarily have an oppressive character and the rebellion and suspicion against it is at the heart of tradition itself. Thus, the traditional/contemporary binary can be precluded by reconsidering how "tradition" and "traditional" are conceptualized considering philosophy of tradition and artistic memory.

Keywords:
cultural traditions, cultural memory, communicative memory, contemporary art, tradition, artistic memory

1. Introduction

This paper zooms-in on the link among cultural memory, tradition, and contemporary art.[1] Jan Assmann's influential concept of "cultural memory" subsumes the realm of cultural traditions.[2] Actually, "tradition" is inextricably linked to Assmann's conceptualization of cultural memory on the grounds that this memory format is diachronically elongating over epochs longer than one hundred-years-old. At the same time, artistic production also employs cultural memory formats that do not exclude cultural traditions in their materializations. Yet, a significant fraction of contemporary art and cultural production is nowadays following a strong anti-traditionalist trend, and many artists claim that their artistic production is a rebellion against artistic and cultural traditions. However, artists and theorists do not often offer an exhaustive explanation of what "tradition" entails and connotes for them, and many of them tend to reject it *tout court*. The rejection of the traditional aesthetic values (like beauty, harmony, elegance) in art making is also reflected in the artistic choices of the topics contemporary artists engage with. Often, and with some exceptions, we hear the dictum "tradition[al] versus contemporary."[3] This assertion is formulated by contemporary artists on the grounds that "tradition" has an oppressive character and impedes creative developments in art making. Seen from a theoretical perspective, "the term 'contemporary art' seems to allude to artworks made of heterodox material and techniques confronted to the 'tradition,' within an incredible wide range of expressive trends."[4]

Thus, contemporary artists reject both traditional materials, media and techniques of art making (alongside the traditional institutions of art). Yet, what contemporary artists do not discard in their work is a constant draw on individual and collective memory meant to signal political, social, and identity concerns. While contemporary artists often reject traditional media (like painting or sculpture) and prefer to express their ideas in conceptual, de-materialized, performative formats, the quest for memory materialization remains prevalent and many art pieces reveal topics that pertain to memory events and reparative commemorations. To put some flesh on these theoretical bones let us take some examples of artistic memory work where the past is rendered in its multifarious aspects ranging from the 9/11 artistic memory projects, commemorative art pieces dedicated to the Holocaust memory, and other violent pasts to intimate memories of breakup, victory, or wellbeing. For instance, Polish artist Angelika Markul's "Polish American Dream" is a multisensorial installation – in line with the artistic demands of contemporary art's aesthetics – that enacts a memory work in which the artist refers to food nostalgia (the notorious Donald bubble gum). As Agata Stronciwilk posits, "Markul refers to food nostalgia and the collective memory but also engages political issues, as during the communist regime for many Poles 'Donald' gum became the symbol of [an] unreachable lifestyle and freedom."[5] Apart from various artistic renderings of the past materialized in artistic memory works (e.g., individual works of art that display memory events), there are also theoretical positions according to which contemporary art (in general) "has harnessed memory in such a wide variety of ways that can readily be taken as representative for the range of attitudes toward and uses of memory in the culture as a whole."[6]

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1) This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, CNCS-UEFISCDI project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2019-0025, within PNCD III. Contract TE 24/2020.

2) Assmann and Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 125–33.

3) Nicholas Galanin is one of the few who rejects the "traditional" / "contemporary" binary. For more on his *rationale* behind this rejection see Galanin, "Out of Line: Nicholas Galanin Rejects the Traditional / Contemporary Binary."

4) Martore, "The Contemporary Artwork between Meaning and Cultural Identity," 2.

5) Markul, "Food, Emotions and Memory in Polish Contemporary Art."

6) Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, 1.

When we think about memory in both social and artistic contexts, we are expected to engage with the main theories of collective memory making. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs placed memory in a social context (*les cadres sociaux*) by showing how, on the social level, memory is a matter of social interaction and communication.[7] Aby Warburg, Thomas Mann and Jan and Aleida Assmann also included the sphere of culture into the study of memory.[8] Yet, although both Warburg and Mann have attempted to reconstruct in their work a certain "cultural memory," the term as such has been introduced only later on, particularly by Jan Assmann. For him, cultural memory is "a kind of institution."[9] It is a memory tied to politics and material objectivations, whose preservation, interpretation, display, and transmission is handled by those who are trained, knowledgeable and specialized (historians, priests, archivists, museum curators and so on). Unlike cultural memory, communicative memory is non-institutional, and its contents are not stable but changeable and transitory. Communicative memory (what Assmann proposed to rename Halbwachs's "collective memory"[10]) is not cultivated by connoisseurs and specialists but on the contrary, everyone is considered equally qualified in remembering and interpreting the past. However, this does not mean that cultural memory cannot exist outside of institutions but as Assmann puts it, "it needs institutions for preservation and re-embodiment."[11]

Communicative memory and cultural memory differ for Assmann in five aspects: contents (communicative memory deals with individual biographies while cultural memory deals with mythical / absolute past); forms (communicative memory is informal, loosely shaped by everyday interactions while cultural memory is consciously established); media (communicative memory is living memory while cultural memory is established, traditional encoding); temporal frameworks (communicative memory refers to a limited temporal horizon of maximum one hundred years while cultural memory refers to an absolute past); and carriers (communicative memory is carried by non-specialized individuals while cultural memory is handled by "specialized carriers of tradition").[12]

We must keep in mind that for Assmann, communicative memory and cultural memory are two ways of remembering the past which permeate one another. They are not like two monads without windows (to recall Leibniz's metaphor from his *Monadology)* but two possible horizons, modes of memory.[13] Yet, the question is *why Assmann wants us to first distinguish them carefully?* What does it mean to remember in accordance with the Cultural Memory? For Assmann this distinction is important because communicative memory and cultural memory generate different kinds of meaning. The kind of meaning generated in cultural remembering is, for him, more binding and "authoritative" than in the case of the communicative memory. At the same time, the meaning of cultural memory claims to be valid for larger communities (societies, religious communities, nations and so on). However, as Marianne Hirsh points out, Jan Assmann's "cultural memory" refers to *Kultur*, understood as an "institutional hegemonic archival memory. In contrast, the Anglo-American understanding of cultural memory refers to the social memory of a specific group or subculture."[14] Still, what a social group

7) Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*.

8) See for example Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*; Mann, *Wälsungenblut*; and Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity".

9) Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 110.

10) Ibid., 111.

11) Ibid.

12) For more details on this distinction see Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 29.

13) In Leibniz's philosophy of substance, a "monad" is a simple substance "namely, souls or, if you prefer a more general term, *monads* (C14: C175)." See Leibniz quoted in Cover and Hartz, "Are Leibnizian Monads Spatial?," 295.

14) Hirsch**,** "The Generation of Postmemory," 110.

or subculture remembers is not merely the result of what the members communicate as living communicative connections, but it is also triggered and generated by certain images which are already imprinted in their minds. These images are also part of the institutional archival memory and of a certain tradition.

2. Framing Culture Conceptually

Social scientists claim that social phenomena can be explained through cultural approaches to the past.[15] Yet, this does not mean that cultural lenses are master narratives which occasion objective accounts of the past. For many theorists, culture is fundamentally a collective concept which can be in the inter-subjective domain of shared meanings.[16] On this basis, the very concept of collective cultural memory is theorized. Would this mean that culture is something essentially inherent in a collectivity? As Keating suggests, it would be a mistake to regard culture as something inherent in a collectivity which is then activated by each person from the collectivity. Culture is, indeed, a collective concept (applicable to social groups) but this does not mean that the individual is a passive recipient of a community's influence.[17] The influence of the community's cultural traditions is, indeed, significant but this does not mean that the individual members of a community do not alter, adjust, or reinvent what they have received from their cultural traditions.

For Jan Assmann, culture is "the non-biological inherited memory of humanity."[18] Yet, as Astrid Erll posits, Assmann's handling of the concept of "culture" as an adjective (in cultural memory) is not without issues. What he calls "culture" can be understood, according to Erll, more like "culture as monument (as opposed to culture as lifeworld)."[19] Many contemporary public art pieces and artists also express their disdain for "monumental sculpture" or "memory in bronze or stone" as opposed to living memory or performative memory (which is also to a certain degree a form of counter-memory or anti-hegemonic mnemonics). They find "monumentality" a type of cultural remembrance which emphasizes the static and continuum of the cultural expression to the detriment of the fluid one. Similarly, Karin Kukkonen states that Jan and Aleida Assmann's approach is quite one-sided as, "they concentrate on phenomena usually classified as 'high culture': the literary canon or sites of national remembrance."[20] Kukkonen is interested in the analysis of both historic continuity of popular culture (mostly in the fairy tale traditions) and in understanding and evaluating genres, and topics which have moved across the high / low culture dichotomy. She attempted to base her research on Assmann's theorization of cultural memory, but, as she noted, Assmann's neat distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory "fails to account both for the longstanding historic continuity of popular culture itself – and for such repertoires of genres, topics and styles which have moved across the high culture / low culture divide."[21] She also adds that the same memory content can be discovered in both works of popular culture and in works of high culture and moreover, "the cultural memory of the canon can be subject to politics and market laws to the same degree the communicative memory of the everyday can have conduits that last longer than the *saeculum*. Fairy tales, for example, are not limited to the present, as is communicative memory, but they also

15) See Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures*; Ross, "Culture and Identity in Contemporary Political Analysis," and Keating, "Culture as Social Science."

16) Ross, "Culture and Identity in Contemporary Political Analysis," 45.

17) Keating, "Culture as Social Science."

18) Assmann, "The Cultural Memory."

19) Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 30.

20) Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory," 262.

21) Ibid., 263.

do not fulfill the high culture criteria of cultural memory."[22] In addition to these observations we can add Erll's contentions for which the adjective "cultural" from "cultural memory" can be appropriate for both "communicative memory" and "cultural memory" because both are phenomena of culture. Not only through everyday speech but also through new digital media an event can become simultaneously an object of cultural memory and an object of communicative memory.

According to these interpretations, Assmann uses the term "culture" in a quite narrow understanding since his concept does not connote a broad understanding of culture as "the totality of human self-interpretations in a given context."[23] Thus, his use of the term "culture" seems to connote only "high," staged, elite and stylized culture while popular culture and the practices of the everyday life cannot be found in this account of cultural memory. This use and understanding of "culture" seem to overlook, at first sight, the current anthropological and ethnographical approaches which focus on everyday cultural practices and popular culture. Hence, for some social scientists and cultural theorists, Assmann's "Cultural Memory" might be ineffective in accounting for all the manifestations of memory in culture. On the one hand, according to these views, a certain amount of memory work manifested and materialized in "popular / low" cultural practices cannot be described, theorized, or assessed through Assmann's cultural memory theory. On the other hand, this does not mean that Assmann's concept of cultural memory cannot be employed for analyses of popular culture. Both Astrid Erll (in her work on German and British novels on WWII) and Karin Kukkonen (in her analysis of Fables and fairy tales) successfully employed Assmann's cultural memory theory basing their analyses on the idea of "shared reception experiences" of cultural texts. In this light, both Assmann's memory cultures and today's globalized media culture surface from shared reception experiences. The only difference rests in the fact that the communities of popular (media) culture are informal and unfixed while remembrance rituals and the cultures of institutionalized remembrance are formal and usually stable. However, what they have in common is the shared reception experience which occasions the formation of identity and belonging to a certain community beyond the national borders. Thus, popular culture is understood both as a "way of life" and "cultural texts." As I will show in the next section, unlike linguistic communication, texts are products of culture through and through.

It is true that before the "cultural turn" many social scientists avoided the concept of "culture" for various reasons: the inherent difficulty of operationalizing it; the tendency to identify (in the past) cultures with nation-states; the difficulty to isolate culture from other factors which turns culture into a catch-all device that explains everything in social life or end-up in explaining nothing.[24] How we conceptualize "culture" is nevertheless as important as the conceptualization of memory. A certain degree of terminological precision is required in both cases. There is always a danger in either overextending the boundaries of memory and culture or in over narrowing them. If "culture is the non-biological inherited memory of humanity"[25] then "what is *not* memory in culture,"[26] and should we fuse the concept of *memory* with the concept of *culture?* In other words, if for Assmann communicative memory lacks cultural characteristics we must have a very clear and accurate understanding of what is *culture* and what is *memory* in culture, to understand his concept of "cultural memory." As David Berliner argues, memory is not everything which is transmitted across generations and social scientists must be more precise in distinguishing between memory as recollection and memory as cultural reproduction: "by

22) Ibid.

23) Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 30.

24) Keating, "Culture as Social Science," 113.

25) Assmann, "The Cultural Memory."

26) Berliner, "The Abuses of Memory."

a dangerous act of extension, memory gradually becomes everything which is transmitted across generations, everything stored in culture, almost indistinguishable from the concept of culture itself."[27]

3. Tradition in Cultural Memory

Assmann's conceptualization of "cultural memory" crosses the borders between memory and tradition constructed by Maurice Halbwachs. Moreover, for Assmann, the crux of the matter in understanding cultural memory is the very understanding of the concept of "tradition" because, as he argues, cultural memory subsumes cultural traditions. In his words: "Tradition can be understood as a special case of communication in which information is not exchanged reciprocally and horizontally, but is transmitted vertically through the generations."[28] Therefore, as Jan Assmann posits: "What communication is for communicative memory, tradition is for cultural memory."[29] Cultural memory is an enlarged concept of memory because it encompasses the full range of traditions reaching far back into the past and allowing, at the same time, identification with the forms of cultural expression going back in time thousands of years. As Richard Bernstein posits, Assmann rethinks the concept of tradition by expanding its significance and by allowing space even for the unconscious transmission of memory across the generations. Our memory is not only socially determined but also culturally, through embodied cultural traditions. Thus, in an undeniable Gadamerian spirit, Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory amounts to an "ontological turn in tradition."[30] In the preface of this book *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies,* Assmann invokes Gadamer's "ontological turn in hermeneutics" by synthesizing this turn in just one sentence: "Being that can be understood is language."[31] While the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was interested in hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation and understanding), Jan and Aleida Assmann have attempted to follow Gadamer's ontological turn but directed it toward remembrance.[32]

This does not mean that Assmann and Gadamer's approaches followed completely different paths. On the contrary, understanding / interpretation and remembrance are intermingled in Gadamer's work where all human understanding is cultivated by a pre-understanding that comes from memory. By the same token, cultural tradition is a special form of vertical communication (through remembrance) and a sense-making of the past through interpretations of texts, artifacts and so on. In Jan Assmann's approach "Being that can be remembered" is not language but text (texts as products of culture). In other words, for him, text (not necessarily only written text) is always constituted since a previous communication (communications), involving the past and its recollection, while language (linguistic communication) is direct dialogue (contemporary mutual exchange of information). While language (linguistic communication) takes place during the direct conversations, texts emerge in the context of cultural traditions.

Both Assmann and Gadamer rethink the concept of "tradition," which is at the core of their theories. I believe that they are right in doing so because we are formed by the traditions that are alive with us (or, more

27) Ibid., 203.

28) Assmann quoted in Bernstein, "Religion and Cultural Memory."

29) Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 8.

30) Ibid., 6.

31) Ibid.

32) It should be also noticed that continental philosopher Paul Ricoeur also approached collective/cultural memory through the lens of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Ricoeur does not attribute the process of remembrance of the past to individual mnemonic agents but rather to others both in close relations and more distant collective others who remember an event even if they have not experienced it first-hand. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting.*

accurately put it: we are what we have made from these traditions, when we applied them to our own situation). Up to Gadamer, there were two philosophical approaches to the problem of "tradition." One approach emphasized the oppressive character of a cultural tradition, especially the undesired practical consequences of blindly adopting its dogmatic rules. The other approach (that was endorsed especially by the German philosophical romanticism) held that turning our attention to tradition could be a very enriching experience: we can discover hidden meanings, lost senses, fruitful ideas, and so on. Now Gadamer accepts the second approach, but he does something more. He underlines two important aspects of tradition: the first aspect is its inescapable character – we cannot avoid our tradition (in the two correct senses: the sense of "one cultural tradition among others," and the sense of "general human tradition"), even if we would like to. This is so, because our tradition (even if we conceive it in the broadest sense, as the human tradition, the tradition all humans share *as* humans) is a part of us – it constitutes us. The second aspect is that, although it constitutes us, our tradition is not oppressive. This is because we never take our tradition for granted. In talking, writing, thinking about tradition we interpret it, we introduce new meanings in it. In this way we enrich it and we pass our tradition enriched with new meanings to the new generations, which will enrich it in their turn. In this sense, I think that for Gadamer, tradition can be regarded both as the condition of possibility of any intellectual history, and as the basis of any meaningful discussion about human intellectual, cultural and political liberty. Tradition needs to be affirmed, preserved, and maintained in our reflection not as an idol but as a positive fact about us, as human beings. The act of preserving is a rational act. We cannot reject what tradition gives us because what it offers to us is a sort of basis on which we utilize distinctions (between world's cultures, and between individuals belonging to a single culture) even if we keep our distance from it. So, we still need it in order to keep our distance or in order to rebel against it.

It is both a significant and relevant fact that the Gadamerian understanding of tradition emphasizes our belonging to a common *human tradition*.[33] This could be interpreted in many ways, but I would like to underline only the fact that we share (at least) a common set of rules of intelligibility because of the "traditional" view of the "*humanitas* of the *homo humans*." We cannot neglect the importance of our *human tradition* (human tradition that also contains all cultural wars, as well as all historical rejections of a particular tradition or another), because we cannot start everything "*ex nihilo*." The crucial thing is that *tradition is an interpellation* (as something that addresses us) and not something levied on us. This is the strongest – indeed, the most significant – point in Gadamer's analysis of the concept of tradition. Our tradition (or even *traditions*, if my two senses of "tradition" are correct) addresses us, and we should take a stance on what it pronounces. We should accept it, or we should reject it, but even if we reject it we are still a part of it. Tradition's *smooth* authority does not require blind obedience, on the contrary: it "obliges" us, in a smooth authoritarian way, to interpret and understand it in our own terms. It also "obliges" us, in the same smooth authoritarian way, to respect and understand the other in his own terms, not by "assimilating" his perspective, but by accepting it and by transcending both our perspectives in *our common human* perspective.

4. What Is "Traditional" and What Is "Contemporary" in Art: Traditional and Contemporary Artistic Memory

As stated at the beginning, this paper attempts to disentangle what "cultural tradition" means to contemporary artists and how they make use of it in spite of the so numerous so called "anti-traditionalist" trends in contemporary art production and reception. Before elaborating on this argument, it must be mentioned that

33) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

there are many influential theories of "tradition," both pertaining to philosophical and sociological reflection. Tradition is generally defined as the presence of the past in contemporary matters, as well as an essential part of the collective memory and identity. Referring to cultural traditions Hobsbawm and Ranger identify cultural practices perceived as traditional (coming from a distant past), but which are recent and even "invented" to fit the political agenda of various groups.[34] From these more general considerations on cultural traditions, let us move now to zooming in on who "tradition" is employed by and how they understand it in contemporary art.

Although "contemporary art" is notoriously difficult to briefly summarize and accurately describe, the term refers to art produced by artists of "our times." In many places, contemporary art emerged as a form of protest authority (both political and institutional). Contemporary artists question and redefine "fine art" and the traditions of art making. They started to prioritize the artistic pluralism and cultural innovation (an infinite variety of sources, materials, and mediums) as opposed to mainstream art, academic art and so on. Many theorists and artists distinguish traditional art (e.g., painting, sculpture) from contemporary, concept-driven art practice. Yet, although contemporary art seems to reject a certain "tradition" in art making and displaying this does not mean that it is not "haunted" by the past. Contemporary art's turn not only toward archives but also toward re-staging and repetition of past art works (see for example Marina Abramovic's re-performances of her art piece "Seven Easy Pieces") testify to art's exploration of memory, as well as the process of active "forgetting" and memory's effect through time.

Both social scientists (especially anthropologists) and artists / curators are familiar with the academic debates revolving around tradition and cultural innovation. The terms "tradition" or "traditional" in the arts context, usually refers to most-treasured cultural practices and artifacts, or to the "old" and authentic cultural practices. Although in art museums the traditions and practices of preserving and displaying the most-treasured art are difficult to dislodge, in contemporary art practice and theory, the concept of tradition (traditional art making and displaying) is currently criticized on the grounds that "authentic" art or traditions of art making imply a certain degree of exclusivity and politics of exclusion: if one type of art or cultural tradition is rendered authentic, then others must be fake (inauthentic). Hence, as many contemporary art practices rely on reproductions and reenactments (e.g., digital art, re-performance, reenactment art, appropriation art, pop art and so on) they seem to be rendered as "inauthentic" or "non-traditional" cultural practices. As in Assmann's approach, the very concept of tradition implies a certain linear progression from the past to the present. In addition to that, as Sean Mallon argues in "Against Tradition," this term does not only refer to the progressions from past to present but it also "can be used to conveniently describe a non-time-specific way of life. People talk about traditional societies and practices as if they are somehow pure and untouched by the outside world."[35] Still, many theorists (e.g., Wendt and others) reject this view, on the grounds that culture cannot neither be preserved or transmitted "pure and untouched" nor transported through cultural memory as a fix set of contents of meanings maintained by trained and specialized persons from official institutions. As Wendt put it "no culture is ever static and can be preserved – like a stuffed gorilla in a museum."[36] According to this line of thought the unchanging practices, symbols, rites, and rituals are controlled by cultural elites as important social and political resources. The same cultural elites have control over what is "tradition" or "traditional" and what is not. In other words, what is called "tradition" is a hegemonic construction meant to control and evaluate cultural production and its economic or political value.

34) Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Traditions*.

35) Mallon, "Against Tradition," 364.

36) Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," 58.

Various artistic mediums also play an important role in what is regarded as "traditional" or "contemporary" in art. Typically carving, painting, and sculpture are regarded as traditional mediums while video, web-based platforms and other conceptual mediums are regarded as contemporary. Contemporary art is many times envisioned as conceptual forms of expression (performance art, ephemeral art, dialogical art, participatory art, event art, installation and so on). This dematerialization of art brings noticeable changes in the way we perceive, interact, and deal with the work of art. Traditionally, art has been preserved and displayed in museums and cultural centers. The institution of the museum or art gallery has epitomized the boundary between art and everyday life. Moreover, the museum (as institution) was endorsed and supported by the state (especially during late nineteenth century when "art built the nation"). The museum culture has started to decline, and art is no longer secluded within institutional frameworks and settings but takes place where everyday life takes place (in the streets, in community centers, in the neighborhoods of the cities, in private flats and so on). Often, contemporary art blurs the boundaries between everyday life and art. This change brings with it a reluctance to accept the old structures of the museum and its objectivations of the past. It opens instead the gates for interactive and participative cultural practices of communicative histories and in this way, the very concept of "museum" as gatekeeper of cultural memory is redefined and reshaped. As Deepak Srinivasan posits, the traditionalist museum "as a symbol of dominant history is subverted and re-utilized."[37] The micro-practices of culture, oral histories, social change, personal-micro-histories, and livelihood are documented, digitized, and displayed on online platforms. The "history of the nation" and "the memory of the nation" are slowly replaced in contemporary art museums / art galleries by private, personal, or community memories. To illustrate this shift, Srinivasan discusses two case studies: The Museum of Broken Relationships (Croatia) and Jatan's Museum of Memory (India). Both museums consist of collections of collective community memory or private memories. While the Museum of Broken Relationships focuses on personal stories and remembrances of romantic break-ups (revolving around the ruins of relationships), Jatan's Museum of Memory documents disappearing cultural practices from rural districts of India. Then, as Srinivasan concludes "this highly individual context of memory projects heightened meaning on to objects that are relatively ordinary and every day, commenting thus on the customary process of valuing collections."[38]

Yet, artistic memory is often performed outside of any museum or art gallery space. A very recent example of contemporary artistic memory performed in the public space is the art performance entitled "Carrying that Weight" (2014) of Columbia art student Emma Sulkowicz. For many art lovers, this piece of art which deals with the traumatic memory of rape is known as "The Mattress Performance." As Ben Davis reports, we will not find this artistic performance in New York galleries or museums, "instead, *Mattress Performance*, in case you haven't yet heard, is a performance art piece of Emma Sulkowicz, a 21-years old Columbia University studio art major who was vowed, in an inspired bit of absurdist-activist theater, to haul a twin college dorm mattress with her everywhere she goes until the man she says raped her on the first day of her sophomore year leaves Columbia."[39] Shortly put, Sulkowicz's performance is as much art as protest and everyday life. The choice of a mattress is not arbitrarily because firstly, it triggers bed remembrances about the rape she suffered, and secondly, the mattress is a private place where a lot of intimate life takes place.

Another revealing example of artistic production that deals with cultural memory which blurs the boundary between everyday life and art is Elana Katz's "Spaced Memory" project performed from 2014 in several Balkan countries (Romania, Kosovo, and Serbia). The "Spaced Memory" project consists of multimedia, installations,

37) Srinivasan, "Changes in Contemporary Art Practices."

38) Ibid.

39) Davis, "Columbia Student's Striking Mattress Performance."

and performances that document the fading away of the Jewish sites in the Balkans (synagogues, canteens, restaurants community centers, cemeteries, and schools) during and since the Holocaust. Katz claims that her site-specific performances displayed at places which have related to the life of the Jewish communities from the region commemorate and provoke a critical discussion concerning the absence of Jewish subculture and its cultural memory at "sites of historical erasure." The artist envisions this "historical erasure" as being the result of the Holocaust, of post-WWII communist governments from the region, and of enduring anti-Semitism. She signals the commemoration of the violent past by emphasizing the "presence of absence" (which is, sites that no longer exist yet reclaim their "right" to be remembered). For example, in Belgrade (El KalVejo) there was a gorgeous Jewish synagogue destroyed in 1950s. Presently, on that very site there is an inactive basketball courtyard. The artist performs on that site the action of washing with detergent and water the basketball court for many hours. She mops the bitumen of the basketball courtyard as a quotidian gesture of spring-cleaning but the "Wash Empty" performance endeavors to communicate to the viewers the impossibility of cleaning away the inopportune history of violence. Although Katz's work (and its video documentation) does not take place within an established cultural institution (but in the streets and through new media on blogs and web platforms), it invites communication, cooperation and collaboration with the local Jewish communities, individuals, art centers and non-profit organizations. This memory work (artistic memory) can be regarded as a vigorous engagement with the past, where the past is performed and not re-staged or re-enacted because the sites of memory are not necessarily canonical sites. Then, as Erll and Rigney suggest, "memory sites have a history, and although they represent in many ways the *terminus ad quem* of repeated acts of remembrance, they only continue to operate as such as long as people continue to reinvest in them and use them as a point of reference."[40]

Preserving the living memory of these sites is envisioned in a dynamic and inter-subjective way and not in terms of establishing unanimous consensus and cannon-building in remembering culture. These artistic memory events (where memory is performed) become simultaneously both an object of "communicative memory" and "cultural memory." In other words, they permeate one another. How? Katz's artistic performances commence as "disembodied," independent cultural forms (outside of institutions) but as Assmann puts it, they need "institutions for preservation and re-embodiment."[41] They are re-embodied and preserved by the system of contemporary art world. As I elaborated elsewhere, by "art-world(s)," I understand certain theoretical milieus within which a work of art is completed, apprehended, preserved, and distributed.[42] Arthur Danto posits that this "atmosphere of theory" does not refer to any kind of philosophy thought by artists, art historians or art critics but to a theory provided by the art historical context in which the work of art is created. Without these theories and historical contexts, we cannot discriminate non-art from art. In this vein, "red paint is just red paint" and should not be taken for painting. These theoretical environments (the so-called "art world") occasion art to happen, allowing us to identify it as such – differentiating it from non-art. However, we should not assume that these theoretical environments are not necessarily only the institutions of art or the mainstream institutions of art (e.g., art museums).

The discipline of philosophical aesthetics displays two chief theories of the "art world": Arthur Danto's (in his article from 1964, "The Artworld") and George Dickie's significant "institutional theory of art,"[43] in which he claims that the art world is an institution represented by theorists, curators, artists, and other people acting on behalf of a certain institution, who confer the status of art only for artifacts. The key difference between

40) Erll and Rigney, "Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory," 2.

41) Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 110.

42) Asavei, *Aesthetics, Disinterestedness and Effectiveness in Political Art*.

43) Dickie, *The Art Circle,* 79–111.

Danto's theorization and Dickie's lies exactly in the institutional approach of art. Briefly put, the art world is understood as an institution for Dickie (it is an institutional structure which generates authority to confer the status of art to various artifacts) while for Danto it is constituted by "art history and an atmosphere of theory." What is important to underline at this point is that for Danto the art world is not an *institution*. As Jeffrey Wieand argued, the art world in Danto's philosophy of art should be understood as a kind of broader *community*: for example, when somebody refers to the "college community" she does not mean only the teachers, the clerk, students and employees of the college (of the institution), but also of people broadly connected with the college (retired professors, parents, alumni, persons who play baseball on the college's playground, or those who read the college's newspaper).[44]

Still, even a "community" needs a certain institutional background to function and to persevere in time. Newer artistic practices and styles are evolving in contemporary art and many of them are perceptually indistinguishable from daily-life practices (as in the example discussed above regarding Katz's Street washing). What makes them art? Are these artistic expressions and practices completely "new" and unprecedented cultural productions? As recent philosophy of art demonstrates a certain interaction with tradition is at the heart of the development of the new artistic practices. When we look at a contemporary art piece, we unavoidably recollect things that we have seen before. This is so because art is usually not something created in a vacuum. Contemporary artists and other cultural producers are constantly referring to the past (consciously or not): not only when they borrow traditional artistic techniques to produce "new" pieces but also when they attempt to criticize and ridicule outmoded models of art making, thematic clusters and forms. Therefore, the artists of today (and not only the artist of today) relate to historical / traditional notions of art even when their concept of art diverges from the traditional assumptions about art. Tradition in this context must be understood as an ongoing interpretation of the past or as a process of thought rather than an assemblage of artifacts and the techniques of their making. Hence, as Edward Shils argues, tradition itself changes incessantly.[45] This is so because traditions are always defined in the present by our interpretations and re-interpretations of them. Cultural traditions are not necessarily something separate from or in opposition to contemporary arts. Despite many opinions which distinguish traditional art from contemporary, concept-driven art practice, art exists as much in conceptual, dematerialized forms as in dance, waving, ceremony, cloths, puppets, objects made for tourists and so on.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed and critically evaluate Assmann's distinction between cultural and communicative memory by focusing on the centrality of the concept of "cultural tradition" in understanding memory work especially in contemporary arts. Jan Assmann's distinction between cultural memory and communicative memory is nevertheless very instructive for contemporary artistic practice and artists and other cultural producers can expand their knowledge by disentangling this distinction. The purpose of this distinction is not to keep the two types of memories apart but, as Assmann puts it, what is at stake is "the transformation of communicative, i.e. lived and in witnesses embodied memory, into cultural, i.e. institutionally shaped and sustained memory, that is, into "cultural mnemotechnique."[46] As the examples discussed in this paper reveal, collective community memories (as those displayed in Jatan's Museum of Memory) or private memories (as the personal stories and

44) Wieand, "Can There Be an Institutional Theory of Art?," 413.

45) Shils, *Tradition*.

46) Assmann quoted in Levy and Sznaider, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," 91.

remembrances of romantic break-ups exhibited at the Museum of Broken Relationships or Emma Sulkowicz's "Mattress Performance") have started to emerge as communicative memories but have ended up in institutionally supported cultural memories. The examples discussed in this paper are concept-driven art practices (conceptual art). Thus, the artistic practice does not rely on an assemblage of artifacts and the techniques of their production (as in "traditional" artmaking) but on communicative strategies of dissemination. However, they are not totally unprecedented cultural (artistic) productions, despite their "anti-traditional" look, because they are still constituted by an art history and "an atmosphere" of theory (to use Danto's term). Therefore, although artists and cultural produces do not take certain cultural traditions for granted, this does not mean that they do not re-interpret them, introducing new meanings in them. In this way they enrich these cultural traditions and pass them enriched with new meanings to the new generations, which will enrich them in their turn.

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