

Rewind and Press Play: An Installation on Memory Distortions

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Abstract

Over the past century, cognitive psychologists have studied the complexity of the human brain in order to understand the processes behind mental functions, including memories. Separate altogether from the act of forgetting, memory distortions are a common phenomenon that result in inaccurate episodic recollections. Through the thought-provoking amalgamation of crocheted VHS tapes, a home video, and a warped plastic rocking chair, the installation *Rewind and Press Play* embodies the intricacy of the mind's capability to confuse and delude personal memories. Research for this project focuses mainly on two important facets of the exhibition: the investigation of select types of memory distortions as a concept and the exploration of installation art as a lucrative strategy for artistic expression. *Rewind and Press Play* ultimately invites viewers to relate to the artist's fascination and acceptance of natural memory distortions by way of emotional responses to the idea that their own memories are subject to distortion.

1. Introduction to Concept

Rewind and Press Play was born from the appeal of the possibilities of installation art, as the artist was particularly drawn to the idea of creating large-scale forms by crocheting, a growing hobby of hers that began to intertwine with her sculptural artworks. Crocheting was a particular craft that the artist shared with her last living grandparent, her grandmother; and their mutual interest brought them closer together for several years. At the time of the show's conception, the artist's grandmother was struggling with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. The thought of losing the only grandparent that she had truly known was extremely difficult for the artist. She began reaching for distant memories of her grandmother, but found that even recent ones lacked the detail she wanted and often did not match her sister's recounted versions. Even though she knew this was normal, the artist investigated affects on memories further and found that she was likely experiencing what cognitive psychologists call memory distortions. Intrigued by the struggle to hold on to clear, precious memories, the artist decided to base her show on this concept and was inspired directly by her personal experiences with distorted memories.

To understand memory distortion, one must understand the basics behind memory formation and retrieval. When the brain stores information into the memory system, the sensory information must be changed into a form that is more easily stored. This change is called "encoding." The three main forms into which information is changed are visual, acoustic, and semantic. "Storage" deals with the duration, capacity, and type of information that can be stored in the memory system. This part of the process organizes long-term and short-term memories. In order to optimize storage space, the brain categorizes several information units, or "slots," that can store an unknown amount of information as short-term memories. It is thought that long-term memory storage is unlimited. Memory "retrieval" refers to the mental act of taking memories out of storage, and is commonly known as remembering. Long-term memories are retrieved from associations that are encoded within it, such as visual and auditory clues. Short-term memories are retrieved sequentially, meaning that the brain recalls this information in the order of which it was received.¹

All three processes: encoding, storing, and retrieving, are vulnerable to errors that cause memory distortions. These distortions are not to be confused with the complete loss of a memory. Many times, we have no recollection of past events in our life due to the lack of memory formations as a young child, conditions such as amnesia, and the degradation of the memory system during the later years of life. These memories are no longer stored and cannot be distorted. Memories that are distorted are perceived recollections of the past that seem real and correct, but are in fact inaccurate. Though there are several types of memory distortions, *Rewind and Press Play* focuses on “reconstructive retrieval”, which refers to a “schema-guided construction of episodic memory that interpret, embellish, integrate, and alter encoded memory representations.”ⁱⁱ Schemas provide our perceptions with certain expectations that help us to learn, but can also alter perceptions to miss events that do not follow these expectations. Because of schemas, some memories might become distorted in order to “conform to momentary expectations,” allowing us to “fabricate how past events most likely unfolded.”ⁱⁱⁱ The extent to which events can be distorted during reconstructive retrieval depends on how much of the memory is leveled, sharpened, or assimilated. “Leveling” refers to the loss of detail in the memory, by omitting unfamiliar or insignificant ideas to shorten the recollection. On the other hand, “sharpening” refers to remembering details that were inferred based on general knowledge and expectations, though the details were never presented. Finally, “assimilation” refers to the memory being “rationalized or normalized to fit with preconceived notions.”^{iv}

With very rare exceptions, everyone is affected by memory distortions. People often tend to level, sharpen, and assimilate episodic events that are personally experienced, called “autobiographical events.”^v The exhibition *Rewind and Press Play* explores the idea of distorted autobiographical events, and how the misinformation received from reconstructing memories from childhood and of significant events during life, like learning to ride a bike, a first kiss, or the last moments with a deceased loved one, causes disillusionment in recalling the past. Is the memory affected by how many times we recall it, as we desperately try to relive the moment in our minds? Is it subject to degrade further and further until there is nothing left to reconstruct other than a simple acknowledgement that the event occurred? These are questions that *Rewind and Press Play* asks the viewer to consider, without giving any specific answers. In order to convey this demanding and introspective concept, the artist created a sculptural installation that envelops the viewer with sensory information, using materials and media that is relevant to the idea of capturing and replaying memories.

2. Installation as a Strategy

During the 1960s, the term “installation” in relation to art began referring to more than just describing how singular pieces are arranged or physically displayed. A new focus was brought to how the arrangement of art works affected viewers and eventually gave rise to the term “installation art,” which loosely describes art that embodies the whole exhibition space. Claire Bishop, of the History of Art Department at CUNY Graduate Center in NYC, argues that “installation art” cannot be confined to a firm definition because the term is applied freely to works that may have a shifting spectrum of commonalities. In her book *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Bishop explains that installation art is often described as “‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’.”^{vi} For the purpose of this paper, the word “installation,” unless otherwise noted, refers to works of installation art.

Though it may be hard to define installation art, there are ways to classify installations that are based on the approach an artist takes to create the work. One approach is to start with the concept and the art, then incorporate it within the space. This type is called a “filled-space installation.” Within a typical filled-space installation, all pieces and components relate coherently to each other, rather than relating significantly to the location. Filled-space installations can usually be recreated in other places. The second method is to approach the location and concept first and then determine the corresponding art for that space, deeming this type “site-specific.” Installations that are site-specific consist of pieces that relate to each other, but also are more importantly linked, conceptually and often physically, to the space around it. Recreating the installation in another location would undermine the artist’s original intention, and would therefore destroy the integral context in which the audience views and understands the work.^{vii} *Rewind and Press Play* is considered a filled-space installation. Mark Rosenthal, author of *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*, creates a further taxonomy for filled-space installations – specific forms called “impersonations” and “enchantments.” Installations that are considered impersonations present situations of reality, recreated or removed, or expand upon those circumstances. The latter, however, present situations that are extreme visions of reality, imaginary, or dreamlike, which give the viewer a sense of entering the artist’s mind. Rosenthal explains that the goal of the enchantment installation is to create “a full-body escape from reality, in which someone else’s aura and world-view dominate the viewer’s entire perceptual field.”^{viii}

An installation artist that worked with enchantments as filled-space installation is Joseph Beuys, of the German Fluxus movement. His work titled *Plight* (Fig. 1), on display at the Centre Pompidou of Paris, France, is an example of a work that physically affects the audience. It relies on the viewer's emotional and physical experiences equally to convey his meaningful concept. The installation consists of two rooms covered on all walls with large rolls of felt and a grand piano, a blackboard, and a thermometer. The audience immediately feels the heat of the insulated room as they walk into the installation, and might even become discomforted by the stuffy environment. The overwhelming sense of the air density may feel crushing and even angering. The felt serves to also absorb sound, and so the two rooms are eerily quiet. The intensity of the silence forces the viewer to become more aware of their body within the space that is empty, except for the three objects and the rolled felt.^{ix} On many occasions, Beuys attributed his interest in felt to a traumatic wartime experience as a German combat pilot. After a plane crash in 1943 on the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine, nomadic Tartars found him in the snow, unconscious and badly wounded, and wrapped him in lard and felt to keep him warm.^x *Plight* is an installation that uses space, silence, and feeling to create an environment that allows viewers to escape from reality and acknowledge the sense of one's self.



Figure 1. Joseph Beuys, *Plight*, 1985, felt, piano, blackboard and thermometer, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo by Adagp, Paris.

Like the installation works of Joseph Beuys, *Rewind and Press Play* is a filled-space enchantment that transports the audience beyond reality. However, there are few other similarities between the works, so it is also important to note the installations from two current artists that directly inspired the aesthetics of *Rewind and Press Play*.

3. Influences

A large influence on the decision to make a sensorial and multimedia show was the installation *Capturing Resonance* (Fig. 2), a collaboration by the artist Soo Sunny Park and musician Spencer Topel at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. For the ten months that the installation was on view, Park had created an undulating wave above the viewer's head with chained link fencing and had filled each diamond shaped space in the fence with iridescent acrylic Plexiglas. The coated acrylic filtered the spectrum of the sunlight coming in from a window above the gallery differently depending on the viewing angle, which was an extension to

the installation's concept of playing with space and self-awareness. The musical compositions by Topel that accompanied the sculpture also depended on the light and movement within the room by using sensors that changed the audio with programmed algorithms when there was a change in light or more viewers moving within the space.^{xi}



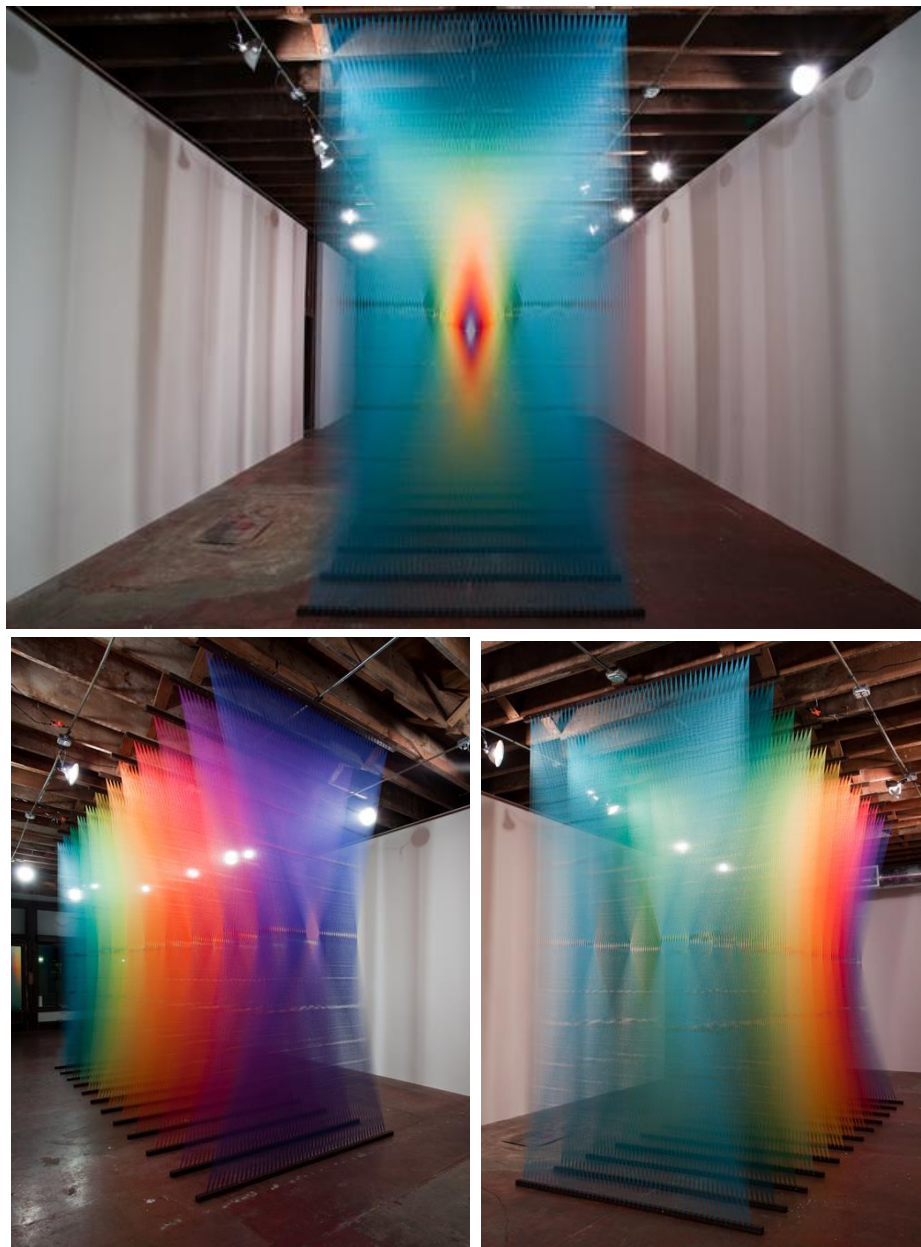
Figure 2. Soo Sunny Park and Spencer Topel, *Capturing Resonance*, 2011, multimedia installation.
Photo by Peter Harris.

In April of 2013, Soo Sunny Park created an installation continuing her exploration with fencing and acrylic Plexiglas in a show at Rice University Art Gallery, of Houston, Texas, called *Unwoven Light* (Fig. 3). Many of the components of this show were used in *Capturing Resonance* as well. Park explained that her concept for *Unwoven Light* revolved around harnessing and revealing light, an immaterial that “we don’t notice... so much as we notice the things light allows us to see.”^{xii} Park uses the natural lighting and the gallery lighting as a key structure in the work, just like in *Capturing Resonance*, and in doing so, she transforms the space. Through her works *Capturing Resonance* and *Unwoven Light*, Park uses art installations to turn imaginary environments into a reality.



Figure 3. Soo Sunny Park, *Unwoven Light*, 2013, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, TX.
Photo still, from *Soo Sunny Park at Rice Gallery*, by Walley Films.

Another installation-based artist that influenced *Rewind and Press Play* is the Mexican artist Gabriel Dawe. Dawe creates site-specific art installations that explore both architecture and fashion. The idea of architecture is transcribed by the importance of shelter, in any form, for survival. Dawe also seeks to challenge the notion of masculinity that prevails in our society today by using textiles and materials associated with fashion to examine his homeland's "complicated construction of gender and identity."^{xiii} Dawe's site-specific installations consist of brightly colored sewing thread, wound around hooks mounted on opposing or adjacent surface planes in the architectural structure each piece is located. The simple material of sewing thread is not only integral to his concept, but also determines the visual aesthetics of his work. Because the sewing thread is thin, linear, and spaced at intervals and angles that are purposeful, his installations start to merge into one entity that varies depending on the viewer's vantage point. The physical depth of the piece combined with the transparency of the space throughout creates an illusion of color gradients, which change as the viewers move around the installations.



Figures 4-6. Gabriel Dawe, *plexus no. 3*, 2010, gütermann thread, wood and nails, 12' x 6' x 16', Dallas, Texas.
Photos by Kevin Todora.

4. Process

Multiple large-scale, sculptural pieces in *Rewind and Press Play* were constructed by using a fiber arts technique utilized by craftsmen, hobbyists, and homemakers to create functional and decorative items. Little has been recorded about the history of crocheting and its predecessor, knitting. Crochet has been referenced as a technique that was commonly known by the eighteenth century.^{xiv} Some scholars agree that it was a nun's craft in medieval Europe, but it has also been suggested that the use of crochet can be seen in the detailed edges of some surviving textiles from the Byzantine Empire.^{xv,xvi} Crocheting and knitting have been used in textiles for centuries, but are relatively new techniques found in the fine arts.



Figure 7. Sally Garner, *Complexities of the Mind*, 2013, detail, crocheted VHS tape, dimensions variable.

A major component of the show is a quilt-like drapery of circular forms crocheted from VHS tape, titled *Complexities of the Mind* (Fig. 7). In crocheting, a chain is the basic starting point for a work. To crochet a chain, a hook specifically made for the handicraft is used to pull loops of the fiber through previous loops, one stitch at a time. The following rows of stitches are built off of the initial chain. In order to make each individual section of

Complexities of the Mind, the artist crocheted a short foundational chain and connected the ends to form a circle. The stitches crocheted from the foundation and subsequent rounds, along with a standard increasing method in which twelve evenly spaced stitches were added to each round, shaped the circular forms. The artist was able to vary the size of each circle by varying how many rounds were crocheted from the center foundational ring to the edge of the circle. In order to give depth to each section, she then continued crocheting a varying number of rounds without increasing the number of stitches. The effect created was a bowl-like appearance. Each form was then arranged and crocheted together to unify the piece into one structure that drapes in the center of each conjoined section. *Complexities of the Mind* hangs from the back right corner of the gallery, crossing the space above the audience and down towards the floor at the center of the gallery. The height at which it hangs changes drastically in order to allow viewers to walk under and around the crocheted VHS material, viewing it from both below and above.



Figure 8. Sally Garner, *Play Over (Again)*, 2013, detail, stretched and crocheted VHS tape, dimensions variable.

By exploring numerous ways to use the VHS tape, the artist discovered that the plastic ribbon shrinks to the width of string when gently stretched. This allows the material to be more versatile and to create new effects with shadows and reflections when lit. *Play Over (Again)* (Fig. 8) was created using this method and consists of only crocheted chains. After stretching the VHS material into string, a long chain was made, which was then seen as the new fiber that in some places was crocheted again into chain stitches. The resulting section where the chain was crocheted again, up to four times in some places, was larger and denser. By varying the amount of stretch on the plastic ribbon, the artist was able to control the width of the material. Numerous sections of *Play Over (Again)* were crocheted with VHS tape that was barely stretched and not stretched at all. The resulting artwork is a long crocheted line that has width variations due to the two different techniques. In *Rewind and Press Play*, this piece is displayed as several horizontal lines tightly hanging in the left corner at the front of the gallery. As *Play Over (Again)* crosses from one wall to the other, the shadows created are both clear and distorted. The shadow is clearer where the piece is close to the wall at the end of each line. As it crosses the corner of the gallery and hangs further away from the walls, the shadows become blurry and distant.



Figure 9. Sally Garner, *Replaying Christmas*, 1994, 2013, photo still from video, dimensions variable.

The light illuminating this piece is a large video projection of a digital media piece titled *Replaying Christmas*, 1994 (Fig. 9). The video, showing the artist's family on Christmas morning when she was four years old, was converted from a home video recorded on 8mm VHS tape. The artist edited the video to simulate the act of watching and rewinding specific parts of the video several times before allowing it to play on. The certain parts that are replayed in this video show exchanges between the artist and her late grandmother. The video, projected from across the room, is eight minutes and forty-five seconds in duration. For the exhibition, the piece was placed on a loop for constant playback.



Figure 10. Sally Garner, *Vantage Point*, 2013, vinyl wall decal, nails, and VHS tape, 30'L x 7'W x 0.75"D.

Directly installed on the right side wall of the gallery is the piece *Vantage Point*. (Fig. 10) the artist hammered nails in two horizontal lines along the thirty-foot wall. The top line of nails is located eight feet from the base of the wall, and the bottom line of nails is one foot from the base, for a total height of seven feet. With a constant interval of half an inch between the nails in each line, approximately five thousand feet of VHS tape is strung vertically from one line of nails to the other, wrapping around two nails from each row at a time. By wrapping the ribbon around the

nails, the ribbon is in a perpendicular position length-wise to the wall, so that the edge of the VHS tape is touching the wall rather than laying flat against it. (Fig. 11) This allows viewers to see through the tape when they are looking at the wall from certain angles. Applied directly to the wall behind the tape is a vinyl decal of a black-silhouetted rocking chair that is five feet six inches tall.



Figure 11. Sally Garner, *Vantage Point*, detail, 2013, vinyl wall decal, nails, VHS tape, 30'L x 7'W x 0.75"D.

A rocking chair made of partially melted and formed plastic VHS cassettes is located in the back left corner of the gallery. The material for *Distorted* (Fig. 12) once physically encased the other materials seen in the show, but the rocking chair was formed and assembled only by using heat to soften and shape the plastic shell, after which it cooled and re-hardened. This process is imprecise and destructive to the material. The plastic shrivels and recoils when it is heated too much. In *Rewind and Press Play*, the rocking chair is placed beneath three suspended curtains of VHS ribbons that hang vertically above and behind the chair to provide depth within the space surrounding the piece.



Figure 12. Sally Garner, *Distorted*, 2013, plastic VHS cases, 2'H x 1.5'W x 2.5'D.

5. Results and Interpretations

As an older form of recording video and audio that can succumb to damaging factors, VHS tapes, the material choice for *Rewind and Press Play*, metaphorically symbolize the fragility of our memories during storage and retrieval. Videocassettes typically have a lifespan of ten to thirty years. The manufactured magnetic tape is made of several layered components that make recording possible, but become unstable due to environmental factors or natural decay.^{xvii} Over time, the VHS tape is considered to be unwatchable due to an extreme lack of detail in video and/or audio quality. Similarly, memories fade in detail over time. Our minds compensate by adding details that fit our conceived notion of how that event should be remembered.

The use of craft techniques in the installation heightens the viewer's reaction to it as fine art because of its purposeful use with unconventional craft materials. The artist decided to crochet her work to literally give the VHS material its texture, which ultimately defines the overall visual aesthetic of the installation. Shiny, metallic, and lightweight, the simple material is transformed into a pleasure to the senses when it is taken from the hard and familiar VHS case and placed in large quantities under gallery spotlights. The strong light on the plastic ribbon creates a sophisticated glitter, which moves and sparkles as the audience walks around the pieces, and especially seen in *Complexities of the Mind*. While reflections and refractions of light enhance the visually captivating experience of both Soo Sunny Park's installations and *Rewind and Press Play*, the latter differs from Park's installations because the artist features a very controlled environment of low-level lighting to evoke a more mysterious and isolating tone, whereas Park's installations invites viewers to focus on the idea of light itself. The sensual aesthetic expands beyond the visual properties of the installation by activating other senses. The rustling of plastic ribbon, the smell of the old VHS tapes, and the feel of the textures, as viewers were invited to interact with

the installation, also stimulate the viewer's senses. The smell alone is distinctive enough to invoke feelings of nostalgia.

The texture created by crocheting the forms that make up the piece *Complexities of the Mind* not only gives visual interest, but also alludes to the intricacy of the brain's associations between memories and certain schemas. The floating piece represents memory storage. With seemingly unlimited capacity, it is one mass of several groups – within each is an organized web of knotted information. Through this piece, the viewer is able to experience the artist's vision of her memories suspended in her mind. The overwhelming size of *Complexities of the Mind* is humbling, and invites the audience to reflect on the grandeur of the mind's capabilities.

Play Over (Again) uses the repetition of a long, multidimensional line of crocheted chain stitches to represent the back and forth motion of events in recalling memories over and over. When we try to remember in detail a certain event from our lives, we tend to focus on specific aspects. *Play Over (Again)* serves as a reminder to viewers that memories are not as clear as they may seem. The variations of thickness in the crocheted piece symbolize the perceived importance of memories placed within a timeline of events. The thicker parts, where the artist crocheted the material multiple times, correspond to moments that are remembered more often, and are therefore regarded as more important. As noted earlier, intertwined with the crocheted lines of *Play Over (Again)* is a video projection of *Replaying Christmas, 1994*. The video shows the artist's personal attachment to memories of her grandmother because every interaction between the two are rewound and replayed more than once. Viewers are able to relate their own memories to the action of rewinding and replaying certain durations of a video multiple times before feeling satisfied enough to allow the video to play onward.

As the viewer enters the room, the right wall appears reflective and black, but as the viewer walks through the gallery, the perspective changes and the wall and decal behind the tape become more visible. This wall piece, *Vantage Point*, can be similarly compared to Gabriel Dawe's thread installations. The illusion of the VHS tape creates a visual gradient from black to white depending on the position of the viewer. Unlike Dawe's installations, the purpose of this piece is to hide the image of the rocking chair behind the VHS tape, which forces the viewer to engage with the piece by actively searching for the parts unseen and remembering the portions they have already found. This piece refers to receiving and retrieving information and memories because viewers must pick up and remember different aspects of the image to be able to see the whole. The illusionary aspect of *Vantage Point* likewise reflects on the ability of memory distortions to undermine the integrity of memories that we perceive as whole.

Symbolically, the image of a rocking chair is important to the artist's own childhood memories that she shared with her grandmother. By placing the sculpture *Distorted* in a stage-like environment, on a short pedestal and surrounded by the curtains of VHS tape, the artist showcases the piece as separated from reality. Viewers may connect with *Distorted* if they have similar affections towards objects like the rocking chair that they hold onto because of the memories associated with it. The destructive nature of manipulating the videocassettes with heat reinforces the concept that memories of the past become deformed and twisted over time. Though the memories are manipulated, we still build our knowledge around them, much like the rocking chair, which appears real enough to rock in. Because the rocking chair is displayed further away from the entrance of the gallery, this piece places significance on the journey towards the realization of the object, even as it becomes increasingly distorted as the viewer moves closer.

6. Conclusion

Over the past five decades, artists have furthered the development of installation as a new medium in contemporary art by creating works that are experienced on levels previously untouched, such as time and place. By enveloping the viewer within a sensory-stimulating and overwhelming environment, considered part of a filled-space enchantment, the installation *Rewind and Press Play* transports the viewers out of the framework of a traditional gallery and into the artist's imagination. The artist expresses her artistic vision and fascination with the mind's memory system through careful considerations for the visual elements and symbolic references between the VHS material and the installation's concept. By using VHS tapes and other nostalgic symbols such as the rocking chair and home video imagery to represent the encoding, storing, and retrieval of memories, *Rewind and Press Play* encourages viewers to acknowledge the possibility of distorted memories in their own lives, as one may not always be aware that recollections are often fabricated. At first, the artist feared memory distortions and was unwilling to accept that her sacred memories of her late grandmother could be less than perfect representations of reality. Her installation offers the audience a way to explore their own reactions to the distortions that leave the mind

confused and disillusioned. *Rewind and Press Play* ultimately provides a larger-than-life experience in hopes of easing the fear of memory distortions as an uncontrollable reality. The beautiful environment inspires viewers to find acceptance in losing the precise details that shape the contexts of their memories, no matter how determined they are to preserve them.

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8. Endnotes

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